

impact executives

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“...there is no real challenge to
the power of the US...”

Idea Man: A Memoir by the co-founder of Microsoft by Paul Allen

Renowned for his billionaire status and pursuit of adventure, Paul Allen's natural curiosity has ensured that he has left his mark in every area from science and sport to music, philanthropy and aviation. He is perhaps best known for his definitive adventures in business and technology as the co-founder of Microsoft. Time magazine described him as one of the “100 most influential people in the world” and his memoir offers an extraordinary insight into the life of a man who helped to pioneer the digital world we live in today.

The book is filled with plenty of interesting anecdotes and offers a glimpse into the highs and lows that have helped to shape Allen over the years. He has had a fairly unconventional career, so with the exception of parts of the early chapters where it can get a bit too technical, his memoir is a fascinating account of a man who set about translating his ideas into reality. The book details everything from his early friendship with Bill Gates, co-founding and ultimately leaving one of the largest software companies in the World and twice suffering a life threatening illness - to the first privately funded space craft, mapping the human brain and jamming with Mick Jagger. However most interesting reading is his experiences in the commercial world and the valuable insight he offers into successful innovation.

With any innovation Allen always starts by asking a few basic questions:

- Where is the leading edge of discovery heading?
- What should exist but does not yet?
- How can I create something to help meet the need?
- Who might be enlisted to join the crusade?

Innovation is a contentious issue for many organisations given the current economic climate. According to PWC's 2011 Annual CEO global survey, innovation is definitely back on the agenda. CEOs are increasingly seeing innovation as one of their best opportunities for growth but in this risk-averse climate, turning ideas into reality is a challenge. One of the lessons that is clear from Allen's experience is that Innovation needs to strike the right balance between pushing an idea to the edge of what's possible, understanding it's commercial viability and having sufficient direction.

In 1992 he set up Interval, this was a 'for profit' organisation described as a cross between an industrial research lab and a venture capital fund. Its mandate was to incubate next generation applications with a view to either turning them into licensed products or spin off companies. Allen describes how “On paper, Interval had it all: talent, resources, and the time to pursue the frontiers of technology.”

He saw a vision of future computing and Interval was the vehicle to pursue that vision. However, lack of focus, too much emphasis on research and not enough on development, resulted in the business shutting down 8 years and \$300 million later.

Collaboration is also something Allen feels has contributed significantly towards his success over the years.

“Inspiration may begin with an individual, but I learned long ago that it does not reach its full fruition without collaborative development.”

Allen's views on Microsoft today and the future of the company also make for interesting reading. How can an organisation like Microsoft, once at the forefront of technology and change, fall so far behind? He highlights scale, culture and leadership as key factors in the organisation's inability to continue to innovate organically and stay ahead of their competitors.

“Too many semi competent managers, in house politics among the fiefdoms and silos of product lines, complacency and cultural drag” are cited by Allen as factors which may continue to hinder their ability to catch up with the market leaders. Can Microsoft quicken its pace to compete in the mobile platform? Allen feels they have no choice.

There will undoubtedly be many organisations that face similar issues. In Harvey Nash's 2011 CIO survey, 74% of the global CIOs surveyed believe that without innovation, their company will lose market share and this view is shared whole heartedly by Allen who believes that for the most part, the best opportunities lie where competitors have yet to establish themselves, not where they are already entrenched. This leads to a constant uphill battle. In this new world, companies can't afford to adopt the approach of minimal risk for maximum return. Allen's message is clear, in an increasingly fast paced and competitive market, with everyone jostling for a place in pole position, ideas alone are not enough. Organisations need to focus on ambidextrous innovation; have compelling products linking to customer needs; be agile enough to mobilise and have the right organisation and partners in place to make innovation work. If not, even the biggest giants may fall

“The virtual world he imagined is now as real as concrete.....the very fabric of a twenty first century that he and a tiny club of others literally invented. Shy, humble, brilliant....Paul Allen's intellect and generosity of spirit are there on every page.” BONO

“This son of Oklahoma, by way of Seattle, electrocuted a classmate, soldered his skin, gassed a family pet, purposely crashed systems, dove in dumpsters for coffee-stained print outs, and went on to create the engine that changed the world.” Dan Akroyd

“Paul is a True adventurer in every sense of the word. His ideas have helped shape the world we live in. Witnessing the way his mind works is like watching a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo: you have no idea how he does it but it blows your mind.” Dave Stewart.

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