



Slow Innovation: A Savour-y Way to Success By Derek Cheshire

In the late 1980s, Italian journalist Carlo Petrini was strolling past a new McDonald's franchise in the centre of Rome and he asked himself the question, "*If this is fast food, why not have slow food?*" He went on to start the Slow Food Movement with the aim of counter-acting fast food and fast life as well as arousing people's interest in local food, how it tastes, and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. The slow idea has since spread to other areas such as education.

In the world of business there is huge pressure to deliver results 'fast', but do the changes we make, the consultants we employ, and the money we spend create a lasting difference to our businesses? We make a constant stream of decisions that merely suffice to get us by until the next crisis.

This got me thinking about 'slow innovation'. Innovation has become a buzzword. If we generate good ideas and research the market, then we are bound to unveil new products into the market and ensure the future success of our organisation—right? Not necessarily, and in most cases the results are disappointing, to say the least. Sometimes the future of the business is put into jeopardy, and the actions can have serious consequences both within and outside our businesses.

For the purpose of clarity, I'll continue to use the food metaphor, but first, there are two points to clear up—**what exactly do I mean by innovation and what is slow and what is fast?**

My simple definition of innovation is a blend of creativity (generating ideas) and knowledge or know-how (the things that we already know). As a business concept, innovation—in products, services or process—is sought to create value (monetary or otherwise). Exactly how this is done is part of the slow/fast debate.

Returning to the debate over fast food, most people agree the food is tasteless or 'artificial' in taste, unsatisfying, encourages social problems as there's little time for social interaction, and is quite simply bad for your health. 'Fast' is attractive because it provides a one-stop shop for eating. No matter how much damage you are prepared to do to your own body, are you prepared to risk the health of your loved ones? And here is the crunch: you are giving serious money to someone else.

By applying the fast food metaphor to an innovating business, you are essentially involved in a marketing exercise; one in which you're simply dreaming up a new product and putting it in the market. This approach devalues your ideas by treating them as commodities and it is not sustainable because you ignore your greatest assets, the people who generate the ideas.

Social (cultural) problems rise within your business and develop an 'us vs. them' culture. You may have chosen a solution led by your marketing department or from a single outside consultancy, but ask yourself whether it really has been 'fast', how much value has been generated and will it create long-term value? Could you, for instance, repeat the process on your own? If you are prepared to consistently flog your marketing department to death in order to get your so-called innovations into the marketplace, how much long lasting damage are you inflicting on your company's culture, the organisational culture that is linked to, amongst other things, intrinsic motivation?

With all of these ‘airy fairy’ ideas, readers may be think I am a social worker or HR professional! Not a bit of it, I just happen to believe that, in what is rapidly becoming a knowledge-based global economy, we must take care of our most valuable assets. Whilst a computer can come up with millions of different variants or solutions in little time, people can generate new ideas, spot subtle trends, make almost illogical associations and combine knowledge in new ways that computers can’t. Is it not desirable to make the whole greater than ‘the sum of the parts’ with no capital investment at all? For those people who believe that it cannot be done, take time to read *Maverick* and *The Seven Day Weekend* by Ricardo Semler. Whilst Semler’s ideas might be radical for some, they demonstrate what is possible. They are not just ideas; these books are a record of what has actually taken place.

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Back to my favourite subject—food. What characterises ‘slow food’? Although the end result is important, the method is equally important. Fast foodies may fill their bellies, but they will in time forget how to cook. Slow foodies will learn to cook and then experiment, widening their knowledge of techniques, taste and ingredients. They will also pass this know-how among those around them ensuring continuity and sustainability. In the world of slow, there will be less waste as there’s time to be more resourceful and to use the materials already available. Because we are in complete control, we are more likely to meet the needs of our diners especially when ingredients can be in or out of season. Finally, we can also use slow dining to improve social interaction within families or other social groupings.

But what about the people who do not care about being social, those who want to fill their bellies and move on? Not many business leaders can do this repeatedly without being ejected either by their employees or shareholders. This behaviour destroys shareholder value very quickly.

On my website is a simple survey that asks, “Which is the major factor that hinders creativity in your organisation?” As the number of respondents grows, the ratios remain fairly consistent:

Leadership/Management	47.4%	The biggest factor by far is Leadership and Management, not middle management but right at the top—the Chief (Executive Officer) or should I say Chef! At this level, decisions are made on whether a company will take the fast or slow route to innovation. Those lower down will play a part in the innovation process and determine whether any initiatives are successful but they do not make the initial decision.
Process/structure	18.4%	
Organisational culture	15.8%	
Strategic barriers	7.9%	
Learning Capacity	7.9%	
Corporate Culture	2.6%	

Fast food requires a ready supply of outlets and sufficient marketing to fool the general public and slow food requires a competent chef, an array of suitable sous chefs and other kitchen staff, a hygienic and reasonably well arranged kitchen and the right ingredients. In addition, to consume the food as well as prepare it, a good wine, pleasant surroundings and good friends will ensure a pleasant event. It is easy to see why the fast route appeals—a cash injection in return for a short-term stimulus.

So where are many companies going wrong? What we have created, with our knee-jerk reactions, is the fast business, driven by objectives that have not been thought through. What seems to matter is the outcome, not the process or consequences of our actions. In our quest to achieve a short-term goal we have neglected the systems that should be put in place to properly manage ideas, to ‘unmanage’ our employees, to create the right culture, ensure that our money is spent wisely and create a long-term programme that will avoid a constant stream of (expensive) knee-jerk interventions.

As with fast food, these events are not pleasurable for our shareholders or staff. We will suffer from obesity (consultant overload), additives (things we do not need), hypertension (change fatigue) and of course an empty wallet. This is Taylor's scientific management applied in the wrong context.

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'Fast' also usually means you get what someone else wants you to have (part of the trade off for being fast) whilst slow requires more thought but gives you what you actually want and need. Slow is tailored to the immediate and long-term needs of you, your customers and employees. The route to slow innovation entails savouring the flavours of diversity and learning, blending ideas and know-how and ultimately becoming self-sufficient. In our fast consumer society, we can throw away what we grow tired of or find not suited to our taste. We cannot throw away our businesses and start again unless we work for ourselves. Slow innovation, the sustainable way, is surely a better way to create the business of the future, but how?

Innovation, as a combination of creativity and know-how, works only if there is a framework for it to exist in. This framework needs to balance several commonly identified factors such as teamwork, 'stretching' employees, being aware of your competitive environment, organisational culture and management style. Even if this looks ok, and it can be measured, your business still needs to look at other factors. Having an ideal framework for innovation does not necessarily mean that you are embracing slow innovation.

Are there any strategic barriers that stop your business from taking certain courses of action such as attitude to risk or mindsets (ethical, moral or simply created over time)? Other issues such as tolerance of ambiguity and transparency are important too. Do you have ways to generate ideas that involves the whole company and how do you harvest, store and acknowledge these ideas? The suggestion box is just not good enough.

Who looks after the company finances? Do you have an accountant or book keeper, or do you employ a financial director or controller? The former will be accustomed to treating company finances rather like housekeeping and the latter will be used to properly appraising projects and calculating returns on investment. This factor alone prevents many growing and innovative businesses from taking potentially profitable courses of action. This does not mean that you need to take unnecessary risks, remember risk decreases the more you know about the project that you wish to undertake so information gathering, both internal and external, is an important part of the slow organisation.

By far the biggest area to focus on is leadership and management. Middle management is incredibly important. Being in the middle of an organisation, these managers are important catalysts in the flow of knowledge, capture of ideas and development of organisational culture. These managers need a wide range of 'people' and business skills; their most important skill being to know when not to interfere and how to encourage an atmosphere of collaboration whilst keeping an eye on broader business objectives. These qualities are essential, most other things can be acquired through professional or personal development. If the basics are not there then for the good of the organisation it may be necessary to move or replace some of your middle managers.

If I'm suggesting replacing middle management, what about the person at the top, the CEO? Such a person needs all of the qualities of those whom they lead plus the ability to see the bigger picture whilst appreciating the detail, to be able to lead and motivate and see the way into the future. Returning to our food metaphor for a moment, our top chefs will gain Michelin Stars as their skill and appreciation of their profession increases. You are never too old, or too senior to learn.

It seems like all of this should be written into a manual for all CEOs to follow (the cookery book), however each company is different and so while the qualities required to implement slow innovation may be the same, the actual course of action may vary. This highlights the final and most important quality of all – intuition and the ability to feel what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. Good chefs use taste, smell and touch as well as sight to test their progress of their creations and the ‘business chef’ must learn to do this also.

So far I have suggested that we don’t know exactly what innovation is, and that we should all take the road less travelled. We should also take a long hard look at ourselves and our management teams then prune or replace if they are not up to scratch. The slow path is also coloured by human relationships, unfamiliar risks and learning. The scariest part of all is the lack of support as you dispense with the services of those who peddle ‘snake oil’, the large consultancies offering a quick fix in return for long-term dependency. Is all of this worth it, is it possible to create an innovative company whose structure and culture are conducive to long-term growth and sustainability, and most importantly is this desirable for the health of our businesses? The answer is most definitely yes. 📌

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Derek is a professional speaker and has a long list of articles to his name including *Innovation—How long is a piece of string?*, *Taking the In Out of Innovation* and *How to Generate 20 New Business Ideas Over Coffee*. One of his papers is soon to be published in India as part of a reference book, *Strategic Importance of Idea Generation and Management*. Derek is also a member of the mastermind group for the Design Interaction course at the Royal College of Art and Design in The Hague and recently took part in the CNBC programme *The Business of Innovation*. You can read more from Derek at his blog, [Creativity and Innovation](#).

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