Public sector horizon scanning – stocktake of the Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network*

Kate Delaney
Delaney Foresight Pty Ltd
Australia

Louise Osborne
Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network
Australia

Abstract

Horizon scanning is not new, nor is its use in the public sector. In this article we report and reflect on our experience in the Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network (AJASN), a horizon scanning group started in 2005 with the support of four Australian Commonwealth government agencies that in 2012 has a membership of over twenty agencies from Australia and New Zealand. A survey of members past and present in 2012 highlights the importance of leadership, timing and processes in adopting horizon scanning into decision making and planning. The paper places the lessons learnt in context with the broader literature.

Keywords: foresight, horizon scanning, public sector

Horizon Scanning

There are a number of definitions of horizon scanning that have been proffered over the years. One that has been widely adopted, in a government context, is: 'the systematic examination of potential threats, opportunities, and likely future developments which are at the margins of current thinking and planning. Horizon scanning may explore novel and unexpected issues, as well as persistent problems or trends' (DEFRA, 2002). Sutherland and

Woodroof (2009) suggest that the most important activity horizon scanning has is the recognition of issues that are just beginning to emerge. Butter *et al.* (2010) say that scanning serves complementary objectives: *'to enhance resilient policy-making and address policy makers' needs and concerns regarding new issues they will encounter; to identify business opportunities by anticipating consumer and societal needs; and, to prepare society on less expected or rapid changes (Butter *et al.*, 2010).'* Bourgon and Milley (2010) say *'It is about discerning probable patterns where none were seen before and extracting meaning from diffuse information and imperfect knowledge. This work requires the diversity of perspectives coming from the interactions among multiple actors.'*

A plain English explanation of horizon scanning that the AJASN uses is 'horizon scanning is the practice of monitoring the strategic and operating environments, and tracking changes in these environments that could have an impact on critical outcomes.' A basic view that most AJASN members share is that better understanding of the time horizon they are operating in, the relative rate of change, the range of potential outcomes, and the nature of change patterns are helpful to their organisations.

In practical terms, scanning efforts by the AJASN focus on change dynamics (events, trends, underlying drivers and worldviews) in both the perceived environment (the one that we notice and talk about) and the pertinent environment (the one that can drive change in member organisations). As the network matures its focus has shifted towards improving identification and reporting on 'frontier' issues and weak signals (Jackson 2011).

Horizon Scanning in Government

The most publicly visible and accessible examples of governments' horizon scanning in the period of time that the AJASN has been operating are those in the United Kingdom and Europe. Two such programs are The Horizon Scanning Centre, which was developed and supported by the Government Office for Science in the United Kingdom, and the European Foresight Monitoring Network (EFMN), although there have been many other efforts that are noteworthy. In the United States, Fuerth and Faber (2012) argue in, a heavily endorsed article, Anticipatory Governance: Practical Upgrades, that the Executive Branch of the U.S. Government needs to fuse foresight with policy analysis.

It remains unclear whether interest in foresight is becoming a mainstream public sector activity in Australia. However, the formation of a horizon scanning Working Group reporting to the Coordination Committee on Innovation, the participation of the Prime Minister's office in internal and other scanning activities – including the AJASN and international networks – and the development of formal horizon scanning activities in the Premier's Department in Victoria are indicative of growing interest.

Many government-based horizon scanning systems are less visible. There is a National Government Foresight Organizations group with members from the UK, Finland, France, Holland, OECD, Singapore, South Korea, United States, and Canada which has been meeting since 2009. The principal aims of the group are to:
- Build an international network of national government foresight organisations
- Exchange experience on challenges in doing effective scanning and foresight in government

- Share analysis and discuss emerging issues of mutual interest.

In Australasia, Singapore and New Zealand have both undertaken horizon scanning. The former has run a national security focused program called the Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning system (RAHS), the latter FutureWatch which focused on emerging science trends and innovations, notably in biotechnology and nanotechnology.

Table 1. *Snap shot of several national horizon scanning efforts[1]*

Country	Organisation	Reporting to
Canada	Policy Horizons Centre	Canadian Government Deputy Ministers community (equivalent to Departmental Secretary)
Finland	Inter-departmental committee chaired by a secretariat	Prime Minister's Office
Singapore	Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning system (RAHS)	Prime Minister's Office
United Kingdom	Horizon Scanning Centre	Government Chief Scientific Adviser, who reports directly to the Prime Minister and Cabinet
United States	National Intelligence Council	Director of National Intelligence, head of Intelligence Community

Interest in Horizon Scanning in the Australian and New Zealand Governments

A key message of reports like the 2007 Victorian Government and Demos report *Towards Agile Government* and the 2010 Commonwealth Government *Blueprint for Reform* is that horizon scanning contributes to better design, delivery, and implementation of services, programs, and policies. Horizon scanning is recognised as an innovation method in the Australian Public Sector's *Innovation Tool Kit* (2011) and a method to inform capability management in the New Zealand Government's *Capability Tool Kit* (2008).

A number of agencies have produced horizon scans and scan periodically. There are also a few well-funded and directed scanning groups like the Australia New Zealand Horizon Scanning Network (ANZHSN) which is an on-going scanning activity to identify emerging health technologies (Mundy, Hiller & Merlin 2011).

Our general observation is that like most other strategic foresight activity undertaken in Australia and New Zealand over the past two decades the appetite for horizon scanning and its uptake waxes and wanes over time. Indeed the uptake challenge is not dissimilar to the experience of others working in similar fields.

The Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network

The Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network was created in the last quarter of 2005 when a decision was made by its founding members – The Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry, The Bureau of Rural Sciences, Land & Water Australia and the New Zealand

Ministry of Research, Science and Technology -- to pool their resources to undertake horizon scanning rather than to separately complete a periodic scan. The decision reflected their view at the time that sharing resources and their efforts would result in improved depth, breadth, and timing of advice about coming opportunities and potential 'train wrecks.'

The AJASN business model is fairly unique in terms of national scanning activities (Table 1).[2] The AJASN has adopted a fluid partnership approach, with individual members contributing a small fee each calendar year. The outputs include an online database, quarterly reports, and an annual report. Member organisations decide the level and nature of other contributions they will make to the network; these contributions vary according to their specific needs, workloads, and interests. Participation in the network is as simple as passively receiving reports to more active participation through written and editorial contributions.

Member organisations are responsible for translating, making relevant and socialising the joint AJASN reports within their respective organisations. Different agencies have taken different approaches suited to their individual culture and mission. AJASN activities and reports are used to inform broader position papers, annual reports, internal horizon scans, strategic planning activities, and individual policy, program and service delivery design and development processes. AJASN is also used by member organisations as a professional development opportunity (to improve strategic thinking).

Membership itself is achieved partly through approaches made to the AJASN, but also through members identifying suitable participants that would benefit the network. In the latter case the suitability of the agency, but also critically the individual is assessed. Individuals with skill and knowledge sets that complement the network composition are often approached by current members to attract them to the network. An active watch on overall composition is maintained. A mix of older and newer members, age groups, experience, expertise, and world views helps to balance articles in the reports.

AJASN has a range of external links and reporting relationships. For example it reports to the Coordination Committee on Innovation (CCI). The Coordination Committee on Innovation (CCI) is a discussion forum for 30 Australian Government departments and agencies with responsibilities or interests that impact on the national innovation system. AJASN also feeds into other scanning networks and activities such as 'Quick Quotes' produced by the Caring for Our Country program. These external links are continuing to evolve. In addition, some member organisations maintain parallel formal scanning systems or activities within their organisations (e.g. Prime Minister and Cabinet, EPA Victoria) or more broadly (e.g. Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) involvement in a specific Shaping Tomorrow scanning node; Environment Waikato involvement with the international Public Sector Foresight Network).

The AJASN provides seminars/training for member agencies, when requested to do so. Not all agencies have taken up this freely available opportunity.

In 2012 the AJASN has started publishing a newsletter, issued in months when there is no quarterly report or annual report. The newsletter will focus on raising awareness of scanning, building skills and sharing new scanning resources (e.g. new journal articles, other networks' scanning reports and resources).

In its seven years of operation the AJASN has seen its membership expand and

the web based tools used in the network's horizon scanning activities developed and refined. AJASN (and member organisations that have their own internal scanning systems) uses a combination of manual, semi-automated, and participatory methods of scanning (Amanatidou *et al.* 2012).

Database

One of the key benefits of membership is a shared scanning web-based database. The database is comprised of scan 'hits'. Scan 'hits' are varied – they include anything from new data sets and peer-reviewed literature to personal reflections found in a variety of media and 'grey' literature (i.e. reports, studies, monographs produced by government, non-profit, private, and educational institutions not appearing in the peer-reviewed journals). As a rule of thumb, hits either nuance or confirm a current understanding or change dynamics, or identify an early indicator of change. In other words, a scan 'hit' might be an anomaly that a member has spotted – i.e. it 'does not fit' with conventional wisdom or current planning assumptions. Individual participants are tasked with entering 15 items per quarter into the database, the consultant contributing a further 2-300. Different members manage this in different ways. For many the agency participant will take sole responsibility for entering items of interest that they come across during their daily activities or conferences or meetings that they attend. In some agencies a more distributed approach is taken with teams asked to store up any items of interest that can be entered.   In one agency that runs a separate internal trends process, the team in charge of this process use this method to gather information from a wider group of people in the agency. The database items include fields for item title; source publication; keywords; URL; summary ; author; date; credibility (peer reviewed; credible; speculative); impact areas; and a 'so what' (what does it mean in broader terms).

Meetings and reports

The AJASN holds four quarterly meetings each calendar year. The last quarterly meeting of the year also identifies the issues which will be addressed in the annual report. As not all members attend meetings, contributions may be submitted independently of the meeting process.

Prior to the meetings members are provided a download of the database contents for that quarter (as a pdf and MS Excel document). Members generally use some form of mindmapping to scan through the issues and look for trends in the information in preparation for the meetings. During the meetings members preferably discuss scan 'hits'. These 'hits' might be discussed thematically, in isolation, or in clusters pointing to weak or previously unobserved indicators of change. This discussion expands the ideas and trends spotted by individuals prior to the meetings, and allows the collective intelligence of the group to direct the item into shape. Bishop (2010) indicates that *'the best scanning hit is an event or a new piece of information … that is unknown … that has a high likelihood of changing the future.'* Inayatullah (2003) notes we should capture issues that have *'… both a forecasting utility in that they give us information on potential futures and a disruptive dimension in that they call into question our assumptions about the present'*.

Mendonça *et al.* (2012) indicate *'weak signals can be thought of as gross, unstructured, fragmented, incomplete, and inadvertent environmental data that may be refined into valuable information regarding context and further be articulated into strategically actionable knowledge.'* In the same article, Mendonça, Cardoso and Caraça (2008) also suggest *'As advanced indicators that precede significant discrete one-off events and/or novel developments in the rate and direction of trends, their analysis has the potential to facilitate the real-time alignment between organisational decision-making and changing external circumstances.'* It is this alignment of decision making to possible and probable change that is rare.

After the meetings different members work together to produce a one page assessment for each topic of interest to their organisation as discussed at the meeting; each individual co-written assessment of the issues focuses on 'what's new' and 'so what' (or impact). Each individual account of change refers back to the scan 'hits' in the database, allowing readers to backtrack to the source documents and so facilitating the (report) readers ability to re-interpret the conclusions reached by the authors of a specific section of the quarterly or annual report.

A co-ordinated draft of the report is distributed to all members of the group providing an opportunity to comment and add to report observations. Once the report is finalised it is the responsibility of each member to translate the report or parts of it into targeted inputs that are of use to their organisation. This is very challenging – especially in strategy and policy making processes – as horizon scanning is only one item on the table – science, political matters and pressures, beliefs and values, and experience are also in the mix (e.g. Prewitt, Schwandt & Straf 2012).

As a point of comparison, with estimated substantially greater funding base than that of the AJASN, the Horizon Scanning Centre in the U.K. produces:

1. Rapid insight studies - reports of 20-30 pages in length, completed in 6-12 week turnaround
2. Mini briefings – rapid overviews of key topics - 2- 4 page briefings completed within 5-10 days
3. Point research – 2-4 hour turnaround for ad hoc enquiries
4. Tailored services – workshops, training, ad hoc advice and assistance
5. Networking - Identification of external resources and contacts

AJASN Stocktake

To better understand how the network has been received in government we have looked at changing membership, participation levels, and knowledge transfer mechanisms.

Additionally, to gain a deeper understanding of barriers and enablers to the uptake of information produced by AJASN, we asked all present and six contactable, past AJASN member organisations to complete a survey. Seventeen of a possible 26 respondents replied to the survey. We conducted seven follow-up interviews with five current members and two interviews in lieu of survey responses with two of the six former members of the network that we were able to contact in October/ November 2012.

Shifts in Organisational Membership

The more organisational members value horizon scanning and the process, the more they will resolve to engage in the network. Key questions for the AJASN are: do members value horizon scanning generally; and do they value the AJASN specific process? For example, do they think that it is needed, important, beneficial, or worthwhile?

During the seven years that AJASN has been working together the membership has changed. Current and former members fall under four broad groupings: (1) organisations that have joined and retained their membership, (2) organisations that have joined, left the AJASN, and then re-joined, (3) organisations that have joined and left, and, (4) organisations that have joined for a specific purpose and then left. Table 2 shows the membership movement since 2005 in these four categories:

Table 2. *Membership categories for the AJASN*

	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4
	Member organisations that have joined and retained membership	Member organisations that have joined, left and then re-joined	Member organisations that have joined and left	Member organisations that have joined for a specific purpose and then left
Number of organisations in this category	22	4	8 (six could be contacted)	1

Four organisations come under category 2, eight under category 3. For organisations that leave the AJASN, they do so because they are (a) either re-structured with different priorities, or abolished by government, or (b) their budgets are placed under severe constraints as a result of government budget choices. Between 2005 and 2012, there have been 5 agencies that have left as a result of financial pressures, and 3 agencies that have been re-structured or dis-established. This is not a uniquely Australian/New Zealand phenomenon, Havas, Schartinger and Weber (2010) noted that *'economic standstill or recession tends to lead to resistance to change and makes it very difficult to allocate resources to future-oriented activities.'* For these organisations the reasons given for their departure include:
- Loss of a senior executive champion (also found by Rohrbeck, 2012; Farrington, Henson & Crews 2012)
- Change of government priorities for their agency

In discussing reasons for their departure former members of the AJASN have explained that past experience with horizon scanning and broader foresight work has positively and negatively affected the views of staff to whom members report (*e.g.*, whether they think the horizon scanning really will deliver benefits) and efficacy judgments (*e.g.*, whether they think their organisation can effectively translate and then use collective horizon scanning approaches and results). A general conclusion is that participants in horizon scanning must be persuaded that their efforts accrue visible benefits to their bureaucratic and – sometimes political – audiences and sponsors.

Organisational culture also seems to amplify or dampen the value associated with horizon scanning. Interviews with past members show the value of horizon scanning sometimes depends on whether scanning fits or conflicts with cultural

values. Leadership is necessary to bring scanning into planning processes. Likewise, organisational policies and procedures positively or negatively affect members' appraisals of task demands, resource availability, and situational factors.

The second shift in membership that we have observed since 2005 is an expansion of participation to include agencies that by necessity must take into account longer time frames in their planning, investment, research directions, policies, and strategies. This shift is illustrated in Table 3. For example since 2005 the membership has expanded from one focused on environmental issues to one that includes science and innovation agencies.

Table 3. *Breadth of 2012 organisational members*

central agency	primary industry	science, research, technology, innovation	energy	environment	higher education	justice	planning & infrastructure	social services
2	3	3	1	6	2	2	2	1

Participant Churn and Contributions

One of the complexities of running a multi-agency, on-going horizon scanning group relates to membership churn; although agencies retain membership, an individual's participation may be very unstable, especially when the rate of broader government changes is high. This problem has occurred in other networks including the European Institute of Innovation & Technology Innovation Radar (Thom, 2011).

Levels of participation from members are subject to budget variability and consequently available resources in terms of time and travel to meetings. Staff turnover for member agencies also means turnover for the network bringing in new world views and expertise but also a need for continuous up-skilling of members.

As the selection of individual participants is left to each organisation, the degree of their interest and the contributions they make to the network are variable. While all stakeholders are invited to contribute, some prefer to make use of insights/ reports rather than providing them. Bishop (2010) has found that *'the single biggest problem to enterprise level scanning is to encourage members of the enterprise to contribute to the database. While a rich source of scanning hits benefits the whole enterprise, it is hard for individuals to justify spending much time making the contributions in the face of many other pressing demands on their time.'* One factor for success in AJASN is the independent contribution made by the facilitator to the database and reports each quarter, ensuring a broad view and a reliable input.

Corporate horizon scanning systems require *'a deep understanding of the organisational functions they feed into'* (Rohrbeck, 2010). Where individual participants are not connected into broader decision processes and systems within their agency, the individual's ability to position horizon scanning insights, or to table them for further exploration, is limited.

Transferring knowledge

A number of factors affect the adoption of the material such as: the presence of a champion (or champions) at a senior level; the timeliness of the information; and the

internal processes of the organisation.

The AJASN horizon scanning process faces the difficulty that the reports it produces reach into many different public institutions. In horizon scanning the lack of ownership by key, influential staff and decision makers cannot be compensated for by great dissemination efforts. Bourgon and Milley (2010) indicate *'While data and technology may help anticipate emerging trends, the most important knowledge lies not in the data itself but in the conversations about it – in the interpretation and insight shaped by the line of questioning of various actors.'*

The impact of horizon scanning from a decision making perspective might be very limited without effective knowledge management/translation. It is a truism that scanning results have higher impact when they are timely i.e. published at *'the right moment.'* Horizon scanners need to develop a good understanding of the processes into which they feed their results. Parliamentary sitting times, hearings and the agenda of the government can strongly define when public sector decision makers are most sensitive to new insights and when these can be fed into policy making and decision processes. Election lead up times and campaigns have distinct rhythms – sometimes including strong limitations for public administrations. In a 2009 report for the European Environment Agency *Looking back on looking forward: a review of evaluative scenario literature* the authors observe *'Long-term thinking cannot provide a technical 'fix' for a context that is driven by short-term concerns, regardless of whether these concerns have political or economic drivers.'*

The basic patterns used to transfer knowledge back into each department, agency, or organisation that participates in the AJASN are:
- Circulation of reports through agencies socialising the material and providing no surprises information
- Using the reports as a base for further exploration of issues through desktop analysis or workshops to feed into planning, investment, and/or policy development processes
- Engaging staff in internal scanning processes that complement AJASN material
- Skill transfer through up skilling of AJASN members who can then transfer the skills back to their agency.

Of these it is integrating scanning with planning processes that is the least well done and intermittent.

To exemplify how this might work a couple of brief case studies are described.

In one member organisation AJASN reports were used to identify upcoming issues that may impact on investment priorities. This was done by a small team looking at potential agency and portfolio relevant impacts of the trends in consultation with the management team. The selected issues were referred back to experts in the field to analyse the potential for impact on the organisation, the nation and at a global level. This information was then included in investment planning processes to prioritise R&D investments.

Another member organisation has created a mirror internal scanning network. This complements the AJASN by targeting a narrower range of issues more directly contained within the agency portfolio. It is also creates a forward thinking organisation by training staff in scanning, and identifying trends and impact. Both the AJASN and internal reports are then fed into strategic planning processes to work through immediate and longer term potential threats and opportunities. At

present the planning process involves workshopping the trends reports with senior managers.

Less formal methods of socialising reports include the circulation to a wide range of staff members with a five dot point analysis of potential impacts, and the delivery of reports to decision making bodies such as Boards or other networks such as the inter agency Australian Government Coordination Committee on Innovation.

In all cases the best use of the material has been achieved when resources have been dedicated to facilitating its use. One point of resistance commonly met is a lack of awareness that scanning is part of a suite of foresight tools and acts as a first step. Immediate and visible impact is expected from reports without further development of the material. Another is a misunderstanding of the discipline of scanning and that the value comes from the intersection of issues. This analysis of the intersection of issues is not achieved by casual browsing of the media, but the later can be perceived as adequate 'scanning'.

Benefits of Horizon Scanning

Members of the AJASN identified a number of benefits of membership that agree with what we already knew about mechanisms of knowledge transfer.

The November 2012 survey responses indicated that at an organisational level AJASN:

1. Informed both strategic planning and investment planning decisions
2. Alerted policy makers to potential technical innovations that may impact on service delivery and/or informed operational areas
3. Informed internal futures work including serving as an example of a scanning process that informed development of internal networks
4. Increased awareness of the need for active policy engagement, rather than being reactive; broadened scope of interest in whole-of-government influences on policy (similar experience overseas noted in Lundqvist, 2009)
5. Bringing much needed methodologies that had previously not been fully exploited within the mainstream of the organisation (similar experience overseas noted in Calof and Smith, 2010)

On a smaller scale tangible and intangible benefits are produced by:

6. Providing helpful points of contact for consultation on issues through networks
7. Skill/capacity building (i.e. individual professional development, improved team scanning skills, improved strategic thinking skills)
8. Providing no surprises information to decision makers or to inform the work of policy officers for example.

It benefits government on a wider basis by:

9. Seeding skilled individuals in organisations
10. Strengthening linkages across agencies
11. Providing a systems perspective.

There are many statements of horizon scanning benefits in the literature (e.g. Habegger, 2009, 2010; Connery, 2012). In the AJASN, benefits of horizon scanning that resonate with public sector audiences are: (a) shared resources, reducing individual agency costs; (b) current decisions are more routinely informed by better strategic thinking (e.g. identifying potential high impact change and exploring

patterns of change, downstream unintended consequences and medium term course corrections and adjustments) and (c) improved quality of decisions.

Challenges

Three strong 'challenge' themes emerged from the AJASN survey. Participants who completed the survey indicated:

1. The AJASN had to improve its focus on governments' policy priorities/concerns identified by their agencies; the network should take a more systematic/focused approach to identifying items to track/report on.
2. Some members' limited time and resources mean that it is difficult for them to meaningfully relate the AJASN reports to their core business (i.e. they have limited time to translate the joint scan into culturally appropriate, agency-specific form)
3. The network should improve its capacity to identify emerging issues early and its capacity to challenge current underlying assumptions (e.g. similar experience overseas noted in Blackman and Henderson, 2004)

The literature review identified a number of challenges for adoption of foresight activities, including but not restricted to horizon scanning. These are broadly categorised as cultural (e.g.), capability, institutional (e.g.) and evaluation challenges (e.g. Schultz, 2006; Lundqvist, 2009; Havas, 2011; Johnston, 2012; Mendonça *et al.*, 2008, 2012).

A quick take on the challenge categories suggest that cultural challenges relate to alignment with broader decision making processes and priorities, the willingness to collaborate within and across agencies, the freedom to challenge strategic thinking flaws and mental models, the over-reliance on a small group of routinely consulted experts or trusted advisers, and the not invented here syndrome. Capability challenges link to the ability to identify/recognise relevant sources of information at the periphery, and the capacity of senior leaders to engage with uncertainty and maintain an open mind. Institutional challenges relate to the degree of administrative autonomy in the public sector, and the nature of scrutiny of the public sector. Evaluation challenges are connected to the difficulty of measuring foresight impacts in a meaningful way.

Studies, for example, by Schultz (2006), Cameron, Silvester, Nicholas and Cronin (2006), and Thom, Rohrbeck and Dunaj (2010) discuss some of the challenges identified.

We better understand that Government's desire to be *'evidence-based'* may create policy and decision-making processes that are victims of tunnel vision; missing the periphery remains a possibility, even when horizon scanning is undertaken (Schultz, 2006).

Cameron *et al.* (2006) recognised that horizon scanning networks like AJASN need to socialise their findings. For FutureWatch, a New Zealand biotechnology-focused horizon scanning system similar in structure and approach to the AJASN, they argued that for the approach to be successful one element needed was *'… a setting within which this information could be further explored, both by scientists and those who offer additional expertise.'*

In a benchmarking foresight study with 83 participating technology companies, Thom *et al.* (2010) found that while many have strong competences in collecting

and interpreting information, they are weak when it comes to disseminating and using the results: *'Only 23% of the respondents to the benchmarking study consider themselves as communicating important information to decision makers effectively.'* They recommend three mechanisms to translate weak signals into action: IT-based platforms, round tables, and road-mapping.

The extent to which use of horizon scanning is supported, rewarded, and expected is important (Weiner, Belden, Bergmire & Johnston 2011). We found in the challenges identified by the AJASN stocktake that there is a distinction between the capacity to undertake horizon scanning (resources, organisational structures) and the readiness to use horizon scanning. An important factor is the alignment with the political agenda and ongoing administrative processes.

Areas for Improvement – AJASN

Not unexpectedly, the AJASN membership holds a range of differing, sometimes conflicting, views and expectations on what horizon scanning might deliver. This difference arises from the participants' perspective of what information will add most to their specific organisations' starting point and knowledge base about what strategic foresight is and how to use strategic foresight in a public sector organisation.

We have identified some areas for improvement of ongoing scanning:

Process improvements

1. The first improvement is to clearly identify and share members' strategic priorities annually, as a mechanism to better target scanning activities and to facilitate inter-agency networking. A number of members have clearly conveyed the view that more targeted (directed) scanning will improve the relevance of horizon scanning (Choo, 2001).
2. The second improvement is to use social media and collaborative software, as well as the database, to facilitate information sharing, discussions and exchanges beyond the quarterly meeting.
3. Our stocktake has also resulted in a number of very useful suggestions about reporting scanning results. One key message is that the information gathered must be translated into a form that is easily digested by the final users of the data.

Improvements to better understand implications

4. A number of members suggested ways to improve how the network shares 'what works' to ensure the use of horizon scanning; many of these will be adopted.
5. In 2013, the AJASN will explore and trial new ways to assess the potential consequences of the emerging issues identified, jointly and individually based on suggestions received in the stocktake e.g. symposiums, idea-labs.

Areas for future research

6. One area for further research we think merits consideration is how trust is built within horizon scanning networks and, in turn, how these networks build trust outside of their confines.

Conclusion

The use and impact of horizon scanning in policy and other public sector decision processes is not yet fully understood. This is not unexpected given that we

do not even understand the use of science in policy, after decades of exploring the question (US National Research Council, 2012).

The thresholds, if any, for horizon scanning, in terms of its contribution to the capability to mobilise resources and orchestrate courses of action are unclear (Weiner, 2009).

Our experiences with AJASN are similar to those reported elsewhere. The leadership of an organisation must value and invest resources to the foresight activities. The biggest barrier to adoption from the survey was how to digest the reports for internal readership. Along with the time a barrier was a skills barrier to moving scanning material from report to action through other activities such as analysis and scenario planning. Adoption was only systematic in one member agency and the others depended on the will and skills sets of individuals. While the network can adapt to these barriers to a certain degree, there must be some internal shift in member's capacity before the full benefits are reaped. Some members felt that AJASN was assisting with raising the profile of foresight activities and in this way effecting a slow change in attitudes and capacity.

In a culture that is evidence based and deals with probabilities (or preferably certainties), it can be hard to integrate working with possibilities into planning processes. We hope to strengthen the use of horizon scanning through better understanding the cultures of our members, and thereby improving the palatability of delivery and knowledge transfer mechanisms. It is anticipated that this will continue to be a slow process of mutual learning. The other challenge that we anticipate is that of evaluation. With increasing accountability the question of attribution of decision making back to scanning processes is one that arises more frequently, and can create a barrier to the use of foresight tools. This is a challenge in itself.

Foresight is not a predictive process, but acts on the principle that events can evolve based on actions and decisions made today. Thus, while we can suggest futures we can also avoid them. Foresight itself can affect the rate and direction of activity. This creates a conundrum to evaluation as good foresight practices should to a degree see an absence of serious knocks. However, it is hard to evaluate the 'absence' of something predicted as a positive indicator. Scanning is also an evaluation tool in itself providing early indicators of positive and negative indicators of policy/programs/actions.

A Dutch proverb says that trust comes by foot, and leaves by horseback. This seems to be the case for horizon scanning. The Conference Board of Canada reporting on five horizon scanning organisations in 2008 for the Ontario Ministry of Health cautioned 'horizon scanning is a long-term investment that needs a critical mass of talent and resources … it takes time to develop, and successful programs take time to mature; the most effective scanning departments are at least five years old … scanning programs (they) reviewed are not static, but rather works-in-progress.' This contrasts with the Havas *et al.* (2010) observation, discussed earlier, that it is quite difficult to fund foresight activities when fiscal constraints come into play.

Bourgon and Milley (2010) presenting extensive international collaboration and research and the thinking of the multi-lateral New Synthesis Project on the future practice of public administration note, 'In the face of uncertainty and complexity, countries whose governments have the capacity to anticipate emerging issues and initiate proactive interventions will have a significant comparative advantage to

influence events in their favour.*'*

Correspondence

Kate Delaney
Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network
Delaney Foresight Pty Ltd
Suite 6 84 MacGregor Street, Deakin (Canberra suburb), ACT 2600, Australia
E-mail: kdel1473@bigpond.net.au

Louise Osborne
Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network
Suite 6 84 MacGregor Street, Deakin (Camberra suburb), ACT 26000, Australia
E-mail: louise.osborne@gmail.com

Notes

1 E-mail exchange between Peter Padbury, Director Policy Horizons, Government of Canada and Kate Delaney, AJASN Facilitator in June 2012.
2 Exchange of e-mails and reports in June 2012 About Australian participation in the National Government Foresight Organizations group between Peter Padbury, Director Policy Horizons, Government of Canada and Kate Delaney, AJASN Facilitator.

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