

DIGITAL TOOLS



DIVE DEEP!

THESE DAYS EVERYONE IN THE TECH BUSINESS WANTS to be a Disrupter. Which is too bad because, as a recent experience revealed to me, the world needs fewer Disrupters and more Deep Divers. Disruption has changed a lot since grade school, when disrupters were the students whose behavior made it impossible for anyone else to learn. Lately, the term has been adopted by business strategists; a disrupter now is a person who brings out a cheap, quick and dirty solution to a problem, a solution that eventually beats out products from established vendors.

PCs were the classic disrupters—for the way that, despite their humble origins, they eventually dethroned the mighty mainframe. As this template for viewing innovation became popular, investors and pundits went looking for new disruptions. “Disruptive” became a required word in every tech press release, replacing earlier clichés like “world-class.”

It was never entirely clear how relevant the disruption idea was outside of digital hardware. Computers have Moore’s Law going for them, meaning that because of the way chips always get faster, the lowliest, least expensive product will eventually become as powerful as top-tier products used to be, and thus is poised to disrupt. The phenomenon applies to other digital objects, like cameras and phones.

It’s impossible to be against disruption. But attention to it comes at the expense of other, less heralded forms of innovation, like something I will call the Deep Dive. A Deep Dive happens when a company spends a lot of time and energy solving what at first seems to be a narrow problem but, because of the thoroughness of its answer, ends up creating new and unexpected opportunities.

My thinking was inspired by a new piece of software called DropBox. Like a lot of people, I spend time at many different computers: one at work, one in the den, one in the bedroom and

so forth. I never knew where I would be next and was constantly e-mailing files to myself. The problem is called file syncing, and it’s been around for a while. Lots of companies have taken a stab at solving it in some form or another, including Microsoft.

It’s apparent, though, that a new breed of engineers and entrepreneurs have rethought the problem, this time with the goal of taking advantage of the Internet. DropBox is just one of a number of companies tackling the problem; SugarSynch is another. I was attracted to DropBox because it’s free.

On each machine you work at, you download and install the DropBox software. It creates a DropBox folder, and then sits quietly in the background, looking to see if you change anything in the folder—adding, deleting or editing a file. When you sign on at another machine, the software on that unit checks with headquarters to see what’s new and synchs the DropBox folder on that machine with the others. It’s so fast that the folder is usually updated by the time you have a chance to get Word or Excel running.

Had DropBox followed the conventional wisdom of disruption, it would have created some sort of basic file-syncing software and waited for it to grow from there. But its engineers instead took their time and ended up writing a lot of quite complex code, though for a user it’s all as simple as pie.

As a result, DropBox has other uses beyond the obvious ones for syncing and backing up files. It solves the age-old problem of moving around files that are too bulky to e-mail. With one mouse click, you create a URL for any file you want to send to someone else. E-mail the URL, and your friend clicks on it to have the file download.

Disrupters aren’t really relevant outside of digital hardware. Far better: companies that go deep to solve problems.

The program doesn’t ask you to change anything else about your behavior. That’s in contrast to the approach of the Microsofts, Googles and Apples of the world, which usually want to smother you in their warm embrace. For example, you hear a lot about “cloud computing” these days in the tech world; it’s predicated on the idea that one

day soon we will all use Google Apps, downloaded from the Internet, instead of Microsoft Office residing on the desktop.

But my own experience made me realize that the cloud crowd has things backwards. Just about everyone has a copy of Office, licit or not, on every computer they use. The problem isn’t replacing Office with Google; the problem is making all my computers work the same for me. That was disrupting the way I work, and I am grateful that some people dived deeply into the problem and fixed it. **F**



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