The Three Horizons Framework

Understanding how today’s systems evolve towards possible futures



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Based on the Three Horizons Framework developed through the work of Bill Sharpe and the International Futures Forum. Aviation security examples and visual interpretations are illustrative adaptations.

Why think in three horizons?

Managing today's demands while preparing for tomorrow's challenges



For professional discussion and reflection • Illustrative, not prescriptive • The Three Horizons Framework is a strategic foresight tool, not a prediction of the future. Assumptions, emerging signals and possible futures should be examined through structured analysis, evidence, stakeholder engagement, professional judgement and appropriate organisational, operational, security, intelligence and risk-management processes.

Understanding the three curves

Three overlapping patterns of change, not three separate periods



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Horizon 1: The established system

Understanding what works today and what may become less effective

H1
The established system

Current ways of operating that meet today's requirements and provide a stable and reliable foundation.

Key characteristics

- Established processes and procedures
- Known roles and responsibilities
- Proven technologies and infrastructure
- Supported by regulations and standards
- Relatively predictable operating environment

Potential limitations

- May become less effective over time
- Can be vulnerable to new and emerging threats
- May be rigid or slow to adapt
- May not fully address future operational needs
- Resource intensive to maintain



Horizon 2: The transition

Exploring innovations, adaptations and emerging alternatives

H2 The transition

Innovations, experiments and adaptations that bridge today's system and the emerging future.

Key characteristics

- Testing and piloting new ideas
- Adapting existing systems and processes
- Building new capability and skills
- Learning from experience and data
- Creating connections and partnerships

Typical examples in aviation security

- Introducing new screening technologies
- Enhanced data analysis and threat detection
- Using drones and remote monitoring
- Integrating information across organisations
- Trialling new operating concepts
- Developing organisational culture and skills



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Horizon 3: The emerging future

Imagining new ways of operating that may eventually become dominant

H3 The emerging future

New patterns that are only just appearing today, but could eventually become the dominant way of operating.

Key characteristics

- New operating models and technologies
- More integrated and data-driven approaches
- Potential for significant change
- Different skills, roles and organisational structures
- Greater collaboration and connectivity

Examples in aviation security

- Advanced screening and non-intrusive detection
- AI-enabled risk analysis and predictive threat detection
- Integrated data sharing across stakeholders
- Use of autonomous systems and robotics
- Adaptive and dynamic security operations
- More resilient, flexible and sustainable security systems



All three horizons exist today

The future is already emerging alongside established ways of working



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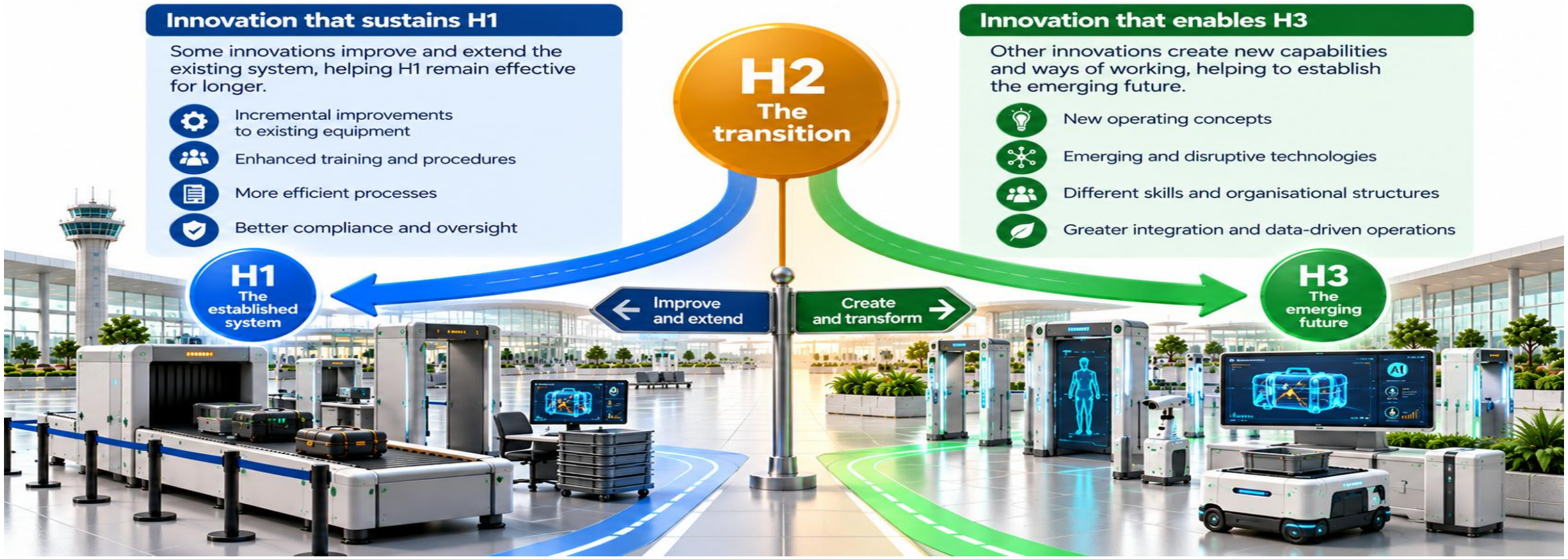
When innovation sustains or transforms

Not all innovation leads to a different future



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Signals of change and emerging threats

Recognising early indicators that established assumptions may need reviewing



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Aviation security: Applying the framework

Exploring how airport security capabilities might evolve



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From today's challenges to tomorrow's capabilities

Identifying what to retain, what to change and what to develop



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Three Horizons versus the Stacey Matrix

Two complementary approaches to complexity and strategic decision-making

Three Horizons Framework

Explores how different options can evolve over time and coexist.

H1 The established system
Optimise and maintain current capabilities.

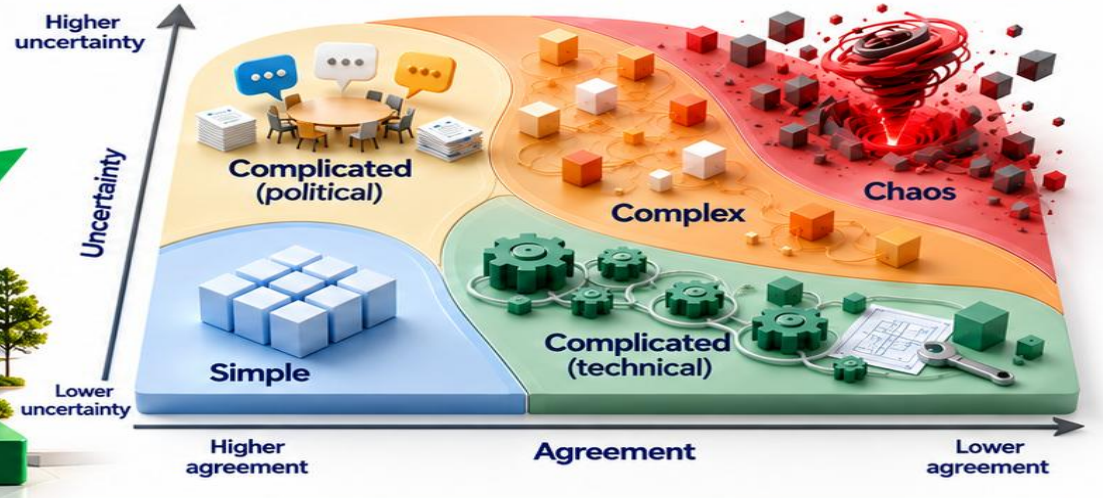
H2 The transition
Experiment, innovate and adapt.

H3 The emerging future
Explore and develop new capabilities.



The Stacey Matrix

Helps identify the nature of a situation and the appropriate management response.



What the Three Horizons helps with

- Explore possible futures and changing patterns of dominance
- Identify what to retain, what to change and what to develop
- Encourage longer-term thinking and innovation
- Recognise that all three horizons can coexist

What the Stacey Matrix helps with

- Understand the level of uncertainty and stakeholder agreement
- Identify the nature of the decision problem
- Select an appropriate management response
- Recognise when more analysis, dialogue or experimentation is needed

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Limitations and common misinterpretations

Important considerations when using the Three Horizons Framework



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Key lessons and practical application

Using the Three Horizons Framework to support better decisions



Use it with purpose

Match the horizon to the decision, question or challenge you are facing.

Engage stakeholders

Bring different perspectives together to explore trade-offs and build shared understanding.

Turn insight into action

Use the framework to test options, strengthen resilience and align short-, medium- and long-term development.