Passport for innovation: Seven questions on the road to success

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Executive summary – Truly innovative ideas need to fit into larger contexts to be successful. Innovators need to nurture ideas in their own environments, but they also need to become good sponsors of the developing innovations for future steps. A good start in preparing the innovation is to answer the time-honored list of basic reporters' questions – who, what, where, when, how and why – about the next environment. Seven focused questions can provide a shortcut for this analysis.

From the idea's point of view, innovation looks like a long trip through a variety of countries. Before each stop – from research to development to strategy to manufacturing to marketing and distribution – arrangements must be made, bags must be packed and all the papers need to be in order. The idea may need to learn to work in a new language and show its value in a new culture. And innovators all along the path enable a smooth journey in two ways: 1) they perfect the current environment for the idea, making sure it is "at home"; and 2) they become sponsors of the idea, improving its odds of success in the next environment by helping with the preparations.

For example, let's say you have heard that a tremendous amount of heat is given off when platinum electrodes are placed in water and a current is run through them. Because you also know that hydrogen atoms can work their way into the metal, an innovative idea is born: cold fusion. Maybe the hydrogen atoms are actually going through the same process that powers the sun, fusing together to form helium atoms, but without the extreme heat and pressure.

Is this idea worth a further look? A good starting point for investigation is using the tools of a reporter – who, what, where, when, how and why. The experiments you heard about are not published; there is no authority behind them. The *who* is weak, but the risk seems slight – low cost, minor time commitment, not something you need to get approved by others. The *what* amuses you because, if cold fusion is real, views of physics and the economics of energy will change dramatically. As for *where* and *why*, your lab actually has the expertise to run the experiments methodically, and the personal payoff could be a Nobel Prize. You are between projects, so the timing is right for you (*when*), and the proper equipment is at hand (*how*). The cold fusion idea has successfully moved from a glimmer in your eye to a research project.

If the experiment yields no interesting results or points in another direction, that's the end of the cold fusion idea. If there's a really powerful explosion, and you detect lots of helium each time you try it, can it move to the next environment: in this case, development?

The *what* would seem to be satisfied since there is conventional evidence that fusion is taking place, and at a rate that might be of practical value. There is a promise of unlimited amounts of cheap energy. The *who*, for the developer or financier who must create the next environment for the cold fusion idea, may be more problematic. If you are a nuclear physicist, your peers will quietly point out your errors or perhaps confirm your results and help promote them. If, as happened with the real-world cold fusion scientists, you are an electrochemist working out of your field, expect all hell to break loose and cold fusion to die an unquiet death.

Detail on the reporters' tools

Who. Our idea starts its journey with a pool of ideas. To hit the radar screen of a researcher, the idea must have some credibility. Who it comes from makes a difference as far as trust is concerned. Its provenance, tied to the researcher's social network, determines whether it gets a hearing at all. Who it comes from and the credibility become more and more important as the stakes are raised. With each step, "who" becomes more critical to moving forward because the bigger the risk, the more trust is required. Attention must be paid regarding whom you approach: their culture versus yours, social connections, knowledge and how the expressed idea will be heard.

What. The idea itself, of course, makes a huge difference. Does it fill or can it create needs and desires (either directly for the researcher, or indirectly for that person's clients or bosses). Does it or can it deliver on expectations? Can it be worked into known rules, standards and specifications? Does it cluster with other ideas or even become a hybrid? Can it connect up to create synergies or to satisfy implied (emergent) needs? What are the natural attributes and characteristics and how flexible are they? What is the appeal?

Where or why. Has the idea found the right home, or should it be handed off? This is primarily tied to the identity of the receivers. What do they do, and what do they not do? (And sometimes, what might they do?) How does it fit their worldview and what they have successfully taken on in the past? What has been their history or their history with the idea? Have they financed it, tested it, modified it, provided specifications? Does it help them fulfill their purpose, do they value it? Again, what is the culture of this environment: free or constrained? Looking to the future, is this an idea with some promise? Could it – or a hybrid – help fulfill plans or commitments or bring about a desired transformation (who we will be)? Could it increase wealth or prestige or impress other stakeholders?

When and how. Finally, is the timing right (to avoid being too late as well as too early)? Do we have the resources, money, people or even the right to make something of this, to fit it into our context? Can we access the right talent and decision-makers? Are commitments in place to make this happen?

Seven questions for the innovator

Examining the culture and environment of each "country" along the route can lead to insights that can help move innovations along or stop them when they no longer make sense. For each of the reporters' questions there can be detailed testing (as described above), but good answers to seven questions can help an innovator nurture the innovation in his or her own environment and effectively sponsor its movement to the next.

1. Do you need a partner to improve the idea's chances? The answer should result from an honest appraisal of the risk implied by the innovation (is it expensive, unconventional, or not invented here?) and your own credibility (do you have the social capital, expertise and authority to gain trust and confidence?). In some cases, an idea may need a whole gang of supporters to validate and endorse it. In others, even one partner could distort the idea and destroy the chances of it being fully realized as a product or offering.

2. Do you know what you need to know about the next environment for the idea? If you can answer all the reporters' questions, you can be a more effective sponsor. If you have spent some time in that environment, you'll understand the unwritten rules. (In one case, this author was able to solve an explicit problem, only to discover that it was a polite fiction. No one really wanted the problem solved because it provided a politically palatable reason for filtering a whole set of innovations.) You may even develop a relationship with someone who can be the next sponsor on the path. Though it may seem obvious, perhaps the most important part of this question is understanding that the next environment is the best place with the best people for the idea to survive and grow.

3. Would waiting help? Timing *is* everything. You can't push an idea into the next environment faster than immediately, but you can delay an idea. Do you have time to make it better prepared? What's the trade-off? Can you hold it so it slips neatly into the funding process? Can you wait until a new executive team is in place? Can you watch and wait for market demand to build?

4. What's the competition? Can your idea beat the others to find employment in the next environment? It depends on the other ideas that are in circulation. Some just compete for funding, leaving your idea to starve. Others compete directly, and if they have better function, cheaper costs, better fit (such as software that works with other applications) or seem to be more familiar (which can turn on something as simple as naming), your idea will probably lose.

5. Where's the money/power? It's a maxim that an innovation needs an executive to push it through, but approach this one with caution. Going to the wrong person for money and authority can be more damaging than having no executives in your corner. Take the line of attack that you are interviewing an executive to be the caretaker of your idea. Get a reference and look for the right qualities.

6. How does your innovation relate to the business model? If you have a good strategy team, they will want to understand whether the innovation you are sponsoring will create or destroy capabilities that are important to the organization's business model. Anticipate this by understanding the business model itself and learning which capabilities are essential. For instance, if speed is part of your company's value proposition, and you have a decision support tool that can cut the time of a sales process, that may be great – unless the time spent in that sales process is what helps build customer loyalty.

7. What is the next value proposition for the innovation? You probably can describe the benefits and business context of your innovation in your own environment. Can you describe it in terms that are clear and engaging for the next environment? Will your idea translate? This gets especially important in the marketing/sales environment, where the substance of the idea (expression of it as a device or service) becomes less important than its expression (not just benefits, but branding, relationship to customer pain and differentiation from competition).

These questions are based on analysis of ideas across the entire path an innovation must follow. As a whole, this sort of passport view can help you to:

- Revise an idea, so it is better prepared to move forward
- Determine barriers, stalls and opportunities
- Find shortcuts
- Help you husband the idea through the innovation process
- Identify hybrids of your idea that may be more fit for survival
- Discover a safe haven where an idea can develop as its time comes
- Make allies
- Choose the right path, either informal or formal
- Figure out when to hide, share, hand off or give away an idea.

Ultimately, you want your idea to emigrate from your mind to the marketplace. You want it to be understood and valued. You want it to fit in well with other ideas and have proponents. If possible, you want it to say good things about you and build your credibility and trust. Thinking of each environment, from the point of view of an idea that needs to adapt to new conditions, can be a tool that will help you achieve innovation.

About this publication

Executive Technology Report is a monthly publication intended as a heads-up on emerging technologies and business ideas. All the technological initiatives covered in *Executive Technology Report* have been extensively analyzed using a proprietary IBM methodology. This involves not only rating the technologies based on their functions and maturity, but also doing quantitative analysis of the social, user and business factors that are just as important to its ultimate adoption. From these data, the timing and importance of emerging technologies are determined. Barriers to adoption and hidden value are often revealed, and what is learned is viewed within the context of five technical themes that are driving change:

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Pervasive Computing: Combining communications technologies and an array of computing devices (including PDAs, laptops, pagers and servers) to allow users continual access to the data, communications and information services
Realtime: "A sense of ultracompressed time and foreshortened horizons, [a result of technology] compressing to zero the time it takes to get and use information, to learn, to make decisions, to initiate action, to deploy resources, to innovate" (Regis McKenna, *Real Time*, Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997.)
Ease-of-Use: Using user-centric design to make the experience with IT intuitive, less painful and possibly fun
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