

DEFENDING INNOVATION 2.1 COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Hunkered down is the new normal. This is hardly surprising given that thousands of companies around the world are facing stagnant economies, hyper-efficient competitors, and tight-fisted customers. When you seem to be caught in a cycle of endless retrenchment, it can be hard to be optimistic—even if you believe the world is filled with more promise than peril. And if you're a champion of innovation, it's even harder to put on a happy face. If you're a mid-level VP, you've probably had a pet project gutted by some newly empowered bean counter. If you're a struggling entrepreneur, you may have had to lay off some key talent and cut expenses to the bone. And if you're a consultant who helps other folks to innovate, you may be one "spending freeze" away from posting yourself at a busy intersection with a hand-lettered sign that reads, "Will brainstorm for food."

In recent years, left-brain types have had the upper hand while starry-eyed innovators have struggled to get a hearing. Nevertheless, before innovation slips any further down the list of corporate priorities, we need to remind ourselves that we owe *everything* to innovation.

WE OWE OUR EXISTENCE TO INNOVATION

Our species exists thanks to four billion years of genetic innovation. Since time immemorial life has been experimenting with new genetic combinations, through sexual recombination and random mutation. As human beings, we are the genetic elite, the sentient, contemplating, and innovating sum of countless genetic accidents and transcription errors. Thank God for screw-ups. If life had adhered to Six Sigma rules, we'd still be slime. Whatever the future holds for us bipeds, we can be sure that happy accidents will always be essential to breakthrough innovation.

WE OWE OUR PROSPERITY TO INNOVATION

Most of us do more than subsist. From the vantage point of our ancestors, we live lives of almost unimaginable ease. Here again we have innovation to thank. A thousand years of *social innovation* gave millions of us the right to self-determination. We are no longer vassals and conscripts. We live in democratic societies where we are free to think and do as we wish—essential prerequisites for innovation. Repeated bouts of *institutional innovation*—including the invention of capital markets, company law, and patent protection—paved the way for economic progress by facilitating trade, capital formation, and entrepreneurship. And a hundred-plus years of frenzied *technological innovation* blessed us with personal mobility, instant communications, an arsenal of disease-fighting drugs, unprecedented computational power, and TiVo. As technologies multiplied, incomes soared. Between 1000 and 1820, global per capita income rose by a scant 50%. Over the next 12 decades, it grew by 800%.¹ Put simply, innovation rescued humanity from privation.

WE OWE OUR HAPPINESS TO INNOVATION

Humans are the only beings who create for the sheer pleasure of doing so. Whether it's laying out a garden, plinking out a new tune on a piano, writing a bit of poetry, manipulating a digital photo, redecorating a room, or inventing a new chili recipe—we are happiest when we are creating. Yes, we innovate to solve problems, to make money, and to get ahead. But for most of us, innovation is an end, not a means. We don't need a practical justification to innovate. We create because we were born to; we have no choice. From Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi² to Tal Ben-Shahar,³ the experts agree: human beings are happiest when they're exercising their ingenuity. Throughout history, millions of human beings were denied the chance to exercise their creative gifts—because they lived at a time when the tools of creativity were prohibitively expensive or in a society where creative freedoms were abridged. Our generation, by contrast, is blessed. We have access to dirt-cheap tools (like a \$100 video editing program), can connect with our creative fellows around the world, and are able to share our innovations with any and all (thanks to the Web). Forget the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution—ours is the golden age of innovation, and we should take delight in that fact.

WE OWE OUR FUTURE TO INNOVATION

Today, human beings confront a daunting array of problems that demand radical new solutions. Climate change, global pandemics, failed states, narco-crime, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation—meeting these challenges will require us to invent new innovation *systems*. (The idea behind Google Ideas.) We have to learn how to solve problems that are multidimensional and multijurisdictional. In the early years of the twentieth century, Thomas Edison and General Electric invented the modern R&D lab, and with it a set of much-imitated protocols that would help to generate a century's worth of technological progress. Today, humanity's most pressing problems

aren't merely technological; they're social, cultural, and political, and global in scope. That's why, like Edison, we must innovate around innovation. Luckily, there are new meta-innovations (like idea markets, crowdsourcing, and folksonomies) that can help us innovate across disciplines, borders, institutions, and ideologies. This is the only way we'll solve the make-or-break challenges now facing our species. Our future, no less than our past, depends on innovation.

So don't give up. Innovation isn't a fad—it's the real deal, the only deal. Right now, not everyone believes that, but they will—even all those corporate cost-cutters with shriveled right hemispheres.

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