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# the Drainwave ISSUE

In this, our fifth Big Ideas special, *AFR BOSS* brainstorms the curious, inspiring and uncertain world of tomorrow as our modern prophets take the pulse of business and society

LONG BEFORE Sir Isaac Newton had an apple fall on his head, there had been "much labour of thought and of calculation", writes Peter Ackroyd in a new biography, *Newton: Ackroyd's Brief Lives*. It was Newton's applied genius, not his legendary epiphany, that established the universality of gravity and revolutionised the world of natural philosophy. While the apple anecdote makes generating new ideas seem human and random, the reality is that flexing the mind's muscle takes more than a flash of inspiration.

Newton was an eccentric, a workaholic and an insomniac. He ate meals standing up, slept in his clothes and rarely laughed. And he didn't shy away from experimenting on himself, as did Marie Curie with radium. Contrast this with the butchers paper, coloured pens and clock watchers at the 2020 summit earlier this year. It was a contrived display of invention for invention's sake and the result: not much really new at all.

Newton is a case study of what true innovation is for today's idea-crazed world. He asked more questions of the universe than he answered, and in so doing unearthed an abundance of virgin mental terrain still being explored today.

It is this cerebral "white space", as Roger Dennis calls it – that is the last creative bastion for thinkers. Dennis, an associate at Innovaro, one of Europe's leading strategic innovation consultancies, says generating strong intellectual property takes enterprise and savvy: "Bringing in an idea that could potentially derail your existing business can be confronting. You have to be willing to explore the unknown and then make the first move to catch competitors off-guard."

Chip and Dan Heath advise in their 2007 book *Made to Stick: Why some ideas survive and others die* that a level of ignorance is necessary to be truly innovative. They also stress the importance of understanding and connecting with the idea's target audience. So why do some people seem to have an endless supply of ideas while others struggle to come up with anything at all? One explanation is that they identify relevant gaps in research and the marketplace. The other explanation is passion. Newton had passion. He could blur the borders of society, embrace non-convention and gaze into a less-than-obvious future. It is this sort of cleverness that wins big in business and can withstand the test of time.



# The new networking

"Trust me" is the big idea of 2008. **Mike Hanley** reports on the thinking, big and small, that influences the way we work, live and play, while **Brad Hatch** plots an A-Z of fresh ideas

TWO DOGS are sitting in front of a computer screen. One turns to the other and says: "On the internet no one knows you're a dog." This famous *New Yorker* cartoon by Peter Steiner was published 15 years ago and was more prescient than the cartoonist realised. Steiner could not have known how much the issues of identity and trust – within our organisations, our social groups, online, in public and in private – would come to dominate much contemporary global thinking.

## It's all about the networks

For the past few years, serious strategy theorists have been wrangling with the idea of networks. The internet is just one of the many sets of connections we are all part of each day. Theorists are focusing on how to design these networks for strength, trustworthiness and efficiency, and how to take commercial advantage of them.

Imagine the organisational chart of your company. Now overlay that with a map of the other kinds of networks that

are influential within the organisation: the work networks that make up part of everybody's daily routine; the social networks, with whom people check in to see what's going on; the innovation networks through which people develop ideas; the expert knowledge networks, the career guidance networks, the learning networks. Everybody in the organisation may move within each of these networks, but play different roles in each. Understanding the nature of the links within these networks, the different ways people use them and the aggregate amount of trust they create can help organisations perform more efficiently, driving down the amount of politics and organisational friction, and upping the level of purpose and productivity.

Corporate anthropologist Karen Stephenson's work in mapping and overlaying organisational networks laid the basis for much of the multi-disciplinary thinking in the field. Now a rich seam of strategic insight, social network theory, undergirds the work of scholars such as Ron Burt at the Chicago School of Business and David Krackhardt at Carnegie Mellon,

**Autopilot** Sebastian Thrun's robots are good drivers. The Stanford University robotics professor recently led his team in an event in Victorville, California, where cars had to execute complex manoeuvres in traffic, including merging, passing, parking and negotiating intersections, sans drivers. Thrun's team came second in the US Defense Department-sponsored event.

**Banksy** The enigmatic British artist's stencils speak about modern evils in a very anti-establishment way, and he's popular with the Gen Y crowd. A Banksy original graffiti recently sold for more than \$450,000. The artist's latest work in central London is a comment on Big Brother society: it depicts a boy painting the words "One nation under CCTV" as he's watched by a security guard.

**Clouds** Forget about investing in soon-to-be-obsolete silicon. The latest offering from amazon.com is cloud computing: selling computer hardware as a service. Users rent storage, data and computer processing ("geek treats") at cheap rates. Amazon has spent more than \$US2 billion on technology to turn clouds of bits into the retail equivalent of the next Harry Potter.

**Dilbert.com** Lets fans take up the cartoonist's pen. Users can create and send online "mash-ups" of cartoon strips with altered speech bubbles. The site illustrates the media's new direction: more conversational and interactive. Dilbert's creator, Scott Adams, plans to comment on fans' work. Cartooning is now a competitive sport.