



IFTF HABIT WORKSHEET

Signals of Change

New to foresight practice? Here's some advice from the Institute for the Future's Foresight Essentials team for how to get started with "signals of change."

1 | Know what a signal of change is.

A signal of change is a concrete example of how the world could one day be different.

It might be a tiny change happening in just one town, or just one school, or just one company, or just one person's life. But it's real. It's not a hypothetical possibility. It is happening right now, and it proves that a specific kind of change is possible. As the science fiction author William Gibson famously stated, "The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed." A signal of change draws your attention to where the ideas, technologies, and habits of the future are being actively experimented with, tested, seeded, invented, today.

You can find signals of change in the news and on social media, in scientific journals and TEDx talks, in podcast interviews and at protests. They pop up wherever new ideas are shared and wherever surprising events are documented. You can even find one right now, just by typing "future of (anything)" into your favorite search engine.

Keep in mind, as you look for clues, that signals of change aren't general trends like "artificial intelligence" or "decrease in health insurance coverage in the U.S." They are vivid, detailed, specific examples of innovation, change or invention – like "Fight Health Insurance" a startup that leverages machine learning and data analysis, identifying discrepancies in coverage and giving people personalized insights on how to approach their appeal process after denial of coverage. Now *that's* a signal, of both the future of artificial intelligence and the future of insurance & risk.

You know you've found a signal if you can tell a story about it – a who, what, when, where and why.

2 | Go on a signals of change scavenger hunt.

Finding signals can be as simple as doing a quick news or social media search. The easiest way to find a clue is to search "future of..." plus whatever you're interested in.

"This week, I searched for 'future of prison reform', 'future of mental health', and 'future of pets,'" says IFTF research director Jane McGonigal. "That last one was a particularly fun search – I learned about dinosaur chickens, therapeutic robot cushions, and 'how dogs on Mars would live'."

Throw in search terms like "innovation", "experiment", "surprising", "future", "trend", "leading-edge", "weird", "strange", "creative idea", "new phenomenon", and "scientific study" to help you find more signals.

Be sure to search videos, images, podcasts, too!

3 | Collect signals of change from others.

Here are four ways you can expand your search, and make your signals of change habit social:

- **Consider** starting a signals sharing group, in-person or online. You can organize a monthly signals-trading snack break, lunch, or coffee break. It's just like starting a book club – but instead of reading a different book every month, you pick a different future topic, and everyone brings at least one signal of change related to that topic.
- **Make** it a new rule to start every team meeting or staff meeting with one person sharing a signal of change they've recently found.
- **Set up** an online channel for sharing and trading signal of change: an email list, a Facebook group, a discussion forum, a Discord channel, or a Slack channel, for example. Participants can add and discuss signals whenever they want.
- **Tap** your social networks! Post on social media questions like this: “What’s the weirdest or most surprising thing going on in cryptocurrency right now?” “I’m looking for leading-edge projects and ideas in the future of voting – what can you share with me?” “What’s happening in the world that you wish more people knew about, or were paying attention to?”

4 | Interpret a signal of change.

Collecting signals is fuel for your curiosity and imagination. It's fun just to notice them and share them with others. But the next step is to do a little analysis of the signals, by asking these questions:

1. What kind of change is it an example of? From what to what?
2. What's driving, or motivating, the change? Why is it happening?
3. What does this signal make me worry about? What does it make me excited about?
4. What would the world be like if the signal became common and widespread?
5. Do I want to wake up in that world? Is it a future I want?

These are great questions to spark discussion if you're collecting and sharing signals with others.

5 | Make it a weekly habit to look for signals of change.

Make a commitment to spend five minutes each week finding one new signal of change. Pick a day of the week. How about Tuesday, Clues-day? Or Future Friday? Put a recurring event on your calendar so you make this habit easy to remember and keep.