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# POLICY HORIZONS CANADA COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK FOR FORESIGHT PRACTICE

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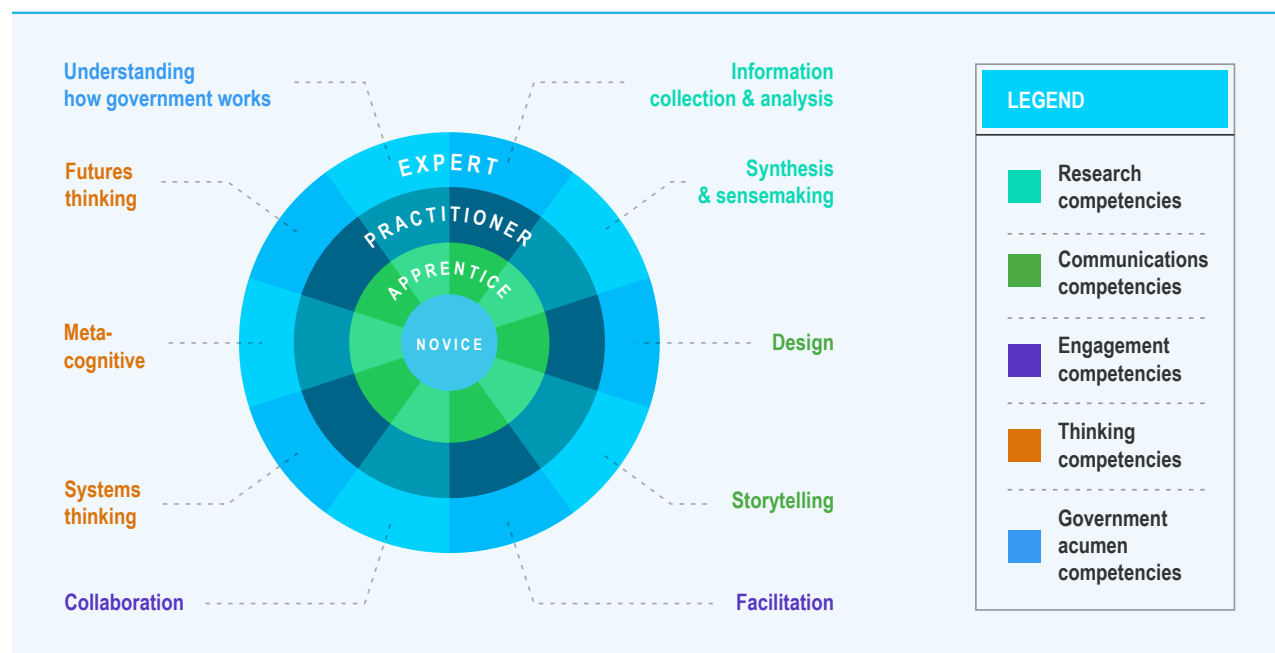
In a world marked by complex challenges, rapid transformations, and evolving expectations, foresight is a critical tool for public sector decision-makers. It helps to navigate change and make informed decisions amidst ambiguity and uncertainty.

As the Government of Canada's centre of excellence in foresight, Policy Horizons Canada empowers decision-making with a future-oriented mindset. Our mandate includes analyzing emerging policy landscapes, engaging in forward-looking conversations, and building foresight literacy across the federal public service.

*To bolster its mandate, Policy Horizons Canada has crafted the Policy Horizons Canada competencies framework for foresight practice.*

**The competencies framework (see figure 1) is a dynamic instrument designed to support the strengthening of Canadian public servants' ability to practice effective foresight.** Whether we are engaged in foresight research or applying foresight to strategic decision-making processes, the tool can be used to assess proficiency levels in foresight and the related competencies outlined below and to guide an ongoing learning journey. While the framework is a pathway to individual growth, it is also a blueprint for constructing a resilient and forward-thinking public sector.

**Figure 1: Policy Horizons Canada competencies framework for foresight practice**



The **Policy Horizons Canada competencies framework for foresight practice** incorporates **two distinct learner profiles**, **four proficiency levels**, and **ten competencies** essential to good foresight practice. This comprehensive approach ensures that every learner can find their path and progress at their own pace, fostering a culture of continuous learning and development.

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## LEARNER PROFILES

The competencies framework for foresight practice distinguishes between two types of learners: **foresight users and foresight producers**. For foresight to deliver on its value, good foresight practise will bring together effectively both foresight users and producers.

**Foresight users** include members of policy, innovation and program communities who may not be actively involved in the foresight development process but who use its insights to inform policy, program and service delivery decision making. Given that their efforts will be focused on using what they have learned about what the future might bring to make decisions, their learning journey places greater emphasis on developing the acumen to navigate government systems and processes successfully, effectively communicating the value of foresight to government business. As their work also relies heavily on the ability to collaborate effectively with colleagues across government, collaboration and facilitation skills are also of importance.

**Foresight producers** include members of policy, innovation and program communities who are actively involved in conducting foresight research and/or in designing and managing the foresight development process. Given their work focuses on conducting research into change taking place in the present and exploring the factors that may shape alternative futures, their learning journeys focus more heavily on research, communication and thinking competencies. As experts in foresight processes, they also rely on the ability to design engagements that enable effective collaboration with, and between, colleagues across government to provide timely and relevant insights and advice to support strategic decision making. An understanding of how government works is beneficial to designing and conducting foresight within a public sector context.

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## PROFICIENCY LEVELS

**Table 1: Proficiency Levels**

PROFICIENCY LEVEL	CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS PROFICIENCY LEVEL
<b>Novices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Typically have a basic understanding of a competency area and rely heavily on guidance, instructions, and step-by-step directions to perform tasks.</li><li>• Make frequent mistakes due to limited experience and understanding and take longer to complete tasks as they are still learning fundamental concepts and skills.</li><li>• With little-to-no practical experience, are likely to struggle with applying their knowledge effectively.</li></ul>

PROFICIENCY LEVEL	CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS PROFICIENCY LEVEL
<b>Apprentices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are developing their skills and knowledge and becoming more capable of applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations.</li> <li>• Are still actively engaging in hands-on experience and practice, often under the guidance of a mentor, more experienced individual, or community of practice.</li> <li>• While growing in abilities, may still need some supervision and guidance to ensure work is accurate and effective.</li> </ul>
<b>Practitioners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a well-developed theoretical knowledge and practical skillset with solid understanding of a competency area.</li> <li>• Can adapt their skills and knowledge to various contexts and scenarios and work with minimal guidance, typically only seeking advice for more complex problems.</li> </ul>
<b>Experts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possess a comprehensive and profound understanding of a competency area, including its theoretical and practical complexities and nuances.</li> <li>• Are highly adept at solving complex problems and often contribute new insights and innovations in this area.</li> <li>• Often serving as a mentor or educator, they recognize the need for ongoing learning and stay updated with the latest advancements.</li> </ul>

*Table 1 describes the key characteristics of each level of proficiency. Specific characteristics will vary for individual competencies.*

The Policy Horizons Canada competencies framework for foresight practice recognizes that learning occurs at all stages of development. The four proficiency levels (see table 1) reflect novice apprentice, practitioner, and expert level learners. Expertise is not solely a function of time spent in a field, but also hinges on the quality of learning, practice, and accumulated experience. The rate of progression from novice to expert may vary across the ten competencies, and with regard to individual learners. It is not necessary to achieve expert level in every competency area for either foresight users or producers to be successful.

Recognizing that learning is a personal journey, this framework aims to provide an actionable tool to foster professional growth in foresight and futures thinking by assisting learners in determining their current level and mapping their growth trajectory.

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## ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES FOR GOOD FORESIGHT PRACTICE

Competencies represent the collection of critical knowledge, skills, tools, and behaviours that an individual leverages to achieve success. While some competencies may be innate, this framework is concerned with the competencies that are developed through learning and practice.

Foresight is rooted in the investigation of change taking place around us. In a public policy context, the systematic exploration of how the future may be different to the past or the present, to expectations or desires enables policy makers to design policies and strategies that are more resilient to change. Effective foresight requires much more than a familiarity with foresight methods and techniques. It calls for a combination of competencies and mindsets that touch the domains of research, communication, engagement, cognition and understanding how government works.

The following **ten competencies** are pertinent to both types of learners— foresight users and foresight producers— and reflect a wide spectrum of practical and cognitive skills, knowledge, and behaviours necessary for successful public sector foresight. While many will seem familiar, they manifest in diverse ways within a foresight context. Figure 1. illustrates the competency areas (research, communication, engagement, thinking and understanding how government works) that are necessary for good foresight in the public sector.

### Research competencies

Research is the systematic process of gathering, analyzing, synthesizing, and making sense of information collected during an investigation. For the purposes of this competencies framework, research has been separated into two competency areas to reflect the importance of these distinct activities for foresight research.

#### Information collection and analysis

One of the first steps in a foresight project is the systematic gathering and analysis of information about what is changing within and around the domain under investigation. Multiple information collection methods may be used to identify the fundamental sources and drivers of change. This can include trends, weak signals of change, emerging issues, and black swans. Analysis breaks a topic down into its constituent parts in order to better understand the relationship and interaction between these parts. Analysis can aid in developing a more detailed mental model of the domain under investigation, so that any information gaps can be identified and explored.

In foresight research, we are continually collecting and analyzing information about what is changing. New information about the nature of changes identified or the interactions between components in a system can inform and shape other stages of the research.

The skilled application of this competency helps to identify emerging issues that could be highly disruptive to the domain under investigation, alerting foresight users and producers to potential opportunities and challenges in the policy landscape.

### **Synthesis and sensemaking**

Synthesis is the process of integrating information from multiple sources to produce new and useful knowledge. This work allows us to develop a holistic understanding of changes taking place in the policy landscape, identify interconnections and interdependencies between weak signals and change drivers, the underlying forces that affect their trajectory. The process of synthesizing information enables foresight users and producers to surface, and challenge assumptions, generate new insights about potential future states, and inform decision making that can help policies become resilient to possible disruptions.

Sensemaking is the process of interpreting and creating meaning from uncertain or ambiguous information. It can help organizations interpret emerging issues and build shared understanding of about how the future might unfold. Insights generated through sensemaking can inform decision making and help foresight users and producers to improve an organization's ability to adapt to and take advantage of changing environments.

## **Communication competencies**

Communication skills are critical for the dissemination and understanding of foresight insights. They enhance the overall impact of foresight processes by bridging the gap between the users and the producers of foresight and creating a useful forward-looking dialogue between future-oriented research and present-day policy and decision making.

### **Storytelling**

Storytelling is an ancient art that drives innovative ideas, builds connections, and sparks change. Skillful storytelling can be a bridge between analytical insights and human understanding and is essential to shaping how we make sense of the world. An essential competency for good foresight, storytelling takes place in multiple ways and at multiple junctures. We tell stories about change in order to gain support for exploring the future, making sense of changes we may confront and making insights accessible, relatable, and tangible. Telling stories about alternative future states and conditions allows foresight users and producers to explore plausible chains of events, such as examining potential cause and effect of relationships of policy decisions and actions. Stories about the future also help to create empathy and understanding for the experience of others, increase comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity, and bridge the gap between vision and implementation.

## **Design**

Design demands a deep understanding of user needs and the coordination of multiple elements (people, objects, processes, and systems) to fulfill an intended purpose. Design processes allow us to visualize data and make it more accessible and tangible by transforming abstract ideas into tangible outputs. Design enhances the communication of ideas that may be challenging. It is an essential component of foresight because it allows us to explore complexity, and test policies and strategies under different contextual environments, and prototype new ones.

## **Engagement competencies**

Facilitation and collaboration are deeply intertwined. Strong facilitation skills enhance a group's ability to collaborate by creating space that is safe for frank and open communication. Facilitation and collaboration rely deeply on active listening to focus energy, resolve conflicts, and steer groups to useful outcomes.

### **Facilitation**

Facilitation is the art of guiding group efforts towards shared objectives and is a foundational competency for leadership and teamwork. Effective facilitation encourages creative thinking, ensures all voices are heard, and steers engagements toward novel ideas and innovative problem solving. In foresight, where issues of complexity and ambiguity are common, skilled facilitation builds trust in the process by providing structure to exploratory conversations, creates a safe space for diverse perspectives, and leads to better decision-making and problem-solving. Foresight users and producers with strong facilitation skills help their colleagues to explore the implications of change and devise plans for action that are relevant and resilient.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is the powerful core of collective action. When people combine their skills and knowledge, they can achieve better results than they could on their own. Effective collaboration relies on open communication, cooperation, common goals, and shared decision-making. Foresight processes integrating the perspectives and expertise of a broad range of participants foster greater openness to explore difficult, ambiguous, and controversial ideas. They enable foresight users and producers to arrive at a deeper understanding of complex and interconnected issues, break down silos, and enhance strategic decision making.

## **Thinking competencies**

Much of foresight work relies on our ability to use our minds. We create mental models of systems to help make sense of the world today and process the information we perceive about how the world is changing. Our ability to imagine how the future might be different to today enables us to infer implications of change and anticipate required action. Effective foresight is built on rigorous and reflexive thinking processes.

### **Futures thinking**

A futures thinking mind-set encompasses a long-term perspective that recognizes that while the future cannot be predicted, it can be shaped by our actions. As a result, the range of possible futures that we may confront is multiple. Futures thinking in action is the rigorous application of strategic foresight methods, tools, and processes. Futures thinking provides policy and decision makers with the capacity to better navigate uncertainty and ambiguity by providing the means to understand the implications of changes taking place in the policy landscape and support strategic decision making.

### **Systems thinking**

Systems thinking is a holistic approach to understanding the dynamic relationships between components of a complex system that can adapt its behaviour in unexpected ways. Systems thinking allows us to view challenges and opportunities as part of an interconnected whole, rather than in isolation. Systems thinking focuses our attention on understanding the relationships and interactions between components in a system and patterns of behaviour, rather than on seeking to achieve certainty by trying to predict how a system will behave in the future.

By visualizing the underlying structures and patterns that drive change, we can see beyond the obvious connections and relationships to those that are hidden below the surface and recognize the complexity inherent in a system.

By examining a system and its dynamics, foresight producers and users are better equipped to identify places where small changes could lead to significant adjustments to a system's patterns of behaviour, an activity that is crucial for developing policies and strategies that are resilient over time and in the face of change. Systems thinking can help us to anticipate and potentially avoid the unexpected behaviours that can emerge from complex adaptive systems. Thinking in systems is an important activity for identifying and challenging implicit assumptions and mental models that foresight users and producers might hold, as this can limit explorations of possible futures.

### **Meta-cognitive awareness**

Meta-cognitive awareness is the ability to think about our own thought processes and learning strategies and to reflect on how our upbringing, education, training, experiences, language, geography, and unconscious biases shape the way we perceive the world, and by extension, how we perceive the future. Metacognition enables reflection on our own mental models and how those mental modes are supportive of, or detracting from, our other foresight competencies. Foresight work often exposes us to ambiguous information, complex contexts and stakeholder groups with differing objectives and levels of influence. Meta-cognitive awareness helps foresight producers and users improve research and sensemaking by prompting them to question their own mental models and biases, seek out more diverse and unconventional information sources, challenge their assumptions about what information is considered valuable and valid, and identify information gaps. It enables them to move beyond the expected or obvious choices and embrace novel and unconventional ideas.



## Understanding how government works

The Government of Canada is a complex set of interconnected and interrelated systems. For public servants to be successful in their roles, they need to deeply understand the structure, functions, and operational cycles of government. The activities and insights that derive from foresight processes can make valuable contributions at any stage of operational or strategic cycles and are actionable at all levels of the hierarchy — i.e. analysts, managers, executives, and leaders.

For foresight to support strategic decision making, it is vital for foresight users and producers to leverage their understanding of how decision making happens, budget and policy cycles, how information flows within the system, and whose support may be needed at which point in the process. This in-depth understanding of the workings of government systems ensures that policy and decision makers are aware of changes in the policy landscape that could have significant and disruptive impacts on their domains. This understanding ensures that foresight users and producers have examined assumptions embedded within policy and strategy frameworks; explored alternative, plausible futures; and understand the potential impacts of alternative futures on their policies, programs, and services; so that they can make informed decisions about action.

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## LEARN WITH POLICY HORIZONS CANADA

The Policy Horizons Canada competencies framework for foresight practice offers a robust structure for developing the skills necessary for practicing effective foresight within the Government of Canada. To make the most of this framework:

- 1. Identify your learner profile:** Are you someone who will be making use of insights derived from foresight research and/or processes (foresight user) or are you looking to develop your skills for research, communication, and facilitation in support of foresight practice (foresight producer)?
- 2. Assess your current level:** Use the proficiency levels described in the framework to evaluate your current proficiency level for each of the ten competencies.
- 3. Identify your growth areas:** Which competencies are most relevant to you or your team? Which areas do you wish to further develop first?
- 4. Set learning goals:** Based on your assessment, which specific objectives for enhancing your foresight competencies can you outline right now?
- 5. Learn with Policy Horizons Canada:** Join the Federal Foresight Network (FFN) or the Interdepartmental DG Committee, or partner with us to explore your specific foresight needs. There are multiple opportunities for building skills and experience in foresight.

By actively engaging with this framework, Government of Canada employees can contribute to building a more resilient and forward-thinking government and become better equipped to navigate the complexities of an ever-changing world. We encourage all readers to embrace the journey of continuous learning in foresight and to use this framework as a guide for professional growth and enhanced decision-making in the public sector.

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