

Irving Wladawsky-Berger
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Collaborative Innovation in a Diverse, Open, Information-
based Society

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm very pleased to be with you this evening, and I'm truly humbled by my induction into HENAAC's Hall of Fame.

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In the last ten years, much has changed in our world. And one of those changes – a major one -- is the fact that we no longer feel the need to explain why diversity is so important for businesses and for our nation.

Indeed, we find increasing acceptance of the proposition that businesses and countries that embrace diversity thrive, and have a far more promising future than those that rely on a more homogeneous population.

Simply put, every business needs to attract the best and brightest to compete in the increasingly fierce world we inhabit. But, as we all know, the best and brightest come with all kinds of characteristics -- from gender, nationality and religion to color and sexual orientation.

Not only would it be morally wrong to ignore this. It would be downright foolish for a business to deprive itself of really good people, because those people do not feel welcome in that company's environment.

A few weeks ago, for example, I was in Mexico for several days. I met with people from the private sector, from government and from the university community.

All could speak English. But, I have no doubt that my ability to conduct meetings in my native Spanish added tremendously – not just to the relationships that I established -- but to their impression of IBM as well.

As commerce becomes more global and nations more interdependent, being able to draw upon people who come from different backgrounds is an ace in the hole for the US and for US businesses.

I often think how very lucky we are to live in a country that has developed perhaps the strongest tradition of welcoming and accepting diverse peoples.

I've wondered as well what it is about the United States that has fostered this environment that has enabled so many of us, who came here with so little, to enjoy productive careers and satisfying lives, and to make our own contribution to our country in return.

I believe it starts with equality. Equality is woven into the moral fabric of our nation. The founders asserted it with bold conviction in those remarkable words of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .”

I am not naïve. I realize that, after that same Declaration of Independence, came a Constitution that accepted slavery and limited the right to vote to male property owners.

But with time, the injustice of slavery was eliminated and the right to vote extended to every adult citizen. The American reality is not perfect. Indeed, it has often been tragic. But through it all, the Declaration's *principle* of equality has endured, and prevailed.

Then there is hope, which may very well be the glue that holds us together as a society.

Hope, at its most basic, is the belief that the future isn't pre-determined, but rather open, unpredictable and emergent.

This is the America of discovery, of new beginnings, of setting out for the frontier – whether that's to be found in Kansas... or California... or the moon – or along that wonderful new global frontier known as the Internet.

Hope is also the conviction -- sometimes against all odds -- that our lives and those of our children can be better, that the game is not rigged . . . that studying hard, working hard, and playing by the rules can bring success.

What else but hope has drawn so many millions to these shores for centuries?

Hope is the heart of the American *idea* — that unique spirit of exploration and entrepreneurship – call it the spirit of innovation – that has kept us moving forward... asking questions, solving problems, tackling injustices and becoming a fairer and better society.

Finally, there is the quality of diversity itself. In particular, the fact that we are at heart a multi-cultural society, a melting pot as it were.

Diversity is about the importance of having many different elements in the mix... many different experiences, many different perspectives, many different skills.

All that restlessness makes us appear messy at times, a melting pot, a work in progress. To some, this *inherent imperfection* is troubling. They like things more settled, more defined, more rooted in the wisdom of the past. But to Americans – always looking to improve ourselves, our country, and the world around us -- the future is the air we breathe.

I am convinced that this kind of diversity is, quite simply, a critical requirement today for being a successful business – and it's only going to become more so, given the many changes taking place all around us .

Let me take a few moments to talk about this fast changing world, and some of the powerful forces that are shaping it.

Among the forces shaping the future, none is stronger than innovation.

Innovation occurs when invention and insight intersect . . . that is, when someone takes a brilliant piece of technology and applies it in a way that transforms institutions, enterprises, even society as a whole.

Innovation generates new industries and new markets. It can even inaugurate entirely new epochs in human history, as is happening today.

As we speak, the industrial age is giving way to an information-based society. The Internet is the most prominent proof that this historical transition is under way.

Increasingly sophisticated information technologies are transforming the Internet into a global infrastructure that grows daily in capacity and capability, and is becoming far more powerful, far more scalable, far more diverse and far richer than anything we have ever had.

This in turn is enabling information, people and business processes to work together . . . something we at IBM call “On Demand Business.”

Others call it “adaptive,” or “real-time,” or “sense-and-respond.” But regardless of what one calls it, this powerful emerging infrastructure promises new levels of innovation -- innovation of a character profoundly different than we have known in the past -- collaborative innovation that draws on the talents, perspectives and insights of the many rather than the brilliant breakthroughs of the few.

The Internet has changed the very nature of innovation permitting it to occur more and more at the intersection of multiple disciplines, and of business, government and academia.

Scientists and engineers can now collaborate across continents and oceans in real-time, sharing knowledge, data and insights and cutting innovation cycles dramatically.

Connected, they can bring more intelligence and insight, more imagination and intuition to bear on the most complex problems known to science and business, and deliver the innovation that moves society along the path of progress.

The need for collaborative innovation is clear from the types of problems we must address these days. They are too complex for one or two or three people, or a whole lab, or even the resources of an entire company.

Collaborative innovation is arising not simply because the technology is available. It's emerging from the elemental human need for community.

Scientific research has grown more and more to be a community effort of shared work and insights. Indeed, that was and remains among the primary functions of the Internet.

But now the Internet has scaled the walls of the research lab, and enlarged the Internet community to embrace hundreds of millions of people around the globe . . . people with different languages, cultures and values . . . people who see things from different points of view . . . all of them captivated by the opportunity to collaborate on the myriad challenges of the information-based society.

This is community on a cosmic scale . . . potentially hundreds of millions of human interactions . . . an almost infinite number of opportunities to innovate on everything from new technologies, like Linux and Grids . . . to solving the toughest problems in life sciences and physics . . . to joining the workforce of an increasingly interconnected world economy, as we see happening in Brazil, China, India and Eastern Europe.

There are, of course, others who reject the very culture of diversity and acceptance, of equality, hope and innovation that we celebrate tonight. Theirs is not a hopeful journey, but a dark passage.

And, in a gruesome irony, they often exploit the very tools of connection and collaboration whose spirit they oppose. They see them as an opportunity to incite the alienated – those who have experienced neither equality nor fairness, and who clearly have no hope for the future – and to marshal their rage for destructive -- even murderous -- purposes.

Technology will play a major role in helping us identify, find and contain those who are trying to hurt us and our allies. But in the end, it's not technology that will thwart them. It will be people all over the world connecting at the level of basic human values, and applying the virtues of diversity and acceptance on a global scale.

I believe that our faith in equality, our enduring spirit of hope, and our commitment to diversity -- all of which sustain our open, accepting culture -- can move the global, information-based society toward a future that is genuinely productive and peaceful.

Perhaps in the end, we will find that this has been our greatest innovation.

Thank You.