

JEFF DEGRAFF

THE
GREATEST INNOVATIONS
ARE THE ONES YOU
DON`T SEE

THE JEFF DEGRAFF INNOVATION LIBRARY



Cool, shiny, sleek: these are the qualities we associate with top-shelf innovations. That's because we're constantly confronted with magazine and Internet lists of the most innovative companies that are essentially just beauty contests. At the top of all these shimmering lists are blustery bands and glitzy gadgets and chic designers.

But take a closer look and you'll see that these sparkly objects aren't really the best innovations. If you used these lists as an investment tool, you wouldn't actually beat a composite growth index like the Russell 3000—you would lose your purse, your swagger, and your assumptions about what makes an innovation valuable.



Innovation can, of course, have a big payout, just not in the way that these lists want you to believe. The most valuable innovations don't have exciting stories and they're not cool, shiny, or sleek. They're plain and understated, they blend in with their surroundings—they're the inventions that don't catch our eye.

THEY'RE HIDDEN
IN PLAIN SIGHT.

True innovation happens behind-the-scenes. Sure, new technologies and products and services that we perceive as breakthrough advancements look exciting, but the meaningful innovation is in the larger, more complicated processes that make those things possible.

There's no new miracle drug without discoveries in chemistry, manufacturing, and control processes. There's no new animated feature film without a revolution in software-coding practices. There's no new electric car without developments in material sciences.

Consider all the game-changing actions that have facilitated life-saving improvements to everyday existence: desalinating water to quench drought-stricken regions, debottlenecking highways and airport traffic to improve flow and to reduce accidents, redeveloping the electrical grid to radically improve energy efficiency. It's easy to forget that the Internet and human genomics—both revolutionary platforms—are, in reality, loose federations of technology, software, and stitches.



THE MOST VALUABLE INNOVATIONS
SOLVE
REAL PROBLEMS
& RESPOND TO PRESSING ISSUES.



So the smartest innovators are the ones who look not at lists in magazines but who look at the processes and products that everyone else overlooks. Here are three ways to find and make use of these hidden gems.

#1

FOLLOW THE RIVER UPSTREAM.

Innovators can learn a lot from wilderness guides. Adventurers know to follow the river upstream to the headwaters whenever they've lost their way. This is a wonderful analogy for growth and change: take an innovative device, service, or solution, and trace it all the way to its roots—to the basic, foundational parts that make up its whole. Determine which elements make the product innovative, that make this object stand out. Is it lighter? Smaller? Easier to use? By identifying the start of a previous innovation, you just might find the start of your own, newer, and better innovation.





In the world of innovation, suppliers, distributors, and service providers are the locals who can give you insider expertise that you won't get anywhere else. Bring these locals into your project as early as possible, preferably before the design and development stages. Ask them how they'd improve your product or service. Encourage them to integrate their capabilities into your innovation goals. Be kind and generous to these suppliers, distributors, and service providers. If they have reason to believe that you'll take advantage of them, they'll inevitably be reluctant to share their local knowledge. Give them the freedom to work their magic.

#2
TALK TO THE
LOCALS.



Once you find these hidden innovators, go on an expedition together to co-create your future project. Search for the low-hanging fruit that others before you missed because they didn't have the help of locals. Gather the nuts near your camp, the berries that turn out to be not only edible but also full of nutrients. Without the knowledge and experience of locals, you won't know what you can actually use and how to use it. Go fishing and put out your lines in new markets. Make it worthwhile for the suppliers, distributors, and service providers helping you by bringing additional value to their innovation. The more lines you put out, the more likely you'll pull in a big catch.

#3

FORAGE & FISH.



Curiously, the only time we see these invisible innovations and innovators is when they fail. Think about blackouts and food recalls and natural disasters. It is at these moments of crisis when we realize how valuable these technologies are. So instead of waiting for them to fail, embrace the gifts of these hidden wonders by discovering them now.



WHERE
WILL YOU LOOK
FOR THE GHOSTS
OF INNOVATION'S FUTURE?

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