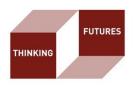
# Doing Environmental Scanning An Overview Guide

An overview of the major phases of doing environmental scanning from deciding what to scan, who should scan and what you should do with the information you are finding to strengthen your ability to respond to today's strategic challenges.



# **Thinking Futures**

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#### **About the Guide**

I often get asked 'how do I start environmental scanning?' This is usually followed by something along the lines of "I understand what scanning is and I know we need to do it, but how do I start?"

This guide provides you with an overview of doing environmental scanning in your organisation. The aim is to allow you to build an understanding of the environmental scanning process and what is involved. It's based on a series of blog posts on my site (<a href="http://thinkingfutures.net/blog">http://thinkingfutures.net/blog</a>). I'm going to assume that you have made the decision to scan to inform your organisation's strategic thinking around possible options and strategies available to it into the future, and you want to know how to get started.

My goal in producing free resources such as these is to help people set up scanning systems in as many organisations as possible. Only then will you have high quality information to inform the thinking that goes on when strategy is developed. And that information will be futures focused, not stuck in the status-quo. Futures focused strategy is essential if we are to craft strategy that allows us all to have a sustainable future.

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Please let me know what you think about the guide – my contact details are on the last page, and get in touch if you have any questions.

#### Maree Conway

Thinking Futures February 2012

**Disclaimer:** I refer to Shaping Tomorrow throughout the guide. This is a free, online service that provides you with a tailored system to store your scanning 'hits' or insights, and has a set of tools to help you analyse what you are finding. I have been using Shaping Tomorrow for my own scanning since 2006, and in the last couple of years I have started to work with them on research projects.

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# **Strategy Development and Futures Thinking**

An overview of futures thinking and how scanning fits in the strategy development process.



Strategy is a bit of an industry now, and the isomorphic effect is reducing it to a formula that often locks organisations into closed planning methods.

If you look at many strategic plans, underneath the varying degrees of gloss, they all look remarkably similar in content and tone. The way organisations plan today usually doesn't help them all that much to deal with the future and its associated uncertainty and complexity.

The future will not look like the past and the present, so using information from those domains provides a baseline for strategy development purposes - but it won't necessarily enable organisations to prepare for the future, in an active rather than reactive way.

Strategy development that is futures focused consists of four 'levels' or 'stages' of activity as shown in Figure 1: *strategic scanning* which identifies relevant and credible information about changes in the external environment, strategic *thinking* which uses the scanning information to generate options for your organisation, *strategic decision making* which is about setting direction, and *strategic planning* which is about implementation and action.



Figure 1: Four Stages of Strategy Development and Implementation

What we understand to be strategic planning was designed to document and communicate agreed goals, but it has tended to morph into an end in itself and to subsume the four stages shown in Figure 1. The plan becomes the focus rather than the quality of the information and thinking that goes into the decisions that the plan documents. To avoid this, strategy needs to be considered as a four stage process: scanning, thinking, deciding, and then planning – each requiring different and separate approaches and tools, and the time to spend on each stage.

Strategic or environmental scanning is an input into the strategic thinking stage of strategy development. Scanning focuses on identifying what might be important in terms of your organisation's future, gathering information and data to test that thinking, and exploring beyond mainstream or conventional/status-quo thinking to identify emerging issues and potential surprises in future operating environments that are likely to have an impact on your organisation.

Strategic or futures thinking involves a set of steps as shown in the Generic Foresight Model (Figure 2). The process starts with gathering information via environmental scanning, following by analysis and interpretation of that information for the particular organisation, and then using that information to inform thinking about a range of alternative, plausible futures for an organisation. This is the strategic thinking stage of strategy development that allows you and your organisation to build a strategic foresight capacity and a broader and deeper perspective of possible futures and possible options. Your decision making processes are then informed by an expanded, more robust set of strategic options.

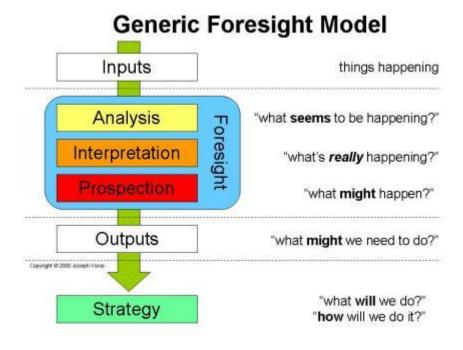


Figure 2: Generic Foresight Model

Most strategy development processes move from the analysis and interpretation stage to the decision making phase without doing any prospection – that is, without systematically exploring what the future might hold for their organisation and testing often deeply held assumptions about that future. It is our assumptions about what is real and what will continue into the future that are often flawed, but we are unable to see this unless we challenge and test those assumptions by acknowledging the uncertainty that comes with thinking about the future. *Environmental scanning provides the information we need to be able to determine what is relevant for our organisation's future*.

# **Part 1: Focus Your Scanning**

Building a strong focus for you scanning with help you find relevant and useful information to use in your organisation's strategy processes.



I have had some online discussions about my recommendation to always start your scanning with a focus. My reason for that is simple: we have limited time and energy, and limited resources. And we all have important strategic issues, challenges and decisions which need to be considered now. Scanning systems about the future must therefore, above all, be practical and relevant in the present.

If you head out into the external environment without a focus, then pretty soon you will be overwhelmed by the amount of information out there (now neatly termed 'infowhelm'), and the result of that is that you get frustrated and give up.

The argument put forward about not having some sort of focus and doing what Choo calls undirected scanning is that you might miss something at the periphery or just emerging if you are concentrating on one thing. Or that the focus will mean you concentrate on one area at the expense of another. However, a focused or directed scan is cost-effective and allows you to evaluate relevance of what you are finding for your organisation's strategic challenges. It doesn't mean you ignore something that piques your interest.

**Remember**: a focus for scanning gives you a framework or some parameters for where you start to look but it does not constrain you from looking wherever your scanning takes you. In fact, that's one of my scanning guidelines: go wherever your scanning takes you, and do this deliberately. You will end up in places you never imagined, and this is the point of scanning - sensitising us to both current trends that are relevant now and the issues out there at the periphery, often in the realm of the weird and the whacky, that may be relevant into the future. These are the early signals of change.

Ultimately, because most of us do scanning to provide high quality input into our organisation's strategy development processes we need to end up with scanning reports that are useful are relevant for our organisation. Those reports need to have a focus to be seen as useful and relevant - they need to show what's coming that you need to be aware of, but the information in the report has to link to the organisation of today for people to accept it as valid and important to consider.

Your scanning report is about the future, but it informs decision making today. Having a focus does not stop you from exploring what's out there; it provides an 'anchor' though to allow you to start to make sense of what you are finding as it relates to your strategic decisions today.



So, to get started with environmental scanning: identify your focus, and document it. Ask yourself whether what you are finding helps you understand that focus issue, question or challenge more deeply?

Deciding what to scan for will most likely be linked to your institutional strategy initially, by identifying the major drivers of

change in the external environment that are likely to have an impact on that strategy into the future. There are drivers of change that are relatively pre-determined, such as demographic shifts and the likely impact of globalisation - these affect the strategy of just about any organisation. There will then be drivers that are industry related and some which are unique to you.

The key to scanning is to identify those drivers that you know a fair bit about, and to seek out those drivers which are uncertain in terms of what impact they might have - for examples, delivery of educational services - how quickly will the idea of student determined learning develop (learning at the discretion of the learner - what, when and where they decide)?

There are different levels of scanning:

- what competitors are doing,
- what is happening in the industry and how your competitors might respond,
- what is happening more generally with industry and government policy, and
- then broader societal and global trends.

The emphasis you put on each segment will depend on what you need, but you should **always** spend time looking at global trends – this is the area that sometimes gets dismissed because people are busy and want to know what is going to affect their work tomorrow rather than in 10 years time. But, the global trends drive the former and you need to understand them first.

**How do you identify the focus?** One way is to start with your strategy, take the 'context' section that is probably in your strategic plan and identify drivers or trends that are shaping that context. Then draft a suggested scanning framework (the areas you will scan around and why and the sorts of questions you are trying to answer) and get feedback from staff, other stakeholders and the Board.



A better way is to survey/interview a representative range of staff and Board members to identify what they think are the critical trends that will have an impact on your organisation in the future, and analyse that to identify common areas for scanning. Compare that to what's in your strategic plan and refine the framework. Then send it out to all staff and the Board for feedback.

The latter two stage approach will take more time but it says to staff that this process will be participative, and that your opinion about the future is valued. Sure, you will need to run an online survey or conduct some interviews, but this will help awareness about your scanning to filter through the organisation, and providing opportunities for staff involvement from the beginning will start to generate their interest in what you are going, and after all, interest is the first step in that elusive 'engagement' in our strategy that we all seek.

## Part 2: Who Should Scan?

Building a strong team of smart and diverse staff who are curious about what's happening out there.



Most of us scan the external environment every day, either consciously or sub-consciously. We usually scan around our jobs, our professions, our industries. What we find usually stays in our heads, however, unless your organisation has a formal scanning system in place, or you join a site like <a href="Shaping Tomorrow">Shaping Tomorrow</a> where you can record what you are finding.

A formal scanning system aims to take the scanning information out of individual minds and share it across the organisation, so that the breadth of information that informs strategic thinking is diverse and avoids being narrowly focused on what one or two individuals think is important.

Everyone in an organisation can contribute to a scanning system if given the opportunity, but a core group of scanners needs to be formed as early as possible in the set up of your scanning system. This group will act as champions for the scanning process, and will be provide the first analysis point to begin to determine relevance for the organisation.

A representative group is best, so that all areas of the organisation are formally involved in the scanning process, and a senior manager needs to be involved to ensure the work of the group can be translated into the context of broader organisational strategy. This sounds easy, but to be successful, it requires commitment or at least acceptance of the value of scanning so that staff have permission to be involved. Because variable support among managers is common, it's important that setting up the scanning group only occurs after the formal scanning system has been endorsed by the CEO and Board.



People in the scanning group need open minds, and be willing to have their ideas challenged. They need to be able to think outside the box and not be tied to the present way of doing things. They need to be willing to share their knowledge and be able to see the big picture rather than being limited by their job.

The scanning group needs to be trained in how to do scanning, and then supported while they become familiar with the process. Regular review meetings need to be held to allow the group to share their experience

and frustrations and to fine tune the scanning process for their organisation. Once they have started scanning on a regular basis, and scanning hits are accumulating, the group can begin to look for patterns and themes in what they are finding.



Sharing what the group is finding across the organisation is important, so that staff are kept informed about what the team is doing. A regular 'look what we've found' type email or newsletter is a good idea - it can have maybe three items, a brief summary of each and a link to follow up if people are interested.

The aim of this type of communication is to raise awareness of what is going on 'out there' in the external world, and to highlight that there are

trends that are likely to change the way they work in the future.

Ultimately, all staff can be involved in providing scanning hits, and the ideal situation is for scanning to be included in the position description of all staff - which is more likely in smaller organisations. A rating system of scanning hits is another way to get staff involved in identifying what they think will be important to consider as strategy is developed.



Finding ways to involve anyone who wants to be involved in scanning is not the easy way to 'do' scanning, but it promotes the collection of diverse perspectives about trends and drivers of change critical to the organisation's future, and often generates innovative solutions.

That diversity of perspective is key to challenging assumptions about what is possible in the future, and moving beyond business-as-usual approaches to strategy development.

## **Part 3: Starting to Scan**

Leaping into the scanning flow to identify What's important for your strategy.



You will soon be ready to take those first steps to explore what's 'out there'. Remember that you are probably already scanning the environment in an undirected sense, particularly around your industry and your professional work. Environmental scanning in a strategic sense is similar but requires a broader perspective, both in terms of where you look and what you look for.



Set up your classification system: a preliminary step is to consider the categories you will use to classify and record what you are finding. You can use a STEEP framework – social, technological, economic, environmental, political – or a variation, plus some sub-categories. Setting up a system means that there will be some consistency across the scanning team which will help similar hits be connected. When you are starting out, though, it's probably best not to worry too much about getting the categories right, as you will usually quickly work out the best system and tags/keywords to use. The point of doing this is to enable you to

retrieve your scanning hits easily in the future, and to be able to search across your scanning output when you need to do a report.

You should also have some sort of idea of what sort of outcome you want from your scanning — will you be doing a report for the Board, a snapshot report on some major trends, a monthly newsletter to staff? There are different types of 'products' you can develop from your scanning, with varying levels of detail. Again, as you are starting out, don't worry too much about this, as you will begin to work out how you can use your scanning hits to enhance your organisation's strategy and planning processes.



So...you've got your focus, and an idea of what you need to look for. Your scanning team is in place and has been trained. How to take that first step?

Yes, go to google and search on some keywords and see what you get. This will be fun, but as mentioned earlier, can quickly become overwhelming as you will have lots of information to deal with. You may also feel unsure about what is relevant and what is not, and feel just a tad overwhelmed. This is normal, so keep going. You will start to see connections between the

individual hits you are finding, and the relevance of what you are finding will become clearer. Remember to use your focus as your anchor in all of this – if you are unsure of whether something is relevant, think about how it might help you better understand the issues you have identified. If it's not directly relevant, but you think it's interesting, trust your instinct and record it anyway. It's the collision of seemingly disparate data that often generates new strategic insights.

#### Where to Look?

Using google is one way to explore what's 'out there', and the sites of futures consultants and futurists sometimes have trend reports. Meta scanning sites like <a href="Shaping Tomorrow">Shaping Tomorrow</a> use a crowdsourcing approach to gather scanning hits and make them available for free. Subscribe to RSS feeds of sites you find useful, and ones you find a bit weird or way out. The latter are often the home of the next big trend that you will need to deal with. Do searches on <a href="Twitter">Twitter</a> as the quality of information being shared there is quite extraordinary. You need to avoid, of course, the 'what I ate for breakfast' type posts and instead look for the tweets of people in the futures community and beyond who are sharing what they are finding in their scanning. You can <a href="follow me">follow me</a> on Twitter too.

#### Your Biggest Challenge?



Your biggest challenge will be finding the time to scan on a regular basis. Scanning all too quickly falls down the priority list in the face of busy days and overloaded email in boxes. And if scanning is not recognised formally as part of your job, then it will become hard to justify in the face of short term and urgent demands on your time.

I do my scanning first thing in the morning when I read the overnight emails and feeds. After you have been scanning for a while, you'll have become very proficient at identifying what's important and pretty quick at entering the details on whatever scanning database/system you are using.

Whatever schedule you set up to scan, make sure it's regular, and make sure it's time you treat as non-negotiable.

## **Part 4: Recording Your Hits**

Establishing a robust system for documenting what you are finding.



Okay, you have your focus, the scanning team is in place, your keywords and categories are decided, and you've started to scan. How do you keep track of what you are finding?

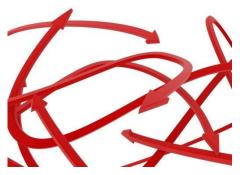
At its simplest, you can use your computer's folder system to store copies of documents, and a social bookmarking site like delicious or diigo to records website links. If you make sure you use the same tags and keywords in both places, this will work - if you are not dealing with huge amounts of information. Even if you start off small, over time you will amass a lot of information, and the biggest challenge then becomes searching and retrieving that information when you need it.

I use **Shaping Tomorrow** for my scanning database. And here is a disclaimer: I now do some work in partnership with <u>Shaping Tomorrow</u>, but I started using their database in 2006, as a paying customer. Before then, I think I tried almost every solution I could think of - the folder system I described above, developing my own database, word documents, excel spreadsheets...you get the idea. I'm not going to provide any more of a free plug for Shaping Tomorrow; however, head over to <u>their site</u> to see the value of what they provide for yourself. I use the site to store my scanning hits, and to write up trend alerts and reports.

I also use <u>Evernote</u> to store webpages that I don't classify as a scanning hit, but which I want to keep track of. Sometimes this is a quote or a section from a paper I've written, and I think the data or concepts being discussed will come in handy in the future, for a presentation or a workshop. I do use the same tags and keywords in both Shaping Tomorrow and Evernote.

The key to recording your scanning hits is to do so in a way that is accessible not only to you and the scanning team, but also to staff in your organisation to use in their day-to-day work. If you do this, you are offering a resource to your staff that they didn't have before, and over time, you could them to start contributing to the scanning database (remember that most of us already scan the environment every day, even if we don't call it that).

Once you have been scanning regularly for a couple of months, you will start to see similarities between individual hits - when this happens, you are starting to identify a trend. Scan in more depth around that area, and see if it is a trend - a cluster of similar events that all seem to be moving in a similar direction. If it is, and it's relevant to your focus, then this is something you could write up a trend report on - but don't do that just yet.



Many websites do trend reports and many people put out their lists of 'the most important trends to watch for this year/this decade', usually at the beginning of each year. Few, however, do this kind of work in context - that is, they treat a trend as if it existed in isolation and never connected or collided with another trend. In reality, no trend exists in isolation and it is the **trend ecosystem** relevant to your strategic focus that you are trying to build.

So you need to be alert as you scan for connections and dependencies among the trends you are finding, and record your thinking about these connections as you go. When you are ready, a systems map of your trend ecosystem is a useful exercise, and can be done when you come to more formally analyse the output from your scanning.

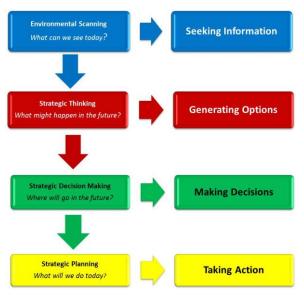
## **Part 5: Analysing Your Scanning Output**

Analysing and interpreting what your finding to identify implications for your strategy.



So far, we've identified the strategic questions, set up a team, started scanning and have been recording hits and seeing patterns among them.

At this stage, you have started to identify trends and you can see some interdependencies among those trends. What does it all mean? When you ask that question, it's time to move to analysis.



Remember that environmental scanning provides input into the <u>strategic thinking</u> stage of strategy development. The aim of this stage is to **expand your perceptions** of the strategic options available to your organisation by broadening the range and depth of information you consider as you develop those options. It's at this stage where strategic analysis of your scanning hits takes place.

Strategic analysis is about the future, not today. This is a space which is long term and big picture rather than operational. It's about breaking down what you have found in your scanning into manageable 'chunks' to determine what is relevant for you, and the areas in which you might need to

do more research to inform your strategic thinking.

This space is about possibilities, about what might happen in the future as the result of the evolution of the trends you have identified, not about what is here and present today. If you approach strategy with the mindset that the future is a linear extrapolation of today, then you are likely to have a 'this is rubbish' response to analysing scanning output. You will be looking for confirming trends that confirm your view of the world today, rather than 'disconfirming' trends that will open up possibilities not seen or previously ignored.

So, approach the analysis stage with an open mind.

### How do you analyse your scanning output?

- Confirm relevant trends emerging from your scanning this is about determining the
  importance of what you are finding for your strategic question. Not everything you find will be
  relevant for that question, or for your current strategy cycle. Keep an eye on the trends you
  regard as less relevant, however, as they could start to increase or wane in strength over
  time.
- Explore how the relevant trends might evolve over time, and resulting possible impacts of those trends on your organisation into the future.
- Identify the strategic issues you need to address or explore further to be able to respond to challenges that might emerge.

There are many tools you can use in this stage of the strategy process. You can assess trend relevance using the <u>Trend Relevance Assessment</u> worksheet. The **Futures Wheel** is a simple tool that helps you identify the implications of a trend continuing to develop over time and how it connects to other trends.

**Scenario planning** or scenario thinking is a tool that allows you to explore risk and opportunity in a range of plausible future contexts and to identify strategic options for today. **Systems maps** connect trends and drivers of change, so you can see cause/effect and influence attributes, and see clearly that no trend exists in isolation. **Causal Layered Analysis** helps to address any deeply held organisational assumptions about the future that may be constraining change.

This stage of the scanning process is often the most difficult, because here we have to challenge thoser deeply held assumptions about how the future will evolve. It also involves recognising that there are no future facts, and that trends have multiple possible outcomes – which is why you are aiming to develop a trend ecosystem, not a database of individual trends.

This is the stage of the strategy process where the complexity and uncertainty of what's possible becomes apparent. It's the stage where you have to move beyond business-as-usual thinking to be able to identify strategic options that will help you develop sustainable strategy for your organisation.

## **Part 6: Reporting Your Scanning Findings**

Communicating your findings to your organisation to trigger strategic conversations.



We've discussed focusing your scanning, setting up your scanning team, how to start scanning, recording what you are finding and analysing your scanning output. This section is about reporting your scanning findings within your organisation.

This is a critical stage in terms of ensuring your scanning findings are 'used' within your organisation's strategic processes. It's very easy to read a scanning report, say something like "that's interesting", put it down and go back to work. The aim with futures focused scanning reports is to trigger thinking about new ways to address strategic challenges, to move thinking about possibilities beyond the status-quo.

A scanning report is an opportunity to change the way people think in your organisation, so they need to be prepared with care, particularly in terms of tailoring the report for your audience(s). There are different types of scanning reports:

- a snapshot report of the external environment, covering the status of a selected number of trends at a given point in time,
- a background paper for the strategic planning cycle,
- regular trend reports on single trends that you are watching (including other trends influencing the trends on your watch list),
- more detailed quarterly reports on implications of trends and drivers, and
- Quick snippets about what you are finding, circulated at regular intervals across your organisation.

The type of report you prepare will depend not only on your audience, but also how embedded scanning is in your strategy processes. If you are just starting out, the aim will be to ensure your first reports as accepted as valuable additions to your organisation's strategy processes.

There are also many formats for reports, some more detailed than others. Explore options for presenting beyond paper as well - presentations, videos and other technological formats can be useful. My advice, particularly for a first report, is to keep it simple and very clear. Focus on relevance for your strategy, credible sources and a range of strategic options that connect your scanning to today's challenges. Focus on the quality rather than quantity in your report.

In all cases, you should include trigger questions that help generate some strategic conversation about what these trends mean for your organisation. Trigger questions for specific trends can take the forms of answers to the following questions:

- What impact might it have on your industry today and in the future?
- What might be the implications for your organisation?
- How could you respond?
- How, and in what ways, could this information be relevant to my organisation?



If this process of identifying trigger questions hurts your brain, then you are on the right track. The potential implications of change in the external environment are not clear cut, they can't be identified and boxed neatly. There are many future possibilities, many questions to discuss and explore before your strategic options emerge. It is this conversation that is triggered by your reports that strengthens the final strategy that is developed.

The only way you will build an organisational conversation about your report is if you have worked out ahead of time where scanning 'fits' into your existing planning/strategy process. If you don't do this, people will see no value in the conversation and won't contribute - because the relationship between scanning and strategic decision making is not clear. They will find your scanning reports interesting, but not useful, and nothing will change.

If you have time and the capacity, test your report with a trusted group of people inside the organisation who can give you feedback - this will allow you to adjust the content and/or presentation to ensure it is received positively.

And ask for feedback. Expect negative comments as well as positive, and understand that changing how people 'do' strategy will take time. There are some powerful models out there which often have the unfortunate side-effect of lulling us into a false sense of security – that by ticking the boxes, you will have a robust strategy.

You will only have a robust strategy if you have crafted a clear view of your organisation's long term future to inform your decision making today.

## **A Final Comment**

Scanning is a continual process. For it to be of any value in strategy development, it needs to be done on an ongoing basis. It needs to be someone's job

The aim of scanning and of futures work in general is to enable organisations to be ready to respond to the challenges of the external environment, and to adjust strategy accordingly.



You are aiming to build your understanding of the external environment in ways that are broader and deeper and more meaningful to your organisation's strategy development processes.

What you are trying to avoid is the 'head in the sand' syndrome where you believe that you don't need to keep an eye on what might be coming because the future will be just like today. Expect surprises with this approach, and expect to stay reactive!

You will find that your focus on what really matters sharpens over time. You will still be under the influence of the busyness syndrome on a daily basis, but you will have clearer signposts about where to focus your energies – both as an individual and as an organisation. Your biggest challenge is likely to be finding the time to scan and to think about what you are seeing – but you must making finding the time a priority. You will change the way you think, and you will be able to contribute to the development of a longer term view of your organisation's future.

## **About Thinking Futures**

Thinking Futures is a strategic foresight practice that helps you move beyond the status-quo to shape your organisation's future today.

We work with you to find the thinking space to critically interpret and find meaning in the complexity of the trend ecosystem that is your external operating environment, and to use that understanding to inform your strategic responses today.

Here's the formal overview of what Thinking Futures does.

Thinking Futures works with people in organisations to enhance their long term thinking capacity – otherwise known as their strategic foresight capacity – and to use that thinking to build strategy that is futures ready. I work with you to help you think about possible futures today by:

 building and enhancing environmental scanning to identify information and ideas needed for strategic decision making – I help you bring the outside into your organisation,



- running <u>strategic thinking</u> processes that start
  with a focus on the long term view rather than short term urgency I use<u>scenario planning</u> to
  help you understand the shape of preferred futures, potential risks and opportunities and your
  emerging strategic options so that your strategy today is robust and <u>futures ready</u>, and
- documenting your strategy in clear, concise and useful <u>strategic plans</u> that inform short-term decision making by your people I work with your people to make your plans meaningful 'on the ground' in your organisation, and a key tool in your strategy execution process.

## **Questions? Need to Talk?**

Get in touch with me at any time – seriously. I do offer scanning services if you want specific help tailoring your scanning, but if you just want to chat, please do get in touch – no obligation at all!

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