Innovation, Life-Centered Design, and Societal Progress

By Tntra, based on a conversation between
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Introduction

“We have used GDP to determine wrongfully what is, in fact, the state of well-being of a country, it does not give any indication of the well-being of society, it does not measure the health of the environment, it does not measure the psychological well-being of our citizens, it does not measure the vitality of our community, and so on. What I want to say is that GDP is necessary but inadequate, and we need to develop additional indices that would tell a more comprehensive, a more holistic story about how human society is progressing. In fact, we need to know what are the ways in which we are developing the non-materialist and economic side. The human being has two needs, the needs of the body and the needs of the mind, and what we have focused on so far is mostly the body, perhaps only the body. So, it’s a paradigm shift that we need to make,” says the ex-prime minister of Bhutan, Lyonpyo Jigmi y Thinley, to the participants of the second OECD World Forum on “Statistics, Knowledge, and Policy.” While this message was given more than 5 years ago, it finds its relevance today, more so than ever.

The measurements of societal progress are changing, and economists, statisticians, and industry experts no longer argue over the traditional approach. GDP is a crucial factor for gauging economic growth and financial stability. However, it doesn’t determine, in subjective and objective terms, whether the society is progressing on multiple fronts or not.

Variables like well-being, happiness, quality of life, etc., are left behind when understanding societal progress. Innovation is a massive contributor to the growth of all these variables but fails to come to the front stage. This paper talks about the impact of innovation on the upliftment of society. It aims to highlight how efficiency and innovation go hand-in-hand and how to look at innovation in terms of art and science. It also throws light on using the life-centered design approach for innovation to solve modern-day challenges.

Innovation is often considered as a double-edge sword. Historically humans have shown a tendency to use innovation as a force for societal good as well as harming society. This makes some people believe that we were better off as cavemen, without the dangers that innovation might bring. However, without innovation, growth is not possible.

Innovation often comes from instinct rather than a carefully planned decision. However, the creative process still applies. Therefore, the paper also focuses on how innovation requires intellect and intuition to become a reality.

Life-centered Design Approach

We have come to understand that it's not technical or business innovation that drives the success of a society. Innovation works well as a practical objective and drives the growth of different projects that lead to societal progress. And in that process, instead of adopting a human-centric approach, it aligns well to think of all life for innovation to be successful as a practical objective. Such an approach is followed by the Massive Change Network, which it attributes to as "life-centered design." They have 24 principles of life-centered design, which is called the MC24 or the 24 principles of massive change.

Today, the world is witnessing transformations on a massive scale. There are pressing issues of size and complexity that we have never faced before. Evidence of reaching a population of 8 or even 10 billion people by the mid-century suggests that there will be challenges, unlike anything that we have to ever deal with. Life-centered design is one of the most significant approaches to facing these challenges. It's an urgent need that determines how far human societies and all life forms will progress.

Innovation: Efficiency vs. Impact

Most arguments suggest that innovation is not efficient. It is exponential in its productional value. One cannot achieve linear production of efficiency when working with innovation. There's always a multiplicative impact associated with innovation. In a linear or sequential sense, efficiency doesn't play a significant role in innovation. There are no incremental improvements but more exponential ones - which leads to impact. In broader terms, innovation measurement is done in terms of the impact it leaves rather than the efficiency achieved.

It is challenging to integrate innovative projects with efficiency. There's a bigger view that innovators adopt while working on any project. Completing a project on time is not equivalent to the success of any innovation. The real measurement is the lives that it impacts. Therefore, gauging innovation in terms of efficiency gives an unclear idea as to whether the new product / design / innovation works for the betterment of society or not.

A question arises again: How do innovators achieve that impact, given the limited amount of time and resources, within an efficient framework? One principle of MC24 suggests designing the time of our lives. Designing the things that innovators work on helps to organize time. Ben Franklin said, “Time is Money,” but it is believed that time is more valuable than money. Once you lose money, you can get it back. Lost time doesn’t come back, and that’s where the alignment of innovation and efficiency comes in. Therefore, the important thing is to think of time as a design product - that is, innovators can actually design their time to achieve goals within an efficient framework.

Dividing innovation into modular systems is one way to look at it. While innovation requires talent, which cannot be taught, processes can be easily learned. Modularity can help optimize talent, time, and other resources needed to produce innovation. So to achieve efficiency, a modular process can be designed that we can easily apply within our innovation framework.

Is Innovation Art or Science?

The synthesis of art and science is considered an important element in innovation. An MIT-published book called “The Nexus” discusses this intersection of art, technology, and science. If you go back to the renaissance, all three sustained together. A renaissance person had mastery of all the three domains and could easily bring them together to create extraordinary outcomes. The beginning of the scientific method can be traced back to the synthesis method in the work of Galileo. He was both an artist and scientist, which suggests that he was able to see things that other scientists couldn’t.

The Nexus or the synthesis also focuses on identifying the people who work in that way. There are artists, scientists, and technologists who are living at the Nexus today. Designers are one example of such people who critically follow this synthesis. But it only works if it touches people and connects emotionally to the heart. Apple, Pixar, George Lucas - all of them are examples of Nexus. They created new technologies, new businesses, and new industries. They aligned themselves with the intersection of art & science in innovation and built entirely new things that didn’t exist before.

That is where life-centered design works well. When the entire design focuses on achieving innovative pursuits through means of art, science, and technology and reaches an impactful outcome, change is bound to happen.

Structural Components in Innovation

One way to achieve sustainable innovation is to bring different blocks and components into the process. Examples like that of Tntra, which works on structural components like engineering, incubation, ventures, and academy, showcase how innovation needs to be considered from all aspects. One major component of this process is PEOPLE. It focuses on developing the character / mindset of people more than their capabilities that lead to innovative endeavors. While throwing stuff on the wall and seeing what sticks is an approach that does work, there are countless examples of processes and structured components that make up the entire spectrum of innovation.

Different innovation methodologies exist today that provide a basic structure for approaching the process. When you have a specific outcome in mind from innovation, there's the decision that you will not be subjected to / are willing to eliminate random outcomes. By having a vision, the end product becomes easier to achieve. Unexpected outcomes become part of the method, throwing stuff on the wall is a step in innovation methodology. Massive Change Network, for example, utilizes the OFBD methodology for innovation, which stands for Opportunity, Formulate, Build, and Debrief.

Opportunity is to design the outcome. It focuses on the impact the innovation aims to achieve. Formulate is about the plan and how the innovation will take place. Build is the execution of the process and see what actually happens. And finally, Debrief is the learning phase. This is an entire cycle that happens over and over. In terms of product development, you need to go through this cycle as many times as possible before going to the market. Every innovative process needs to have such basic functions and components. One significant aspect is to develop an "It's okay to fail" culture while producing innovation. While it is radically against every business, this is what designers, innovators, and entrepreneurs do. It suggests that if you throw 100 things on the wall, you have to be okay with 99 not sticking.

Innovation and Societal Progress

The current challenges of health, politics & the economy are often discussed without practical solutions. Suggestions like controlling the world population to preserve resources & build a better future have often been considered. However, innovation seems a likely way to resolve such challenges in the long term. People must focus on rethinking how innovation takes place.

It calls for life-centered design and not just human-centered design and innovation. There's only one thing on the planet, and that is life. Therefore, it suggests looking at innovation in a way that benefits all of life rather than just humans. So we don't talk about human societies but life societies.

Innovation needs to be conceded as an ecological practice. There needs to be an ecosystem-based design. Instead of designing objects in innovation, the focus should be on designing impact from innovation. That's how societal progress becomes an outcome of the process. When life-centric design happens, resources and ecology is looked upon as internal to human life and not as externalities. So, in essence, resource consumption becomes efficient, and innovation focuses more on the impact rather than the end product. So along with changing how we look upon innovation, we also need to redefine what societal progress means. Adding more technologies and objects may not triumph eliminating efficiencies and existing challenges that hinder societal growth.

Conclusion

There are multiple problems that are coming all at once. Issues of climate change, food & security, world politics, crisis of justice - these things are all stacking together and creating a new set of problems at a higher order of complexity. Life-centered design is the approach to innovation that calls for a higher order of ecosystem methodology to solve these challenges. We need to design solutions that cover the holistic aspects and bring ecosystem sensibility. In the coming decade or two, practically everything we do will be changed. Therefore, innovation will be more about engaging people with the relevance of the modern-day that is inevitable. While innovation isn't linear and certain, some components minimize risk and offer better dependability on new products and ideas to solve the challenges of our times.

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