On The Trail with the Idea Hunters

By Andy Boynton, Bill Fischer, with William Bole

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Ideas matter

In the emerging global knowledge economy, ideas are the raw materials out of which we are forging our future. Those organizations and nations that are able to generate more and better ideas than others, and do it faster, will have a better chance at sustainable success than those that are, for whatever reason, disadvantaged in the economy of ideas. This much is understood and accepted more widely now than in the past.

What is less understood is how the challenge of ideas applies to individual managers and other professionals. Most of them realize that finding and developing innovative ideas has become an essential task for their organizations; some would see it as a simple matter of survival in a hyper-competitive environment. Many leaders, however, are stymied by misconceptions about idea work. Or they are not sure how to carve

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this work into their professional routines.

One set of misconceptions revolves around the whole question of creativity, which has drawn increasing attention among senior executives. Last year, IBM asked more than 1500 CEOs what leadership qualities they valued most, and more than two-thirds of the corporate chiefs named "creativity." Rating fairly low in their estimations were such conventional attributes as dedication and "influence." In other studies as well, creativity has begun to outshine other presumed pillars of leadership such as hard work and even integrity.

These findings point up the extent to which innovation has become a life-and-death matter for corporations. Leaders know they have little choice but to "Think Different," more imaginatively, as the Apple slogan professes. Still, most people have only a foggy notion of what creativity means in a corporate milieu, and this notion does not lend well to the idea work that needs to be done. For example, it is easy to conjure up images of a brilliant person sitting alone in an office with the door shut, finger pressed tightly against forehead, mustering all the brainpower to hatch a thoroughly original notion.

That is a popular image, but in reality, the ideas that fuel innovation are seldom original in any unmingled way. More often than not, they are borrowed, much in the way that Apple's Phil Schiller gloomed onto what became a winning feature of the original iPods. A marketing executive (not a techie), Schiller did not dream up the notion of a click wheel–the lightning-fast scroll that helped initially separate the iPod from its poor MP3 cousins. He borrowed this feature from a motley assortment of electronics products dating to the early 1980s.

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Part of Schiller's feat was to take an idea from one environment and transport it to another. This was not really a stroke of creative genius or an act of stunning originality. It was a simple case of repurposing an idea.

What today's innovators (and yesterday's) can teach us is that high-value ideas are not necessarily created. More often than not, they are already out there, waiting to be spotted and then shaped into an innovation. And, they are not the sole province of creative geniuses. Business ideas come to those who are in the habit of looking for such ideas - all around them, all the time.

We have worked or spoken with many innovators who explain their success in these unvarnished terms. One of them is Jim Koch, founder and chairman of Boston Beer Company, best known for its flagship brand, Samuel Adams Boston Lager. He recalls that in his former career as a management consultant in Boston, he seldom thought explicitly about how and where to find ideas. As a consequence, he did not come up with very many of them, in his estimation. That changed, however, in the early 1990s, when Koch decided to strike out on his own and explore entrepreneurial possibilities. Suddenly the ideas started bubbling up all around him.

"My sense was that once I started looking for business ideas, they were everywhere," he told us in an interview. "It's sort of like radio frequency. You're surrounded by radio waves, but if you're not tuning into them, you're not going to receive them." Koch's revelation, of course, was that he needed to go looking. Such a basic awareness has led him and many others to adopt a host of skills, habits, and strategies, such as setting aside time every day for fresh learning, engaging the world with eyes wide open, and testing ideas regularly in conversations with people from a variety of fields and specialties. When it comes to business ideas, such everyday tasks are of far greater importance than possessing rare intelligence. Behavior counts more than brilliance.

The Power of Purpose

With such an attitude, almost anyone can begin the "hunt" for ideas (which is how Thomas Edison described his search for solutions). There is, however, a prerequisite: all of us need to have a general sense of what we are looking for, and why. To arrive at such an understanding, leaders at every level need to know what they are all about as professionals, what they aim to accomplish for their organizations, and where they would like to be going in their careers and projects. All of that adds up to what we call The Gig, the sense of professional purpose.

Every great innovator has such an operative sense. Walt Disney's gig was to create entertainment for the whole family. Henry Ford's gig was to create a car for everyone, and he had to refashion the process of manufacturing to do it. Warren Buffet's distinction, apart from his nest egg, is that he has taken a different tack on investing than his colleagues. He has sought to understand the fundamentals of a company rather than try to predict the ups and downs of the stock market.

These and other legendary figures knew their gigs. And the salient point is that their gigs gave focus and direction to their learning and idea seeking. For instance, because he was interested in family-friendly entertainment, Disney did not go looking for his best ideas in the thrill-ride American amusement parks of his time, which were seedy places with bad food and unfriendly employees. He traveled to Denmark instead, to observe the scene at Tivoli gardens, a clean and orderly park in Copenhagen with, as one chronicler had put it, "lush flowers, tame rides" and a festive family atmosphere. Disney's gig led him to Tivoli, which, in turn, inspired his vision of Disneyland, which opened in California in 1955. In the craft brewery business, Jim Koch has come up with many pacesetting ideas, such as setting expiration dates and finding ways to limit the amount of time his beer spends in inventory. But these and other ideas have been fueled by a purpose - his desire to offer the freshest beer in the industry. That is his mission, his passion, his gig as a high-end beer producer.

Based on our experience as consultants as well as our studies of innovation strategies, we have identified four bedrock principles for use by managers and other professionals. We call these the I-D-E-A principles, because the fundamental traits involve 1) being very *interested* in your surroundings, 2) drawing on a wide range of idea sources, as *diverse* as any investment portfolio, 3) *exercising* idea muscles all the time, not just in a brainstorming session at work, and 4) being *agile* in the handling of ideas, catching and combining ideas as they gush forth from various directions.

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Interested

Consider, once again, Henry Ford - an auto maker who was also an aficionado of auto racing. One day in 1905, he was attending a motor race in Palm Beach, Florida, where a smashup left a French car in pieces. Interested in more than just the spectacle, Ford walked over to the crash scene after the race. He investigated the pile of steel and rubber.

"I picked up a little valve strip stem. It was very light and very strong. I asked

what it was made of. Nobody knew," Ford recounted years later. "I gave the stem to my assistant, 'Find out all about this,' I told him. 'That is the kind of material we ought to have in our cars.'" It turned out to be a steel alloy that contained vanadium, which was manufactured in Europe at the time but not in the United States. Ford may have embellished this account for dramatic effect, but as biographer Steven Watts points out, there's no doubt about the significance of Ford's finding. Vanadium steel provided the "final, crucial piece of the production puzzle" of how to construct a durable, lightweight car at a low price, Watts explains in his book *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century.*

This story suggests that Ford knew his gig - which was to mold a new production process to manufacture a car for everyone. But it also demonstrates the constant value of being interested in the world out there. Note that being interested is not the same as being *interesting*. Ford did not, as far as we know, wander over to the crash scene in order to impress others with his knowledge of automobile production or to regale them with stories of his exploits as a race-car driver. He simply followed his curiosities to the scene.

Diverse

Idea Hunters do not place themselves where all of the competition is - browsing the same publications, going to the same web sites, comparing notes with the same people, and winding up with variations (at best) of the same tired ideas. They seek out a diverse collection of sources, which allows them to adapt ideas from untypical places. This part of idea work requires a wide intellectual bandwidth, which is the breadth of information and knowledge to which we are receptive. Such breadth or diversity makes it possible to span distances - between, for example, your specialty and other specialties.

One leader who consciously seeks to widen his bandwidth is Jack Hughes, founder and chairman of TopCoder, a global software firm based in the United States. His company has pioneered the model of "crowdsourcing" in that industry, spawning a community of more than 250,000 freelance software developers around the world. Hughes has helped create intense buzz around the organization by adapting ideas from other business and non-business arenas.

To be sure, he and his team stay on top of technical developments in their field. But they are emphatic about the need to look for business ideas elsewhere. Referring to the software industry, he told us, "I almost never look to the existing discipline for new ideas. Most of the time, I actively avoid it....so I look to other disciplines - manufacturing, the arts, science, finance," and - most fruitfully perhaps - sports. For example,

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he has developed a first-of-its-kind ratings system for independent software coders, modeled on Major League Baseball statistics. He has also examined the tournament structure of college basketball in the United States and applied that structure to software competitions held by TopCoder. This is the modus operandi of the company; members of the community take part in contests to come up with creative designs and solutions.

Hughes noted, "We are experts in software, but we're not going to learn a lot" from other software developers about gaining an edge in this business. "There's a parochialism among the experts that sort of blinds them to what could be," he explained, adding - "We want diversity."

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Exercised

The most experienced Idea Hunters are exercised, engaged in daily training, though it is hardly a chore for them because they take pleasure in the Hunt. Many of them keep notebooks where they record what they have seen and heard, and they connect their personal experiences and impression to their projects and proposals. One key to being exercised is to develop the skills of observation, which includes knowing what needs to be observed closely (a function of one's gig). These skills go hand in hand with other habits of the Hunt, such as recording your observations (with or without a notebook).

There is a point at which observing and noting give way to prototyping - that is, to rough expressions of an idea. When people hear the word "prototype," they may think of a full-scale mockup of a product, program, or design. We look at it differently - as a less formal, everyday activity. When a sales

manager maps out the possible structure of a presentation she will make on behalf of her team, she is prototyping. If she does it legibly enough for someone to look at, then it is a more effective prototype, because she makes it easier to elicit feedback.

Prototyping should begin as early as possible in an innovation process, not just when it is time to show clients a few carefully crafted versions of what is being developed. Because of its tangibility, prototyping allows a team or individual to start thinking in practical terms about an idea, to start getting a picture of what the final result might look like.

At the same time, these first renderings do not have to look pretty. They can be very rough, which makes it possible to think more freely and seek to innovate more boldly. As a result, a person or team can move ahead without the fear of failure that is too often a killer of innovation. Prototyping is one of the regular exercises of The Hunt.

Agility

Ideas require deft handling, partly because of the sheer number of them that need to be in play. (As Edison said, "To get a good idea, you must first get a lot of ideas.") Agility is required especially because these notions and impressions are worth little unless they're in motion, shifting in response to fresh data and conversation, evolving through stages of reflection and prototyping. That is why, through much of the Hunt, wild ideas are encouraged, bad ideas are not a deal breaker, and quantity is preferred over quality. The most important thing is to keep the ideas in flow.

In other words, the goal of an Idea Hunt is not necessarily to get a great idea all at once. The objective is to set an idea in motion, letting it stretch, ripen, morph, or otherwise develop in collision and combination with other ideas. That is how an idea becomes great.

Let's say you are looking to produce an animated motion picture and come up with the notion of a French rat that aspires to be a celebrated Parisian chef. On its face, is that a good idea? A bad idea? Hard to say. The well known company that wound up producing that movie is Pixar, the studio that also created such favorites as *Cars, A Bug's Life*, and *Toy Story*. The people at Pixar explicitly make the point that a good idea is not the highest priority when starting out with a project. What's critical is bringing together "literally tens of thousands of ideas," which are found in almost every line of dialogue and every design, as one Pixar manager says, and seeing where the original notion goes.

Whether you have a good idea, a bad idea, or maybe an odd notion that is hard to assess at first, success will depend heavily on whether it's put into a flow with other ideas.

We could multiply these stories of celebrated innovators, but it's important to understand that they are scarcely the only ones who win with ideas. During our travels, we have spent much time talking to customer-facing employees like the housekeepers at Ritz Carlton hotels. These people are

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expected (and trained) to look for fresh ideas about how to cater to each guest as an individual. They do so, first of all, by noticing things - developing the habit of observation. They will look at the crunched-up cans of soda in someone's hotel room, pull out pad and pencil, and make a note. This is how a guest comes to find Diet Coke on ice the next time she checks into a room at the Ritz.

Ideas matter to hotel workers. Shouldn't they matter also to people in sales and marketing, and to managers everywhere? They and many others get ahead not just by working hard, but also by thinking hard. They are idea professionals, whether they describe themselves that way or not. These people compete and collaborate more effectively when they know how to find and handle ideas.

And those who do well share one basic strategy. They go Hunting.

This article is adapted from The Idea Hunter: How to Find the Best Ideas and Make Them Happen (Jossey Bass, 2011), by Andy Boynton and Bill Fischer, written with journalist William Bole.

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