

Environmental Scanning

Organizations use environmental scanning to monitor important events in their surrounding environment. It is a way to answer the question, "What's happening in my environment that will affect my future?" Scanning involves identifying the issues and trends that have important implications for the future. The scanning includes analysis of the information about these issues and trends to assess their importance and determine their implications for planning and strategic decision making.

What is it?

Discover emerging trends of strategic importance. Scanning is different from ordinary information gathering in that it is concerned primarily with the future, emerging trends, and issues that have strategic importance for your organization.

Gather information from variety of sources. It involves gathering information from publications, conferences, personal and organizational networks, experts and scholars, market research, and any source that appears to be useful. Organizations may have formal, continuous processes for scanning, with a permanent unit of the organization responsible. Or the effort may be episodic and organized in an ad hoc manner.

Analyze data for planning purposes. Simply gathering the environmental data is insufficient. It is also necessary for you to interpret the data correctly and make it useful for planning and decision making.

What is it good for?

Take advantage of opportunities. Environmental scanning can help capitalize on emerging opportunities. It can be an important part of strategic planning by helping you shape strategy to better fit emerging conditions. When asked his hockey strategy, Wayne Gretsky is reported to have said, "I just skate to where the puck is going to be."

Anticipate developments to avoid costly mistakes. Scanning also helps avoid costly mistakes by helping planners and decision makers anticipate new developments. This is particularly important in any planning that involves information technology, since the capabilities and costs of IT are evolving at a rapid pace.

Some limitations and considerations

Level of resources required. It's hard to judge the appropriate level of resources to devote to environmental scanning. Where environmental conditions are turbulent and full of potentially significant changes, large amounts of resources may be justified. Even with large efforts, there is no guarantee that some wholly-unanticipated event will cause serious problems or present a great opportunity for which you aren't prepared.

Interpretation an inexact science. More importantly, the interpretation of trend information and forecasting is an inexact science at best. The farther into the future a scan probes, the more careful you must be with the interpretation.

Self-assessment Tools

Self-assessment tools include a wide range of methods to gather information about a current situation or performance. They are designed to answer the question, "How are we doing?" These tools range from something as simple as a newspaper survey asking readers to rate their knowledge of the Internet to the kind of year-long institutional self-assessment procedures used in hospital accreditation. The essential element in all these tools is they recognize that many kinds of assessment questions are best answered by the person or group being assessed. In some cases, only the people themselves have access to the necessary information, or the collection and assessment procedures would be far too intrusive or expensive for an external agency to perform.

What are they?

Self-administered questionnaires. The simplest form of self-assessment is a self-administered questionnaire or test. In order for the assessment to work, the questions must be sound and the participants must understand the criteria and provide valid responses. The answers are usually accompanied by an answer key and information on

how to interpret a score.

Informal evaluations. For informal self-assessments, such as the newspaper variety, neither the questions nor the resulting interpretation scales have any particular scientific basis, and are at best rough guides. More comprehensive self-assessments and accreditation procedures usually involve the participation of those being assessed in setting and reviewing goals. In the typical institutional assessment, the evaluation criteria are a mix of external standards developed by the accrediting body combined with the institution's own goals and criteria. So, establishing and reviewing goals is a part of the self-assessment process.

What are they good for?

Performance evaluations. If well designed, self-assessment can be a highly efficient kind of performance or status evaluation. The main cost of the process is the development of valid assessment tools and procedures. Once developed, the tools may be used repeatedly without the need for outside intervention.

Do-it-yourself. The kinds of information called for by the assessment tools may be quite extensive and complex to assemble. And the kinds of internal deliberations involved in institutional self-assessments require considerable staff time. But they avoid the costs of external consultants and analysts.

Build consensus, morale. The deliberative processes in setting goals and reviewing performance can have positive effects on the organization by building consensus, enhancing morale, and increasing understanding of operations.

Screen for problems. Self-assessment instruments can also be efficient screening devices to identify possible problems or areas for further attention. Self-administered surveys are often used in organizational development work to identify these areas and issues.

Planning tool. Self-assessment can also be used as a planning tool. One of the key planning questions to be answered in justice information integration is, "Where do we stand in terms of overall integration?" Your plan should be based on the most accurate possible assessment of past progress and the current status of integration efforts.

Some limitations and considerations

Hard to validate. Self-assessment tools are difficult to validate. The fact that they produce a measurement or evaluation result does not mean that it is accurate or meaningful. Interpretation must be done with careful attention to the validity of the tools and how they were used.

Distorted results. Those involved in the self-assessment can distort the results a number of ways. They may deliberately provide false or misleading information to promote their own interests: provide inaccurate data due to their own biases, faulty memories, or flawed perceptions; be unduly influenced by others in the process, either deliberately or inadvertently. And the data sources on which the assessment is based may themselves be of low quality.

Bias of the tools. The tools themselves could be badly designed or insufficiently tested, or there may be accidental but serious flaws in the information produced. The assessment tools could be deliberately designed to favor a particular point of view or desired outcome.

For more information

The Why EDI Guide for Small and Medium-Sized Businesses (1995). Montreal: EDI World Institute.

Strategic Planning Process Self-Assessment Questionnaire for Federal/Government Agencies .

<http://www.strategicfutures.com/articles/stratpln/gov/quesgov.html>

Building Smart Communities (1997). San Diego, CA: International Center for Communications, San Diego State University.

Current/Best Practices Research

Often, you may find that your business problem has already been dealt with, in whole or in part, by other government agencies, private and non-profit organizations, or academic researchers. Identifying and evaluating these solutions are important early steps in your project planning. There is an abundance of information and expertise in the IT community, as well as elsewhere in the public sector, that can contribute to solving problems

that are common to similar organizations. In particular, there is a great deal to learn from those cases where things did not go as well as expected. Best practices research involves learning both what works and what does not work, based on the relevant experience of others.

What is it?

Find various solutions. Best practices research involves identification and consideration of various solutions to the problem, or the components of the problem, that a project is intended to address.

Learn from others' success and failure. Such research may take different forms, but the ultimate goal is to learn from the experience of others so you can avoid "recreating the wheel" or replicating the mistakes of others.

Early project task. Best practices research should be conducted during the start-up phase and continued over the life of the project.

What is it good for?

Understand the problem. By finding out how other organizations tackled a similar problem, you can develop a better understanding of your problem from multiple and varied perspectives.

Find potential solutions that have already been tried. You can identify individuals and organizations that have solved, or tried to solve, problems similar to yours. You can learn from their experiences and gain feedback on your proposed and ongoing project activities.

Identify methods and resources. Use this tool to identify methods and mechanisms for evaluating IT solutions. In addition, current practices research is an effective way of identifying sources of relevant technical expertise and technology.

Classify all parts of the problem. By identifying all relevant components of a problem, you can avoid the trap of "treating the symptoms" of the problem instead of the problem itself.

Some limitations and considerations

Assumptions about others' work. When gathering data about other organizations' solutions, you must make assumptions as to the appropriateness or relevance of their experiences to the problem you're facing.

Reliance on published data and people's memories. In order to get information about current and best practices, you must rely on published reports and recollections of people involved in those projects. This can limit the scope of your research.

No one wants to discuss failures. Organizations and individuals are more likely to share stories about their successes than their failures. But both kinds of stories can provide valuable information.

Benchmarking

In benchmarking, you compare yourself to the best known example of how some other organization creates a product or service. The "best practice" provides a reference point against which to evaluate your own performance.² For example, if a county jail wanted to evaluate its recordkeeping procedures against a benchmark, it might investigate the fastest or most efficient examples across all county jails and take the best as the benchmark. Such a benchmarking framework has the advantage of using organizations that are similar in mission and basic technology. However, such a narrow framework might result in missing important lessons or improved methods to be found by a wider view. You may want to look outside your own "industry" for better examples. When Xerox Corporation wanted to improve its order fulfillment process, it did not use another copier company for a benchmark, but instead used LL Bean.

What is it?

Select an appropriate benchmark. Identifying and selecting the appropriate benchmarks is a critical part of the process. The news media, professional publications, and competitions are good ways to identify possible benchmark candidates.

Compare yourself to the best. Organizations that develop effective innovations and approaches to a particular problem typically publicize it. Most professional organizations and many publications sponsor annual competitions for best practices and noteworthy innovations. There are also databases of benchmark and best practice information for the public sector (see Keehley et al. below).

Requires consensus and support from team. Selecting the benchmark also requires consensus and support within your organization. In addition, you may have to establish a partnership with the benchmark organization.

Thorough analysis and understanding of business process. You need a thorough analysis and clear understanding of the business process and/or product to be evaluated. Without it, the lessons or innovations revealed by using the benchmark may be missed or misapplied.

What is it good for?

Learn how to improve efficiency and performance. The central benefit of good benchmarking is learning how to improve efficiency and performance. Benchmarks achieve their superior performance by innovative, often highly creative ways and offer rich opportunities for learning and gaining new perspectives. These new ideas, perspectives, and techniques can be learned through benchmarking much more efficiently and quickly than by self-study alone, formal research, or evaluation projects.

Take advantage of other group's investment. By using another organization as a benchmark, you're benefiting from its considerable investments in research, testing, training, and experimentation. Use the knowledge you acquire to help avoid mistakes and achieve higher performance.

Information sharing and collaboration. Benchmarking also involves information sharing and potential for collaboration. The process may start an ongoing exchange of performance ideas and innovation among organizations, providing greater opportunities for performance improvements.

Positive publicity and recognition for participants. Successful benchmarking efforts can also lead to public recognition for the participants. The potential for performance gains can be substantial, resulting in opportunities for increased public support and rewards.

Some limitations and considerations

Once-in-a-lifetime experience. The outstanding performance of the benchmark may be due to special circumstances or factors that you can't replicate.

Lack of good information. Locating adequate information about the benchmark may be difficult because of proprietary restrictions, poor documentation and recordkeeping, or lack of cooperation from the benchmark creators.

Can you live up to this standard? The high standards and great success of the benchmark organization can raise unrealistic expectations among your project participants.

Need solid support and good resources. Trying to replicate the success of the benchmark requires political support and consensus within your organization. In addition, you need adequate resources to respond appropriately to the challenges produced by using a benchmark for assessment.

For more information

Keehley, Patricia, Medlin, Steven, MacBride, Sue, and Longmire, Laura. (1997). **Benchmarking for Best Practices in the Public Sector**. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

2 Benchmarking has a different, more technical meaning in hardware or software development and evaluation. In that sense, a **benchmark** is standard test routine or software program that is used to test the performance of a system or device (e.g., the Winstone or WinBench tests for PC's).

News Analysis

News analysis involves gathering and analyzing news stories from various sources to gain insight into the success and failure of other justice information integration projects. By reading editorials, viewing television

accounts, and listening to talk radio shows, you can learn about other initiatives and gauge the public's reaction to them.

What is it?

Gather accounts from several sources. Find news stories in a variety of media outlets-newspapers, magazines, radio, television, Internet, government and justice publications- from around the country related to justice information integration efforts.

Thorough analysis. A complete news analysis provides rich insight into what worked and what didn't work for other justice information integration projects. You'll also learn how the media and the general public reacted to the successes and failures experienced in these projects.

Identify problems and solutions. Like current and best practices research, a news analysis will identify the problems others faced and the solutions they developed to achieve their integration goals.

What is it good for?

Real life examples. News stories are great resources for real life examples of how integration has improved public safety and increased efficiency for justice professionals.

Contacts with other justice projects. You'll find other justice professionals who have lived through integration projects and can share their experiences.

Identify obstacles and understand costs. Project accounts will help you identify the obstacles other groups encountered, as well as understand the costs and risks associated with integration projects.

Gauge media reaction. Knowing how the news media reacted to other justice integration initiatives will help you predict how reporters might cover your project.

Some limitations and considerations

Space, time restrictions. Reporters and editors are often forced to leave out information due to space or time constraints, thus the whole story may not be told.

Regional differences. The justice governance structures will be different from region to region. So it may be hard to apply others' experiences to your own project.

Just the facts. News stories often fail to capture the history, personality, and relationships that arise in interagency projects.