

CHAPTER 5 DRAFT BLUEPRINT: SPOTTING TRENDS

It is easy to get insular and comfortable, to focus on what's going on inside an organization. However, it is critical to bring the outside in, not only to stay current but to stay relevant.

Work through these overarching questions for each aspect of TRENDS, using the prompts to guide you.

- 1 How do you know what is going on in your field?
- 2 What are your sources of information to stay abreast of trends in your area?
- 3 Who in your organization monitors external activities?
- 4 How is the information communicated and disseminated in your organization to stay up to date?

BABY STEPS

When I joined 3M, in what used to be the Disposable Products Division, there was an organized group of researchers who would get together periodically for a facilitated meeting. The participants would provide updates on the most recent patents in areas related to our products, such as tapes and other components for disposable diapers, as well as the overall platform of diapers. This practice allowed us to understand evolving customer and market needs along with discussions on the technology and competitive advancements being made externally. It helped to continually build the mental 'mosaic' on the industry and the key forces impacting it.

This was a great experience for someone like me, just starting out in the area; the discussion was always enlightening, and the context was valuable. It helped me crystallize my own ideas and come up with new ones.



TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Often captured in journal articles, trade publications, conference presentations, patents, and research disclosures.

For example, the impact of AI on your technical field and the academic research related to new discoveries.



REGULATORY OR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

Typically tracked by those who have functional expertise in specific areas of the regulatory landscape.

For example, raw materials being phased out or energy requirements being imposed.



ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Changes in the business environment that can have a big impact on product development outcomes.

For example, geopolitics, inflation, or environmental-social-governance (ESG) issues.



NATURAL EVENTS

Force majeure events that can impact the normal functioning of operations; they require contingency plans or urgent action.

For example, fires, blizzards, earthquakes. Changing climate has very relevant potential to impact many organizations.

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DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

Factors that may affect the workplace and culture as well as the representation among customers and the consumer base.

For example, increasing numbers and proportions of women in the workplace.

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SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Impacts the workforce, workings of the organization, and public perception of the brand and organization's image.

For example, increased demands for environmentally responsible products and practices or shifting views around mental health.

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NEEDS OR THREATS

As you deepen your understanding of trends, you can ask yourself a number of questions.

Cue the Qs

- *What needs or wants emerge from the impact of the trends?*
- *Will new, improved, or disruptive products be warranted?*
- *Will business model changes be required?*
- *Will research need to be initiated in new areas?*
- *Would the manufacturing infrastructure need to evolve to meet these needs?*
- *What ideas will be required to accommodate any threats to the current product portfolio?*
- *What skills and capabilities might be needed for the organization?*

For example, an increase in sustainable products will likely require certification and regulation mechanisms to validate the claims. Or, increase in usage of Generative AI will require training around prompt engineering to improve effectiveness and accuracy of output.

Envisioning future scenarios to identify trends, needs, and threats can and should be done by anyone at all levels and tenures. Fresh thinking of new graduates, or those new to an organization or area, is especially critical and valued in most organizations.

It is important to keep that fresh-eyes perspective even as tenure grows, and continue to bring the outside in. It can also provide the rich context and deep insight required for working with your supervisor on goal-setting. Just the fact that you are aware of trends can allow you to be a better-informed contributor and smart about your organization's objectives.

It is prudent to advocate and allocate time and space for this activity.