Turning ideas into action: innovation within the humanitarian sector

A think piece for the HFP Stakeholders Forum

Stacey White, Humanitarian Futures Programme, November 2008

"Just as energy is the basis of life itself, and ideas the source of innovation, so is innovation the vital spark of all human change, improvement and progress.” — Ted Levitt

Introduction

Since the Humanitarian Futures Programme [HFP] first began institutional assessment work in 2007, its teams have explored a number of questions regarding innovation and risk-taking within the humanitarian sector. Generally speaking, questions regarding innovation have been met with cynicism and even a chuckle or two. For many humanitarian interlocutors, the stakes are simply too high for innovation, per se. For still others, lack of time, rigid funding frameworks, and the inflexible nature of large, slow-moving bureaucratic structures stand as the major impediments to creative thinking and action.

Whilst there are a growing number of examples within the traditional humanitarian sector of persons developing and implementing innovative practices – notable of which are Medecins sans Frontiers’ Plumpy Nut nutrition pilot in Niger, GEOSS’ remote sensing initiatives for humanitarian action, and telemedicine experimentation by a host of international medical organisations in various locations – the humanitarian sector as a whole has shown itself to rely primarily on conventional methods of aid delivery rather than exploring natural and social scientific innovations that could lead to more effective ways in which to address the needs of vulnerable populations.

Reasons noted by HFP assessment participants for the lack of innovation are too many to enumerate. What is clear, however, is that there exists a widespread and arguably growing feeling amongst humanitarian practitioners that more should be done to innovate within the sector. Faced with an increasingly complex and uncertain world in which potential threats to human vulnerability are multi-dimensional and coming from diverse sources, humanitarian professionals are understandably concerned about a “business as usual” view of the work at hand. At the same time, they are frustrated with an industry leadership that would seem to offer very few incentives to foster creative thinking and new approaches.

1 As found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innovation#cite_ref-0
It is clear from the hours of interviews and discussions conducted under the auspices of the HFP programme thus far that humanitarian professionals want to experiment with new ways of working and clearly wish to push the boundaries of current humanitarian thought and practice through innovative pilots and other collaborative initiatives. For many, however, the critical question is how? How can one innovate when the immediacy of saving lives all too often prohibits creative and speculative thinking? And with which partners should we seek support for the design and implementation of innovations that promise to have the greatest impact?

HFP sees three main challenges to greater creative thinking and innovative practice within the humanitarian sector. These are identified as follows:

1. How can innovation be prioritised and identified within the sector?

2. How can innovative approaches be developed and tested within one’s own organisation and operating network?

3. How does one create and sustain partnerships that foster innovation?

This short paper seeks to provoke thinking and discussion about the three challenges noted above during the course of the HFP Stakeholder’s Forum 2008. It also serves as a foundation, or precursor, for further HFP work in the area of innovation and “innovations brokering” over the 2009-2010 period.

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2 Data collected during HFP assessments 2007-2008 [USAID, IASC, UNCTs in Ecuador, Philippines, Central African Republic and Tajikistan].
How can innovation be prioritised and identified within the sector?

One need only Google the word “innovation” to be presented with webpage upon webpage of definitions, quotes and descriptions surrounding the topic. Innovation - distinct from invention - is a term generally used to describe the process by which new ideas are applied successfully. A more detailed definition describes innovation as the embodiment, combination, or synthesis of knowledge in original, relevant, valued new products, processes or services. For most of us, it is about doing something new and/or combining existing approaches in a novel way to produce a previously non-existent good or service.

According to some of the leading business leaders worldwide, innovation is best fostered through a cross-pollination of ideas and through the breaking of silos between disciplines and “thought ecosystems”. Many of these leaders note that innovation by the most successful of companies is not something that occurs “on the side”, neatly directed, for example, by a department established to promote innovative practice. Instead, innovation in its truest form is embedded in the strategic processes of an enterprise, existing as part and parcel of its overarching vision. Because innovation involves the constant assessment of possibilities from many different sources and directions, e.g. low tech vs. high tech, external vs. internal, bottom up vs. top down, doing innovation right requires investment in a systemic innovation capability based on the building of an organisational architecture rather than in a single miracle solution expected to spring up out of nowhere. Business experts note still further that innovation rarely stems from a single individual, but rather grows out of a continual exchange of ideas within and between collaborative networks. Innovation, therefore, reflects a breakthrough moment on a continuum of incremental improvements brought about by months and often years of hard work and idea exchange.

In the eyes of many humanitarian practitioners, innovation refers to a commercial sector pursuit that takes place far from the emergency response challenges of distributing food rations, digging camp latrines, and providing screenings to under 5s. The average aid worker may have read about the successes of modern-day high-tech innovators such as Larry Page, Mark Zuckerberg, Shawn Fanning, and Pierre Omidyar but surely has not thought of the world of these innovators as being closely interlinked with his/hers. These innovators are viewed as geniuses - “tech geeks” - who possess a special gift that allows them to identify knowledge opportunities and then apply this knowledge in new ways for the benefit of society. These men, and sometimes women, are considered as “thought

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3 An invention typically denotes an idea made manifest. See http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invention for full definition of invention.


5 Refer to http://www.IBM/doing for further details of the 2008 study on innovation comprising the contributions of over 1,000 CEOs worldwide.

6 See Berkum, Scott. The Myths of Innovation, O'Reilly Press, Sebastopol, 2007, Chapter 5, pg. 68.

7 Larry Page, Google; Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook; Shawn Fanning, Napster; Pierre Omidyar, eBay.

8 A favorite woman innovator of the authors of this paper is Jessica Flannery, co-founder and think engine of Kiva, the super cool internet-based micro-financing organisation for entrepreneurs in the developing world. See http://www.kiva.org for more information.
leaders” who have the time and resources to think - an activity widely perceived as a luxury by those working in the humanitarian sector.

As the world becomes increasingly interrelated and threats to human vulnerability more acute and far-reaching, however, there would seem to be a growing number of professionals who wonder how the humanitarian community might be able to tap into mega-innovations for the benefit of the world’s most vulnerable populations. Certainly, there must be a way in which GoogleEarth and/or GEOSS remote sensing technologies can be utilised not only to track the movement and well-being of displaced populations but to broadcast this information to a host of interested stakeholders across multiple geographic locations; surely there must be an adaptation “in the making” of now ubiquitous social networking platforms such as Facebook or LinkedIn that would connect regional humanitarian and scientific experts before and during a humanitarian crisis; and there must be a way in which emerging “crowdsourcing” methodologies - now gaining such ground in other sectors - can be systematically employed to harvest solutions to seemingly intractable and emerging humanitarian problems. Notwithstanding the wish to try new approaches, reservations about how such strategic experimentation might actually work, where to start, and with whom to seek support are often so overwhelming that the most innovative ideas get shelved in favor of tried and tested approaches utilised in the sector for the last 20 years.

Prioritising innovation is difficult when one does not know where to start; identifying innovation from a variety of sources is even more challenging, particularly when one is already working in a fast-paced, high-risk environment offering little time for reflection. Noted above are examples of how world-renowned technologies now used by billions of people might be prioritised for adaptation in the humanitarian sector. These could be considered as the “no brainers”. Questions surrounding the identification of innovations become even more problematic, however, when considering how best to recognize low-tech and other ideas originating from beneficiary communities, indigenous populations and other less recognised partners. How does one know whether a “little idea” might have the potential to improve or, better yet, revolutionise the way in which aid is delivered in a particular sector? And once identified, how does one then communicate the potential value of the idea to those that can help make it happen. In short, if one is not dealing with innovator giants such as Google or Facebook, how does one know when an idea is worth pursuing?

Currently, humanitarian organisations - responsible for implementing projects over a relatively short time frame [usually 12 to 18 months]9 - have little time to observe and reflect on the profile and changing needs of their “customers” and on the efficacy of their implementation of goods and services. Despite the growing specialisation within humanitarian organisations in monitoring and evaluation techniques over the last ten years, evaluations tend to be very project-specific, focused on measuring intended outcomes of activities, usually for purposes of donor reporting, rather than concentrated on strategic analyses for the purposes of research and development. However, it might be

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9 According to staff interviewed by HFP over the last two years, humanitarian donors rarely consider even three to five-year funding.
worth exploring whether the humanitarian community is doing enough to evaluate both the *unintended* as well as the intended outcomes of projects and programmes? In other words, is the community investing the requisite time and efforts in “seeing” what it needs to see in order to make meaningful changes in operational approaches?

Humanitarian organisations are rarely encouraged or rewarded for generating new ideas about how to approach a problem beyond the goals of a specific project. As a result, organisations invest relatively little time and resources in enhancing their capacities to identify new ideas that may grow out from a particular project but be unrelated to current objectives even if such an idea could eventually be very valuable to both humanitarian donors and their “customers”. In that regard, it would seem that members of the humanitarian community, despite their best efforts to interrelate their efforts and activities, continue to work in “silos”, seemingly unaware of the knowledge opportunities available to them from a variety of diverse sources.

![Capacity of organisations to identify innovation](source: HFP 10)

A final, although no less significant point, regarding the prioritisation and identification of innovation relates to how the community might be able to engender greater creative thinking from within the sector itself. Surely, there are a host of programme managers, strategic consultants and technical assistants with ideas begging for a platform. How to foster staff ideation and give it a “voice” is a major challenge for the humanitarian community. And in that, humanitarian practitioners are certainly not alone. Within the traditional business sector, the psychology of innovation is a field of growing interest given that it is both tantamount to corporate success and, at the same time, difficult to achieve. Given the enormous threats that we face, however, the humanitarian community might

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10 Data collected during HFP assessments 2007-2008 [USAID, IASC, UNCTs in Ecuador, Philippines, Central African Republic and Tajikistan].
wish to invest more time exploring how the management of staff for innovation could positively impact on its relevance and effectiveness in the longer-term.

According to some of the world top business leaders, creative thinking is best promoted by offering staff:

- **A deep sense of purpose**: Ostensibly a humanitarian characteristic, there nevertheless exists a gap in the relationship between the profound commitment of staff to improve peoples' lives, their willingness to innovate and develop new approaches

- **Trust – assign a task and back away**: Although “field-logic” does rule operational decision-making for most agencies in the industry, accepted precepts regarding accountability offer little room for implementing partners to diverge from course in response to emerging knowledge opportunities

- **Extrinsic rewards such as recognition or money**: It seems hard to imagine organisations engaged in humanitarian response offering monetary “bonuses” to staff involved in innovation; nevertheless, it would seem that much more could be done to offer change-agents and other “thought leaders” within the sector commensurate recognition for their ground-breaking efforts

- **Intrinsic rewards such as the satisfaction of reaching one's goal and/or being part of a creative process**: Those HFP assessment participants who were able to relate a story of innovation during the course of their careers spoke of the experience with nostalgia and deep appreciation for being able to have participated in such an effort, suggesting that staff could be rewarded through the process of participation

- **An environment where failure is accepted [and where the only wrong decision is indecision]**: In a humanitarian context where stakes are very high, where the consequences of decisions can have far-reaching impacts, and where donor and media scrutiny can be considerable, it would not seem that the industry has yet learned how to accept and learn from failure

- **An environment where collaboration of new actors/ideas is embraced**: It is clear that collaboration is accepted but evidence is not convincing that outreach to new actors/ideas is actively encouraged by industry leadership

A major aspect of nurturing innovation amongst staff is not only the ability to encourage teams to think creatively, but to give them the tools to stretch their thinking and develop new perspectives. When people are given the time and space for reflection and ideation, it has been observed that innovation will sprout from all parts of an organisation – from

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project supervisors, to drivers, to the ever-popular IT guys. In *The Myths of Innovation*, innovation guru Scott Berkun illustrates nine different ways in which self-identified innovators utilise idea-finding techniques to come up with new approaches:

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

**Figure 3:** Based on an on-line survey of over 100 self-identified innovators. (Source: Scott Berkun, *The Myths of Innovation*, pg. 89.)

The prioritisation and identification of good ideas over time through the systemisation of innovation across the whole of an organisation is key to building the necessary capacities to recognise knowledge opportunities and exploit them.

**Developing and testing innovative approaches in the operational environment**

Prioritising new ideas within the sector is only part of the innovation equation. Developing and testing these ideas within an organisation and/or operating network is an altogether different matter, a process that has the potential to kill a good idea long before it has even had time to germinate. The fact that innovators within organisations will meet resistance to change is all too evident. In the HFP institutional assessments conducted thus far, some of the most passionate and dedicated professionals also demonstrated themselves to be the most resistant to change. Likewise, organisations or departments within organisations expected to be the most agile and adaptive were often the most unmov ing in the face of new thinking and perspectives. Due to the high stakes and limited resources available to organisations engaged in humanitarian action, people are understandably hesitant to "buy in" to and finance an idea before seeing its value at work. For this reason, persuasion and the ability to communicate the value of an idea is key to getting things off the ground.

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True innovation, after all, can be unpredictable and messy. There can be failure and, even in the most positive of situations, only incremental improvement. What if the innovation does not succeed? What if, despite promises to surpass strategic objectives over the longer-term, the new approach compromises the ability of organisations to meet intended project outcomes in the short-run? And finally, what if the so-called innovation is not an innovation at all, but just a bad or inappropriately applied idea that loses traction from the start?

From the perspective of an aid worker in a crisis-affected country, there is also the understandable worry that the testing of a new approach may falsely raise the expectations of already vulnerable humanitarian “customers”. It is one thing if the GPS on one’s iPhone does not take the most direct route to a meeting place or one’s new Microsoft Vista application is not quite up to snuff. It is another matter altogether if the hybrid planting seeds that one is distributed do not bear produce or the alternative energy cooking devices introduced in one’s village do not operate in very cold temperatures. For humanitarian “customers” already living in environments of extreme uncertainty, disappointment over a failed approach can be devastating. For this reason, humanitarian stakeholders are justified in meeting new ideas with caution, but also have to be even more creative in identifying opportunities and building relationships for innovations environment testing that are the most appropriate and promising.

In an industry in which the practical impacts of each and every project on target populations are paramount to everything that the humanitarian community does, risk-taking can seem irresponsible and even immoral. Annual financing frameworks, for example, deeply entrenched within international humanitarian operating systems, call for distinct and measurable outputs over relatively short time frames, seeming to disallow or at least strongly discourage experimental approaches that do not navigate a straight and tidy course. Furthermore, existing precepts about humanitarian accountability mean that if an organisation explores a new approach on one project, it could not only compromise its ability to reach project-specific goals, but if unsuccessful may also undermine its chances of garnering additional donor funding in the future.

Such rigid dogma regarding accountability further affects the ability of organisations to develop and fine-tune innovations through prototyping as it limits their ability to “learn on the job”. In a business context, the need to continually have a competitive edge predicates that models can be implemented without being perfect.\textsuperscript{13} A company may choose to test a partially developed idea with the view that, through piloting, it will be able to grow more

\begin{table}[h]
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\textbf{Making innovation happen: Building a persuasive case for change} \\
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Step 1: Define the problem \\
Step 2: Describe how the problem is solved today \\
Step 3: Outline the benefits and costs to the new solution [and demonstrate the relative advantage of the new solution] \\
Step 4: Chart an implementation approach [and show the level of compatibility of the new] \\
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robust organically, teaching its developers additional information about its potential capabilities. This has been precisely the strategic approach of Wikipedia and Facebook, two collaboration/social networking platforms that have called upon customers to use their products and make them their own as a means to developing the models further. In instances where it is determined that an initial approach may not have been the most effective mid-way through implementation, flexible business models permit and even encourage the modification or combining of certain project elements. As readers surely know, such thinking is more difficult in the humanitarian sphere where organisations are hamstringed by inflexible budgets that do not necessarily allow them to shift course six months into a grant.

Best business practice also dictates that organisations focus on developing and testing innovations that address the most important problems rather than the most interesting. In HFP’s experience working with humanitarian organisations thus far, however, it would seem that the political and funding frameworks particular to the sector call for a slightly modified approach. Because of people’s resistance to change and the difficulty of pushing new approaches through the entirety of large, bureaucratic organisations and/or operating networks, an innovations approach that focuses on small changes that do not infringe on the respective turfs of organisational departments and are not implemented in countries high on donor and media radars may actually be the best way forward. At least this has been the thinking of senior leadership within UN and other agencies assessed by HFP over the last year. It would seem that the best approach – and the one most likely to be taken by a truly visionary organisation – might be a strategy in which an innovations portfolio balances both smaller, more easily adopted ideas with bigger, high-risk thinking, thus distributing risk more evenly over the whole of an organisation’s efforts.

Key components for driving through innovation during the development and testing stages are identified as follows:

- **Relative ease of adoption**: The “sweet spot of innovation” refers to the “goodness” of an idea relative to barriers of access for adoption.
- **Creation of an observable value as soon as possible**: Naturally, people are more willing to support an idea if they can see its value at work as soon as possible; this

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14 Through some 20,000 applications produced by Facebook users themselves, people are using a product to design a still better product that they want. As for Wikipedia, it has been referred to as a hybrid of both a tool and community because the community of users actually makes it what it is. For more information, see Shirky, Clay. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2008, pg. 136.


16 An “under the radar” approach was noted to be a promising way to go by two UN humanitarian coordinators with which HFP has worked thus far.

17 Points taken from an array of books and Internet sources on the subject, see Further Reading at the end of this paper.

18 See Berkun, pg. 123.
relates to the above point about relative ease of adoption, allowing an idea to be steered for maximum value.

- **Establishment of new planning processes that maintain balance in the delivery of creativity and the capturing of value:** Innovation in its truest form is not about a particular product but about a way that an organisation or company operates, continually seeking and assessing possibilities from a variety of sources. The key to this activity in the humanitarian sector is, of course, balancing exploration and experimentation with the creation of real value for target populations.

- **Focus on a strategic model rather than an individual product:** Reinforcing the point above, innovation must be viewed as a strategic model encouraged by strong and focused leadership rather than as a single product around which an organisation might erroneously “put all of its eggs”.

**How does one create and sustain partnerships that foster innovation?**

In an industry where collaboration is, or at least increasingly will be, key to getting anything done, communicating the value of a new idea and ensuring that it is well understood by a host of diverse stakeholders are critical. It would seem a rare situation indeed wherein a small team of humanitarian practitioners would be able to innovate in a vacuum, *per se*, without the participation in some form of government representatives, donors, implementing partners, beneficiary communities, corporates and even the military. Therefore, building strong collaborative networks for innovation from the start is indispensable to turning an idea into action.

Even in a very focused sector-specific project that employs tried and tested methods, there can be so many moving parts and actors of varying contribution that implementation becomes a real art. One could argue that even in these situations, the traditional humanitarian community continues to have difficulty deciphering what make a particular project a success and what make it a failure. Throw a new, untested idea into the mix and keeping track of these parts through collaboration becomes an even greater challenge.

In such instances, trust becomes the glue that binds. When introducing a new idea, all actors need to “buy in” to the idea and be invested in the strategic experimentation process. They need to trust one another as well as the leadership driving through the idea to be flexible and adaptive in their approach. If not, respect for the judgement and actions of the various parts will not be adequate to allow all stakeholders involved in the process to work creatively, diverge from course as necessary, and take advantages of opportunities presented during the course of implementation. According to Clay Shirky, collaboration expert, building trust amongst “communities of practice” is not difficult. In *Here Comes Everybody*, “… groups of people who want to collaborate also tend to trust one another. If
this [is] true, then a small group [can] work on a shared effort without needing formal management or process.”

In addition to trust, innovation requires focused and persuasive leadership that is able to enforce accurate measurement but also offer generous rewards in the form of remuneration and/or recognition. In order for partners in a collaborative process to be willing to take risks, they must be passionate about what they do and believe in the leadership and management process - including its tools, rules and discipline - that is going to get them to where they want to be.

Perhaps most important of all, however, is the ability of network leadership to frame a problem in order that members of the network, both highly motivated and less motivated, can set about to solve it. Apparently Einstein once said, “If I had 20 days to solve a problem, I would take 19 days to define it.” And it is certainly widely acknowledged that only when a problem is recognised creatively can it find a creative solution. It is widely noted that a creative and careful view of a problem by regular people is worth much more than detailed processes carried out by organised focus groups. It is with this spirit that partners should work with each other to observe problems in new and illuminating ways.

Collaborative partnerships and networks that have the capacity to innovate are said to comprise:

- A strong and focused leadership that encourages value creation
- A strong and focused leadership that properly frames a problem
- A culture that views innovation as vital to its culture and mission
- The existence of reciprocal trust and flexibility

Ensuring these main components for innovation in humanitarian collaborative networks is made challenging by the fact that stakeholders are often working from distinctly different geographic locations and working cultures. For example, an idea put forth by indigenous cultures may not resonate with decision-makers in Geneva or New York unless there is well-trained programme manager in-country who is able to communicate its value and regional appropriateness to those who can make it happen.

In fact, the experience of HFP thus far demonstrates that “field logic”, i.e. the knowledge harvested from experts in country, calls for greater innovation, but that “systems logic”, or

\[\text{Further Reading}\]

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19 This comment was made in relation to Ward Cunningham’s thinking when creating the first wiki in 1995. See more on the subject in Shirky, pg. 111.
20 Einstein, Albert as found in Berkun, pg. 127.
22 Points taken from an array of books and Internet sources on the subject, see Further Reading at the end of this paper.
dogma from the headquarters of large, well-resourced organisations, can function to block it, or at least that seems to be the perception of those working at the country level.

![UN staff perceptions about innovation at the country level](image)

**Figure 4 (Source: HFP)**

During one HFP mission, for example, UN country staff were critical of the overall system’s lack of ability to support their own efforts to work creatively. At the same time, junior staff of that same UNCT - primarily nationals in this particular instance - with a presumably greater understanding in “field logic” or knowledge coming from the country were even more critical than their senior-level counterparts about the system’s inability to innovate, leading one to believe that resistance to new approaches increases as one moves from the “top” of the humanitarian framework rather than the “bottom”.

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23 Data collected during HFP assessments 2007-2008 [USAID, IASC, UNCTs in Ecuador, Philippines, Central African Republic and Tajikistan].
Ways forward

As HFP has endeavored to make linkages between scientists, academics and “thought leaders” from outside the immediate humanitarian sector over the last two years, it has been struck by the sheer quantity of knowledge opportunities available to the humanitarian and development communities. It is heartening to think that at a time when crisis drivers impacting on human vulnerability are becoming more complex and potentially far more devastating that there exist both great minds and great models to address them.

In the age of Internet 2.0 and emerging Internet 3.0\(^{24}\), we now have the unprecedented opportunity to share information across industries and disciplines at such an unprecedented scale that the entire way in which we think of sharing and collaborating will be transformed.\(^{25}\) As a result, the connections made between previously unlinked experts and the cross-pollination of ideas previously thought to be unrelated for greater innovation make solutions to seemingly intractable humanitarian response and mitigation problems closer than ever.

If we hope to exploit these potentially amazing opportunities, we need to question a number of our assumptions about what the necessary tools and appropriate courses are for getting the job done. However, the more we hold on to processes, ideas and attitudes of the past, the greater difficulty we will have in embracing the possibilities of the future. Afflicted with “nostalgia paralysis” as it is termed by some\(^{26}\), we risk to become an industry that keeps working but never moves forward. Instead, we need to stretch ourselves by exploring the three questions that posed at the start of this paper:

1. How can innovation be prioritised and identified within the sector?
2. How can innovative approaches be developed and tested within one’s own organisation and operating network?
3. How does one create and sustain partnerships that foster innovation?

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\(^{24}\) For more information on the potential capabilities of emerging Internet 3.0, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_3.0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_3.0)

\(^{25}\) Clay Shirky explains in his book “We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race.” pg. 106.

\(^{26}\) CNBC. *The Business of Innovation* [Five Part TV Series], 2008, Part 2: Innovate or Die, see it on-line at [http://innovation.cnbc.com/](http://innovation.cnbc.com/)
Further Reading


IBM. *The IBM Global CEO Study*, 2008. Register to download the report at [https://www931.ibm.com/bin/cp/driver.cgi;jsessionid=0000m5d_5vTSM3yUxhiUQoCXLJQ:11jqlbhpg](https://www931.ibm.com/bin/cp/driver.cgi;jsessionid=0000m5d_5vTSM3yUxhiUQoCXLJQ:11jqlbhpg)


