

Innovation isn't always about re-inventing the wheel

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Like disruption, innovation has often been regarded as a 'big bang' event. One major development that changes the course of your business – and your industry. But the reality is that innovation is more usually an ongoing process of continuous improvement, of refining existing systems and processes to help you do what you do – but better.

Consider the effect of the pandemic for instance. Almost overnight, some industries were forced to innovate or die. Despite the magnitude of the crisis, some of these innovations were relatively minor.

Banks, for example, were forced to change their behaviour overnight to compensate for the sudden drop in physical customer meetings. But rather than invent whole new ways of working, instead they scaled up their use of existing digital alternatives. By opening new digital relationships they saw mobile payment applications and contactless payment instances all reach unprecedented heights.

Another measure – this time aimed at improving operational efficiency - involves screening and digitally capturing physical incoming mail for intelligent classification and digital mailbox delivery. Bank workers have responded well to this service which enables mail processing to continue pretty much as normal despite employees remaining at home under remote working conditions.

So, on the face of it, this was a case of 'innovate or die', but one that didn't involve fundamental business change at all levels – which is applicable to, say, the public sector as much as it is banking.

Relatively modest changes required

In this example, innovation was achieved by identifying and addressing a single question: 'how can we serve our customers when they are not allowed in store?' Obviously, retailers had to make some changes, but they were relatively minor. Most of their success was achieved by changing processes and retraining staff. Other bigger brands like Starbucks extended the functionality of their existing systems, such as adding click-and-collect functions to mobile apps, but the change in service delivery was much the same.

In most cases, retailers already had most of what was required. They just needed to extend and refine. Technology helped to make better connections with customers, but the main innovations involved how employees worked. Investments in Covid controlled operations were more important than buying new technologies.

The same basic principles apply to every organisation in pretty much every sector – how can we better serve our customers?

Thinking around the problem

Undoubtedly, technology will play a role in your future innovations, but it is rarely the complete answer. Take the humble mailroom for instance. You can deploy new technology like the Pitney Bowes [Inbound Document and Data Workflow](#) solution to automatically digitise incoming mail. The system is quick and easy to use, offering the perfect opportunity to start a program of change on a smaller scale.

Modernising the mailroom will provide some insight into what you can achieve. Processes get more efficient and compliant, payments are processed quicker, costs are reduced, remote working is simplified. The potential gains are significant, even on a small-scale modernisation project.

Effective innovation is a straightforward, but endless problem-solving exercise:

1. Identify the problem
2. Identify potential solutions
3. Define what needs to change to take full advantage of the solution
4. Measure the improvements and benefits
5. Begin the process again, looking for more opportunities to improve

Occasionally this process will yield seismic change that disrupts your entire industry. But more often than not, innovation leads to internal disruption – and opportunities to create new efficiencies. By focusing on continuous improvement your business is better placed to face the challenges of the future – including the ones we can't yet see.

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