

Serendipity, the stuff behind breakthroughs

By IAN HARVEY

Everyone talks about wanting to innovate but very few people and organizations understand it's a product of serendipity and surprise, attendees at the HRP 2015 Conference and Trade Show in Toronto heard.

Frans Johansson, author of *The Click Moment*, said the reality is that most of what people view in hindsight as a brilliant strategy was in fact a random moment of serendipity.

While you can't plan for serendipity, he said, you can create the conditions to make it more likely. The key is to create intersections of diversity where people and their different experiences and backgrounds can mingle and randomly cross-pollinate ideas and solutions.

Microsoft, for example, is widely regarded as having launched Windows 3.0 in the early 1990s and driven it to create the mega-software giant it is today.

"But in 1990 they had only three people working on Windows," Johansson said. "They were going to let it die because the reality was Windows 3.0 had a fatal flaw in that it kept crashing no matter how much memory you had."

Bill Gates and Steve Balmer had already started talks with IBM about teaming up to create OS2, a new operating system to replace Windows.

By chance, one of those three people, David Weiss, was at a party where he bumped into an old friend, Sargent Murray. In catching up, he explained the frustration with Windows 3.0 and his friend razzed him with an offhand geeky quip about reconfiguring the memory allocation. Weiss stopped dead and said, "You're right. Let's go do it." They left the party and spend all night working on it.

Within days the chance meeting triggered a sequence of events which changed the PC world as we know it. Windows 3.0 stopped crashing, Microsoft pulled back from OS2 (which went on to fail), and subsequent Windows Operating Systems NT, 98, XP, Vista and so on continue to dominate the PC landscape.

The billions of dollars which resulted would never have happened but for that random intersection, Johansson said.

However, it's hard, he said, for people to think and act in random because we're programmed to follow patterns and believe logic is the key to success, along with hard work and dedication.

And that's partially true. Serena Williams has been a champion tennis player for 15 years not just because of her raw talent but because she dedicated herself and focused on training towards that goal, putting in the requisite 10,000 hours of practice considered to be essential.

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The same equation, however, doesn't apply in business, because in tennis the rules of the game are constant. In commerce, the rules are dynamic and change without warning.

Nokia was the biggest mobile phone company in the world back in 2007 and bet the farm that con-

sumers would buy cellphones based on their shape and colour and ringtones. Then came Android and iPhone.

"Their CEO admitted they missed the big trends because the rules of the game changed," said Johansson. "Actually, now their former CEO."

Still, not everyone thought the iPhone would be a hit, he noted. Many observers, from CNET, the king of tech sites, to Bloomberg, thought it would flop.

Indeed, that smartphones took off was a surprise to many and it's exactly that kind of unexpected reaction which is a game changer.

"It's the unexpected which stands us apart," he said, but the difficulty we have is making a decision in the face of uncertainty — and that's something we need to break free from.

"We need to feel we know what we are doing but still introduce serendipity into it."

Serendipity happens when random connections are made, he said, and it's fairly easy to create that in the workplace just by bringing people of diverse backgrounds, experience and expertise together in the same place.

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THOMSON REUTERS

Fear of failure can scuttle anyone's dreams

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One of the world's most successful videogame marketers, Electronic Arts, had a breakthrough with their game, *Mirror's Edge*, when they broke down the silos housing developers, designers and other teams involved and put them together in the same space, which resulted in more face-to-face interactions. Instead of being insulated and aloof to each other's needs, they started working together to find unexpected and surprising solutions for each other.

"Serendipitous connections and interactions allow us to do something different," he said, and it's those unexpected results which are what he calls the "click moment" where things fall into place.

Bringing two things together which are seemingly completely unconnected is where innovation happens, he said, because almost all innovations are the combination of known and existing technology or research.

Architect Mick Pearce of Zimbabwe, he said, looked to termite mounds for his inspiration to design a massive Harare office-retail complex which has no air-conditioning system and uses 90



Photo by Robin Photography

per cent less energy than similar-sized buildings.

It has a series of vents and shafts which draw cool air up, inspired by those termite mounds which keep the insect's nests at a steady 30C.

With the insights gleaned from those intersections of thought, Johansson said, the next issue becomes which one to move forward with.

His advice: Bet them all, or as many as possible.

"We have to get more comfortable with placing more bets," he said. "The people who changed the world tried more than one

idea. Picasso painted more than 50,000 pieces, not all were great. Einstein wrote 240 papers but not one was cited by anyone else, and Virgin's Richard Branson has had many failures among his successes."

It's that willingness to risk failure which sets the winners apart from the losers.

"*Angry Birds* is one of the most successful games of all time but when you look at it, it's a dumb idea," he said. "Still it took off. What you don't know is it was the 52nd game the company created and you don't hear anything about the 51 others."

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Failure is the key to innovation, he said, and placing multiple bets increases the chance of random success.

"If success was predictable, everyone would do it," he said.

Finally, the last step is execution, which can sabotage even the most brilliant idea.

Too often, he said, organizations set too big a goal and end up depleting both their resources and their reputation trying to reach it.

"After all, who wants to set a tiny goal when you can set a big huge goal?" he said. "And so you end up with these zombie projects which are going nowhere but hang around like the living dead."

Small, more attainable goals allow for iterative advances, he

said, and also mean the goal can change as the project or idea evolves.

The Ice Hotel, Sweden's most popular tourist destination, "started off 24 years ago as an event bringing in ice sculptures from Japan," he said. "Anyone could have done that."

Over three years it evolved and grew organically to an exhibition hall of ice to adding ice beds, to an entire hotel. None of it was planned from the outset, it just happened randomly, he said.

As such, choosing what he called the "smallest executable step" allows an idea to seed, take root and grow, and also helps set the stage for serendipity and surprises to happen.

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