



You Need Not be Creative to Ideate (let alone Innovate).

by Aina Zahari
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What skills do you associate with innovation? We would venture that for some of you, the word "creativity" came to mind, and you would have earnestly shared that answer first. (OK, perhaps you'd argue that the title of the article steered you in that direction, but in fact, it should have challenged you to settle on a different answer.)

At a recent international symposium of innovation management professionals, a question posed by the speaker was: "How many of you don't think of yourself

as creative?" What percentage of the audience do you think raised their hands - low or high? Almost no hand shot up to admit to being non-creative. Perhaps it was due to a combination of peer-pressure and wanting to fit the traditional and complete image of the innovator.

What about you? Would you claim that you are a creative person? The reality is that not all individuals are the same, and not everyone is necessarily equally creative. This then seems to present a problem for those who want to innovate. Are you not cut out to be innovative if you are not creative?



WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

Creativity is defined in the Oxford dictionary as the use of the imagination or original ideas to create something. The typical person's understanding of creativity often entails novelty as an over-arching, pre-requisite criterion. If this definition of creativity is underlying your view of creativity too, then innovation may seem to be a Herculean effort.

Another fairly common view of creativity is that it occurs in a flash of brilliance. Many of us have heard the tale of Archimedes' "Eureka!" moment when he takes a bath. Archimedes needed to indirectly and definitively prove the purity of the gold from which the King's

crown was made, without damaging or altering the crown. Time was running out and he was struggling to find a way to measure the volume of the uniquely shaped crown. As Archimedes stepped into the tub of water, some water spilled out and he suddenly realised the solution: fluid displacement.

Remembering only the exciting "A-HA" moment misguides some of us into the mindset that ideas come spontaneously, very quickly, and more likely when we are alone. This is too simplistic a view of how the epiphany actually happens. The creative process actually has several sequential steps such as preparation, incubation, and insight, and when sudden realisations do occur, they are built on a foundation of process and practice. Therefore, let's recognise that ideas don't just spring up fortuitously.



An Innovation Need not be Completely Novel

Pulse News, a sophisticated yet simple newsreader for the iPad that had been just released, used user insights to drive innovation. The creators programmed the app at a café, and got immediate feedback from their target users. They tested hundreds of minor variations daily, literally building the app in collaboration with users. This approach proved to be highly successful. Pulse News was among the first fifty apps that made it into Apple's superior, coveted Apple's App Store Hall of Fame. Even Steve Jobs himself praised the app at a global conference for developers. In this illustrative example, was the news aggregator app concept truly original? Not really. Were the app developers pure geniuses or creative types who developed the app alone through solitary flashes of inspiration? No. Thus, remove the unreal constraints of the solution needing to be entirely unique or invented by you.

Remember that the possible new solution by or for an organisation was never meant to be something outlandish or even wholly original. Innovation is fundamentally about creating value; the newness of the innovation can apply only in a limited sphere and still create significant value (e.g. even if new to just a small organisation.) Although the originality of an idea may make it more appealing or provide a longer competitive advantage when the idea is implemented, an innovation categorically and firmly need not be something novel. Thus, during ideation for innovation, shed the stifling misconception that ideas must be supreme and novel.

How important are ideas and creativity in innovation?

Ideation, or coming up with possible new ways of seeing/doing things, is only a fraction of the innovation process. There is so much more to innovation management; There is also the problem identification (conception of opportunity and challenge), idea selection (conversion of ideas), and idea commercialisation (connection to the market). A simple way to appreciate the difference is to remember the mantra: ideation does not equal innovation. If you scrutinise the steps mentioned above, you can see that creativity is neither required nor critical in most stages of the innovation process. Other skills do come into play, such as risk assessment, project management, communication, being bold, etc.

Innovation is not just coming up with a novel idea (see sidebar).

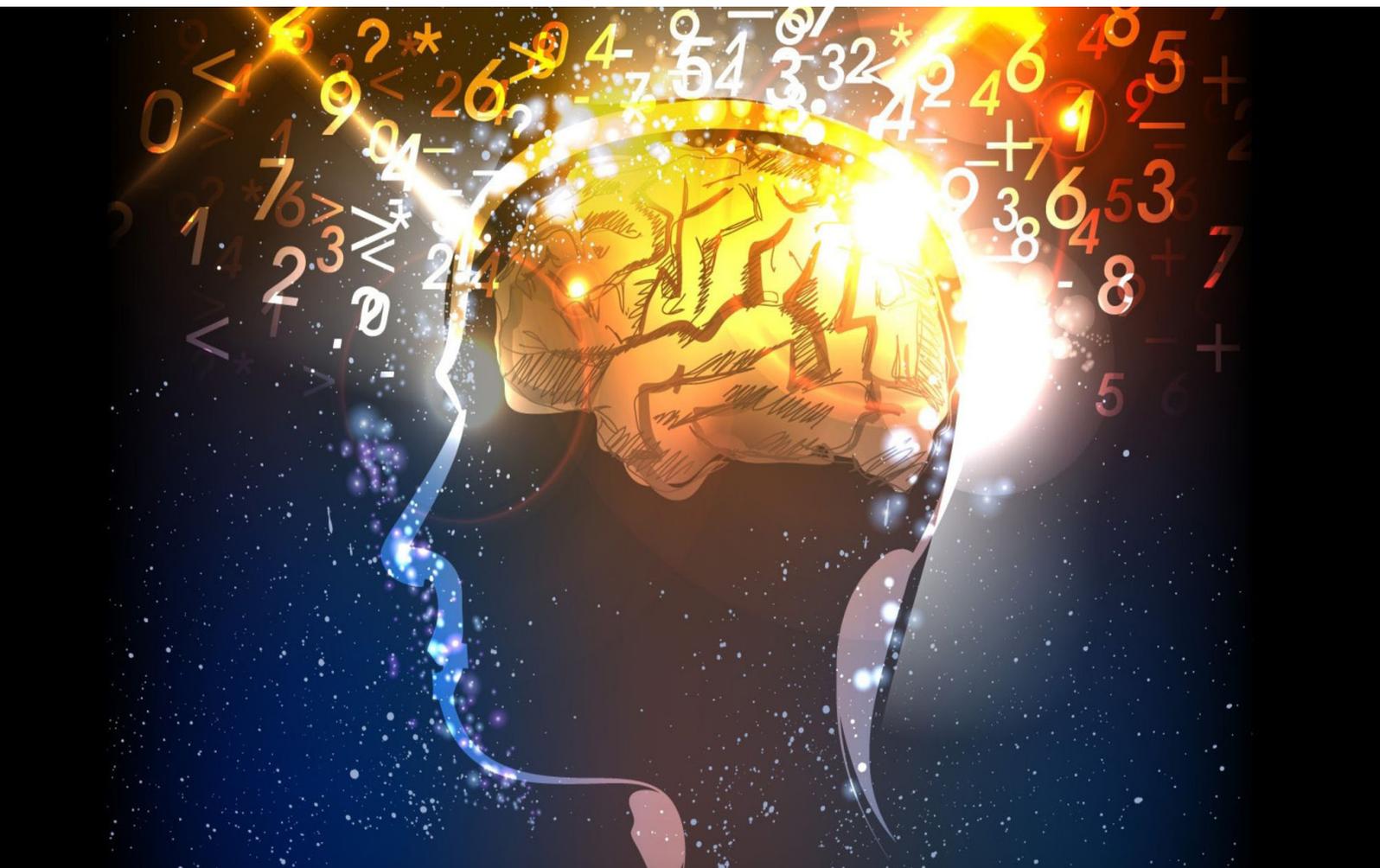
Now that we have framed our minds to look at innovation, ideas, and the idea generation process more broadly, let's run through several ways where you don't need creativity to come up with ideas. **Ideation can stem from other skills, and can materialise from many approaches.** If generating useful ideas or solutions is the aim, there are many other skills, besides creativity, that you can employ or rely on to come up with good solutions.

Empathy and Communication Skills

Creativity does not make you better second-guess what would appeal to the user. Empathising with, and communicating with the user can give you the best picture. Engage and probe the user deeply to get to the root issue or to realise what the user truly values. Gaining a comprehensive customer understanding will often allow you to **uncover the right problem to solve;** the solution part may turn out to be easy.

Analytical Skills

Today, in companies like Facebook, Amazon.com and Google, many left-brained analysts or data scientists shine and contribute the big ideas. How do they do this? They use analytics and study data. **Often, capturing and analysing information or data can in itself reveal new insights.** Seek an edge in coming up with a new solution by utilising technology and your analytical/quantitative skills to uncover patterns. Analytics is a great innovation tool for those who don't think they are the stereotypical creative types. How much rich data resides within your organisation that has not been mined for the golden insights within? Employees in differing roles, such as marketing, R&D, or finance, have leveraged analytics to generate ideas that provide an innovative, competitive advantage. These have been demonstrated in many industries, as diverse as retail, health care, and even sports.



Collaboration Skills

Ideas do not come from isolation. You don't have to be creative on your own; you just have to be able to communicate to get inputs from others. Reach out to your users, suppliers or stakeholders to get feedback and ideas. Good skills in communicating and collaborating with others can very well give fresh perspectives. This is exemplified by the numerous success stories coming from **open innovation where an organisation opens its door and seeks solutions from other parties**. Be willing to let others in and be part of the ideation process.

In short, ideation for business or society does not occur from having a creativity-powered, once-off free flow idea generation session. Ideas for innovation need to have context and meaning. The ideas can be formed from talking with and empathising with the users, or after weeks of looking at patterns



About Alpha Catalyst Consulting

We are a boutique Innovation Consulting company that specialises in helping Asian organisations develop and execute their growth strategy through innovation, without compromising on their unique and ever-evolving Asian culture and values.

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or data or scrutinising operations in the organisation, or from proactively reaching out externally for ideas. These methods can all result in great ideas for innovation. It's really not just about having creativity.

When individuals embrace the fact that creativity is not a necessity in ideation nor innovation, many more will feel that they too can contribute. Remember, anyone, even if he or she is not creative, can have very solid capabilities to partake in innovation. Thus, exercise both or either your stronger left-brain or right-brain skills to contribute to innovation. Innovation is inclusive; anyone can innovate.

Singapore Office

37th Floor
Singapore Land Tower
50 Raffles Place
Singapore 048623

Tel: +65 6829 7003

info@alphacatalyst.com

KL Office

36th Floor,
Menara Maxis
Kuala Lumpur City Centre,
50088 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: +603 2615 0133

www.alphacatalyst.com