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The importance of associating skill in innovation

Steve Jobs said, “Creativity is just connecting things” and innovators know how to connect experiences they’ve had and synthesize new things. Indeed, making connections or simply “associating” is the most basic root of new ideas. Among five discovery skills mentioned in “The DNA of Disruptive Innovators” Book we’ve already read, associating is the only cognitive skill while the others are considered as behavioral skills which trigger our associational thinking. From my point of view, associating is also the most important discovery stuff in innovation since it requires human more mental activities than the others (such as observing and experimenting), therefore it will draw on manifold spectacular views.

Everyone will be creative if they try to cultivate their “associational thinking”. Associating is simply connecting dots of experiences, knowledge or unconnected things to become new ideas and thinking. Innovators often try to put together mismatched ideas to compose surprisingly successful combinations. For example, BlackBerry was derived from the combination of a computer with wireless technology when Lazaridis founder got the idea at a conference as he listened to someone talk about future trends in wireless data transfers. In order to generate potential associations from unrelated information or unconnected problems to, it forces us diving deep into the other discovery skills - questioning, observing, networking, and experimenting. Through these behavioral skills, our brain will actively grasp new knowledge, perception, attention, logical reasoning and enhance our memory. The more various novel inputs our brain possesses, the more brainstorm and unexpected associations it can make. As well as the more different kinds of lego blocks, the more innovative models children can build.

Undoubtedly, associating helps us discover new directions, best solutions for unsolved problems because we have more opportunities for making connections across seemingly unrelated questions. If we could find the right questions, make compelling observations, talk with diverse people and experiment, however, we do not try to serialize and synthesize to become value insights, consequently, all knowledge we acquired will be sooner or later wiped out. When we link random

items together, we could clearly observe their reaction and superiority. If our connection is not a perfect combination, at least it opens up us new experiences and triggers our curiosity to find better solutions. Associating is the last and only step we need to bypass after all behavioral processes such as questioning and observing in order to achieve breakthroughs.

On the hunt for new associations in technology, we could catch many typically successful examples, such as Steve Jobs from Apple and Benioff from Salesforce. Thanks to synthesis of association "enterprise software meets Amazon", Benioff successfully created the commercial software for managing a sales force for small and medium-sized businesses. The knowledge obtained from calligraphy classes helped Steve Jobs applying it to the fonts on the Macintosh. Associating skill is not encapsulated in the technology field, it crosses all kinds of life (business, art, culture and etc.). Intersection and association among many cultures generates significant innovations, many of which are relevant today. In the field of cuisine, "Banh mi" is considered not only as a Vietnam's national speciality, but also this kind of food has crossed the border of its country to become popular in the world. "Banh mi" is a perfect combination of the crunchiness of French baguette, the fatness of pâté and pork belly, the savor of Chinese soy sauce and of course, the freshness and flavor of Vietnamese herbs and pickle. "Rice paper salad" or "Banh trang tron" in Vietnamese, it is a mixture of seemingly irrelevant ingredients (such as rice paper, beef jerky, mango, and etc.), however, its flavor is yummy. The above examples have proven to us that when we put simply everything (including ourselves) into the intersection, where diverse experiences flourish, we can easily achieve new insights.

To build up our ability to think different and create new disruptive innovations, let ourselves experience the violation of unexpected connections. Associational thinking will boost our brain generate surprising ideas, and we can enhance this discovery skill every day. If someone gives a chemist three chemical elements: carbon, oxygen and hydrogen, you think how many combinations he can produce?