Imitation Versus Innovation: Lessons to Be Learned from the Japanese
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ABSTRACT
This article develops an alternative way of thinking about both innovation and initiation in U.S. firms. As implemented by U.S. firms, innovation may be conceptualized as learning-by-doing strategy involving primarily experiential learning within a firm. In contrast, Japanese companies have emphasized the external development of new knowledge, importing ideas and technology across organizational boundaries, or a learning-by-watching strategy. The article takes a close look at innovation and imitation strategies; it proposes a set of five conditions under which imitation may be a more astute competitive strategy than innovation; it reviews some of the larger historical forces that have led to the organization of Western innovation within the vertical hierarchies and Japanese innovation within horizontal networks; and it concludes by offering managers a few suggestions on how to develop an effective imitation strategy within their own firms.*
In comparison to that of Japan, the Western culture has a higher preference for innovation than imitation. Specifically, the United States deems copying as “less estimable than inventing” because it places the idea of being innovative despite the numerous risks and problems that arise from innovation more honorable. Japan, in contrast, believes that imitation can be an “astute competitive strategy in its own right, involving substantial investment, creativity, and expertise”.

The different perspectives between the United States and Japan regarding imitation versus innovation can be attributed to the dissimilar lifestyle of each country. According to the Hofstede’s Six Dimensions, the score for uncertainty avoidance of Japan is twice as that of the United States (92 to 46)**. Hence, there is a higher degree of acceptance in the United States for new ideas, innovative products and a willingness to try something new or different, whether it pertains to technology, business practices or food. The U.S. Constitution Bill of Rights is a great example of why The United States is considered to have a low uncertainty avoidance. The Constitution guides American law. Most American's stay true to the law and do not try to innovate a new Constitution; however it has been amended over time. Japan, on the other hand, with a whooping score of 92, has a highly ritualized lifestyle that contains actions that are prescribed for maximum predictability. A possible explanation is that Japan, constantly threatened by natural disasters, integrates advanced preparations for any uncertain situation. In addition, the “flying geese” model, coined by Japanese scholars, suggests that one economy, like the first goose in a V-shaped formation, can lead other economies toward industrialization, passing older technologies down to the followers as its own incomes rise and it moves into new technologies***. This model accurately sums up the belief and development of the majority of Japan’s economy.

No imitation could exist before innovation.. Reflective imitation, if applied properly, assists a business to surpass its competitors. Similar, innovation, if planned carefully, allows a business to define and foster its brand. As Bolton explains, extensive research and appropriate application of existing resources can enhance a business by reducing the probability to repeat mistakes that may have caused another business to fail in the past. However, a business should not be afraid to try a
new approach because innovation may yield more successful results than existing methods. In order to reduce the risks associated with innovation, it is imperative to perform necessary research and learn how to apply the existing information before innovating. As demonstrated throughout history, innovation and imitation has a mutualist relationship; their coexistence benefit both parties if applied properly.
Sources


**The Hofstede Centre, National Culture (n.d.). Retrieved February 09, 2016, from  