

NOT JUST ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

What innovation is, and what it isn't

The current buzz about digital disruption is feeding an innovation frenzy as companies and entrepreneurs rev up plans to reinvent their businesses to stay relevant.

But what is innovation, exactly? And how should companies innovate?

Some answers were offered at a recent forum on innovation organised by Think Business — a free knowledge site of NUS Business School — and TODAY. Here are the edited excerpts from the forum:

**JASON TAN, ASSOCIATE
EDITOR AT TODAY
(MODERATOR)**

We have been innovating as a species since the invention of the wheel. Even today, in my business of journalism, we are facing the pressure to innovate. When I first joined journalism, we were using 56.6k modems, and there were no such things as news alerts.

Today, we are facing constant pressure to adapt to a changing world in which people consume news very differently.

We have to reach out to readers rather than wait for them to come to us. Past business models and practices no longer work. In many businesses, we have to innovate in order to stay relevant and survive.

**PROFESSOR MICHAEL FRESE,
NUS DEPARTMENT
OF MANAGEMENT
AND ORGANISATION**

I want to tell you what is wrong about the thoughts that people have about innovation. The first is, there is a sharp differentiation between radical innovation and incremental innovation.

Would you have imagined, 100 years ago, you could stack containers on top of each other, like suitcases, and a ship that carries these containers, thus changing the face of trade, would be considered an innovation? The point is that we know only afterwards whether something is radical or not radical, whether it is disruptive or



not disruptive.

The next wrong idea: The more resources you have, the better you can innovate. Creativity actually turns out to be very cheap. Well, we can have thousands of ideas here in this room, very, very quickly. Of course, what is much more expensive is to market what comes out of it.

The other thing that people say is that diversity is good for innovation. I wish it were true, but it is not. It is not bad. It is also not that great. Good leaders produce more innovation, do they not? Let me tell you a secret.

If you are a leader for innovativeness, you have to do two things that are contradictory. You have to open up the book, allow errors, allow risks, encourage people to think very broadly, think against the usual ideas.

And then, you have to close on things because you do have to implement and maybe get things done in time and within budget maybe, and there you have to establish routines, you have to take corrective actions and your sanction errors and distinctive plans. Now, these are contradicting leadership issues and a good leader has to do both.

**DR ROBERT YAP,
CHAIRMAN OF YCH**

When I graduated, my dad started a small lorry business. There were some

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issues and he called me and forced me to join the company. A lorry business is not sexy, right? A girl asks: "What does your father do? Oh, lorry ..."

So what happens when you are forced to do it? I wanted to transform things. We introduced IT very heav-

ily into the business. We decided to use information. We had to think about how we could create simple innovation to make our jobs easier.

A lot of times,



when we attract new people to come into the industry, they say, "it is very boring here, count this, count that, everything you count ...". That is how it pushed me to look at how we can utilise drones to do the counting. Now we are using drones in our warehouse to count inventory. We have RFID (radio-frequency identification) sensors, we have Wi-Fi or real time connectivity.

We use innovation not only to make the job easier, but also to make the job sexier. So today, when you come to

the industry, you can see drones flying around. Very sexy, very impressive. It is not just about big innovation — small ones are also good. But they have to be smart innovations — innovations that will help drive growth.

SARAH CHEAH, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, NUS DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION

Innovation need not necessarily be just about technology. It could be business model innovation. It could even be applications of existing knowledge that we have, just to make the quality of life better for society.

We are living in very exciting times. There will never be a time when technology is more accessible than now. There are social media, and car computing and mobile payments, which make payments so much easier.

People are also becoming more open, more collaborative, and that opens up a lot more opportunities for the sharing economy. So it is easy to live in strangers' houses or drive strangers' cars. There are many opportunities for innovation.

There has never been a better time to think about innovation and entrepreneurship.

GRACE CHOW, CREATIVE ENTREPRENEUR

I draw, I paint, I illustrate for a living. This is something that I really enjoy. My clients are usually from fashion brands, luxury brands and even lifestyle brands such

as hotels, cars and shipping. I work with brands like Chanel, Christian Dior, Saab, Ralph Lauren, Fendi.

While in my final year at NUS, I started using Instagram. I love to draw, so I posted my drawings on Instagram and that is how I got started. Brands started to notice my work and then they approached me to create visuals for marketing campaigns, the social media campaigns, product packaging and even TV commercial ads.

Innovation for me means two things — trying to do things differently and improving. There are so many artists, so many illustrators out there, how am I going to compete with them?

For me, I used flowers in my drawings and it was totally accidental. When I was in university, people started giving flowers during Valentine's Day and one day, my flower was dying, so I just plucked it up and pasted it on my work. I posted it in Instagram and instantly it was a hit and that made me realise that, "Oh! This is popular and I should do something about it". This is how I started to get more awareness on my work.

On using innovation to improve

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Associate Professor Sarah Cheah
NUS DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION





in the space industry where they use laser gun technology to achieve much smaller holes at a much higher density while also improving the absorption, without having to increase the cost. So I think the initial constraint created even more innovation.

Robert Yap, replying to a question on lessons learnt from innovation:

One of the critical factors for people who want to innovate is perseverance

— to come back and do it again. But that is possible only if you have that fire, that passion that you want to do something, otherwise you will just give up. As an innovator, as a leader in an organisation that innovates to survive, it is very important. The moment you stop innovation, that is the end of the day.

But if you continue to innovate, there are definitely some failures, there are also some successes. But do we stop because of failure? No, and it

is the kind of attitude that we must have. We encourage a kind of culture of innovation, especially among the young people.

Do we dare to take the challenge? There is always the question: Are our people hungry enough? Singaporeans, unfortunately, are not hungry enough. How do we become hungry or hungrier, wanting to excel, wanting to actually make a bit more for ourselves? It is something that I think we need to be talking about as a society.

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my work, I ask: How can I do better? How can I service my clients better? When I first started, I struggled because my work was totally done on paper. How can I present this kind of work to my clients, who are going to use it on various products, on a new box, on thin material? I had no art degree, no art background. For me, it was about making use of existing technology. I learned how to use Photoshop and then After Effects, and this is how I improved my work and digitalised them. I took advantage of all these technologies and I was able to continue growing my business.

I used Instagram to publicise my work, so I was really thankful that Instagram has changed so much — there is now data that can tell me who my biggest followers are and how many followers I am getting every day, and so on. Just recently, I found out that I had a follower who has 1.75 million followers. I have only 15,000 followers and she has 1.75 million followers. I could probably approach her, we could do a collaboration or something, and then I can reach a bigger audience. So, to me, this is what innovation is about; we make use of existing technology.

Sarah Cheah, replying to a question on whether, instead of thinking outside the box, companies should think inside the box when innovating, with Lego cited as an example of a company that has successfully done so:

It is a very interesting question about thinking inside the box. For example, there was this company that was supposed to manufacture diapers. If you punch too many tiny holes in the diaper, you can compromise the strength of that diaper, it will tear very easily. But if you have too few holes, then it can cause rash because of the moisture that is trapped in there. So this company had a problem. They needed to increase the absorbing ability of the diaper and yet use a technology that is not more expensive than the current one. Given this engineering challenge, the team searched through the databases as well as applications in other industries. They found a technology

The forum on innovation organised by Think Business — a free knowledge site of NUS Business School — and *TODAY*. An organisation should learn to accept failures as well as successes when innovating, the forum heard.

PHOTO: NUS