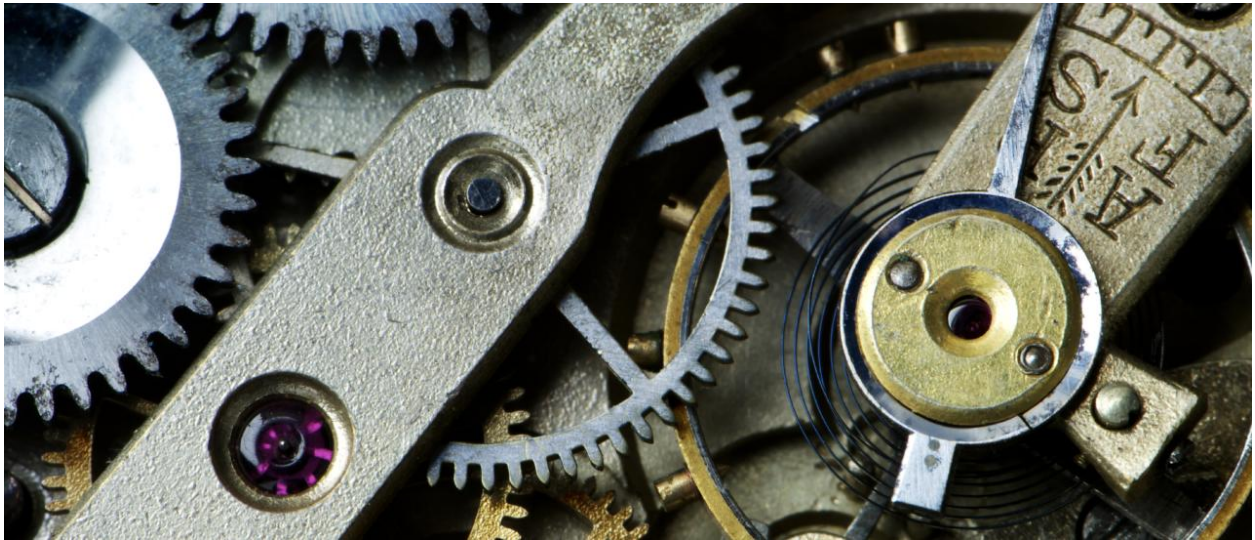

Innovation: Not a Straight Arrow



By Venugopal Gupta , head of Espark Viridian (INSEAD MBA '06J)

Great innovators don't necessarily follow straight paths. Often a winding path can shape their defining inventions.

At a farm in Michigan, lived a little boy. In his pocket, as his constant companions, were little trinkets: nuts, bolts, washers and other small pieces of machinery. He would play with them all day long. Experimenting with them, joining them, taking them apart. His father did not much appreciate all this. Like most fathers, he wanted his son to help in the family business: the farm. Mother was different, she gave in to her child's fancy, perhaps, thinking it was a passing phase that was better indulged than opposed.

So, with support from his mother, the boy set up a small workshop in the farm, in which he kept his tools and other knick-knacks. He would tinker idly in his workshop for hours, to the growing discomfort of his parents.

Then, in the year that the boy turned twelve, he got a watch. It was a big thing then (in the 1870's) and it quickly became the focal point for his tinkering.

The fascination grew. By the time the little boy was 13, he could assemble a watch in his workshop. By 17, he could make a watch for all of 30 cents.

Making something that everyone could afford was important to him. During those times the railroads were the talk of the town. New rail lines were being laid and it was becoming a popular mode of transportation. However, railways ran on a standard railroad time that often differed with the local time. People often faced problems adjusting to the two time zones.

An idea struck this boy. He used all that he learnt during the watch repair days and created a watch that could tell two times: a double dial watch. It soon became a curiosity in the neighbourhood. This little boy was none other than legendary car-maker, Henry Ford.

From watchmaker to carmaker

While his interest in machines never waned, as a teen, Henry Ford was a watchmaker and repairer. Later, he worked on a lumber farm so he could get married and start a family. Finally, he went on to found the Ford Motor Company. He wanted to make cars that could be used for transportation, at a time when most people thought of cars as racing toys.

Could Henry Ford's imagination have made this leap, from sports to transportation, had he not toyed with watches and the railroad time problem?

Henry Ford's example shows that there is not always a straight path to innovation. Creators can follow winding paths, picking up important ideas along the way. Ideas that later shape their defining innovations. A deep childhood passion for machines, a fascination with making a watch that everyone could afford and being troubled with (and solving) the railroad time problem all, no doubt, contributed to the idea of a machine that everyone could use for transportation: the Model T.

'You can't connect the dots looking forward'

We are obsessed with straightness. When watches catch our fancy, we resist because we want to be a carmaker. Yet, as Henry Ford's life teaches us, there is a very real connection between tinkering with watches and making a people's car. What we may deride as 'lack of focus' or 'idle tinkering' could, in fact, be a very productive phase of our life. It could ensure that our initial ideas are shaped by diverse experiences, allowing them to take a life of their own, unfettered by our dogmas and, often myopic, expectations.

In fact, the biggest innovation on this planet, human life, emerged from the flux of the primordial sea, without design. The lesson is simple: take every opportunity to indulge your passions. If you cannot see the linkages between your current passions and your future goals, it is only because, as Steve Jobs very famously puts it, “you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward.”

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