

Are universities and professors about to become extinct species?

Dentsu Ho (Dentsu Report, Oct. 4, 2010)

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Inquisitive mind: key to detecting small signs of breakthrough

We have heard repeatedly in Japan during the past decade that the key to success in the 21st century is the creation of new value and that new value comes from new concepts triggering “Aha” experience and social systems that enable a better life. Despite the call for innovation with new value, few Japanese innovative companies have emerged in the recent years. This is unlike companies such as Apple, Google and Amazon, that have drastically changed the lifestyle of people. Some Japanese have even begun proposing that the Japanese companies should refocus their attention to manufacturing, as they are good at developing hardware, but not at creating new value. Is this recommendation warranted?

I argue that one of the reasons that “new value” or “innovative companies with discontinuous innovation” have not emerged in Japan, is because we ourselves do not have the eye and ability to identify new value and so often perceive discontinuous innovation as “something special and troublesome.” We can sense the beginning of new era and appreciate the inherent value of discontinuous innovation, only if we continue to ask questions. Questions like: “What if we can do something like that?” and then “Why not?”

We should never completely discard new concepts simply because we do not understand. We should never block the crazy idea generated by the young generation even if it is beyond our imagination. The least we can do is to watch how new ideas evolve.

Let me take my own example. My dream in the recent years is to create the platform where anybody in the world can access information and exchange, discuss, and develop ideas on the global scale. It originated from my childhood dream “I want to see what’s in the other part of the world myself. What lies beyond the ocean in front of me?” I am becoming convinced that my dream will come true in a few years, as there are many encouraging signs. The statement by Bill Gates: “The best education will become available via web within five years”, is one such example. Recent activities to promote “open education” show the commitment to make education available to anybody.

Popularity of iPad, Kindle and iTunes U, as well as wide availability of Wi-Fi, indicate that new devices and better infrastructure will help these initiatives become embedded in society even quicker and further.

I am not an expert in ICT (Information & Communication Technology) and am still in the process of trying new technologies such as Ustream. I have now realized that my role is to participate in these recent initiatives rather than start building the platform from scratch.

From OR choices to the AND paradigm

I am one of those who, when faced with something new, just has to try it. It was almost two decades ago that I encountered “hyper text” when we did business case discussion via video conferencing with the Business School on the U.S. east coast. In the latter half of the 1990s, I was given an opportunity to teach a Business Strategy course on the internet. Though this initiative was discontinued with considerable loss after two years, we learned several important lessons. The internet provided completely new capability, but we failed to apply it. All we did was to transform the text from being paper-based to being electronic without utilizing the other features of the electronic medium. Although we tried to make the best of its unique capability, we were not even able to deal with fundamental issues such as copyright.

Why have I been involved in rather “primitive” (then advanced) initiatives? It was my sense of crisis. I heard of the ICT and began to have the sense of crisis because I thought that the universities, and other educational facilities using the physical classroom set up, might disappear. As I was involved with education and skill development at a management consulting firm as well as universities/graduate schools, I sensed the danger confronting my industry and worried that my career would disappear altogether. Rather than wait for the extinction, I decided to “evolve” myself and give the new medium a try.

With the same sense of urgency, I have experimented “open forum” type of format where members can exchange information and discuss their own views, using the existing social media at the Graduate School of International Corporate Strategy (ICS) of Hitotsubashi and other outside seminars. Experiments are now underway at Global Agenda Seminar held at Roppongi Academy Hills.

It took a while for me to start blogging myself, as I was not quite sure how to use it. However, I started Twitter without knowing what exactly it is and how to use it. I even

participated in the panel by using Twitter from overseas in July 2010. I am increasingly convinced that with Kindle and iPad the need to carry heavy books is eliminated which can only benefit our health!

There will be an unexpected discovery if we try new technology and initiatives ourselves even if we don't know what they are. We can try to see the benefit and challenges by trying them ourselves – instead of avoiding them. For example, I now realize that the “real” space where people can discuss and debate face-to-face in classroom and “virtual” space where information and knowledge can be shared on the global scale via ICT are not “Either OR” choices, but can be combined with the AND paradigm. (I advocate this type of thinking in my book, “Strategic Shift from OR choices to the AND paradigm.”)

Evaluated by what you learn, rather than what degree you get

I am convinced that soon anybody anywhere in the world will be able to “learn” by using the Internet. The conventional educational system and institutions will lose their significance if they stick to the old model. Educational background is perceived by not which university you go to, but by what you actually learn. Conventional universities and university professors are about to become dinosaurs if they do not transform themselves.

Therefore I believe the key to success in the 21st century is not blocking new things because they may have an impact on our current career and vested interests. Instead the key is watching how the breakthrough ideas and concepts develop and trying to think of how our own experience can be combined with these new concepts and linking with new people. If we can think of the shift from OR choices to the AND paradigm, we can create a totally new and better world. Can we support the new concept when we realize that we can create a new value, benefitting the society at large? Or do we block the new ideas and concepts, because it may hurt our existing rights and careers? Our choices will make or break innovation and determine whether this innovation will provide new value to the society. New value creation starts with all of us willing to watch and support the new initiative and development.