Exploring the Three Horizons
Building the Common Framework

The Three Horizon Framework

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www.paul4innovating.com
Building a Common Language of Understanding in the Application of the Three Horizons towards Innovation Management.

A critical series establishing the common needs of the Three Horizons Methodology towards Innovation’s Management.

Article 1  The Three Horizons – Providing a Common Language in its Innovation Use
Article 2  The Compelling Value of the 3H for Innovation Management
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The Three Horizons – Providing a Common Language in its Innovation Use

Posted on July 5, 2015 by paul4innovating

Forming a common view of the Three Horizon for Innovation

As you may know I have been writing significantly around the Three Horizons in relationship to innovation.

Initially drawing on the foundation within the McKinsey initial papers, updated here under their enduring ideas, and in particular based on by its original authors of the book “The Alchemy of Growth” by Mehrdad Baghai, Steve Coley, David White and Stephen Coley.

Then I discovered the work of the International Futures Forum, based in Scotland, where a group of members have extended the 3H significantly, well beyond McKinsey’s initial work from my perspective, into a broader, more robust methodology tackling complex problems.

It was this IFF work that excited me, it opened up my thinking to find better ways to deepen the innovation connections and framing that could be suggested in the use of this three horizon frame in exploring and expanding different techniques and approaches.

Connecting the innovation thinking dots

I realized the significant role the three horizon framework could have within our innovation thinking that was still missing and decided to take this further, beyond the original authors view. I have written about this since my first post “The three horizon approach to innovation” in September 2010, after some initial prompting from Tim Kastelle who shares in its value and place in our innovation thinking.
Here I want to provide a common language and approach to the three horizons

I have continued to build my understanding in practice and in my research on the 3H and have published this thinking through a series of articles and posts found as a collection in my insights and thinking page, that focus specifically on relating the 3H to the innovation space for dialogues, planning, portfolio debates, differentiating the distinctions between the three and generally arguing for its value in the management of innovation.

This intent has been to grow awareness and offer a better understanding of how it works, fits and has this great value for innovation’s management that should be within all organizations thinking around working through its innovation ambitions for the future and relating these to the reality of the present.

Go to the “search” on this site and enter “three horizons” you can view the different articles I’ve published on this, or equally you can download these as summary series within my insights and thinking page under the three horizons. They do provide a detailed build on this frame.

Understanding the way to approach each of the horizons

I published in August 2011 a suggested “emerging framework to help navigate across the three horizons” in a further blog which provides a clarity of how to structure, frame and think in these different horizons. This is how:

![Navigating the Three Horizons Framework](image-url)
Navigation across the Three Horizons Framework

Pushing this thinking further I felt we needed a common metrics of understanding

Recently I have taken this further and felt there was a need to provide a common language and application for approaching the three horizons. **We need to look beyond where we stand**

This common metrics of understanding I’m publishing for the first time here

I believe this can be adopted as a suggested approach to thinking about each horizon separately, covering this from the many different perspectives. I hope this provides for an even greater adoption into the innovation thinking we all need to have in our planning, discussions and management of innovation.

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**The Three Horizon Framework - Breaking down the different Horizons**

**Establishing a common understanding and language.**

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**Three Horizon Framework Common Language Taxonomy 1**
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Innovation (1)</th>
<th>Horizon One</th>
<th>Horizon Two</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sustaining</td>
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<td>Incremental</td>
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<td>Radical / Disruptive</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Harvesting / Extending</td>
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<td>Defend &amp; Extend</td>
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<td>Adaptive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Future</td>
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<tr>
<td>Needs</td>
<td>Assimilating</td>
<td>Co/Exist</td>
<td>Transform</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Short/term</td>
<td>Foundation Building</td>
<td>Seeking New Sustainability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superior Execution</td>
<td>Positional Advantage</td>
<td>Insight &amp; Foresights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experienced Managers</td>
<td>Business Builders</td>
<td>Visionary and Champions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Here and Now- Achieve</td>
<td>Seek to Adopt and</td>
<td>Patience and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&amp; Overcome</td>
<td>Establish</td>
<td>Determination</td>
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Three Horizon Framework Common Language Taxonomy 2

So each Horizon needs a different focus, a different management approach, different goals and different thinking.

If you would like a copy of this as a pdf or download Three Horizon Common Language Table

It would be great if these were further built upon and accepted, it would help in our management of innovation.
The Compelling Value of the 3H for Innovation Management

Posted on July 9, 2015 by paul4innovating

The Value of the Three Horizons of Seeing Beyond

Following on from my suggested Common Language approach to the Three Horizons, I would like to outline here its significant value, within any innovation management thinking.

Clarifying our options requires multiple thinking horizons – seeing beyond for all possibilities by listening to the different voices.

For me, the three horizons have great value to bring together and map all the different thinking and possible innovation options over changing horizons.

You can frame innovation in alternative ways by using this approach. Innovation has multiple evolution points and working with this framework allows you to significantly improve all of your innovation contributions.

It goes well beyond the present value of ‘just’ fitting your existing innovation portfolio and directional management into a typical one dimensional view of just working in the present.

By separating your thinking, appreciating that different voices are competing for attention provides a higher diversity of opinion, different perspectives for improving innovation’s eventual value. Those different voices involved can be highly engaged, all wanting to add their perspective:

- You have the voice of today operating in horizon one exploiting the core, the incumbent business. The manager(s) responsible are protecting, leveraging and delivering today’s result, very much focused on the operational and result orientated issues. Fully concerned with managing the existing business, maximizing returns and
keeping the organization going efficiently and effectively, delivering on the needs of the short-term.

- Then you have the second voice, **the voice of the entrepreneur**, those more pushing into horizon two, the ones eager to experiment, to try out new things. They are wanting to push further, to explore and extend, accepting some aspects will not work but keen to investigate, search, experiment and learn from these discoveries. They are experimenting within the current business model but also wanting to push the boundaries to explore alternatives that might have a disruptive or radical aspect where they can begin to equip themselves to understand.

- Last we have **the third voice, the voice of the aspirant**, who is looking to build a different vision, they operate mostly in horizon three, believing in different, more pioneering, perhaps radical solutions that seeks to visualize things in their ‘mind’s eye’. They are far more aspirational. They are looking to explore concepts that often can seemingly look on first ‘sight’ to be totally incompatible to the reality of today, even they can potentially challenge today’s existing core, perhaps cannibalize it or radically alter its very nature. Those operating within this horizon three are often picking up on ‘weak signals’ that are out there that signify a changing future that might impact their own and set about capturing all that can make this a significant game changer.

It is the combination of these different three voices that need to come together and frame the innovation journey by using the **three horizons framework**.

**Establishing a common understanding of operating in each horizon becomes critical**

Innovation is constantly facing disruption; it is constantly going through life cycles and new waves of different activities. We need a far more robust, well thought-through way to apply our innovation resources to meet and anticipate these changing events and for this I always recommend the three horizons.

With the effective use of the three horizons you can see opportunities completely differently beyond the existing mindset and activities, it takes innovation from tactical to strategic, to foresight in your evaluations.

**We need common ways to build a language around innovation and its management.**

We need common ways to build a language around innovation and its management. As the three horizons can help frame the allocation of resources, determine the innovation road map and contribute to structuring the portfolio into its different parts, it can be essential to this building a common understanding and recognition of its organizing value.

**Appreciating its evolving value**

If you can appreciate the value of the 3H frame in its potential, firstly to aid the mapping out of the present and the challenges the business can find itself in, it gives a common position
The three horizons can help you move towards articulating the road map to the future and provide the encouragement to turn this into the ‘what, when, how and why’ that future innovation always needs figuring out the sorting of the essentials to ‘fuel it’.

It can assist in the evidence-based gathering to exploit (h1), extend or expand (h2) and to explore (h3) how the existing core will grow and be seeded or orientated in future ways. It can be a significant contributor to providing the vision, values and beliefs that an organization can orient towards and work towards.

It can help us break out of existing mindset traps through its evolutionary steps to clarify, explore and identify all the different voices and then explain the “how and where we move towards as our innovating future”.

**The 3H is a frame that I genuinely believe is an essential management method for innovation’s good management practice.**

**In Summary of its innovating value to you and your organization**

I believe the 3H framing technique that can structure the evolution of the innovation needed within organizations.

It can be based on existing evidence or as we learn, building evidence-based change, so we can use its framing to adjust to new information and knowledge or be adjusted as the changes occurring, that happen in the years ahead, as the organizations moves towards their innovating future. It can offer a solid structure to the (strategic) decisions that then have to be made.

I would also ask “Why can’t it additionally become an essential visualizing tool, no different from where the Business Model Canvas has established itself?”

It is a frame that should be an essential management method or framing technique that can structure the evolution of the innovation needed, based on existing evidence or as we learn. We use its framing to adjust to new learning or as changes are occurring in the years ahead and the 3H does give a very essential part of the narrative of innovation, something we often lack.

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Go to the “search” on this site and enter “three horizons” you can view the different articles I’ve published on this, or equally you can download these within different summary series, within my “insights and thinking” page, under the three horizons. They do offer a detailed build on this framework to bring it all together.
Applying innovation thinking in different horizons

Posted on June 11, 2016 by paul4innovating

In the past few days, I have had some exchanges on twitter with Jairo H Venegas and Ralph-Christian Ohr on different thinking around the three horizon methodology. We share similar views on its value and partly how it can be applied.

Ralph and I exchange constantly and occasionally meet up together. Actually, we need another meeting Ralph to catch up and explore these mutual innovation value points.

Ralph in a reply to Jairo suggested this: “That’s why a portfolio approach is so important” – with his take here: bit.ly/1Rn5Svq under his excellent Model for Integrative Innovation article. He ‘talks’ of cornerstones and offers different premises to anchor these a little more.

The different premise: premise 1: Innovation management follows a balanced portfolio approach. The entire innovation portfolio is divided into exploitation-oriented and exploration-oriented innovation initiatives and premise 2: Senior management is committed to attributing equal importance to exploitation and exploration initiatives as both are vital for a company to thrive sustainably. Then premise 3: Exploitation- and exploration-oriented initiatives are separated in terms of organisational anchoring, governance and funding and finally premise 4: Fostering an innovation portfolio is enabled by a proper idea management system which allows to either assign an internal or external idea to the corresponding units or to reject it. Then he suggests the use of the three horizons as distinct playgrounds for innovation initiatives.

This brief summary does not do justice to Ralph’s thoughtful build up to this portfolio approach and use the three horizons as a framing for this. I do recommend reading this. The link again is here: bit.ly/1Rn5Svq

Well Ralph’s article leads nicely into this visual I have used and I wanted to contribute further to this collective thinking around different approaches to planning out innovation and in particular in this brief exchange, we were recently having on twitter by giving it a little more context this through this visualisation.

This visual might help make a further contribution to the value and use of the three horizon methodology
Thinking about an innovation portfolio that flows into the three horizon planning

The original source of this visual was by Doug Collins in 2011, adapted here. The article written at the time was linking Everitt Rogers work with the original concept creation of the 3H by Baghai, Coley & White. His article: “Moving from the Front to the Back End of Innovation: Idea Evaluation.” [http://goo.gl/daS7dd](http://goo.gl/daS7dd)

I like this visual as it places the portfolio discussion into its degree of difficulty parts to build a portfolio up without assigning it to time at this stage. That comes next through the use of the three horizons where you are exploiting and exploring these opportunities over time.

**Changing the annual plan thinking is critical to building a robust innovation portfolio.**

The usual arguments of how do you fit these into an annual plan tend to reduce, you are focusing on the attractiveness of different opportunities and time becomes not the issue at this point, that can come back into the thinking later. As you evaluate the degree of difficulty you start assigning different resources and recognising a ‘span’ of different times to bring these idea concepts to realisation.

**You will notice in the middle of this visual there is a key transforming point.**

I believe if you are genuinely looking across different options and broader opportunities you can begin to see a transforming opportunity that has the potential to radically alter or drive your business in the future.

This sits in the middle as it becomes an emerging idea, that goes into the horizon two part. This needs really carefully handling and I have previously written about this horizon two...
specifically in an article here called *Traversing across into horizon 2 for new breaking innovation*. 

Also, I would want you to go back and read two articles, firstly on why *innovation needs a different time and thinking horizons* and then *drawing out the different voices within the three horizons methodology for innovation*. That way I don’t need to repeat parts of them here.

**Recognising our present day thinking are at odds with future thinking**

So you get these clear sense that many are sceptical or pay lip service to the products or service offerings of the future as the thinking, judgement and value orientation are at such odds with the existing measures and metrics they apply to run today’s business and how they get judged.

We must move our thinking beyond the ‘here and now’ and push it into the future if we want to transform our innovation and that takes a very different mindset and where the three horizon framework can help significantly in balancing any innovation portfolio.

So to add to the short exchange on twitter I thought I’d share this visual that might help in plotting your balanced portfolio in a way that combines portfolio management and three horizon thinking for recognising time and allocating resource.

The potential of using the three horizons to any blue sky thinking, or determine what makes up the portfolio, is a more classic positioning but why not, once you have determined your opportunities in the portfolio you place them back into the three horizons to manage them ‘going forward’.

**Just an additional thought or two as you finish up here.**

By the way in my *insights and thinking* tag on this site you have an extensive collection of thoughts around the three horizon methodology, including white papers and different ‘series’ collections to give you a fairly comprehensive view of this most valuable 3H methodology.

End note: *Doug Collins* has pointed out since this publication, that he was original source of this visual. I had lost this reference and I am happy to add it in. His original article adds well to this.
Within our ‘business as usual’ attitudes, there actually lies the seeds of destruction. Today there is a relentless pace; we are facing stagnation in many maturing markets if we don’t evolve. 

Yet we actually subvert the future to prolong the life of the existing. We need to frame our innovation needs differently for exploring and exploiting innovation across different time horizons to move beyond the usual.

Commonality within innovation is becoming increasingly important. We need to build clear common languages of innovation, frameworks, methods and approaches.

There is a pressing need to frame innovation in different ways, to meet change that lies in the future. We are in need to clarify our options and this requires multiple thinking horizons to work through to deliver a richer tapestry of innovation discovery.

Innovation is constantly facing disruption; it is constantly going through life cycles and new waves of different activities and we begin decay faster today than ever. We run an increasing risk that we begin to lose any dominance or competitive position increasingly. We need to innovate to sustain ourselves and maintain our market positions in a rapidly evolving world.
The key requires us to manage this transition, not let others manage it for us. We need a far more robust, well thought-through way to apply our innovation resources to meet and anticipate these changing events.

**It is how we manage this transition becomes so critical.**

The three horizon framework needs to become the innovation space for dialogues, planning, portfolio debates, differentiating the distinctions between the three time line perspectives and generally arguing for inclusion, the value and importance of the thinking and then applying the appropriate resources needed in the management of innovation across these three different timelines.

The 3H framework is a powerful enabler.

The value of the weak signals needs amplifying

We need to exploit developing trends that are emerging in the different but future horizons and begin to tune in and discover the emerging possible options in the future.

The discussions in any forecasting or futuristic planning often have conflicting views of the future, compared to the existing realities based on those products and services that are providing the returns for today’s business. Yet the future is also equally rooted in the present, often called ‘weak signals’

I am a great follower of Dave Snowden’s thinking and work over at www.cognitive-edge.com on “making sense of complexity in order to act” which includes SenseMaker® and the Cynefin Framework, which I have written upon in its value, in this post “use of the Cynefin model for innovation”, and within his work equally are clear views of managing change.

Dave Snowden’s has a view that works for me in applying the thinking around the three horizons, this fits so well. He argues instead of trying to tackle the unknowable, as it is inherently unknowable.

He rightly suggests 1) we fully explore the evolutionary potential of the present, 2) bring in as wide an engagement of views to find a more sustainable or resilient set of solutions to emerge and 3) in his view, and most probably the most important point, it is how you build the narrative and descriptors, as the danger becomes the more you attempt to predict and evaluate, the more you can close down options, some far too early.

He suggests the more you can hold onto this descriptive level, the longer you have in widening the range of intervention points as more knowledge becomes available. You spend less time on (predicting) outcomes and more time on measuring vectors (velocity, acceleration, magnitude, force of direction) which for me, allows the progressive build of the right future capabilities, in more evolving and evolutionary ways of learning from exploring and experimenting, the key transition point of Horizon 2 (h2).
Resisting the early decision.

It is often the cases we can detect change but we consciously ignore it or dismiss it out of hand. This is often the place where the disruptor is presently at work, both existing or new competitors, exploring and exploiting different options, working at displacing your products and market positions. The combinations of new technologies, concepts and business models are constantly emerging and we need to be pioneers these as well as detect them as they emerge, anticipating the change these might bring and focus on building the capacity and capabilities to advance on your own curve of understanding.

We need to separate and structure different mindsets to developing innovation capabilities to explore and prepare for the future, as well as deepen the exploration, to leverage the present. Structuring the approach, by looking across multiple horizons, allow you to evolve the entire innovation portfolio and begin to recognise the many gaps that exist within your thinking, within your capabilities and capacities to innovate.

**Separating the horizon lenses**

By looking at this through separate horizon lenses does equally assist you in allocating the appropriate but usually different resources that are needed to be applied, to each of the time horizons and challenges that are identified and lie within them.

**The three horizon framework** has the clear intent to grow awareness and offer a better understanding of how innovation works and fits, with also its great value for clarifying the structuring and allocation of innovation’s management. It can be used for portfolio alignment, resource structuring and the mechanism for broad dialogue of explaining decisions and describing the growing consensus of the future direction.

**The three horizon framework** can offer a vital part within all the organisations thinking around working through its innovation ambitions, not just for the present but for the future and how these can transition, connecting the reality of the present with the concepts of the future. The need is we all should make the case that different types of innovation operate and evolve over different time horizons and need thinking through differently.

**The three horizon framework** goes well beyond simply a planning tool, it does provide a valuable evolutionary perspective that dialogues can be formed around, so decisions on where to focus and what resources need to be applied can be made for delivering a constantly evolving ‘state’ of innovation development. Dialogues that deliver that then get translated into more plausible and coherent set of activities, projected into the future, searching for emerging winners that can change and challenge your existing business.

**The three horizon framework** is about having strategic conversations about the future, that feeds the discussions about your innovation direction, shaping the longer-term portfolio and capability understandings. It is increasingly vital to understand all of its ways to contribute to your innovation developments and needs.
Its value – *if well-managed* – can offer a helpful way for a significant series of dialogues and tensions to surface, but through this engagement and respect for different positions, you can find mutual ways of connecting your innovation activities and resolve these different opinions, emerging over the different horizons and diverse thinking. You are managing uncertainty in better ways, as a team or organisation through this framing dialogue.

**If you would like to explore all the different ways that give the three horizons framework a much richer return in its value and use, then let me know.**
About Paul Hobcraft

I simply enjoy innovation. I got ‘hooked’ fifteen years ago and since then have increasingly focused on innovation until it is 100% of my business thinking and activities today.

I research across innovation, looking to develop novel innovation solutions and frameworks where appropriate. I provide possible answers to many issues associated with innovation with a range of solutions that underpin my advisory, coaching and consulting work at www.agilityinnovation.com.

The aim is to support individuals, teams and organisations, in their innovation activity, applying what I have learnt to further develop core innovation understanding, so clients can achieve positive and sustaining results from their innovating activities.

For me, innovation needs to enter the DNA of our organisations and our own individual make-up. In my writing, I try to offer a range of thoughts on different aspects of innovation to help each of us to understand this subject better.

Innovation as a source for our growth fascinates me.

As for my personal journey

How I got to this point I can only say it has been varied, challenging but full of fun and learning. This has taken me to live and work in Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Malaysia, Switzerland, the Netherlands, USA, Hong Kong, Australia, and recently twelve years in Singapore. Today, I live in Switzerland, my adopted home.

I’ve worked in a number of senior positions within global corporations, in global, regional, country and functional levels tackling different challenges that have included start-ups, turn-rounds and significant re-engineering and operational design or automation across a global network.

The work has been varied, the challenges diverse coming from starting up different businesses in emerging markets, turning difficult ones around in challenging economic and market conditions more than once, re-engineering a global organization over a three year period choosing to live permanently out of a suitcase (or two) for months at a time in each
of the major global locations as the best way to deliver the changes, and finally simply accelerating companies, getting them through to critical mass points, for achieving their positive contributing footprint, within the world.

In 2000 I went into my own business of consulting and advisory work, firstly based in Asia and then in recent years, based in Switzerland.

After I moved to Ticino in Switzerland, from Singapore I am spending different times between the two regions, although Europe holds an increasingly more central role. All the time my focus is on innovation and many of the related topics that move it increasingly towards a core within organisations. Innovation understanding does ‘simply span’ globally and I have been fortunate on building on the foundations initially laid down in Asia and advanced while in Europe through an ever-expanding network of collaborators, knowledge and insights.

My present focus is spent building this innovation practice, providing advice on building the right capabilities and capacities, into organisations or individuals wanting to advance on what they have already in place; to improve, accelerate and develop their innovation competencies and understandings of the ‘fit’ of innovation.

Paul Hobcraft has been voted into the top innovation bloggers over a consistent period from 2012 on a leading Global Innovation Community - Innovation Excellence - ,

“These accolades are highly appreciated and valued- they inspire me to keep innovating in my own unique way and style. These recognitions help me believe I can contribute to the wider innovation community we are all part of”

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