

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT BASIC METHODOLOGY

Much of this document has been developed over time by the authors and various colleagues in various agencies. These types of notes are now floating around many agencies in a non-attributable form. Special mention here to some initial work done in the formative stages of this type of work in 2002 by Dr Karl Claxton and Mr Geoffrey Rothfield – then senior analysts at the Office of Strategic Crime Assessments in Australia.

This annex overviews the methodology for completing a strategic assessment. This methodology has been developed by the authors as a composite of similar documents produced in law enforcement, in the regulatory community, in Defence and in the corporate sector.

In brief that process is to:

- Research and grasp the environmental context (eg key elements, historical and current features, key stakeholders)
- Determine likely key change agents/drivers/influences
- Assess where things are likely to head
- Select the most relevant findings to report on and draw out key implications

Managers should manage the analyst by aligning them and this process with four programmed deliverables of:

- A brief project plan
- An explanatory piece
- A drivers and futures piece
- A completed paper/Assessment

The analyst with principal responsibility for the project should apply this framework in a flexible, evolving way in consultation with their team leader.

Initial Scoping Phase (1-2 weeks)

The analyst should initially take time to consider:

- Motivation. For example, who is the project sponsor, customer and manager? What is the interest among other clients?
- What is the project to achieve? Why is it important?
- What key knowledge gaps are already acknowledged; what do we know we don't know; missing bits of 'jigsaw'?
- Where does this fit into the overall picture of Commonwealth/national law enforcement?
- What changes have occurred/are expected occur in the area with criminal

activity implications?

- Related Projects. Is there an existing body of knowledge or previous assessments relevant to the project. What assumptions exist, and are they sound? Which are you likely to adopt or challenge? Can certain, already well-covered areas be excluded from the scope?
- Objectives and focus. Is there already an expected central research question? What are the project outcomes, output/deliverables, success criteria - a sequence of strategic decisions to be supported? Is this measurable and realistic, and consistent with strategic objectives?
- Initial thoughts on likely information sources and contacts. Topic experts - who knows who knows; are they friendlies/neutral/mad, bad and dangerous?
- Practical matters. Any known constraints eg. leave planned? Factors or events that could adversely affect the project. Areas of project risk (political, resources, technical, cooperation, financial, scope). How serious? How to meet?
- Stakeholder interests. Of clients, agencies, competitors, key sources, those affected by outcomes. How to meet? Collaboration with other agencies/contractors. Is a contract/MOU/protocol necessary?

After, or in parallel with such initial consideration, the analyst initiates the production sequence by creating a file and initially estimating the classification of the work.

Then the Project Plan is created. The Project Plan will evolve as research is conducted and as intelligence managers and customers input their direction to the project. However, in general the plan should at least include:

- Key anticipated question/focus.
- A first cut of possible 'chunks' of analytical study.
- Basic research design - where information might be / contacts:
- What are the key information gaps/ collection requirements?
- Where is this information? Internal/external experts; official written sources - documents, reports, briefs; OSI eg library help? The Internet?
- Would an initial seminar be useful to kick-start the process?
- Early steerage required for operational personnel if not already underway.
- Broad timings for phases / key milestones to completion.
- Basic methodology/approach.
- Additional resources that may be necessary to carry out the project plan.
- Approval block for signatures.

Before sign-off on the Plan it should be circulated and 'brainstormed' in scheduled analytical 'space' or at an adhoc analysis meeting. Agreement needs to be reached on key aspects with colleagues (schedule more analytical space if necessary) and then the plan is updated.

An Explanatory Piece (normally up to 6 weeks)

Divergent Phase

The happiest time for most analysts is being allowed to play. It is their creative time and all support needs to be given to a strategic analyst to diverge their focus into potentially interesting areas. But to make the process manageable and force good time-management, enforcing some discipline through directing the analytical effort along the following lines is crucial:

- What are the main parts of the issue/problem - how can it be broken down to make research manageable?
- What has happened, is happening, is expected to happen in these areas?
- Why is it happening?
- What is driving developments - which the enduring/fundamental and specific drivers? Any new ones expected?

Such discipline may require the analyst to create a more detailed research design plan or simply update the existing project plan. The intelligence manager will know when the analyst is truly diverging by incessant demands to shift the nature of parts of the scope of the project.

Where the analyst is lost it appears to be spending far too much time in divergent areas, get them to produce Background and Explanatory components of the assessment. In committing words to paper (electronically!) the analysts mind will be focussed on the requirement and it will help the analyst sift through the many facets of information in time to be positioned for the next phase of the project. Some key advice for analysts includes:

- Try to create this part with as much graphics (eg. matrix/diagram/chart) and as little text as possible. Aim for 4 to 5 (max 10) pages.
- Remember the key questions are what are the main parts of the issue/problem?; what has happened, is happening, is expected to happen in these areas?; why is it happening?; and what is driving these developments?
- This material may be further summarised or exiled to appendices in final product but lays the foundation for all further analysis of the topic.
- Circulate explanatory notes.
- Convene analytical space to discuss explanation and consider drivers.

Convergent phase

The analyst now needs to pull the various strands together and make some interpretive judgements about the past and current status of the issue. These should focus on the possible nature and extent of the problem, the key factors contributing to the problem, strengths and vulnerabilities.

This should be delivered to an analytical forum by the analyst in a way that the analyst can deliver their initial thoughts on the issue but can also take on board any additional ideas raised by others. This is a crucial session. If conducted well, all gain insights. In addition, the Drivers and Futures section of work can be brainstormed.

Drivers and Futures (normally up to 2 weeks)

The analyst now needs to isolate those fundamental factors shaping developments using research to date, expert opinion, futures tools, and lots of collegiate brainstorming. These drivers need to be weighed and the trajectory of potential futures considered. This is the most difficult part of any strategic assessment and will require strict managerial oversight. If left to themselves most analysts will not include this section. Rather they will assess the current nature and extent of a problem and simply presume it will get worse. The analyst will naturally demand more time because of the complexity of this part of the analysis. However, this component should not be time-consuming – if they have done the ‘hard yards’ in the explanatory phase and had been considering the future issues from the start.

The ultimate test is asking how the analyst sees the problem unfolding into the future. Then ask – “So what else could happen?” Then it is easier to define the ‘Most Likely’ and ‘Worst-case’ scenarios (what is most likely to unfold) and what are the so-what and now-what possible policy implications for the agency or sector?

Write up (normally about 3 weeks)

As the intelligence manager, it is no good getting to this stage and hearing the analysis for the first time. Ultimately you will need to adjust things which would leave the analyst feeling they have wasted time and their hard work undervalued. If you have managed the preceding phases well and have engineered an inclusive dialogue throughout, then most analysts will feel strengthened by a collegiate approach to their project and less likely to bristle when their assessments are called into question.

The key managerial questions that now need answering are:

- How do we position our key judgements - what parts of our findings are most useful/relevant to report on?
- What are the key ideas in the Intro, Background, Explanation, Drivers, Futures, and Implications parts, (or for whatever structure is most appropriate). For the implications section, comments on legislative advice and policy advice may need expert input.
- What makes the Executive Assessment and what doesn't? (eg.

Statements for the outlook, key judgements, critical uncertainties, and policy implications).

- It will probably be useful to point to possible I&W issues in the Policy Implications part.
- How to sell the product to make the greatest impact?
- Who must see it and in what form?
- Who needs to see it and in what form?
- Who would benefit from seeing it and in what form?

Now it's time to circulate, redraft, finalise, and clear the assessment.

- Run draft product past Agencies/cleared experts/stakeholders in a way that minimises lengthy delays ("we are seeking your expert comments on the draft ... will presume general agreement in the absence of contact by date X")
- Document cleared through the head of intelligence.
- Assessment is disseminated.

Publicise and follow-up.

- Consider any opportunities to deliver findings beside the written assessment itself
- Re-cock the intelligence-cycle if appropriate or viable (for example, if the assessment raises new questions are raised through the strategic assessment program).