

## Ideas → creativity → innovation

Ideas are the force behind creativity – they usually begin with a concept. Innovation occurs when an idea is developed and the concept becomes a reality – i.e. it is brought to ‘*fruition*’ (I am using the term ‘*fruition*’ because it literally means “enjoyment”).

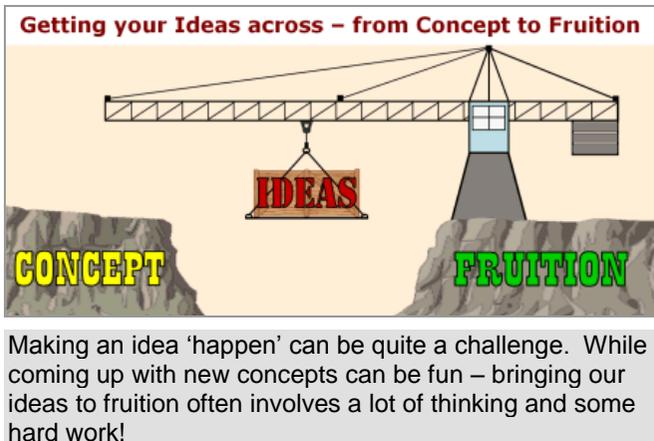
Many years ago a colleague told me “the problem with ideas is that everybody has them, however few ideas ever really come to anything” [Ken Dentice – *this is for you!*] This same sentiment is reflected in the 2002 Accenture advertising message “it’s not how many ideas you have, it’s how many you make happen”. The fact is that coming up with fresh ideas (i.e. concepts) is the fun part, while executing the ideas (bringing them to *fruition*) is usually the hard part.

There is an ancient Greek proverb “*necessity is the mother on invention*”. It does seem that when we are faced with a problem, small or large, our creativity kicks in and ideas begin to flow. We all have ideas – and inspiration can strike at any time of the day or night. I don’t know how many times that I have been wrestling with some issue, gone to sleep, and woken up with an idea of what to do.

## About needs and opportunities

But ideas are not just about solving problems – which invariably involves meeting a ‘*need*’. Ideas can also be about ‘*opportunities*’ – which may be to fill a gap with something new, or to bring an improvement to something that already exists. Although *needs* and *opportunities* are often treated as being the same, there is a subtle, but important, distinction:

- **need**: a situation where something is required because it is very important or essential.
- **opportunity**: a set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something.



Making an idea ‘happen’ can be quite a challenge. While coming up with new concepts can be fun – bringing our ideas to fruition often involves a lot of thinking and some hard work!

In essence, the difference is about how important the requirement is – e.g. while I was visiting Rome earlier this year, street hawkers around the Forum were trying to sell (amongst other things) umbrellas. The morning weather was pleasantly warm, with some sun and patches of cloud. Tourists (like me) were not buying many umbrellas as there was no rain and no real need for shade from the sun. As the afternoon began, the clouds became darker. Soon, with claps of thunder, the storm was upon us, with heavy rain setting in. Suddenly, tourists were wanting to buy umbrellas – which were now at much inflated prices.

## Commercial potential

Some ideas that are initially about meeting personal needs can have commercial potential. Here is an example of a bright idea from my own life:

When my first child was about a year old, my husband used an old metal backpack frame to create a harness for a padded seat which we would use to carry him while we were bush walking. My child sat facing forward, and could safely go to sleep while being carried. We used the frame harness again for my second child, carrying her when we were bush

walking and even while fishing on streams and rivers.

Years (many) later, I saw a similar concept marketed by an outdoor equipment manufacturer – of course it was more professionally constructed, but the concept was exactly the same. These days I sometimes ‘rib’ my husband that he missed the chance to commercialise his concept way back then. This is an example of an idea that was not fully exploited, even though his original concept produced a workable result.

Obviously, someone else saw the opportunity, and went through the necessary development process, i.e. sets of drawings, intellectual property registration, prototypes, costing models, safety certification, testing, marketing and distribution plans, production contracts, and so on. Whether it was an individual like my husband, or whether it was a commercial product developer, today a range of quite sophisticated ‘*child carrier backpacks*’ are available from a number of manufacturers.

## Five-step process

Not all bright ideas need to go through an extensive and rigorous process before they come to fruition. Here is a basic five-step process that can be used to develop and deliver most ideas:

1. **Describe the idea in writing** – starting with a clear statement of the need (i.e. the problem it is solving) or opportunity (i.e. the gap it might fill). Our first ‘cut’ does not have to be in great detail – that will come later. Depending on the nature of the idea, at this stage we may want to investigate similar ideas, e.g. competitors, and also patents.
2. **Define our target audience** – there may even be multiple audiences to consider, i.e. whoever we will ‘pitch’ our idea to (e.g. an investor or a boss/manager) and whoever is our intended target audience (e.g. users or consumers). For

the former, take account of factors such as their personality style, their aspirations and their likely agenda; for the latter, consider their likely needs and aspirations.

3. **Review and refine our description** – in essence, specify, clarify, and simplify. Now is the time to get into specifics, but keep it as clear and simple as possible. Look at the idea from different angles – e.g. investor, employer or retailer, user or consumer. How will it create value for each or any of these – what are the expected benefits? Decide on our development approach – from Agile to Waterfall. We may also need to register our own patent and/or trademark.
4. **Develop a resource plan** – begin with a schedule of what is needed to support the idea in terms of capital investment, materials, equipment and technology, labour and time, etc. This will provide a basis for a costing model and also an implementation plan. Our resource requirements will be dependent upon our approach to development.
5. **Build, test, refine, re-test, deliver** – ‘time to market’ versus product perfection. For many ideas, a less-than-perfect initial solution may be preferable to spending time getting every last detail correct – depending on our audience and our competitors. As a guide, the more something is likely to be ‘mission-critical’, the more it must be fault-free.

While each of the five steps above is important, I would place emphasis on Step 1. Although this doesn’t need to be in great detail, it becomes a ‘mind clearing’ exercise, and allows us to focus. Once this is done, we can begin to work through the various details, without having to continually recall from memory the underlying idea.

### Why ideas fail

While there can be many reasons why a particular idea fails to gain traction, four of the most common are:

- The idea hasn’t been properly ‘thought-through’ – i.e. it is ‘half-baked’ and not really ready to be unveiled. Step 3 above (Review and refine our description) is where and when we should be making sure that our idea is feasible and there are no ‘gaps’ in our concepts. There also may be situations where our concept requires enhancement or maturing of a particular technology (i.e. it is too early to work effectively).
- Not enough consideration of how to ‘sell’ the idea – i.e. our pitch does not connect with our audience. Unless our idea is a personal matter, chances are there is someone whose support we need for the idea to ‘fly’, e.g. an investor, a boss/manager, a consumer. ‘Selling’ is about meeting that person’s needs, or presenting them with an opportunity that they cannot let pass. This means we must understand their needs, their personality, and their aspirations so we can make our pitch relevant.
- Too much time spent on analysis and design – meaning the idea is ‘late to market’, or it never gets ‘off the ground’. The challenge is to find the right balance between ‘time to market’ and product perfection. An Agile approach involves incremental progress based on small iterations, which are tested, evaluated, and refined until they are ready for delivery – in a Waterfall approach, development flows sequentially step-by-step from start to end.
- Someone else does a better job promoting a similar idea – and the longer we spend working on our idea, the greater the possibility this may happen. Clearly the biggest risk of this happening is in the early stages of developing our idea. If our

idea involves intellectual property rights, once we have secured those, we have some protection.

### The story of a VERY BIG idea

Earlier this year I visited a building that has been under construction since 1882, and is not scheduled for completion until 2026. **Basilica de la Sagrada Familia** (Church of the Holy Family) in Barcelona received over 3 million visitors in 2014 – and on the day that I was there the crowds were incredible. What draws many people to La Sagrada Familia is its radically unique architecture – it is not like any other church building anywhere in the world. Its architect, *Antoni Gaudi*, who died in 1926, used a sophisticated design technique based on nature.

*Gaudi* himself apparently never expected to see the work finished, saying “There is no reason to regret that I cannot finish the church, I will grow old, but others will come after me”. *Gaudi* left behind plans, drawings, and plaster models, some of which were destroyed during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Since his death, his work has continued by several generations of dedicated and determined architects, engineers, builders, etc.

Over the years La Sagrada Familia has attracted much criticism because of its unconventional appearance. Apparently *Gaudi* abandoned the intended neo-gothic basilica plans when he replaced the original architect shortly after construction began. Given that Basilica de la Sagrada Familia is a part of the Roman Catholic Church, I find it quite astounding that this incredibly ambitious and unconventional design concept was accepted over 140 years ago. *Gaudi*’s ‘pitch’ must have been something special!

### Coming next

Positive thinking in times of stress – some secrets...

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