

Harnessing innovation in times of Crisis, by Tsvetina Chankova, Innovation Director, Pollen8

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The COVID-19 crisis has forced global business to adapt at an unprecedented rate. Companies and their employees have mobilised to respond to the unfolding situation — leaning heavily on technology to restructure long-standing business practices and cope with new, constantly evolving challenges. Innovation is no longer 'nice to have', but a necessary part of any activity, happening organically across all levels of the organisation.

The right response

During times of crisis, the question of innovation is no longer when, but *how*? The answer is within easy reach: ask the people that understand the problem best. Enabled by technology, we are now powerfully positioned to mobilise the problem-solving capabilities of communities and individuals on a global level.

This approach has already been adopted by big business just one week after social distancing was introduced in the UK, with both [Amazon and IBM launching global innovation programmes](#), which invite communities to help solve some of the challenges of COVID-19.

Employee focus

Organisations need to be bold and swift in experimenting with new approaches and solutions, and the people at the sharp-end of the problems are the most valuable assets when trying to solve them. Employee-led innovation is not only easier, it is a necessity. However, this is often accompanied by duplication of efforts and a gradual decrease in engagement post-crisis. Organisations can proactively capture meaningful employee-led innovation while making sure the benefits are shared and efforts are consolidated in two key areas:

1. They can encourage the mindset and behaviour by communicating best practices and success stories. Establishing a clear way to inspire and educate their people helps to focus efforts where they matter most, while avoiding knee-jerk reactions and siloed solutions.
2. They can capture ideas at a national or even global level. Using collaborative tools to submit, review, and showcase ideas can help rally the whole organisation around a common set of objectives and create even stronger solutions to help the organisation or society.

Examples from the past and present

Crisis times often bring about changes that affect both business and society in the long term.

Lean manufacturing came about in post-WWII Japan in a context of economic devastation and limited resources. To catch up with its US rivals, Toyota had to come up with a new way of production, focusing on reducing waste and inefficiency. The person credited for establishing the new system knew the business inside out and had worked his way up through the ranks.

With the latest crisis, many organisations and communities are finding novel ways of working together and sharing knowledge. The scientific community has rallied around the pandemic and understands more about COVID-19. For example, [NextStrain](#) gathers all the pathogen genome data from labs around the world and has built a GitHub repository to facilitate research efforts. These advances in joint problem-solving are already fostering large-scale innovations in how we approach scientific collaboration.

The future

The global nature of COVID-19 means that businesses in every country are united with a common challenge: How to find new ways of working as part of society, as a company, and for clients? Some of these changes will be short-term solutions to immediate needs, while others will have a lasting, transformational impact on the way we operate in society and as businesses. Innovation is a necessity when time and resources are limited and the stakes are high.

COVID-19 may have forced you to deliberate on where you will be as a business on the other side of the

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crisis. By engaging your employees and capturing their learnings, you will be in a much stronger position to expand the horizons of where you could be.

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