

# **PRESERVING INNOVATION AND PROMOTING WORKPLACE COLLISIONS IN THE AGE OF COVID-19**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Spontaneous and informal opportunities for workplace communication and collaboration result from intellectual ‘collisions’ in the innovation process that are well-documented. Responsive companies redesigned workplaces to foster and encourage these chance encounters that are critical to the production and nurturing of new ideas which in turn fuel innovation and entrepreneurship. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of infected people presents the greatest risk to one’s health, and avoidance of that risk creates social distance—thus creating barriers to collisions. As these conditions persist, small businesses that initially responded well to remote work requirements and limited personal contact among employees are recognizing the long-term implications of such social distancing. How will we continue to create and encourage the interactions and conversations (“collisions”) necessary for innovation and entrepreneurial pursuits when faced with working from home, reduction in travel, and fewer face-to-face meetings—all of which naturally hinder informal yet valuable communication and sharing of ideas? We examine how workplaces thus impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic have hindered critical collisions of creative thought to spark innovation. We also discuss examples of how small businesses can overcome this problem through alternative means of supporting and encouraging creativity and innovation.*

Keywords: Collisions, COVID-19, small businesses, workplace, creativity, innovation

## INTRODUCTION

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the American marketplace and business sector are difficult to overstate. In January of 2020, the United States was the largest economy in the world with a nominal GDP of \$21.44 trillion, representing one quarter of the entire world's economic production (Bajpai, 2020). Then came the pandemic and its impact on almost all facets of the economy, resulting in a second quarter 2020 GDP decrease of a stunning 31.4%. Despite some improvements over subsequent quarters, it is expected that U.S. Real GDP for 2020 will have declined 3.5% from 2019 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2021).

Small businesses, in particular, represent the backbone of the U.S. economy and have been heavily impacted by COVID-19. While full impacts are still unknown, the Small Business Administration reports that the largest drop in employment because of this pandemic occurred among businesses with 20 to 49 employees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020). Initial research on the impact of the pandemic on U.S. small businesses paints a grim picture. A U.S. Census Bureau Small Business Pulse Report found that 89.9% of surveyed small businesses had negative effects from COVID-19, with 51.4% reporting "large effects" (US Census Bureau, 2020). The number of working small business owners declined from 15 million in February of 2020 to 11.7 million in April of the same year (Fairlie, 2020). Not fully captured by these numbers are the many ways small businesses have been challenged with significant changes to operations as well as employee communication, interaction, and contributions, which are critical to small business innovation.

In this paper, we will examine the long-term, structural impacts to small business innovation exacerbated by limitations imposed by the pandemic. We will first report the effects of the pandemic on small businesses, assessing how these effects impact the important elements necessary for innovation and workplace collisions. We will then offer examples of tools and approaches that may be used to mitigate those impacts and nurture the innovation process.

## SMALL-BUSINESS IMPACTS

As defined by the U.S. Small Business Administration, a "small business" can generally be considered as "an independent business with fewer than 500 employees." (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020). There are 31.7 million small businesses in the U.S., 19% of which have paid employees: equating to 99.7% of all firms with paid employees. U.S. small businesses account for 32% of known export value and for 65% of net new jobs (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020). It is not surprising therefore that small businesses have been called the "lifblood of the U.S. economy" and accounted for 44% of all economic activity prior to the pandemic (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2019). The fact that small businesses have a higher percentage of vulnerable jobs during this pandemic is especially relevant, given that they provide nearly half of all private-sector jobs in the United States (Dua, Elingrud, Mahajan, & Silberg, 2020a).

By grouping all small businesses into one category, we could miss important differences among them that might be exposed through a finer lens. In terms of owner goals, operations, and impact, small businesses can vary significantly. While a few small businesses may be classified as “lifestyle” businesses—not intended for growth, but for a comfortable living for its owners—other small businesses are oriented towards growth and the creation of innovative contributions to society. In fact, small businesses represent over 98% of all employers in high-tech industries (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020). Kirchoff’s typology is widely used to classify small firms by growth and innovation objectives; thus, low-growth and low-innovation firms are deemed “Core,” while high-growth and high-innovation firms are labeled “Glamorous” (Kirchoff, 1994). Multiple studies have been conducted indicating that these Glamorous small firms create even greater returns and contributions than large firms and that the employee growth of these small firms leads to greater innovation (Breitzman & Hicks, 2008; Isom & Jarczyk, 2009; Spencer & Kirchoff, 2006).

Lahart (2020) noted that a reduction in the number of small businesses amounts to a reduction in competition for larger firms. This could reduce big companies’ need to innovate to maintain market share, ultimately dampening the dynamism of the U.S. economy. Dua, Elingrud, Mahajan, and Silberg (2020b) recognized small businesses as “entrepreneurship engines,” that “...create unique entrepreneurial opportunities, particularly for women, minorities, and immigrants” (p. 7). As a significant contributor to U.S. growth and productivity, it is valuable to explore more deeply the impact of COVID-19 on these innovative small businesses.

### KEYS TO SMALL-BUSINESS INNOVATION

Innovation is the “development and implementation of new ideas by people who over time engage in transactions with others within an institutional context” (Van de Ven, 1986, p. 591). Innovations change the world and the way we live in it. They can include products, services, or processes, and extend beyond the business world to encompass social change and advances in the sciences (Deloitte, 2015; Meissner, Polt & Vonortas, 2017). Engaging in innovation activities, whether oriented towards new products, services, or markets of internal processes, is a top priority of CEOs (BCG, 2020).

Amazon, Apple, HP, and Microsoft are all companies that make the BCG list of ‘Most Innovative’ each year (BCG, 2020), but are also examples of companies that started small, innovated, and grew. By analogy, we can say that for every Edison Menlo Park creating or perfecting inventions on a large scale, there are two brothers with a passion for entertainment creating an empire that will become the next Disney. Small firms may create, build, and develop the innovation themselves; or, they may sell the innovation to larger businesses to exploit (Teece, 1986). In a study of “green technologies and industries” sponsored by the SBA, it was found that small, innovative firms were 16 times more productive than large firms in terms of patents per employee; further, these patents were cited 79 percent more often and outperformed the large firms in originality, generality, and growth (Breitzman & Thomas, 2011).

Small businesses are not merely small versions of big businesses; according to Richard Branson, “small businesses are nimble and bold and can often teach much larger companies a

thing or two about innovations that can change entire industries” (NASDAQ, 2017). Innovations from small- to medium-sized firms often result from new technologies or market demands. Daily activities and external connections with customers or suppliers are more likely to be the pool from which creative information is collected (Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2008). Empowering employees and acknowledging the importance of learning from their connections has been found to lead to greater small-business innovation (García-Morales, Lloréns-Montes, & Verdú-Jover, 2007).

Small-business leaders can overcome the scale advantages of large firms by focusing on the drivers of small-business innovation success. Common themes emerge when examining the literature on small-business innovation. These advantages center around the following elements, and represent distinctive competencies of small businesses in the innovation process:

- Ability to execute ideas more quickly;
- Pivot faster to avoid dead-ends and seize new opportunities;
- Less bureaucracy to quickly deploy resources;
- Proximity to customers and suppliers; and,
- Team environment.

Innovation requires a champion to guide its journey from creation to final acceptance. There is a social and political process through which these offered ideas and concepts are potentially embraced by the organization if they are to be fostered, embedded, and finally integrated into the organization’s offerings. As such, ideas do not stand on their own; one cannot ignore the socio-political dynamics that have to be managed for innovation to be embraced and institutionalized (Van de Ven, 1986). As an inherently social process, the creation, adoption, and deployment of innovation becomes problematic in a disconnected society. Connections and collaboration in the workplace become pivotal. As a competitive as well as societal priority, how are these connections important to the process of innovation? While many small businesses have shown that they can creatively adapt to survive COVID-19 by utilizing new technologies in their operations (Gurchiek, 2020), other informal, yet critical, processes have become challenging.

## **THE ROLE OF COLLISIONS**

The role of ‘collisions’ in the innovation process—those spontaneous and informal opportunities for workplace communication and collaboration—is well-documented. ‘Eureka’ moments from the lone entrepreneurial genius certainly happen, but to move from idea to reality it more often takes diverse perspectives to perfect innovation offerings. The standard approaches to control the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace—curtailing travel, working remotely, and maintaining social distance—create barriers to spontaneous collaboration. In particular, many startups are grappling with the effects of inefficiencies in problem-solving and lack of spontaneous employee interactions. Examples abound of the cumbersome nature of collaborative problem-solving when participants cannot interact face-to-face, particularly in entrepreneurial settings, while the benefits of ideas sparked by spontaneous workplace interactions were never more apparent (Cutter, 2020).

Although technologies and policies have had to rapidly evolve to meet immediate business needs, questions remain as to the long-term destructive impact of this global crisis. How will we continue to create and encourage the interactions and conversations necessary for innovation and entrepreneurial pursuits when faced with working from home, reduction in travel, fewer face-to-face meetings, and more streaming interactions? All these naturally hinder informal yet valuable communication and sharing of ideas. Firms that have most of their employees working from home account for nearly 75% of small businesses in ‘Glamorous,’ knowledge-based industries, and the majority of those firms plan to continue to allow remote work (Gurchiek, 2020). As many small businesses make the difficult decision to remain remote in 2021, what will be the new normal and how can the new normal be as innovative as possible?

### **RE-CRAFTING SMALL BUSINESS COLLISIONS**

Research indicates that companies that focus on the long-term improvement of culture, technology and physical environments create organizations that are not only more attractive to employees, but four times more profitable and more innovative (Morgan, 2017). The key here, however, is an integrated, holistic approach. While the long-term ramifications of COVID-19 are still unfolding, it does appear that trends such as distributed offices and electronic communications must be considered when designing the small business environments of the immediate future. How can ‘Glamorous’, innovative small businesses integrate the business settings of tomorrow in a way that acts as a substitute for the physical collisions of yesterday? And how can we integrate these tools into differentiating drivers?

Small businesses have learned that the initial responses to COVID-19 are not optimal or sustainable. Despite the initial, perceived success of technology adaptation to accommodate remote work (i.e., employees working from home and primarily communicating via email and video meetings), small businesses are recognizing its limitations. Research has found that employees feel overworked and stressed with regular participation in video meetings, as well as fatigued from the need to continuously focus on a screen (Spataro, 2020). While such meetings (Zoom, MS Teams, etc.) allowed for the rapid adaptation of small businesses to the restrictions of the pandemic, going forward, primary reliance on such tools for collaboration is not ideal.

New ideas will need to be considered to stimulate innovation within the realities of industry, workplace, and employee limitations. As discussed, small businesses have been observed to possess unique innovation capabilities that are difficult for large businesses to replicate. We suggest focusing on these elements, each being a key success factor that small business decision-makers must redesign to rebuild resilience and maximize a holistic firm environment in terms of culture, technology, and physical environment. All of these elements benefit from contact, collaboration, and communication—and ultimately, *collisions*. Going forward, how can contemporary workplaces adapt in ways that can optimize these opportunities? What are examples of ideas that might be cultivated to enhance these elements in small businesses under the realities of COVID-19?

### **1. Ability to execute ideas more quickly**

Today's complex innovative environment requires a move away from a focus on individual productivity, to that of cross-pollination (Waber, Magnolfi, & Lindsay, 2014). With concentrated decision-making, newly minted valuable ideas can gain the resources—financial, political, and human—that are necessary to implement them. Alexander, De Smet, Kleinman, and Mugayar-Baldocchi (2020) recommend launching a network of teams: “In a crisis of uncertainty, the network spurs experimentation, innovation, and learning simultaneously among many teams, much like a neural network in which the whole ‘brain’ is vastly smarter than the sum of its parts (p. 78). This approach includes a “hub and spoke” arrangement, whereby new teams are quickly formed and spun off to rapidly address new challenges.

### **2. Pivot faster to avoid dead-ends, and to seize new opportunities**

The keys here are to encourage learning with feedback loops (scanning and connections), sense-making and absorption, and having support to engage in emergent strategic directions (Ancona, 2011; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Weick, 1995; Winter, 2003). According to research, early entrance can be associated with increased educational costs and inefficiencies, timely pivots based upon organizational learning can also be associated with reduced time to exit and an ability to de-escalate poor prior decisions and commitments (Kirtley & O'Mahony, 2020; Lieberman & Montgomery, 1998).

### **3. Reduce bureaucracy to quickly deploy resources**

Remote-based employment in the COVID-19 pandemic environment may hinder nimbleness and responsiveness of employees—whereas physical proximity and chance meetings may have led to faster navigation through bureaucratic systems. Deloitte (2020) recommends that small-business leaders prioritize being visible and checking-in frequently with employees to counter perceptions of virtual distance that reduce trust and innovativeness. It also suggests empowering self-leadership among remote employees and teams to take initiative.

### **4. Proximity to customers and suppliers**

It is advisable to build connections and bonds with customers and suppliers. Including them as resources and sources of inspiration for new and improved ideas would be beneficial. Including customers and suppliers in organizational decision-making boundaries helps to increase the diversity of people with whom employees come into contact—this is certainly a key to building effective collisions (Cohen, 2019). Moreover, engaging customers and suppliers enhances the firm's continued learning capabilities (Selnes & Sallis, 2003).

## 5. Team environment

In 2017, Vivek Murthy wrote about the epidemic of loneliness, in which people feel a lack of social connection (Murthy, 2017). It has been estimated that 20% of Americans feel lonely or socially isolated. In terms of health impact, loneliness is as damaging as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (HRSA, 2019). With shutdowns and moves to work at home, COVID-19 has only made the situation worse. One study showed that almost 50% of American adults are lonelier since the pandemic began (Ducharme, 2020). From a business (and psychological) perspective, the lonely employee suffers impairment of reasoning and decision-making, while limiting their creativity (Achor, Kellerman, Reece, & Robichaux, 2018; Murthy, 2017).

To improve employee health and innovation skills, small businesses must take steps to reinforce connections among employees, customers, and suppliers. These connections, including reimagined collisions, are necessary for team success. Borrowing from the start-up and educational space, practical tools like Thoughtexchange (2021) and Pear Deck (2021) may be used to encourage employee engagement. Thoughtexchange (2021) distributes prompts on various topics by email to crowdsource ideas and thoughts; employees respond anonymously, and rate others' free responses so that those favored rise to the top—akin to a social media platform (Thoughtexchange, 2021). Pear Deck creates interactive slide presentations that allow for feedback and contributions from an audience, as well as analysis of those contributions for the presenter (Pear Deck, 2021). A new audio-only and invitation-only social media app called Clubhouse may provide low-stress opportunities for employees to share and discuss ideas without screen fatigue (Fischer & Kokalitcheva, 2021). Such informal, spontaneous opportunities for colleagues' input which are less sterile, and which encourage human interaction, can be invaluable in mimicking the value of pre-COVID-19 collisions.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper we suggest that COVID-19 has accelerated the distancing within small businesses, potentially turning collisions into misses. However, with change comes opportunity. COVID-19 has imposed social distancing, but at the same time has increased and accelerated learning and innovation in the ways we use technology in the workplace. Programs and systems such as Zoom, Google Meets, and Microsoft Teams have experienced rapidly accelerated adoption. Further research is needed for measuring, assessing, and ensuring successful collaboration. Here, we suggest studying new analytical tools in data and qualitative systems analysis in the context of small-business leadership. These tools are often beyond the current skill sets of small-business leadership; if these leaders cannot allow greater investments of time, we look toward academic researchers to work with small businesses on systems that better identify, track, and improve collaboration efforts. Studies should aim to focus on ensuring that new systems to evaluate and improve collaboration include both customers and suppliers, as

these are crucial stakeholders for small-business owners, as well as sources of customer discovery and value creation.

Once the COVID-19 impacts have subsided, we suggest continued investigations into innovation productivity at different size levels. Have small businesses maintained their innovation outcome advantages? If not, why? We recommend deeper, ethnographic analyses at the firm level to determine more fully what operational changes have occurred that impact innovation. Often, real drivers of innovation are hidden behind causal ambiguity and social complexity. Researchers must spend time in these firms to add clarity to changes that may have occurred and offer clear guidance as to how innovation systems can be repaired.

## CONCLUSION

Our current reality is that the hurdles associated with COVID-19 are not going away anytime soon. We do not yet know when, or if, the population of the United States or of the world will reach a point of herd immunity. Estimates project that it may be late summer or fall 2021 before most of the American population is vaccinated, and with variants emerging, any timeline for return to normalcy would be premature (Zhang, 2021). Many well-known large companies such as Google, Microsoft, American Express, have extended their remote work policies well into 2021. Indeed, more than half of Americans want to continue working remotely (Hadden, Casado, Sonnemaker, & Borden, 2020). Small businesses, especially those with better-educated workforces, seem to be following suit (Senz, 2020). Small business survival and success will hinge on adapting to these challenges with a more sustainable, long-term horizon.

Despite the many challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are seeing small-business resilience in action: 20% of small businesses now reportedly plan to grow their workforce (Business Wire, 2020). To be viable and to continue their growth, they will undoubtedly need to harness employee creativity and innovation under these new circumstances. Preserving those elements that differentiate small-business innovation from the rest—and nurturing the collisions that contribute naturally to creativity and innovation—will indeed be critical for small-business resilience through the COVID-19 era and beyond.



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