

Three Horizons

What is it?

The Three Horizons framework was developed by Bill Sharpe as a tool for thinking about the future. It helps individuals and organizations explore different future scenarios and plan for change.

The framework divides future possibilities into three "horizons" or time frames:

- **Horizon 1:** The present or near future, where current systems, practices, and mindsets dominate.
- **Horizon 2:** The transition period, where emerging trends, innovations, and changes start to challenge existing systems.
- **Horizon 3:** The long-term, where transformative changes and completely new ways of thinking and doing are possible.

The purpose of the Three Horizons framework is to help people recognize and plan for the different stages of change that might unfold. Horizon 1 represents the status quo, Horizon 2 is where things begin to shift, and Horizon 3 is where the future could look radically different. By analyzing these horizons, organizations and individuals can better navigate the complexity of change, recognize opportunities, and prepare for future challenges.

How to use it?

Map the situation (Horizon 1)

- **What:** Identify the current systems, practices, and mindsets that define the present. Focus on the status quo and what is working or not working right now.
- **How:** Reflect on the present state of affairs. What are the existing structures, challenges, and assumptions? This is your starting point—understanding where you are helps you identify areas for change.

Identify trends (Horizons 2)

- **What:** Look for emerging trends, innovations, and shifts that are challenging the current systems. This is the period of change, where new ideas and practices begin to take root.
- **How:** Observe what's evolving in your field or life. What new technologies, behaviors, or policies are gaining momentum? Think about what could disrupt the current system and begin to influence the future.

Envision radical futures (Horizons 3)

- **What:** Think about the long-term future and what could happen if current trends continue or transform radically. This is where you imagine bold, transformative changes.
- **How:** Look beyond the immediate horizon to envision a future that may be very different from today. What do you hope the future could look like? What bold innovations or shifts could completely change your world or industry?

Adapting the practice

The Three Horizons framework can be adapted to reflect a perspective based on the Past, Present, and Future to better understand the evolution of systems or organizations over time.

Past (Horizon 1)

- **What:** Understand the history and origins of the systems or practices in place. Reflect on how things were done in the past and how those practices have shaped the present.
- **How:** Investigate what worked historically, what challenges were overcome, and what lessons were learned. This helps you recognize the foundations that the current systems are built upon.

Present (Horizon 2)

- **What:** Focus on the present moment, where the existing systems, behaviors, and challenges are currently at play. This is the time when old systems are being challenged by emerging trends.
- **How:** Analyze the current landscape. What are the forces disrupting or evolving existing systems? What new opportunities or challenges are arising that are reshaping the way things are done?

Future (Horizon 3)

- **What:** Look ahead and envision potential future scenarios, focusing on long-term transformational change. This could include radical shifts that are currently not possible or imaginable. It could also include reclaiming or bringing forward traditions of the past in a deeper way.
- **How:** Think about how the changes occurring in the present could lead to new systems, values, or technologies in the future. What major shifts or innovations could reshape the future world or industry? How do you want the future to unfold?

Examples in arts and culture

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on gig workers in the arts and culture sector, affecting how they work, their income, and the opportunities available to them. By applying the adapted Three Horizons framework, we can understand the evolution of gig work in the arts and culture industry and how it might shape the future.

Past (Horizon 1)

- **What:** Reflect on the pre-pandemic state of gig work in the arts and culture sector, which was already an essential part of the workforce but often faced challenges like lack of benefits, unstable income, and inconsistent job opportunities.
- **How:** Before the pandemic, gig workers in the arts—such as performers, freelancers, curators, and technicians—relied on temporary contracts or project-based work. Many were self-employed, working in a system that lacked job security, health benefits, and retirement plans. While this model allowed flexibility, it also left many vulnerable to economic shifts. For example, artists performing in live venues or working on short-term contracts often struggled to make a sustainable living.
- **Impact:** Gig work in the arts and culture was characterized by precariousness, with artists and cultural workers relying on a patchwork of income sources, often without sufficient social safety nets.

Present (Horizon 2)

- **What** Analyze how gig work in the arts and culture sector has evolved during and after the pandemic, focusing on the disruptions caused by lockdowns, remote work, and the shift to digital platforms.
- **How:** The pandemic forced many artists and gig workers in the arts to adapt quickly to new ways of working. With physical venues closed and social distancing measures in place, many turned to digital platforms, offering virtual performances, online workshops, and digital art sales. Streaming platforms, social media, and virtual events became key sources of income. Some gig workers transitioned to creating content for platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon, monetizing their work through sponsorships, donations, and subscription models.
- **Impact:** The present has seen a shift toward more virtual and digital gigs, expanding the global reach for artists. However, many gig workers still face challenges such as inconsistent pay, lack of long-term contracts, and reliance on platforms that take a significant cut of earnings. The gig economy is now more diversified, but it remains precarious, with many workers unsure of how sustainable these new models are in the long term.

Future (Horizon 3)

- **What:** Imagine the long-term future of gig work in the arts and culture sector, considering how emerging trends such as automation, digital transformation, and new economic models might reshape the industry.
- **How:** The future of gig work in the arts could be characterized by more professionalized and stable opportunities through new models of collective bargaining, mutual aid

networks, or stronger unions for freelance workers. Artists might leverage blockchain technology to create decentralized platforms where they can sell their work directly to consumers, bypassing intermediaries and ensuring fairer compensation. Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) could open up entirely new forms of digital art, performance, and experiences, requiring new types of gig work. The rise of creator economies and NFTs (non-fungible tokens) could also allow artists to generate revenue from their work in innovative ways, ensuring more control over their intellectual property.

- **Impact:** The future may offer more financial stability and autonomy for gig workers in the arts. Technological advancements could lead to greater democratization of artistic production and consumption, allowing more artists to thrive in a decentralized, self-directed environment. However, this future also raises questions about accessibility, inequality, and the role of large tech companies in shaping the arts economy.

Climate Crisis

The climate crisis is one of the defining challenges of our time, and youth in the arts and culture sector are increasingly playing a significant role in raising awareness and driving change. By applying the adapted Three Horizons framework, we can explore how young people in the arts have engaged with the climate crisis and how they may shape future cultural movements related to climate action.

Past (Horizon 1)

- **What:** Reflect on how youth in arts and culture have historically engaged with environmental issues and how their voices have been part of broader social movements.
- **How:** In the past, young people in the arts and culture sector were often involved in environmental movements but in a more indirect or limited way. Environmental themes in art, music, and theater have existed for decades—such as early works of eco-art, folk music advocating for nature preservation, or protest art during movements like the environmental activism of the 1970s. However, these movements were less prominent among youth as climate change wasn't yet fully understood as an urgent global crisis.
- **Impact:** While young artists have long been inspired by environmental issues, the climate crisis as we understand it today was not a central theme in mainstream youth culture or artistic expression. Young people often engaged with environmentalism on a local scale, focusing on sustainability, nature conservation, or anti-pollution efforts, but without the overarching global climate urgency that we now face.

Present (Horizon 2)

- **What:** Analyze how youth in arts and culture are currently engaging with the climate crisis, considering the influence of social media, movements like Fridays for Future, and increasing global awareness of environmental issues.
- **How:** Today, youth in the arts and culture sector are at the forefront of climate action. From artists using their platforms to advocate for sustainable practices, to musicians like Billie Eilish and Lil Dicky creating songs that highlight environmental issues, youth culture

is increasingly focused on climate justice. Young people are using art, performance, fashion, and social media to bring attention to the climate crisis. For example, climate-focused art exhibitions, climate documentaries, and grassroots movements like Fridays for Future, led by Greta Thunberg, are empowering young people to create and participate in activism through cultural expressions.

- **Impact:** The present sees youth actively using art and culture as tools for activism, creating a direct link between artistic expression and climate awareness. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow young artists to engage directly with their audiences, spread messages about sustainability, and organize climate-related events. Youth-led cultural initiatives are also shaping public discourse and contributing to a larger shift toward environmental justice in various creative industries.

Future (Horizon 3)

- **What:** Envision how youth in arts and culture will continue to engage with the climate crisis in the coming decades, considering technological advancements, global movements, and evolving cultural landscapes.
- **How:** In the future, youth in the arts could use emerging technologies like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to create immersive art experiences that highlight the consequences of climate change and the importance of climate action. Artists may use AI to create environmentally-conscious art or address climate issues through interactive, participatory experiences. The future might also see youth-driven collaborations that blend cultural expression with sustainability practices on a global scale. For example, fashion designers might focus on regenerative, eco-friendly materials, and filmmakers could produce interactive documentaries that encourage audience participation in climate solutions.
- **Impact:** The future could offer a cultural shift where art, activism, and climate action are fully integrated. Youth could be the driving force behind an arts and culture revolution that prioritizes sustainability, eco-conscious production, and green technologies. We might see the development of a “climate culture” in which all forms of artistic expression—from music and theater to visual arts and design—are inherently connected to efforts to combat the climate crisis. Youth-led movements may push for systemic changes, influencing industries to adopt sustainable practices while continuing to use culture as a means to drive global change.