

# The Perfect time for Creativity

by Alan Nelson

What does the world's first supermarket have in common with the iPod and a hands-free door opener? You may find it hard to believe, but each of these ground-breaking ideas was launched slap-bang in the middle of a global crisis.

While you might think that's the **worst** possible time for new ideas, creativity is **exactly** what we need in a crisis. Bigger problems require smarter solutions, and creativity can keep finances afloat and give economies a desperately needed boost.

In fact, there are two underlying drivers that absolutely require finance professionals to become more creative. The first is, as I have said, the global pandemic. Many businesses have been massively affected by the crisis and for most of those it has been negative. So, whether you can be one of those organisations who are ingenious enough to recalibrate and make a success of the crisis, or you are simply coming up with new ideas to survive, creativity is likely to be pretty important.

The second driver is technology, something we seem increasingly unable to do without. 18 months ago, I was lucky enough to hear Professor Sir Ken Robinson speak at the World Congress of Accountants in Sydney. To illustrate our attachment to technology he used a quote which I suspect he made up, but it amused me:

*"I saw a man in Starbucks today. He had no phone or anything. He just sat there drinking his coffee. Like a psychopath."*

It has come to something when it is actually weird not to be staring at our phone every second!

Research projects around the world have identified technology as a major disruptor in the accounting profession. A recent Oxford University study looked at the job roles that were most likely to be replaced by a computer or robot.

On the surface of it, things look bleak for accountants. Out of 365 job roles the following were all in the top 30:

Rank	Title	Likelihood
4	Financial accounts manager	97.6%
8	Book-keeper and payroll admin	97%
8	Finance Officer	97%
11	Financial Administrative Worker	96.8%
21	Financial and Accounting Technician	95.9%
26	Chartered or Certified Accountant	95.3%
26	Taxation expert	95.3%

The good news is that among a list of characteristics of job roles likely to be safe, the Oxford study put this top of the list:

*"Roles requiring people to think on their feet and come up with solutions to problems are less likely to be automated."*

So, with the transactional side of accounting more and more likely to be automated, creativity has never been more important. But if that's the case, why is it so rare to find finance professionals who embrace this point. In our work in this area we have identified four main barriers.

The first barrier comes from our own professional training. As accountants we are trained to be professionally sceptical. This can be an invaluable skill as we engage with some activities such as budgeting and forecasting, or the valuation of assets and goodwill



in an acquisition, but in the early stage of innovation, it can inhibit creativity. Once an idea has taken shape and before we commit serious funds to its development it is reasonable to expect some evidence for our belief in it, but too often accountants are hard wired to question things and ask for evidence when they are really just ideas. Beware the person who always proposes a market research exercise when a new idea is raised.

The second barrier is arrogance. That is a pejorative word, but we are all guilty of it to some extent. Most new ideas will leave some people feeling defensive.

*"If this is such a great plan, how come I never thought of it, when it really concerns my role? It must be nonsense and I can explain why."*

It's a natural response. It takes a very positive team culture to break through this but it's possible if you work at it and establish ways of involving people who might otherwise be defensive at an early stage.

The third barrier is the business planning cycle. The annual business plan is no respecter of creativity. New ideas don't emerge on schedule and according to pre-prepared plans. And good ideas are by their very nature disruptive. To counteract this, we try to convince ourselves that we can build them into future plans, in an orderly way, but that ignores the fact that sometimes what we should really do is rip up the plan and start again.

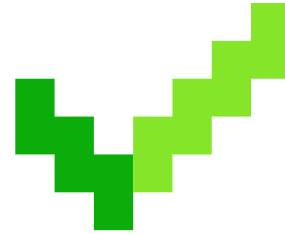
Of course, that is why a major crisis, although calamitous in all sorts of ways, can be such a good breeding ground for innovation.

The final barrier to creativity is our attitude to risk. This is not to say that some of us are by nature more or less risk averse. I am sure we are, but that's not what I am referring to. I am talking about the way our attitude to risk changes in a cyclical way.



We call the first stage **Innovation**. We start off full of enthusiasm for a new idea. We implement it and are pleased with ourselves. The second stage is **Consolidation**. Through serious of tweaks and fine tuning, we improve upon our idea. We build a collective sense of success as we learn the detail of what makes things work well.

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The final stage is called **Conservatism**. We have refined our idea over many stages and are collectively vested in its success. We have a professional pride in the process we have been through.

The conservatism of this third stage can be a good thing. We don't want to be throwing away what we have achieved, by chasing after another new idea. But sometimes, just at the time when our idea has passed its sell by date and we desperately need some new thinking, we are at our most conservative and are not receptive to challenge. Everything we have tried over the past five years becomes a reason why any new idea won't work. We need something to jolt us out of this complacency.

Once again, we see why the midst of a crisis is the **perfect** time for creativity.

But what does this have to do with the finance team? Creativity sounds like the sort of thing marketing departments do!

That may be true, but your ideas are as valid as anyone else's. And you have the advantage of really understanding the financial dynamics of the business model. You should be able to sift through your own ideas to find the ones that might be financially wise.

But you have a second role in all this as well. You can help to make other people's creative ideas financially viable. And it's not all about new products... In times of uncertainty, finance people will be asked for innovative ways to cut costs, price products and secure funding - all of which require creative thinking!

Let's go back to the three examples I started with, to see that working through a crisis may be about more than just battering down the hatches. Take the King Kullen Grocery Company, the world's first supermarket. It opened its doors in the middle of the Great Depression, as the economic crisis inspired the concept of selling large volumes of goods at discount prices, helping people put food on the table in a time of profound financial difficulty.

And when Apple launched the iPod, just six weeks after 9/11, Steve Jobs' innovation inspired entrepreneurs across the globe to rejuvenate a struggling



economy, all while bringing a bit of joy to a civilisation in mourning.

Last but not least, it was during the devastating Covid-19 pandemic that designer Steve Brookers thought up the ingenious "Hygienehook", a hands-free door opener intended to stymie the spread of the deadly infection.

So here are my top tips for getting creative in a crisis:

**1. Find somewhere that inspires you –**

In a park, the woods or your garden, new surroundings can help you be more creative.

**2. Change your point of view –**

Think about what solutions somebody else might dream up. Getting out of your own head can lead to unexpected ideas.

**3. Don't be afraid to fail –**

Put forward every idea you have, even

if it's a bit mad. Crazy thoughts can become the most innovative ideas.

So good luck. And remember, a crisis can be devastating, but creativity can help us rebuild, and find better ways of working in the future.



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