CONTINUOUS INNOVATION: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

A relatively simple concept, no matter your organization's size or industry, in order to achieve ongoing success, continuous innovation is needed. However, unfortunately, due to its inherently "no brainer" nature and lack of information due to it being a newer practice, many organizations actually fail to successfully understand, manage, or measure ROI.

Defined by Go Big Dictionary as "modest, gradational, ongoing upgrades or enhancements of existing technologies or products; continuous innovation generally does not fundamentally change the dynamics of an industry, nor does it typically require end-users to change behavior." Essentially, continuous innovation is what constantly pushes an organization forward -- one project, one change, one adaptation, or one idea at a time.

As technology as well as customer demand expands or changes, so should the operations of any organization. Any new implementation that keeps on occurring is continuous innovation. For example, if an organization that used to store its data in paper file format, then moved to digital CRM storage, and now keeps everything on the cloud for faster customer file retrieval, that is continuous innovation. And, it can be applied to almost anything.

For that reason, continuous innovation has become a hot topic in every industry as organizations scramble to manage it with ease and comfort. In the following article, we will take a deeper look into why companies need this practice and how to manage the development of it, along with some industry examples.

(This article is part of our Innovation in The Enterprise series. Use the right-hand menu to navigate.)

Why continuous innovation is so important

No matter who you are or what company you run, you will always have competitors, demand, and changing times knocking. As stated in an article from Entrepreneur, "Having a good product at a fair price, and with great customer service, is no longer enough to succeed -- it's merely the cost of entry. And in today's hyper-competitive environment, entrepreneurs must be innovative." Truth is, survival in a turbulent competitive environment depends on constant adaptation and continuous improvement. From product turn out time to shorter lead times, delivery with quality and assurance requires the best innovations to make tasks run smoother while making your company stand out.

Also, as we live in a fast-paced world that is in constant flux, adapting to innovations is what will make an organization more flexible. Being flexible will ultimately lead to greater chances of overcoming competition and survival. If innovations are not continuously updated, they run the risk of no longer being relevant.

Therefore, in order to survive and stay relevant, a company must focus on continuous innovation. Just take Kodak for example. The choice of this technology company to not move to digital photography led to its bankruptcy in 2012. They placed too much faith in old innovations that were no longer relevant.

Maximizing continuous innovation examples

As explained by LearnStack, "Companies that learn fast, outlearn their competition and get to build what customers really want. By doing this continuously, they stay relevant to their customers and see their business models thrive and grow."

Telephone industry example

From the conception of the telephone, this industry began with gently continual innovation. For example, it went from rotary phones to touchpads and things like expanding long-distance plans or moving away from switchboard operators. Then, in the 1990s, innovation changed with a bang. Cellular phones were introduced, then smartphones, and now touch screens. With each jump in technology, companies scrambled to stay relevant and the ones like Apple
, who continuously innovated, lead the pack.

Computing industry example

An industry that has been innovating for hundreds if not thousands of years, computing went from the use of an abacus to quantum with continuous adaptations. "Software also follows a similar path from the creation of Analog Hardwired circuit right up to the numerous SDK/IDE/Frameworks (Software Development Kits / Integrated Development Environment) that are used to create software for any Machine. Pure ongoing innovation." Again, with each step forward, the companies that learned quickly survived. Just take a look at cloud leaders Microsoft, Google, and AWS. None of these organizations started out with a focus on cloud sharing.

Amazon

Speaking of AWS and Amazon, we can't write a continuous innovation article without mentioning this powerhouse organization. "Over its nearly 22 years, Amazon has moved into one sector after another

and gentrified it, even if that meant tearing down its own existing structures." The founder's continuous innovation mentality propelled the company to become a leader in not just the home delivery industry but the cloud, speaker, tv devices, streaming, and more. Adapting to what it's customers want and need makes Amazon highly valuable and a brand that is easy for customers to remain loyal. Take the company's success during the recent Covid-19 crisis. Their continuous innovation provided a flexible structure that allowed them to not just succeed but flourish.

Challenges of continuous innovation

While the focus of any business is to stay relevant and keep customers coming back while streamlining processes, the actual steps to constant implementation of innovation can often become lost in the shuffle.

LearnStack says it best, "Even though product development teams have moved ahead to an iterative or agile model, business planning is still stuck in old-world tools. A lot of companies still practice what we call: 'Waterfall disguised as Agile', which simply doesn't work for Continuous Innovation." With old methodologies, the process of pitching, testing, and managing innovation projects is slow. It loses momentum fast and is really hard to track with a continual mindset. And, if innovations are not tracked, they will not be at the forefront of any organization's task list. It is this constant and seamless implementation that challenges organizations of all kinds. On top of that, some organizations aren't even addressing continuous innovation because of the misconception that they are too small. It is time that this practice gets paid more attention on all levels.

Frameworks and Mindsets

Recently, as countless companies have identified the importance of continuous innovations, numerous people have developed frameworks or mindsets in hopes to make this process easier.

Used to streamline innovations, one of the most popular frameworks is known as COIN. Developed by Blinklane, the company describes it as "an open and transparent process to continuously develop, scale and embed innovations in any organization." And, it was developed to overcome the challenges organizations face in monitoring and tracking innovation processes. The key elements of the framework include Ideation, Validation, Experimentation, Scaling Up, and Embedding along with identification of who is running the innovation and at what level it is happening.

Another concept is LearnStack's mindset to constantly think like a scientist. "Scientists use models to better understand the problems they are tackling and extrapolate possible solutions from there. They use these models to make predictions which they then validate or invalidate using experiments. If the model is invalidated, they adjust the model." Scientists are constantly monitoring, examining, and improving the problem in order to make them better. If a business were to adopt this mindset, it would have continuous innovation within a scientific formula.

The methodology you adopt for your organization will vary greatly from the company next to you. However, one thing is for sure, continuous innovation is a vital concept that needs to be implemented now in order to greatly impact success in the future.