

[TOPIC]

# Innovation: In dire straits or dead?

[ADVICE]

With the passing of Steve Jobs last week, I must admit I was choked up with emotion reflecting on this great innovator. In considering Apple Computer and watching the testimonials over the weekend, I thought again about what makes Silicon Valley innovation special. We also have great companies headquartered in Minnesota, but do we have an environment for risk taking and accepting disruptive ideas? Does our heritage, homogenous culture, or conservative approach to life actually prevent us from having a culture of innovation here in Minnesota?

The Silicon Valley innovators seem to generate truly new ideas. I think that calling Silicon Valley the headwaters of IT is selling them short and limiting their creativity. Consider the following three companies: PayPal, LinkedIn and NetApp. All three companies utilize technology to deliver their value, but I would argue that all were born out of distinctly different visions. PayPal recognized the opportunity to utilize the original PalmPilot to make electronic payment transfers. LinkedIn understood the opportunity combine the relationship handshake with basic leverage. Efficiently take the six degrees of separation concept and leverage it around our 'flat world'. Only NetApp takes a more traditional view of solving technology problems directly. NetApp was founded with the basic idea that they wanted to simplify storage the way Cisco simplified networking. In reading about the founders of these three companies, they seem to share some common characteristics. All are infamously restless, defiant to business 'norms' and passionate about driving through seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Recently I read that Max Levchin, co-founder of PayPal noted that he believes innovation in the U.S. is somewhere between dire straits and dead. Wow, that is quite the indictment! But I wonder if Max may be accurate in his assessment.

For a little inspiration, I offer the opening line from the novel David Copperfield by Charles Dickens. "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." Take a risk; offer a disruptive idea to the world.



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