Drucker Challenge Essay Contest 2012
Theme: Reinventing Work, Reinventing Organization

Virtual Innovation in a Networked Future

Supreetha Ranjit

15 July 2012

Introduction

Every generation is a witness to some groundbreaking conception. The ideas that take shape in getting formalized as an invention may take a generation; an evolution that brings with it not just a wide array of technological advances, but also a pinch of gamers' attitude in eagerness, to break the newer creation with something far better. These variable innovative thoughts chasing the human brain are not just confined to a genius. Performing the duty prescribed with dedication and without thinking about the fruits of action brings us closer to fulfilling it, complete with satisfaction.

"To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk." – Thomas A. Edison

Peter F. Drucker clearly pointed out, most successful innovations result from a conscious, purposeful search for innovation opportunities - unexpected occurrences, incongruities, process needs, industry and market changes, demographic changes, changes in perception and new knowledge. "If an innovation does not aim at leadership from the beginning, it is unlikely to be innovative enough."[1]

The Stepping Stone

While in the early 1900s people asked, "What do you do?" Today they tend to ask, "Whom do you work for?"[2] The society had no choice but to accept the retarded growth of the individual in the organization. Majority of the employees worked for the same organization all through their work life. Reasons, not just being limited to the rich experience they gained all the way, but the bond that glued the employee to the company close enough that made "loyalty" a striking reality; apart from personal touch and a sense of accomplishment. This "loyalty" of employee in turn was earmarked to the growth of the company. The nature of work was repetitive, but uncomplicated. Employees were systematic and followed a single approach to a solution rather than thinking complexly. Strict compliance was given to standards and employees hardly questioned the why's, who's and how's of something.

The emphasis given to management as a science and an art is gaining importance at an accelerating rate. But, the earlier-unbranded and the now-branded term of management never in history found a place of neglect. Gradually, existing system of technology including tools and methods used in the organization were reviewed and new improvements that proved beneficial for all, started falling in place. Training employees effectively in order to keep them abreast of the latest advancements became the key. While training became an integral aspect, element of feedback was equally necessary. Employers constantly kept checking their own performance against competitors and ensured their employees were well-trained, so they could come up with novel ideas that proved beneficial to the company.

Surprisingly, it turns out in modern times that employees are reluctant to nurture the fruits of hard labor; instead expect instant growth right from the day they join the company. Emphasis on earning quick-money in spite of the work-hours and the long-term health hazards that pose, are never given an iota of thought. Further, bitter qualities of appraising the performance of employees on a certain yardstick may prove useful in short-term; but fails to focus on the overall picture of retaining the best talent. This verisimilitude attitude makes

---

[1] (Drucker, The Discipline of Innovation, 1998)
[2] (Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices, 1986)

employees change organizations often; and hence, employers are forced to think in terms of check-mating the employee, holding them back by offering better designations and heavy bonuses. This destructs not only the growth of the employee and employer, but the organization itself, leading to more conflicts and hatred that would prove detrimental in the long-run.

Impromptu projects are on the rise and are usually more complex. Creativity and innovation are encouraged at all levels of the organizational hierarchy. More stress is laid on a self-governing basis. "Knowledge technologists are likely to become the dominant social – and perhaps also political–force over the next decades".[3] Besides these, patents, trademarks and copyrights are given a top priority, to ensure that ideas are secure. Money is spent generously on mockups, experiments, samples and advertisements that play a key role in any product or service promotion. Reaching the audience through various social networking tools have almost become part of any organizations' marketing strategy.

Future as envisioned in past

Drucker mentioned that typical large businesses twenty years from 1988 would more likely resemble a hospital, university or a symphony orchestra than a typical manufacturing concern.[4] Four years later that date, it is not surprising that he has been proved prophetic – indeed many are information-based organizations.

Noticeably today, mega organizations have large spaces: huge receptions, vast cafeterias, grand recreational areas and not to forget those open work-spaces where ergonomics play a vital role. Weather conditioners are on throughout and employees hardly need to move out of the building since almost anything essential for work is available within the four walls. The work-space at times looks like a funny huge piece of a rectangular cake with many layers equally cut.

Social life has also gained a lot of importance. Whether employees meet up in person, there is always a tool for staying in touch via social networking. Further, it helps in getting an instant feedback from customers and other users about a product or service. Annual "get-togethers" have been given a go-by and are replaced with employer-employee events happening almost every week creating a platform for sharing ideas and feedback they felt were better discussed in social gatherings than the regular work-hours. "The knowledge society is a society of seniors and juniors rather than of bosses and subordinates".[5]

Employees are willing workaholics driven by a maniacal desire for a fat income and career growth and are willing to even sacrifice family life. Jobs range from full-time, part-time, temporary and contract; and are further classified as day jobs, night jobs, shift jobs, variable jobs, rotating jobs and flexible jobs to name a few. The work-life balance present earlier with the "nine-to-five" jobs has now become meaningless, with employees almost working double the time they used to earlier. These unreasonable work-hours have given rise to stress, poor memory, brief attention span, plethora of distractions and low tolerance level that make them short-tempered easily.

---

[3] (Drucker, The Next Society, 2001)
[4] (Drucker, The Coming of the New Organization, 1988)
[5] (Drucker, The New Workforce, 2001)

Delving deeper

From reading a newspaper or a magazine, life has evolved to reading on tablets or smart phones connected on Wi-Fi; building a blog and a company website with a digital signature in a jiffy; creating a bunch of social networking profiles using the latest web-apps and communicating the physical location of the company via GPS. Storage of data is not just limited to a desktop or a laptop, instead portable storage devices proves handy. Accounting software and office suites are a great help when otherwise time-consuming work are to be performed faster and cleaner. Further, finger-print recognition software and photo-recognition software are some of the latest technologies used for identifying employees and their movement across the work-area. Consumers pay for any product they purchase instantly and are able to check out samples through the photographs and videos displayed on the company's website. It is indeed, a "digital world".

Things that once seemed vague are turning out to be a reality and are happening faster than was ever imagined a few decades back. The world is shifting focus to a more digital landscape, making the entire universe close-knit. From bondage to freedom in conveying thoughts; from closed doors to transparent and open work-spaces – a situation similar to a bud waiting to bloom and give out fragrance; and a larva waiting to turn into a butterfly and spread its colorful beauty mirthfully – unfettered by any negative energies – "this" is the present-day trend.

"The only constant is change, continuing change, inevitable change that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be." - Isaac Asimov

The world today focuses more on sharing of work and collaboration of ideas. Technology is constantly changing and clusters of innovative thoughts are shared constantly to accelerate the growth of the company. "In the theory of innovation and entrepreneurship, the bright-idea innovation belongs in the appendix. But, it should be appreciated and rewarded. It represents qualities that society needs: initiative, ambition, and ingenuity."[6]

The future from 'now': 2030

Popular research areas like robotics; neuro-informatics; quantum cryptography; machine learning; natural language processing and human-computer interaction will become just another field of work like e-marketing and online advertising now.

Although, manual jobs will not entirely die, those that comparatively require a lot of manual labor as in the case with manufacturing will be replaced by highly automated machinery, requiring just a handful of employees for inspection. Robots will feature more in everyday life. The concept of retirement age will be scrapped. The idea of working only for a company or two at a time will be withdrawn. Physical cash and checks will almost become a yesteryears' thing.

Employees will take up multiple assignments and most would fall under these categories: either freelance or a flexible work-hours/days basis -- maybe working as a programmer of a small firm on Mondays, an investment professional of a big firm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, dedicating Thursdays for freelance work and Fridays as a professor for online

---

[6] (Drucker, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, 1993)

classes of a virtual university. Saturdays and Sundays would no longer be weekends but just another day to complete the pending work of the week and also prepare some extra challenging materials for those students who would be taking up this professor-professionals' online exams a week later. Although money will be a top driving force to work, the level of passion for the job will be given equal importance; most likely ensuring a good work-life balance.

And for those whose physical presence will be required, would travel on driverless cars[7] and make use of technologies like project glass[8] to capture and exchange information then and there – no mobiles, no laptops and a more eco-friendly environment. The entire world would be Wi-Fi connected that would never turn off. Travel when really required, would involve fuel-less mini aircrafts and private air traffic will be heavier than road traffic.

Innovation through virtual collaboration, intuition and pooling of knowledge via cloud computing and networking will take front-stage. Social interaction will increase and there will be no boundaries on the ideas shared. The work-space would have turned into a place that is energized by ideas, reflections and creativity. Instead of in-person communications among the employees and employers, most events including conferences, training and appraisals will happen through live web-casts.

Smartest employees would have a greater say in the development of the business rather than just being limited to the participation of C-level players whose influence on decision-making is more, at present. Personnel across all world-wide offices will connect as a single large team and those whose innovative ideas are rated top would be rewarded multiple times than now. Since collaboration will be the key; competition will be reduced to a large extent and companies would join together to bring out something innovative. The only difference would be paying the other company huge "innovation fees" to ensure that they stay protected and this would even abolish the concept of patents, trademarks and copyrights entirely.

Conclusion

Work life beyond 2030 will; at most occasions seem like taking frequent luxury vacations. But the associated health hazards may pose a greater threat to these future innovation specialists. The power of the world will be such that it would be lit throughout – a networked future with multiple virtual innovations; huge technology breakthroughs with networking and cloud computing taking up major dominance.

And yes, finally, intangible assets will be making it to the top and this would ensure a complete changeover even in the accounting and taxation policies existent.

2030 is not too far!

---

[7] (Wikipedia)
[8] (Wikipedia)

Works Cited

Drucker, P. F. (1993). *Innovation and Entrepreneurship.* HarperCollins Publishers.

Drucker, P. F. (1986). *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices.* Truman Talley Books.

Drucker, P. F. (1988). The Coming of the New Organization. *Harvard Business Review* (Jan-Feb).

Drucker, P. F. (1998). The Discipline of Innovation. *Harvard Business Review* (Nov - Dec).

Drucker, P. F. (2001). The New Workforce. *The Economist*.

Drucker, P. F. (2001). The Next Society. *The Economist*.

Wikipedia. (n.d.). Retrieved from Google driverless car: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_driverless_car

Wikipedia. (n.d.). Retrieved from Project Glass: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Glass