

Three horizons

A framework for thinking about long-term change with three horizons that coexist: the current system, the future that is starting to appear, and the transitional innovations between them.

In Spanish

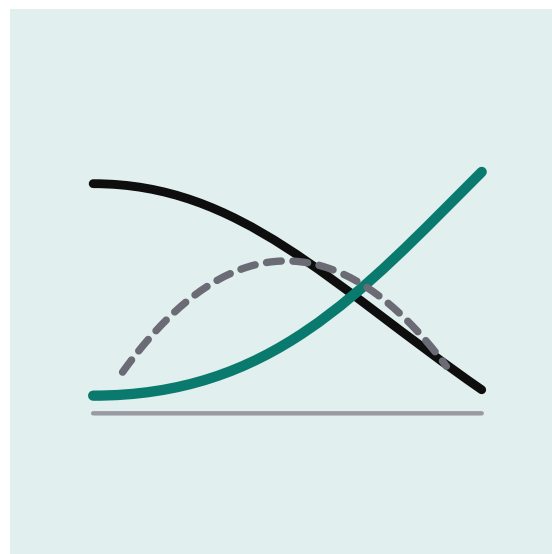
Tres horizontes

Origin

Sharpe, Hodgson et al.; reference article: Sharpe et al. (2016)

Output

A shared map of what is declining, what is emerging and the innovations that lead from one to the other



What it's for

Helps a group with different views talk about the future in an orderly way and tell apart changes that improve the usual from those that open a new path.

Key elements

First horizon

The system that dominates today and is losing its fit with new conditions.

Second horizon

Transitional innovations; some help reach the third, others end up absorbed by the first.

Third horizon

What is emerging at the margins and could replace it in the long run.

How it's done

1



Describe the present and what is no longer working.

2



Look for signs of the future that already exist at the margins.

3



Discuss the innovations that can lead from one to the other.

Applications in design

✓ When to use it

In strategy or futures workshops, when a group needs to agree on where to change.

✗ Avoid

Confusing it with another “three horizons” model from business consulting, which is about a company's growth, not the transformation of a system.

👁 Don't fall for it

Don't discard the first horizon: while the new arrives, what exists today has to keep working.

Connections

Builds on

■ Futures studies

Related to

■ Backcasting

■ Design futures

■ Transition design

■ Horizon scanning

Authors and works

2016

B. Sharpe, A. Hodgson, G. Leicester, A. Lyon and I. Fazey

They presented it as a dialogue practice for transformation and linked a mindset to each horizon: the manager's, the entrepreneur's and the visionary's.

Sources

Original sources

- Sharpe, B., Hodgson, A., Leicester, G., Lyon, A., & Fazey, I. (2016). Three horizons: A pathways practice for transformation. *Ecology and Society*, 21(2), 47. View source (<https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-08388-210247>)

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