AN UNCONTROLLED EXPERIMENT THAT WILL FORCE RAPID, MASSIVE INNOVATION

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The pandemic has now lasted long enough to change behaviors - and societies. It will trigger a wave of accelerated innovation with a power that we have not seen since the Industrial Revolution.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was doomed to push a massive boulder up a steep hill only to watch the boulder slip past him and roll to the bottom whenever he neared the top.

Before the pandemic, most companies trying to drive innovation could have been forgiven for feeling like Sisyphus on the way up that awful incline. During the crisis, they can rightly feel like Sisyphus on the way down, desperately chased by an accelerating rock.

While companies were perhaps slow or ill-equipped to embrace center-pushed innovation in recent years, the past few months has seen a step change in attitudes and responsiveness as businesses have scrambled to to survive, with innovation pushing the center. Corporate innovation has flipped from drag to driver.

With such rapid, sweeping changes, some of our behavioral and working patterns have changed for good. Working from home, for example, is here to stay and not just because of the pandemic. It actually suits companies such as Facebook, who have allowed employees to work from home indefinitely, even if it is not so practical for the emergency services.

Will our cities ever be the same again if vast numbers of workers do not return to fill offices? What will that mean for our streets and transport systems, designed for large crowds?

Perhaps rents will become affordable in inner cities and new communities - and startups - will flood in. We know that innovation is driven by diverse and dense congregations. In this scenario, it is likely that the consequences of the pandemic will continue to unleash a torrent of innovation.

In normal times, innovation is conducted in controlled experiments, with cycles of comparison, control, randomization and replication involved in the fine-tuning of new ideas before they go to market and seek adoption. Now, everything is part of an uncontrolled experiment, characterized by uncertainty, speed, spontaneity and punctuation.

We are living through millions of spontaneous experiments on a global scale. In micro form, the same rate of innovation took place when Apple opened up its platforms to third party apps. On a larger scale, think of the experimentation with steam engines during the Industrial Revolution and then hit the fast forward button.

We will emerge from this period of quick-fire innovation in a very different world. Companies have no choice: they must innovate or get left behind.

Face-to-face lives on. We could see a hybrid of communication styles as an optimal solution. If a company relied on 80% face-to-face interaction pre-COVID, that may drop to 50-60%.
Societal, not just virtual. While many innovations have been digital, there are also huge implications for society. Cities could be redesigned for a new “Generation COVID” that works from home, shops online and does not use public transport.

Now or never. If companies struggled to embrace innovation before, the crisis has loosened the shackles out of necessity. Companies should take the hint. It is time to experiment to survive.