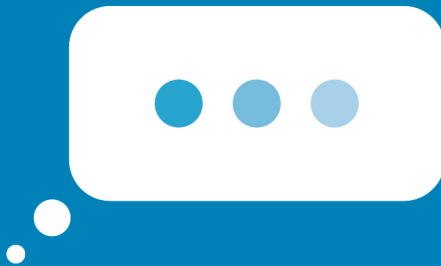


Alain Conrard

TAKING THE PLUNGE!

A different take on innovation



10¹⁴

Cent Mille Billiards

Alain Conrard

Taking the plunge!

A different take on innovation

Translated from French

by Elisée Hazan



Cent Mille Millions

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To Sophie, Lena and Sarah

*In a world deluged by irrelevant information,
clarity is power.*

Yuval Noah Harari

PROLOGUE

The “before” and “after” – the latter outperforming the former (or thinking and acting differently)

And, what if, to talk about innovation, this great leap forward, we were to take a serious step back in time? A big step in time of about fifty years. By today’s standards, it is akin to going back to prehistory. The year 1968 was a year filled with change. Be it in Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Beijing, Rome, or San Francisco, these cities sparked movements that set the stage for modernity. In the United States, the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement crystallize protest, triggering winds of decisive political change on social issues as well as a strong desire for freedom. In the Communist Bloc, the ruthless leaders in Moscow and Beijing are being seriously challenged. And it is also the release of the Beatles’ White Album, their first double album, an innovative concept in itself, a mammoth album that spans a wide range of musical styles giving way, incidentally, to a new style called Hard Rock.

In this year of intense upheaval, novelty and inventions, a single act will completely stand out. An image that will stick in people’s minds that in itself is a condensed version of innovation with a capital “I”: a man, with the whole world watching, broke the status quo in

his sport becoming an icon by simply trying a whole new technique.

You may be familiar with the story (it has become the « story to tell » when referring to Innovation¹), but let me tell you the story again.

At the Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City, Dick Fosbury, a high jumper, was going to revolutionize his sport forever by adopting a “back-first” technique instead of jumping face forward using the conventional straddle – a technique deemed irreplaceable. Fosbury jumped over the bar backwards. The move took the whole world by surprise except for a couple of specialists who were familiar with the technique as Fosbury was not the actual inventor. Another high jumper by the name of Bruce Quande invented the technique in 1959 when practicing on his own, in private school circles². However, Fosbury got the credit and the jump is forever known as the Fosbury Flop. Hence the importance of knowing how to market your name or claim ownership of your innovation. We will see that an innovator is not necessarily an inventor. An innovator knows what it means to market and foresee the industrialization of an invention.

The Fosbury Flop is a perfect illustration of what innovation stands for because it is a move or technique that is completely disruptive. Using no technology whatsoever or any other means other than his body, his training and audacity (it did take a lot to attempt the jump with the

1. Mentioned in Jean-Marie Dru's, *Disruption*, Hoboken, Wiley, 1996 or Xavier Pavie, *L'innovation à l'épreuve de la philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 2018.

2. Fosbury started doing the back jump technique in 1963 unaware that Quande had initiated the move though some tend to disagree on this point.

whole world watching), Fosbury breached the status quo. The extent of his audacity was so that even the judges were taken aback at first refusing to approve the jump. They then had to admit that the jump did not infringe any of the High-Jump rules. The jump was definitely different but not for show, it was different because it was all about performance – the Fosbury Flop keeps one’s center of gravity low to the ground, and the lower one’s center of gravity, the less energy is required to jump over the bar. Innovation implies increased performance levels and yielding better results.

Disruption, audacity, agility, an orderly process and a quest for better performance, perspective, perfect execution, right timing – all the attributes of innovation can be found in Fosbury’s incredible feat. And, the most important attribute of all, without which innovation can not see the light of day, is profitability. Indeed, Fosbury, then world champion, literally *turned lead into gold* by winning the gold medal and becoming an Olympic champion.

Fosbury, well aware of what he portrays, points to what he did as clearly akin to innovation. In fact, his LinkedIn page is titled: “*Innovative, – adjective [in-hu-vey-tiv], being or producing something like nothing done or experienced before; ahead of the times.*”

There has been a “before” and “after” the famous athlete’s flop. This jump sums up what innovation is all about: to succeed by doing things differently. Just goes to show that a “flop” can actually be a hit!

The world of sports may seem to be stifled by inertia due to the strict rules in place that regulate games and competitions. These rules need to be complied with for any sporting event to be officially held and celebrated.

Even what seems immutable
is constantly evolving.

But in reality, even what seems immutable is constantly evolving. And as is often the case, it is the result of certain individuals who are “outside-the-box” thinkers. Fosbury was one of them, but so was boxer Mohammed Ali, soccer player Johan Cruyff and famous sprinter Usain Bolt, that is if you are only interested in sports. There are always those individuals who are game changers, who spark some kind of fundamental change through innovation in a given field, whether by not following the rules (creating their own set of rules or going by no rules at all) or simply because of a strong desire to shake things up. What motivates these people may be very different from one person to the next but the overall outcome is always the same: they change the face of the world. Be it after Thomas Edison, Louis Pasteur, Nikola Tesla, Alan Turing and Albert Einstein, or after the founding fathers of Quantum Mechanics – Bohr, Dirac, Heisenberg, Pauli, Planck and Schrödinger, or after Stephen Hawking, Steve Jobs, Larry Page and Serguei Brin – the world changed. *The “after” is completely different than the “before.”*

The unprecedented disruption the Covid 19 pandemic engendered across the globe gave a global and often tragic dimension to the difference in notion between “after” and “before.” The pandemic is the kind of event that has so far been extremely rare and that carves out a “before” and “after.” This worldwide tsunami completely reshuffled the cards changing the rules by enforcing life-saving social distancing measures. The dominant pecking order of our values was suspended and replaced with another set of values, assuredly more realistic, where all the occupations that were pivotal in maintaining society afloat and saving lives (doctors, nurses, EMTs, first responders, cashiers,

messenger services, delivery services) were recognized and celebrated as “everyday heroes.”

But beyond the tragedy itself, the situation was also an opportunity to step back and reflect on what was happening.

The “pause” effect of the pandemic was like having our global economic system under a magnifying glass bringing to the surface all its strengths and weaknesses. What was not apparent behind all the hustle and bustle of everyday life was brutally brought to the fore by the sudden standstill. Things like the rat race to always make more money and profit, the poor level of public services (especially healthcare), supply chain vulnerability, over dependency on global distribution circuits, outsourcing strategic expertise, financialization of everything taking the wind out of the sails of the real economy, etc. While running a detailed analysis of the ensuing situation is not really the focus of this book, the situation has shown, in a nutshell, that there is an urgent need for change i.e. a global yearning for innovation.

Only innovation can ensure survival. Technological innovation of course but not only. The idea is to reach way beyond the strict meaning of the word. I am referring to innovation that implies a whole new mindset. Innovation understood and appreciated in its most fulfilling interpretation. Innovation that fosters better social interaction (important when the situation causes the reverse effect). Innovation for the environment with the preservation of nature being at the heart of our priorities and expectations. Innovation in our education system that values and teaches “responsibility” to all – parents, children, teaching staff – or innovation in reindustrialization.

Every major crisis, especially health-related crises, were times when major societal evolutions occurred (the Black

Plague in the middle of the 14th century and the beginning of modern society, or the SARS outbreak in 2002 and the growth of e-commerce for example). The major evolution brought on by this pandemic is that of the “isolation economy”³ where being quarantined has led to introducing and adopting a new standard of contactless behaviour. Remote working and the resulting deep change in the nature of social interactions plus the economic consequences of the plunge in commercial and corporate real estate are tangible examples of this new contactless principle. It is no surprise the digital industry comes out on top as it is synonym for dematerialization. This isolation economy has made some major players soar to unimaginable heights: Netflix and streaming and VOD platforms in the entertainment industry. Amazon and Alibaba for online shopping, Zoom for remote working and collaboration, UberEats or Deliveroo for food ordering and delivery.

These new ways of exchange and trade caused by the shake-up and the redefinition of the economy calls upon our ability to engage in agile and collaborative forms of innovation⁴. More so today than yesterday, we need to resort to more creativity and imagination, find ways to reinvent ourselves, rethink the occupational hierarchy and *business models* and develop new approaches to producing and distributing products and services. Innovation, obviously, is in pole position in this urgent endeavour⁵. Because we are

3. Cf. <https://www.forbes.fr/business/pourquoi-les-pandemies-sont-propices-a-linnovation/?cn-reloaded=1>

4. Cf. <https://blogs.alternatives-economiques.fr/reseauinnovation/2020/05/28/la-pandemie-questionne-l-innovation-ouverte>

5. Cf. <https://www.forbes.fr/business/linnovation-responsable-post-covid/>

dealing with reinventing new models, innovation and the people driving that innovation need to clearly appreciate and understand the breadth and impact of what it means to transform a society as a whole and take full responsibility in delivering the full picture of that change including the social and societal aspects that go with it.

The “after” is different than the “before.” Therefore, if you will, it would be preferable that the “after” be much better than the “before.” The guiding philosophy of innovation may well be summed up as follows: contributing to progress (improving the quality of life of the greatest number), while also weighing the potential risks and dangers it could engender. Because innovation on its own does not necessarily lead to a better quality of life if left unattended and turned into an uncontrollable contraption that spits out automation solely for the sake of automation and development.

Any kind of innovation should be, by design, steered at enhancing the overall state of things by not only, aiming at achieving some form of progress, but by also ensuring safety for all.

This should be the course of action when developing an eco-friendly and responsible innovation strategy.

This book, in any case, conveys that idea.