

Connecting the Dots

Becoming a Knowledge Age innovator



In May 1961, President John F. Kennedy asked the nation to commit itself to the seemingly impossible goal of landing a man on the moon by the end of the decade. This clarion call was spurred by more than curiosity or national pride—it was fueled by the United States’ ambition to lead space achievement and confront the communist threat.

Eight years later, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon. While the Apollo 11 landing was a triumph of science and technology, it was also a triumph of innovation and collaboration.

In January 2009, President Barack Obama asked the nation to reduce carbon emissions to 1990s levels by 2020 and then an additional 80 percent by 2050. Although we won’t know for decades whether Obama’s reductions will be achieved, his goal—like Kennedy’s drive to the moon—will most certainly produce innumerable benefits, and it will be fueled by the same feedstocks: innovation and even broader collaboration among many organizations and individuals.

DEFINING INNOVATION

Innovation is essential to the long-term success of every organization. But innovation today isn’t what it used to be. What is innovation in the Knowledge

Age and, more importantly, how must organizations equip themselves to harness its power?

Discovery doesn’t occur in a vacuum—innovators have always relied on ideas that have come before or are emerging in parallel. The Knowledge Age, however, provides new ways to make connections between ideas. Easier travel and improved methods of communication have lowered the cost per idea transferred, enabling greater access to information and allowing people everywhere to work together to solve problems. Technological advances have also created a knowledge infrastructure that enables enterprises and countries to leverage discoveries made far outside their borders. The open, boundless, real-time sharing of ideas is fundamental to modern innovation.

Think of this as “connecting the dots.” By making connections among seemingly disparate ideas, institutions and individuals, innovators create something that’s truly more than the sum of its parts. Organizations wishing to innovate must methodically and tirelessly build and nurture these networks.

Doing so enables organizations to approach innovation asking not just “What can we produce next?” but the more vital question of “Who do we need to be?” Today organizations can and must start with a picture of the future

it seeks to build. That future identity—the role the organization will play and the contribution it will make in years to come—orients the organization and its people, guiding them as they foster the relationships that fuel innovation.

Once a vision for the future is established, an organization can begin to foster innovation by understanding its drivers, committing the right resources and fostering the climate necessary for the development of new ideas and solutions.

THE RIGHT DRIVERS

What drives an organization influences how it approaches and governs innovation. Organizations can be motivated by a number of drivers, but the two most significant may be challenges and threats.

If necessity is the mother of invention, challenge is its father. Today more than ever, we can be spurred by the so-called impossible questions that other innovators are posing and answering. In 2008, for instance, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency challenged its partners to build an airplane that could fly five years without landing. An impossibility now, this plane will exist some day, in part because these individuals were challenged to make it so. Setting stretch goals often is a vital first step in the innovation process.



“connect the dots” from the bottom of the organization upward, networking senior and junior employees in defiance of typical hierarchy. Young employees are more apt to offer fresh perspectives (rather than saying “we tried that before and it failed”) and are generally more conversant with emerging communication and information technology.

Multidimensional networks. Homogeneity is anathema to an innovative culture. Effective organizations capitalize the range of perspectives and knowledge found among different groups, disciplines and cultures. This can be through bringing talent in-house (permanently or temporarily) and partnering with outside groups including universities, emerging companies, non-governmental organizations, social entrepreneurs, community groups, consumers, government officials and others.

Time and money. Focused too intently on return on investment, many organizations fail to see the value of allowing employees the time to simply think—either alone or with each other. This time is essential to innovation, as no one can predict precisely when or how a pivotal revelation will occur.

THE RIGHT CLIMATE

The internal climate of an organization directly impacts its ability to innovate, and Knowledge Age innovators understand that creating that right climate is, fundamentally, a leadership function. Management can facilitate or frustrate innovation through its rules, rewards, expectations and, perhaps most importantly, the nature of its communication.

Effective internal communication is necessary to innovation. When information flow is predominantly top-down, the individual initiative and drive required for innovation are often absent. Further, when communication among disparate groups is mired in bureaucracy, innovative practices sink in the mire as well. Free-wheeling communication is vital to the connecting of one idea to another, which is the essence of innovation. This is also true for external communications, not just for internal.

Other factors also contribute to an innovation-friendly climate:

Active support. When leaders publicly demonstrate their own commitment to innovation and connecting the dots, individuals feel empowered to do the same. When innovative individuals or groups feel they need to fly under the radar the organization as a whole loses.

A long-term view. The unpredictable nature of innovation demands that organizations focus attention beyond the next quarter or budget cycle. The path to success will include false starts and outright failures. In the wrong climate, failure is a barrier to innovation for employees who fear retribution. In the right climate, however, failure is recognized as a milestone. Innovation requires a long-term perspective.

An incentive system. Organizations must foster innovation through employee incentives. Employees could be motivated monetarily

or through public celebration of innovative achievements, for example.

The effective use of narrative. The stories an organization shares with employees are the lifeblood of its culture. Knowledge Age leaders ensure their organizations use the power of narrative to commemorate innovative efforts (successful and unsuccessful) and connect employees with both the process of innovation and one another. Sharing stories also allows leaders to demonstrate their support of the innovation process.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

In the emerging Knowledge Age, public and private organizations must remain focused on innovation to sustain their competitive edge and long-term relevance. While innovation cannot be coerced, a proactive leader in this future must dedicate the organization to identifying and prioritizing the organization’s key drivers and imperatives, allocating sufficient resources to support the innovation process and cultivating an environment that supports innovative practices—one in which innovation is not just tolerated but embraced as the most critical step in creating the organization’s future.

Innovation is about the future—the future of individuals, organizations and society in general. More than any other single factor, sustained success for an organization hinges on its ability to adapt to or alter its environment through the connections it makes internally and externally among individuals and ideas. Connecting those dots successfully over time is the *sine qua non* of innovation today and in the future.

At its heart innovation is change, and in the environment of today and tomorrow it’s driven by connections and networks among innovators in a way that is fundamentally different than in the past. Understanding the forces driving that change, seeing from where new ideas are emerging and recognizing how to connect to and leverage them will be the points of differentiation for private- and public-sector enterprises alike looking to succeed in the future. 🌟

Threats to an organization can also generate innovative thinking. Leaders who can identify, assess, evaluate and communicate threats help ensure those threats motivate rather than suppress innovation. External threats such as war, economic collapse and competitive pressure have spurred some of history’s most significant advances in technology, communication and transportation—and the novel threats of the Knowledge Age will spur countless others.

THE RIGHT RESOURCES

An organization’s investment of resources also affects its ability to innovate. In the knowledge economy, organizations must marshal resources in the service of one overwhelmingly important objective: enabling connectivity inside and outside of the enterprise.

Human capital. The most critical organizational resource is capitalist people. To be innovative, organizations need people who are culturally intuitive, curious, anticipatory, proactive, collaborative, multidisciplinary, and personally networked—individuals who can connect ideas and technologies in new ways to produce something better. The cultivation of an innovative culture begins with smart investments in human resources.

Youth. Effective Knowledge Age leaders



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