

BUSINESS LIFE

Innovation that succeeds by exploiting the past creatively

If you have ever attended an innovation conference, you will be familiar with consultants' graphs that show how, say, the second half of the 21st century will belong to African millennials relentlessly networking via wearable mobile devices. But what has struck me recently is not so much the extraordinary potential of the future, but the extent to which innovators draw on ingredients from the present and the past.

Novelty is virtually the only common element in many definitions of innovation. But any corporate leader who assumes these products or processes must be conjured from scratch will condemn his innovation department to futile hours in the lab.

Gambling that a rare flash of genius will generate a brand new, commercially viable idea is expensive and time-consuming. Google's Larry Page is confident enough about his start-ups to refer to them as "zero-billion-dollar-companies", the implication being that they have billion dollar potential. But even he has had to focus on a few such projects, from the driverless car to smart contact lenses.

True innovators' eureka moments are more likely to spring from the realisation that the elements they need to create a new and marketable product or service already exist - just not yet in a form that most people want or are able to use.

Shai Reshef, who built his University of the People to offer affordable online qualifications to anyone, described it in this way at last week's FT Innovate conference in London: "I realised that

everything that made higher education so expensive was already available - and for free."

The assumption that the components of successful innovation are "already available" should be liberating for companies.

Open-mindedness about where those components can be found will lead companies to different places - beyond known innovation hotspots. For example, a survey prepared for Johnston Press, the regional media group, identified Greater Manchester and Merseyside as the UK regions with the best combination of elements for innovation outside London.

An open mind also leads to different people. General Electric - still often castigated, I think unfairly, as an exemplar of a hidebound conglomerate approach - sourced a new design for the bracket that attaches its engines to aircraft through an online 3D printing challenge. (The winner was an Indonesian engineer, whose blueprint for a stronger, lighter model was initially pooh-poohed by GE's experienced in-house team.)

In some cases, innovators go back to the past for inspiration. One of Johnston Press's case studies, from Portsmouth, on England's south coast, is Pie & Vinyl, a café that sells long-playing records and comfort food, in a shop decorated with locally sourced antiques and knick-knacks. "You don't have to be digital to be innovative," as Ashley Highfield, Johnston Press's chief executive, pointed out, praising the combination.

On a larger scale, Diageo, the drinks

company, recently dug from the Guinness archives century-old recipes for porter, a traditional beer, which it has brewed and packaged with a retro label. Whether or not the porter sells well, Diageo says the Guinness brand will benefit from this association with its heritage.

You can argue whether this type of innovation is truly novel. But start-ups that pitched to FT Innovate delegates last week also combine old and new. Readbug, a magazine subscription service, gives new digital life to print publications. Pocket Anatomy, a phone and tablet app to help doctors explain conditions more clearly to patients, animates anatomical diagrams that Leonardo da Vinci would have recognised. POD Point is building electric vehicle charging infrastructure on what looks like a standard franchise model: it sells its charge points to individuals and businesses to fund expansion of the whole network.

The minimum requirement for an innovation, according to the OECD's Oslo Manual - a handbook about how to collect and interpret data - is that "the product, process, marketing method or organisational method must be new (or significantly improved)".

Impatient corporate bosses sometimes need reminding that it is possible to achieve that objective by mixing mundane elements that may be right in front of them, leaving the innovator to furnish the most important ingredient: fresh thinking.

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Gambling that a rare flash of genius will generate a new, viable idea is expensive



Andrew Hill

On management

Office furniture is being redesigned as where and how we work changes. Are you sitting comfortably, asks Clare Dowdy

The vast Koelnmesse exhibition hall in Cologne was awash with felt last month. Seating designers at the Orgatec office furniture fair had made plentiful use of its noise-absorbing properties to cover spacious high-backed seating that was quite different from the standard, functional chairs that most of us use.

Office workers increasingly spend time away from their base. When they do come into the office, it is to work at a shared desk or to meet up with colleagues for discussions, hence the need for comfort and some help to keep noise levels down. The requirements are similar for the increasing numbers who work at home.

Until a few years ago, shows like Orgatec, Europe's biggest office furniture trade fair, mostly featured the ubiquitous highly functional task chairs and workstations familiar to most of us. But with mobile technology allowing more professionals to work away from their desk, the office space has changed and manufacturers have had to adjust.

On average, 30 per cent to 45 per cent of traditionally allocated desks are occupied at any one time, according to the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

If fewer staff are permanently tied to their workstation, there is less need for everyone to have their own desk. The workplace-design industry estimates that many companies allocate around seven desks for 10 staff, says Felicity Roocke, who heads interior design in the UK for the architecture firm Hassell. At the same time, this hot-desking frees space for other activities, such as collaborating on a project with colleagues or concentrating on a tricky task alone.

Workplace designers have responded by devoting more space to cafés, comfortable seating and quiet spots, where studies repeatedly show that knowledge workers are more productive. A decade ago, it was not unusual for a UK business to spend 70 per cent of its furniture budget on desks and task chairs, and the rest on "soft" furniture. The proportions are often reversed now, says Steve Fitch, sales director at UK furniture supplier Dovetail.

"The actual desk has become a total commodity," says designer Konstantin Grcic, who has created such workplace items for the Swiss furniture company Vitra as a workstation. "Companies don't spend much money on desks (meaning simple long trestle table-style desking), but they spend a lot of money on lounge areas and cafeterias."

Staff who work away from the office a lot may spend some of their time in coffee shops with WiFi and in external meetings, but they could also be working from home. According to the UK's Office of National Statistics, of the 30.2m people in work January to March 2014, 4.2m spent at least half their working hours at home. The ONS also



Make yourself more at home in the workplace

An office within an office: Koleksiyon's Oblivion design for a workspace that can be enclosed or left partly open to the rest of the workplace

Koelnmesse

noted that the homeworkers were in some of the highest skilled roles in the economy.

Similarly in the US, 64m have jobs that involve working from home, according to Global Workplace Analytics. More than 75 per cent have an annual salary of at least \$65,000.

Homeworkers require a proper home office set-up, rather than the kitchen table, and that is good news for office furniture makers.

Some employers pay for home office

furniture. In the UK that could be a budget of £1,750 to £2,500 for desk, chair and storage, says Graeme Winship of Bisley Direct, which sells office equipment online for Bisley, an office furniture specialist that has moved into furniture.

"Four years ago when we started, 80 per cent of our sales were business to business. Now 60 per cent of our sales are private, for home offices," he says.

The home-office department of UK retail chain John Lewis has also benefited from the boom in homeworking

and start-ups, many of which are set up at home. The department's sales are up 12 per cent on last year, says David Barrett, the chain's buyer for home office furniture.

One of John Lewis's products for 2015 is a workstation unit called Stage, made by Bisley. "A lot of office products don't readily transfer into the home environment," says Bisley marketing director Richard Blackwell. "They look too corporate and they are also too big."

When staff come into the office, it is to brainstorm, solve problems and generate ideas - all activities that are easier in proximity with colleagues.

Workplace designers believe that these staff, as well as those tied to a desk, enjoy an office with a homely feel. Younger staff in particular are turned off by conventionally corporate environments, they say. Hassell employs hotel and residential designers on its office projects. "We try to design workplaces so they feel more domestic, not cold corporate environments," says Ms Roocke.

This has led to "crossover" products: furniture that would not look out of place at home or in an office, such as PearsonLloyd's Healey Lounge chair. Designer Tom Lloyd says: "The office used to be very mechanical and grey, but now there's a much softer side of the workplace. You can sell the same thing into the office and home environment."

This crossover has worked in reverse for Denmark's Soft Line. It started out selling to consumers but now "40 per cent of our sales are to the office and hospitality sectors, whereas three years ago it was zero", says export manager Christian Skovhus.

"We are getting more and more interest from offices because people are trying to mimic the home in the workplace."

Future furniture

New ways of working

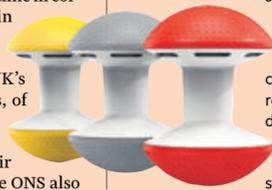
Cross-over product Healey Lounge chair by PearsonLloyd for Walter Knoll
This armchair has the deluxe leather finish of a 1960s classic car - hence its name, in a nod to the Austin Healey. "You need an environment that allows you to create creativity," says Markus Benz, CEO of Walter Knoll. He believes that being able to sit in a relaxed and informal way in the Healey, with a laptop or tablet perched on its broad sliding armrests, will contribute to creativity. Its domestic aesthetic, Mr Benz says, makes it suitable for both the office and home.

Diminished distractions Hexa by Przemysław 'Mac' Stopa for Nowy Styl
"We have to increase acoustic elements on furniture because no one wants to pay for acoustics on the floor and ceiling," says Leszek Romanowski, workplace strategy leader at Nowy Styl Group. Its hexagonal form is upholstered in colourful felt and its high back makes it a good "phone booth". Hexa is modular and can be configured for small meetings or individual quiet time, as a two-person booth or a single seater.



Quick meetings Ballo Stool by Don Chadwick for Humanscale
This mobile stool is designed for handy flexibility during short bursts of activity such as brainstorming sessions. Weighing just 6.8kg and with integrated handholds, it can easily be moved around for impromptu meetings. A counterweight in its base means it remains upright. Chris Gibson, global director of retail at Humanscale, says "Ballo is a fun product" designed to supplement rather than replace the standard office task chair.

Reinventing the desk Hack by Konstantin Grcic for Vitra
Talented young tech recruits can be lured into the workplace with furniture, Vitra believes. Mr Grcic noted that people build informal barricades of belongings such as bags and books around themselves at conventional long-bench desking - "so we made an enclosure". The result is Hack, which comprises a private, height-adjustable work surface, with walls that can be customised. It can be collapsed into a flat box shape when not in use.



Art of persuasion

The night Malcolm X stood tall in the wrong kind of tie

SAM LEITH



Getty Images

Next Wednesday is the 50th anniversary of the American civil rights activist Malcolm X's address to the Oxford Union, a few months before he was assassinated. The debate, on December 3 1964, is the subject of a book by Stephen Tuck: *The Night Malcolm X Spoke At The Oxford Union*.

The motion for the debate was: "Extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." Malcolm's opening words were: "Tonight is the first night that I've ever had an opportunity to be as near to Conservatives as I am." That caused a disarming ripple of laughter.

Here, straight away, was a man playing on his being out of context: amid the white Anglican British establishment, Malcolm X was an African-American Muslim radical. (The dissonance was embodied in comical form at the Randolph hotel, where a receptionist attempted to insist that he sign his full second name in the guest book rather than just "X".)

You can see footage of Malcolm's speech on YouTube, and it's notable for that frequent easy laughter. The Conservative MP Humphry Berkeley had spoken before him, lampooning him for having changed his name and calling him "North America's leading exponent of apartheid". So, primed to expect a fire-breathing militant, the audience was vulnerable to an unexpected weapon: charm.

As he spoke, Malcolm started referring to Berkeley as "that type", occasionally correcting himself when he said "my friend" or "my honourable friend".

Each time, it brought laughter. And through laughter, he was able to lead his audience to his serious points: taking ownership of the definition of "extremism" and making a forceful case

against what Martin Luther King called "the tranquillising drug of gradualism".

There's a small detail, though, that I wanted to mention: he was marked out not only by race and accent but by how he was dressed. His fellow speakers wore, as is traditional, black bow ties. Malcolm, having split bitterly from the Nation of Islam whose members wore bow ties, wore a straight tie. At the dinner beforehand the only other person in a straight tie was the steward pouring the wine.

There is a rhetoric of clothes. How you are dressed has a direct bearing on how you position yourself with regard to your audience. Consider Gandhi's dhoti, which signalled his simplicity and independence; or, at the other end of things, the comic-opera style of Colonel Gaddafi. When in 1997 Gordon Brown wore a lounge suit instead of white tie to the Mansion House dinner, he was making a statement. And members of David Cameron's Bullingdon Club circle are still sensitive about being photographed in black tie.

If, as I argue, a key part of persuasion is establishing an identity in relation to an audience, how you obey - or flout - a dress code matters. Are you looking to make an informal bond in shirtsleeve order; or offer the decorous respectfulness of formal gear?

If you're playing the outsider, certainly, a straight tie in a room full of penguin suits will gently semaphore your position.

That said, Malcolm lost the vote by 228 to 137. Perhaps a dickie bow might have been the way to go after all.

The writer is the author of 'You Talkin' to Me?' Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama

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Great place to meet

Bahri Bar, Dubai



Where: Madinat Jumeirah

WiFi: Free

Plug sockets: Yes

Espresso: AED 40 (£6.95)

Open: 4pm-2am

Privacy points: ★★☆☆

After its humiliating bailout by Abu Dhabi, Dubai is getting its mojo back.

With new trams and a driverless metro, plus another, three-times-larger airport on the way, business in Dubai is heating up again as it prepares to host the 2020 World Expo.

Set in 40 hectares of canals and gardens, the Venetian-styled Madinat Jumeirah resort is a haven for people who prefer doing business in peace. A glance around its colonial-style Bahri Bar reveals architects showing sketches to Emiratis and real estate agents schmoozing Russians.

A great place to seal deals. Or not. One British football magnate is said to have downed cocktails here after learning Dubai

investors would not meet the asking price for his club.

Choose leather armchairs inside or ask Portuguese bar manager Carlos to reserve you seats on the veranda for a view of the crystal-clear waters of the Gulf and VIPs landing on the helipad of the Burj Al Arab, a sail-shaped hotel on its own island.

Menu options include green apple-flavoured shisha and Cuban cigars, mezze and a range of pricey cocktails.

Deal done, hop aboard a wooden water taxi to explore the rest of this city within a city, travelling under footbridges to celebrate in one of more than 40 restaurants and bars.

A rendezvous for cool heads while the rest of Dubai overheats.

Ian Wylie