What should your plan build on, fix, pursue and guard against?

SWOT analysis sorts what your team knows into four boxes: internal strengths and weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats.

WHY IT MATTERS

Every planning conversation surfaces more issues than a team can act on. SWOT separates what your company controls from what it has to respond to — so the conversation starts from one shared picture.

BY THE NUMBERS

8–10
key issues each manager listed in the original method (Puyt et al., 2023)

SOFT
the method's first name, before SWOT (Puyt et al., 2023)

20+ of 50
companies reviewed used a SWOT; none used its outputs later in the process (Hill & Westbrook, 1997)

0.25%
of about 1,400 UK business-school alumni had never heard of SWOT (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013)

HOW IT WORKS

List what you know, then place each item in one quadrant. Strengths and weaknesses are internal — things your company owns. Opportunities and threats are external — things in your market. The output is a sorted list, not a decision: a review of 50 companies found SWOT lists long, unprioritized and unused downstream (Hill & Westbrook, 1997). Carry it into the next step — choosing which 3–5 priorities matter most.



WHEN TO USE IT

- Before a strategy offsite, to put every leader's issues on one page
- When a new leader needs a fast, shared read of the business
- As input to prioritization — pair it with a tool that ranks the options

Where Horizon12 uses it: HorizonAxis cites SWOT, and the Strategy Blueprint workshop applies it.

GO DEEPER

Credit. Puyt et al. (2023) name Robert F. Stewart as SWOT's originator. His SOFT approach — Satisfactory, Opportunities, Faults, Threats — came out of planning research at Stanford Research Institute in the mid-1960s and was later renamed.

Attribution has been disputed. Albert Humphrey is often named as the inventor; Puyt et al. (2023) place him in the same SRI planning group rather than as the originator, and find no evidence for a Harvard origin. Hill and Westbrook (1997) had suggested Harvard business-policy academics as a possible source.

References

Hill, T., & Westbrook, R. (1997). SWOT analysis: It's time for a product recall. *Long Range Planning, 30*(1), 46–52. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-6301(96)00095-7

Jarzabkowski, P., Giulietti, M., Oliveira, B., & Amoo, N. (2013). "We don't need no education"—Or do we? Management education and alumni adoption of strategy tools. *Journal of Management Inquiry, 22*(1), 4–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492612460588

Puyt, R. W., Lie, F. B., & Wilderom, C. P. M. (2023). The origins of SWOT analysis. *Long Range Planning, 56*(3), Article 102304. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2023.102304

BOTTOM LINE

SWOT sorts what you know. Deciding what to do about it is the harder step. Run HorizonAxis and HorizonNorth free, then book a Strategy Blueprint ($5,000–$9,500) to turn the gap into a signed-off plan.