What's the big idea?

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Executive summary – Whatever an idea is and wherever it comes from, its value comes from clearly communicating it to other people. Four steps can help an innovator methodically move a big idea from the concept stage to the point of engaging others in its development.

This Executive Technology Report is based on a personal essay by Peter Andrews, Consulting Faculty Member at the IBM Executive Business Institute in Palisades, New York.

It may be odd, aggravating, attractive or frightening. It may make perfect sense or none. It may even come from that mysterious place called intuition. Whatever it is and wherever it comes from, an idea is worthless until it has been developed into something you can communicate to other people. Somewhere between a gleam in your eye and a full-fledged value proposition is the real work of developing and defining an idea.

For some people, this comes automatically. Others wait for a second zap from the muse. But here’s a four-step process designed to build your initial concept to the point where you can engage others, catch their interest and bring them on as collaborators and allies.

1. Avoid the seduction. Ideas and dreams have a lot in common. They both are unexpected, and they both may create excitement bordering on passion for the owner. Both imply more than they say. Unfortunately, as anyone who has suffered through a blow-by-blow account of a loved one’s dream knows, the unexpected elements make it difficult to figure out what is going on and see the same vision. Lacking context and definition, it may be difficult for a listener to understand, much less get passionate about the dream… or a new idea. Dreams and initial ideas are rarely complete. They are starting points, no matter how compelling they may be to us personally. They are sparks of inspiration. Fiction writers know this. They may put their ideas into journals, but the stories they sell are almost always built and reworked with an audience in mind.

2. Determine what kind of an inspiration you have. Here are eight possibilities:
   - Good question – Curiosity often begins with questions. Little kids ask all the right questions. For an innovator, the question itself may have resonance because it takes on a new topic, explores something in a new way or, if answered, would have profound consequences.
   - Rich problem – A well-articulated client problem can often catch your imagination and create a brainstorm of ideas for its solution.
• Analogy – Especially for processes and ways of doing things, working through relevant comparisons often leads to good starting points for investigation.
• Bright light – Sometimes the “aha” experience comes from a new perspective or sudden insight. You see a piece of the puzzle that you haven’t seen before.
• Use – An unexpected application of something that is already out there or a function enabled by something new.
• Pattern – This may be an intuitive recognition of underlying mathematics, but it could also be as simple as “this usually follows that.”
• Oddity – An anomaly. A quirk. One of the best things to hear a scientist say is, “That can’t be true”!
• Natural extension – The future, often the next step, for something that is familiar.

3. Use the list of inspirations to augment and complete your idea. For instance, the Wright brothers were fascinated by the Good Question of how to make heavier than air flight possible. They found a Pattern in nature by observing how the wings of a bird will change shape and came to a deeper understanding of lift. Their explanation, or Natural Extension, of the not-very-useful working models attracted the U.S. military as a sponsor for development.

4. Test the defined idea with colleagues. Here, going to a diverse group pays off in two ways: first, it forces you to work from fewer assumptions as you describe your idea (so it must be clearer) and second, the fresh perspective is likely to enhance your idea and make it fuller at an earlier state.

Listening to a big idea

If you’re typical, you’ll have more opportunities to react to and help develop an idea than to reach out with your own. If your colleague, the idea master, is enthusiastic, but the idea isn’t beyond the dream state, be tolerant. Explore using the techniques above and see if there is a basis for all the excitement. If the idea doesn’t amount to much, you have still taken advantage of a great opportunity to build a relationship by being an interested, involved listener. And you will have trained the idea master to listen to your next great idea.

If the idea gets more definition and starts to turn into something that resonates with you (or if it was this way on the first telling), remind yourself that you are still at the beginning. Don’t move too fast.

Just getting an idea to the point where it can be explained well enough to attract attention doesn’t make it ready to bring to sponsors. To do that requires lots of work toward exploring the idea, getting the right allies and team members together and identifying the right markets and resources, etc. You still need to develop a fully
formed value proposition that takes into account who you are talking to, what benefits they might derive and what the competition might be.

Along the way, colleagues, cultural practices and competitors are likely to create barriers. You can be beaten, if the idea is superseded or stolen, but you can’t be stopped as long as the idea is valid and you are the right innovator for it. So take a moment now, at the beginning, to take a more objective look at the idea and at yourself.

**All good ideas stink, and really foul ideas are wonderful.** Think of the controversies around nuclear fission, cloning and even the Web. Freedom of speech, the theory of evolution and capitalism have all been around for generations, and they still are widely and emotionally debated. So if an idea excites you, understand why it might disturb someone else. And if it upsets you, look for the potential benefits. Know the good and the bad, and you’ll have a better sense of what you have and what you need to do. Ideas with real power are always worth a closer look. The ones that aren’t worth your time are the ones that are so-so.

**You may already be an innovator.** Whether you came up with an idea or you became its first adherent, you have already established your credentials. Maybe you should quit while you’re ahead. Maybe not. Now is the time to find out which, if any, future roles you need to take on. Will you become an advocate? A tester? A funder? Will you research the competition or help organize a team?

An honest assessment of your skills and your ability to work with key stakeholders is essential. Even more essential is understanding your level of commitment. How much time can you devote to this idea? How much of your personal reputation and influence are you willing to invest? What’s your tolerance for active opposition and setbacks? How far along the journey should you go before you step aside?

The starting point for an idea can be fun. And when your idea or a colleague’s idea has been made more complete and has undergone some testing, you will already be well ahead of the multitudes who are out there selling their unformed dreams. If you have the courage to go a step further – to take on tough questions about the power of the idea and your own roles as an innovator – you’ll be prepared to give a good idea a chance of success.
References


About this publication

Executive Technology Report is a monthly publication intended as a heads-up on emerging technologies and business ideas. All the technological initiatives covered in Executive Technology Report have been extensively analyzed using a proprietary IBM methodology. This involves not only rating the technologies based on their functions and maturity, but also doing quantitative analysis of the social, user and business factors that are just as important to its ultimate adoption. From these data, the timing and importance of emerging technologies are determined. Barriers to adoption and hidden value are often revealed, and what is learned is viewed within the context of five technical themes that are driving change:
**KnowlEdge Management:** Capturing a company's collective expertise wherever it resides – databases, on paper, in people's minds – and distributing it to where it can yield big payoffs

**Pervasive Computing:** Combining communications technologies and an array of computing devices (including PDAs, laptops, pagers and servers) to allow users continual access to the data, communications and information services

**Realtime:** "A sense of ultracompressed time and foreshortened horizons, [a result of technology] compressing to zero the time it takes to get and use information, to learn, to make decisions, to initiate action, to deploy resources, to innovate" (Regis McKenna, *Real Time*, Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997.)

**Ease-of-Use:** Using user-centric design to make the experience with IT intuitive, less painful and possibly fun

**Deep Computing:** Using unprecedented processing power, advanced software and sophisticated algorithms to solve problems and derive knowledge from vast amounts of data

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