

Alex Pratt is a serial innovator. Currently, he sits on SEEDA's Board, but previous roles have included leading the DTI International Innovation team and acting as catalyst for key innovations such as the national brokerage model for business support and re-branding Britain. In 2006, Alex was awarded an OBE for Services to Business and Education.

INNOVATE & FLY

To some, innovation is the application of new technologies in resolving business and life challenges, while to others it is an attitude and culture that pervades the wider team and makes continuous improvement across the face of the entire organisation possible. One thing is for certain, it revolves around change, and we all know we are soaked in this.

One industry continuously buffeted by the storms of change and from which we can all learn lessons is the airline sector, grappling as it does with everything from the benefits of its position at the heart of rebounding global trade and tourism patterns to its evolving pariah status in some quarters as the harbinger of global environmental doom.

This is an industry operating in a vice-like regulatory, social, and political grip, yet time and again it brings forward innovative solutions to competitive challenges.

Perhaps the boldest move in the last 20 years has been the emergence of the low cost airlines that opened up easy access to local economies in previously inaccessible parts of the globe from Bergerac to Bratislava. The major innovation was not as easy as painting everything orange and dressing the cabin staff in jeans, it was the fundamental reversal of the pricing model for air travel, making the early seats seriously cheap and the remaining fixed capacity increasingly more expensive as availability shrinks. Perhaps at some point the traditional pricing models in the hotel, print, and freight transport industries, all of which are characterised by similar lumpy expensive capacity issues, will be turned fully on their heads? Just an idea.

The trick with all innovation however is making a success of the idea. It's not as difficult as many think to generate and select between winning ideas, but to

successfully exploit them in a highly competitive business space is seriously difficult. This is the key lesson to take on board. You only need to look at the expensive BA tailfin re-branding disaster; a sound idea designed to help reposition BA as a colourful forward thinking global airline, welcoming to all cultures, but which failed in the implementation phase because of the failure to prepare for the inevitable competitive reaction from Virgin who played the Union Jack card, and from Margaret Thatcher who publicly hand bagged the idea. And if that isn't enough to convince you that it's all in the implementation, try booking a seat on Maxjet or Silverjet.

Exploitation is everything in the Innovation Jungle.

When Ghandi decided to take on the might of the British Empire in one of the boldest commitments to achieving an outcome through innovation, by walking peacefully to the sea, he did so from a 'do or die' perspective. Total commitment. Or in the words of X-Factor judging, "150 percent". This is usually the missing factor in failed exploitation attempts. Too many values statements, not nearly enough graft.

This may be difficult, but then exploiting a good idea so often is so. Take our attempts to address global warming. We have an aging housing stock in this country and we are demolishing and building fewer homes. My own house is one of the younger properties in my village at approx 250 years of age, so when it was built Louis the 14th and Napoleon were still doing their thing and it had to wait over a hundred years before the invention of the light bulb. So, where is the mobilisation of a massive action plan to refit our housing stock with the latest technologies? We need more than summits and chat.

The idea was the easy bit. Now comes the challenge."

"Innovation is one of those magic business elixirs that everybody talks about as essential to success in a globalising competitive and rapidly changing world, but few seem to fully understand or to have mastered with any degree of confidence."



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