

Innovation's role in business growth and recovery

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As we move into 2021 and look at maintaining business and growth during a global pandemic with its ongoing lockdown periods, it's an opportune time to think about the role of innovation in your business, along with the many challenges and opportunities over the next year. The development of new products and processes is the lifeblood of many businesses. This includes new ideas, creative and better solutions for both existing and new market needs.

Customer behaviours and preferred methods of interaction have changed significantly during the last year and we can expect they will continue to shift. But the increase in the use of digital services is here to stay. Many people using digital channels for the first time indicate that they will continue to use them when things return to "normal". Indicating companies will need to ensure that their digital channels are on par with, or better, than those of their competition to succeed in this new environment. Many businesses believe the pandemic has and will contribute to the acceleration of their digital transformation.

During the last year we have witnessed change as never before, at a speed that many have relished for a number of years – the change and uptake of digital medical consultations that the NHS has hankered after for 10 years happened almost overnight; the explosion of Zoom for both business and personal communications, along with exponential rise of remote and contactless shopping, digital tracking and logistics management and delivery. Many organizations have shifted to remote-working models almost overnight.

The COVID-19 crisis has provided a glimpse into a future world, one in which digital technologies have become central to many interactions, forcing both organizations and individuals further up the adoption curve almost overnight. A world in which digital channels become the primary (and, in some cases, sole) customer-engagement model, and automated processes become a primary driver of

productivity—and the basis of flexible, transparent, and stable supply chains. A world in which agile ways of working are a prerequisite to meeting seemingly daily changes to customer behaviour. Businesses that can learn and adjust more quickly than competitors whilst offering new products, solutions and services are those that will successfully be able to make these gains “stick” and be likely to be successful during recovery and beyond.

A crisis and down period provides, maybe even forces the opportunity for offline and creative thinking that enables the development of both improved and new solutions. During this Covid crisis period we are all beginning to realise the world will be different when normality returns – in the way we do business, how we buy and sell and the use of technology to trade. Businesses that provide a service that we all want now and in the future but have to date delivered in a more traditional style are scrambling to develop websites that enable them to take orders, plan delivery and receive payments. On-line trading is here to stay, as is the use of digital communications which will impact on business travel and hopefully contribute to increased productivity. At BCRRE/Rail Alliance/Digi-Rail, we have long talked about Digitalisation and the impact and opportunities in the transport sector. Now is the time to take action:

Things you can do now:

1. Don't rush into anything, lots of plans to innovate and change require investment, in terms of time, thinking and money. Treat any opportunity to generate revenue just as you would any other investment case, is this a short term idea or a longer term proposition? Do you accept that innovation led growth is necessary, even critical for your business? Talk through your ideas with people you trust, consider how you could run a small trial.
2. Think Digital. The sudden shift to working from home along with reduced social contact has seen a huge rise in the demand for on- line services. Whilst this won't work for every business, if you don't have a strong and robust digital presence for promoting your company offer and sales now is the time to do so.

3. Get creative with what you've already got, build on what you have. Look at diversification opportunities in sectors of the economy that are doing well during the coronavirus outbreak. Identify your differentiation.
4. Think whether your innovation could help the national cause. There may well be national funding and support available.
5. Recognise that innovation is normal and not just reserved for a crisis, think about how you can create a culture of continuous improvement and innovation across your workforce.
6. Think how at the beginning of the process about how you will protect your innovation.
7. As the COVID-19 crisis forces your customers, employees, and supply chains into digital channels and new ways of working, now is the time to ask yourself: What are the bold digital actions we've hesitated to pursue in the past, even as we've known they would eventually be required? Strange as it may seem, right now, in a moment of crisis, is precisely the time to boldly advance your digital agenda.
8. Consider Data security. Are you experiencing breaches as you move to remote working and data sharing, resolve these before you extend your digital footprint.
9. Involve your people, many will have the skills and will welcome the motivation and new opportunity.
10. Seek advice and help. There are a wide range of organisations offering support to help you review and develop innovation in your business along with developing digitisation plans:
Local Growth Hubs, can help you identify the relevant:
 - a. Universities
 - b. Sector specialist research centres
 - c. National and regional funding opportunities
 - d. Specialist trade organisations, Chambers of Commerce

Talk to us at BCRRE/Digi Rail to see how we can help with your innovation and digitisation ideas. If we can't help we will be able to connect you with other expertise.

Rachel has over twenty years' experience in business support and development, specialising in the automotive and transport

manufacturing supply chain since 1996. Awarded an MBE in the 2014 New Year's Honour's list for services to the automotive industry, and in May 2015 received the ISME Gold Medal Award, along with being recognised by The Manufacturer/Innovate as one of the 2020 Top 30 Women in Manufacturing and a Fellow of the RSA. Her portfolio includes being a Board Member at the Black Country LEP, Supply Chain Lead at the Birmingham Centre for Rail Research and Education, Rail and Advanced Manufacturing Lead at GBSLEP Growth Hub, Elected member at the Automotive Council, Manufacturing Awards and F1 in schools judge, and member of the ICAEW Manufacturing Advisory Group.