

MAKING SENSE OF THE FUTURE



From Weak signals to Megatrends

Exploring signals of change

Find signals, innovations and possible trends, and explore possible future scenarios based on one trend. Train your abilities to collect, identify and interpret possible drivers of change, and reflect your assumptions about the future.

	60–90 min	★★☆	intermediate
	in groups		printouts and diverse utensils

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“The future is a much better guide to the present than the past. Be prepared, be ready to trade everything you know about history... for a single glimpse of its future.”

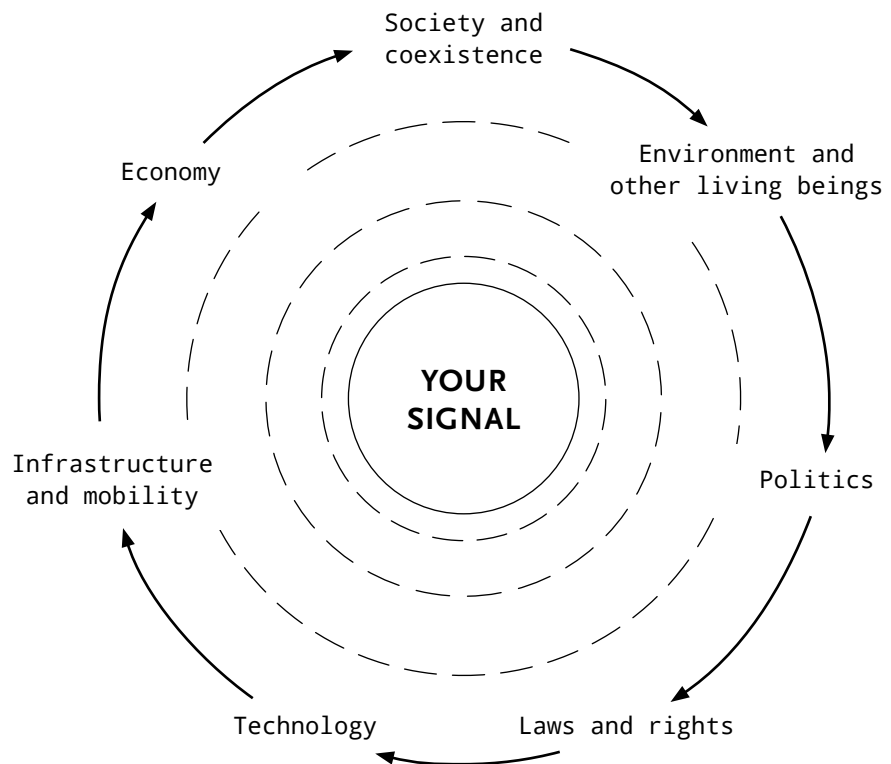
Kodwo, E. (1988) *More Brilliant than the Sun*.

When anticipating future developments, solely focusing on a continuation of the present can lead you to miss hints and early signals that may be hidden below the surface. One way to explore possible futures is to assess the present for signals, trends and signs of future developments.

Fundamental lines of development are often referred to as megatrends: slow, global, yet far-reaching transformation processes that have a lasting impact on the economy, politics, ecology, mobility and society. Current megatrends include the removal of gender stereotypes, a move towards a new culture of pluralism or connectivity, and the novel communication technologies changing the way we interact and do business. However, future drivers of change can often go unnoticed; these are weak signals: warnings, events or developments which are still too incomplete to be fully anticipated. Recognising weak signals expands our view and trains our future thinking.

ASSIGNMENT	Find signals, innovations and possible trends. What if these signals became stronger? How would they influence different domains of our lives? Explore possible future scenarios based on one signal.
LEARNING GOAL	By completing this exercise you will train your abilities to collect, identify and interpret possible drivers of change, and will thereby be able to challenge and reflect on your assumptions about the future. This will help you identify possible new paths by recognising signals in everyday life and their impact.
PREPARATION	Print out the attached templates (your signal + 7 areas) for each group (3–5 people) and place them on a whiteboard or wall (see sketch below). Bring sufficient pens and colourful post-its.

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LET'S START	<p>Heighten your senses and extend your sensors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What novelty (app, device, feature, rumour, news) has surprised you recently? ▪ Have you heard about a development in a report that you were unaware of? ▪ Has a friend told you about an unconventional innovation? ▪ Have you come across a recent study that startled you? ▪ Or have you overheard a conversation or observed something unexpected in public? 	
STEP 1	<p>Form groups of 3–5 persons. Think of a signal that challenges your current assumptions or world views. Decide on one signal together.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; background-color: #ffffcc; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; gap: 10px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; background-color: #ffffcc; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">  </div> <div> <p>WEAK SIGNALS AND MEGATRENDS</p> <p>Weak signals have the following key characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ unusual, surprising information that does not fit into existing expectation grids ▪ they can be interpreted as omens or harbingers of future changes ▪ weak signals are, in particular, warnings, events or developments that are still too incomplete to enable an accurate assessment of their impact and/or to permit a determination of reactions <p>Megatrends have the following key characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ global ▪ long-term (they take effect slowly and gradually over decades) ▪ far-reaching transformation processes that have a lasting impact on the economy, technology, ecology, politics and society </div> </div> </div>	
STEP 2	<p>Examine the signal more closely: combine your signal with the 7 areas of the printed out templates. In which ways could it impact different areas within a timeline of 10 years from now? The areas are: Society and coexistence, environment and other living beings, politics, laws and rights, technology, infrastructure and mobility, and economy.</p> <p>Note down your ideas on a post-it and place them on the template next to the affected area. Explore the scenario further by moving along the different areas and discuss together.</p>	



EXAMPLE


Health consciousness vs. sterile society

In recent decades, an increased awareness of health has developed in many societies. We are encouraged to live more healthily and optimise our bodies and our lifestyle. This trend is often accompanied by digital offerings (such as fitness apps, pedometers, heartrate trackers and menstrual cycle apps).

This trend has been further amplified by the global Coronavirus Pandemic. We have learnt to take preventative measures such as limiting our social lives and changing our hygiene routines.

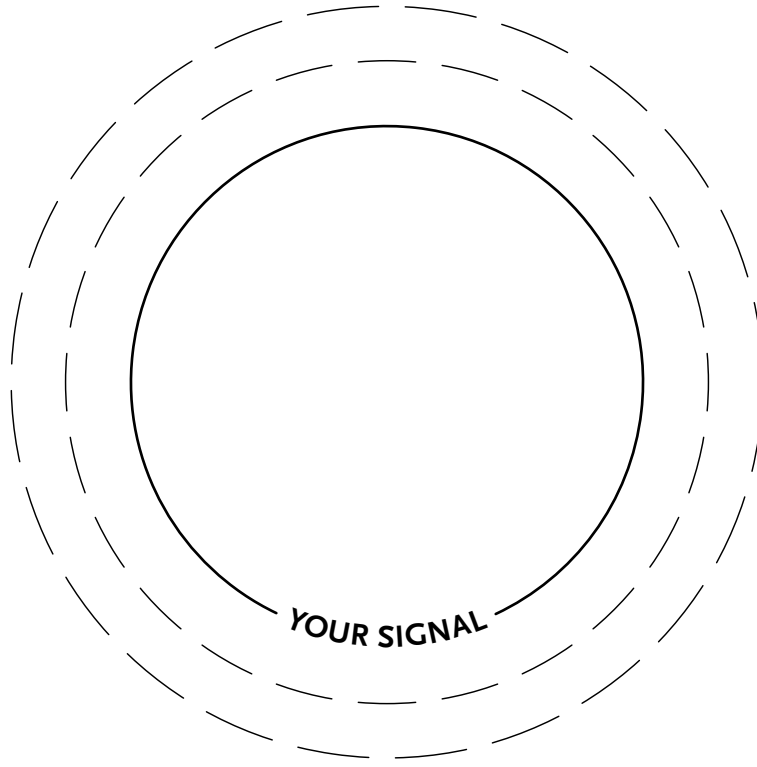
How can we think about this trend further?

On the one hand, a healthy and sustainable life is desirable and worth aiming for. On the other hand, it raises the question of how we want to use digital services in the future, protect our privacy, and reconnect in social and cultural spheres. In many areas, a healthy life is also associated with privileges. How can services be made accessible to all? What scenarios and development paths are conceivable?

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STEP 3	<p>Discuss your results in a group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What would it take for your signals to become a megatrend? ▪ Do you have any ideas on how to influence trends? ▪ What would be the positive and negative effects of your examples? ▪ What social factors would remain unchanged? ▪ Speculate: How could your signal develop within a timeline of 20 or 30 years? What will happen if the signal evolves into a megatrend? 	
	<div style="background-color: #4db6ac; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>CONTINUE WITH OUR TOOLBOX</p> <p>For a different take on digital futures, try the tool: Transform future language</p>	

EXTRAS	From Weak signals to Megatrends	6
SOURCES	<p>Weak signals ^{EN} Holopainen, M. & Toivonen, M. (2012). "Weak signals: Ansoff today", Futures, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2011.10.002</p> <p>Weak signals ^{EN} "Using Weak Signals for Business". Go For. Accessible at https://gofore.com/en/using-weak-signals-in-business</p> <p>Weak signals ^{EN} Schoemaker, P. & Day, G. (2009) "How to Make Sense of Weak Signals". MIT Sloan Review. Accessible at https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-make-sense-of-weak-signals</p> <p>Megatrends ^{DE} Steinmüller, K. (2014). "Zukunftstrends 2025". Z Punkt. Accessible at https://steinmuller.de/de/zukunftsforschung/papers/Artikel_Oberfl.pdf</p>	
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Society and coexistence



Infrastructure and mobility



Economy

Politics



Technology

Environment and
other living beings



Law and rights