

Trial and error paves the way to success

1 Warmer

- a. Discuss this business scenario with a partner. Ask and answer the questions below.

You work for a startup that provides new educational technology tools. During the pandemic, you offered new products and tailored solutions and expanded exponentially. But since, you are only trying to meet customer demands and not working on new products or innovating with the ones you currently offer.

1. How would you re-allocate your resources to keep the culture of experimentation alive?
2. Do you think it's more important to improve the products you currently offer or to keep innovating and create new products? Why?

2 Key words

- a. Write the words from the box next to the definitions below.

Check your answers and your understanding of the words by using the same word to complete the example sentence under each definition. You may have to change the form of the word. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

anomaly	blot	immutable	launch	paralysed	payload	pilot
pioneering	pitfall	postmortem	status quo	trial	unconstrained	vocal

1. the act of sending a missile, space vehicle, satellite, or other object into the air or into space

The head of the space programme gave a short speech before the much anticipated

_____.

2. a discussion or examination to find out why an event happened, especially an event that produced bad results _____

Our boss immediately called a _____ meeting after one of our clients dropped us.

3. something unusual, unexpected, or different from what normally happens

Their software helps to detect _____ in bridges using imaging techniques.

4. the equipment or people in a space vehicle _____

Their latest design has a _____ capacity of up to 50 tonnes.

5. an imperfection, flaw _____

The unfavourable video was a _____ on the CEO's otherwise stellar reputation.

6. done for the first time using new methods _____

The medical school is testing a _____ robot that could save many lives.

7. the process of testing a product, plan, or person over a period of time _____

She has hired a new assistant on an initial three-month _____ period.

8. the present situation or the way that things usually are _____

We must try to break away from _____ policies and come up with an innovative way of working.

9. impossible to change _____

Their programme encourages coaches to re-examine all the concepts that drive them and to discover that no single idea is _____.

10. the process of trying something with a small group of people to find out if it would be successful or popular _____

We are going to test the new materials in a _____ before we release them to the public.

11. someone who is vocal expresses their opinion frequently and strongly _____

Peter is a _____ critic of the new purchase process.

12. behaving in a way that is not controlled or limited _____

_____ by sensible financial concerns, the founder burned through their cash quickly.

13. a problem that is likely to happen in a particular situation _____

In her latest book, Ms Attia addresses the most common digital marketing

_____.

14. temporarily unable to move or think clearly or completely unable to operate normally or effectively

Instead of being incentivised to act, the survey results left managers _____.

How to ensure experiments leave the launch pad

COMPANIES ADVANCE BY TRIAL AND ERROR, BUT NOBODY WANTS TO BE PART OF THE 'ERROR'

ANDREW HILL

- 1 "Flight heritage" is how the commercial space industry likes to describe a record of success established by a string of missions for a satellite or a launch system.
- 2 The phrase cropped up last week in postmortems of Virgin Orbit's failure to launch the first commercial satellites from western Europe. "Space is hard," said Alice Bunn, president of UK trade body UKspace, after an "anomaly" condemned the LauncherOne rocket and its expensive payload to a fiery end before it reached its target orbit.
- 3 What this blot on Virgin Orbit's heritage underlined was the inevitable commercial tension between experimentation and predictability. Pioneering space ventures are in a constant cycle of "working out what happened and getting up and trying again", to paraphrase Bunn. Trial and error is how they advance, but terrestrial companies are not so different. In both cases, customers would prefer not to be on board for the "error" part. The challenge is deciding when to crystallise the findings of the experiment.
- 4 Back on Earth, the pandemic was a trigger for forced experimentation at many companies that had previously assumed the status quo in how, where, and when we work was immutable. Now they have to decide when to incorporate changes in working practices into a more predictable framework. Even the World Economic Forum was obliged to try out a summer summit in 2022, before reverting to its regular January timetable. One question is whether corporate leaders will return to the Alps this week more open to the need to experiment or keener than ever to revert to pre-Covid certainties.
- 5 "It's very risky not to experiment," claims Costas Andriopoulos, innovation and entrepreneurship professor at Bayes Business School and author of Purposeful Curiosity. Teams that were curious, open-minded, and accepting of failure responded better to the sudden lockdowns of 2020, he believes. "If you don't experiment for a long time, then you bet the house and you either win, or lose everything."
- 6 That is a view shared by Phil Libin, co-founder of mobile app Evernote, who now runs All Turtles, a product studio that has adopted distributed working. The company has just implemented a seasonal structure, in which employees commit to a six-month stretch at the company, followed by a two-week holiday taken at the same time by everyone. Libin freely admits it is a trial: "It's guaranteed that in a season or two we will say 'some of these things don't make sense, we have to change it'."
- 7 All Turtles has more flexibility than many to use itself as a laboratory. "Once we become a big company then predictability of execution is rewarded much more by markets and we'll have to experiment less," Libin says.
- 8 But much larger groups can also pilot new ideas, without betting the house. Unilever was able to test a radical shift to a four-day working week with an 18-month pilot in New Zealand, before rolling it out to some employees in Australia last year.
- 9 Elon Musk, who, through his leadership of SpaceX, knows more than most about how hard space is, has also brought real-time testing into the open at Twitter. The debate between those who want him to leave the familiar, predictable features of their favourite social media platform alone and those who applaud a state of rolling revolution has been vocal.
- 10 The cost and risk of a "perpetual pilot" approach are clearly lower for a digital company, which can change the customer experience at the touch of a button, or test multiple options simultaneously. Yet experimentation is a mindset unconstrained by a company's size, age, or sector. Whatever they think of Musk as chief executive, other companies could learn from Musk the experimenter's effort to involve users in his experiments.

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11 In the latest edition of Harvard Business Review, Rita McGrath and Ram Charan write about how digital technology can liberate managers and their teams to experiment in so-called “permissionless corporations”, characterised by flatter hierarchies, faster decision-making, and better customer relationships. They cite retailer Amazon, lift maker Kone and fund manager Fidelity as companies that have changed the pace and nature of the work they do using technology. “In the permissionless corporation, fast, inexpensive experimentation takes over from slow, involved analysis, enabling organisations to pounce on opportunities as they arise,” they write.

12 There are pitfalls to running a company on perpetual pilot. Andriopoulos says sometimes managers “hide behind a lot of experiments because they don’t want to move ahead and take a decision”. Eventually, Virgin Orbit and its partners will take another shot at re-establishing their flight heritage. But they should not stop experimenting. The alternative, as Libin says, would be “to be paralysed by not knowing what would go wrong”.

FT

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3 Understanding the article

a. Scan the article to find the missing name in each statement.

1. Employees at _____ work for six months and then all take two weeks of leave simultaneously.
2. _____ call for using digital technology to speed up decision-making and grab opportunities as they come up.
3. _____ thinks trial and error is a normal part of space ventures.
4. _____ thinks sometimes too much experimenting can be a way to avoid decision-making.
5. The author thinks that regardless of _____'s management skills, he is a good example for users being involved in testing.
6. _____ believes businesses with a culture that is accepting of failure fared better in the pandemic.
7. Virgin Orbit's first commercial satellite, the _____ exploded before it got to its target orbit.
8. _____ thinks that, as his company grows, it will be more profitable to experiment less.
9. The pandemic caused many companies to break away from the status quo in their working practices. An example of this is the _____'s summer summit.

4 Business language – word formation

a. Complete the statements with the noun form of the verb in brackets.

1. _____ is a mindset that should be cultivated in all organisations. (experiment)
2. The greatest risk of experimenting is the _____ to launch. (fail)
3. The best way to learn is through trial and _____. (err)
4. You should define the end-date at the beginning of the trial so you don't remain in _____ pilot. (perpetuate)
5. If you are too risk-averse and don't pounce on _____, you will always regret it. (opportune)
6. If at first you don't succeed, take another _____ at it. (shoot)

b. Change the statements so they reflect your opinions.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements and give reasons for your opinions.

- “Trial and error is how we advance.”
- “It’s very risky not to experiment.”
- “It’s best to simply make decisions without hiding behind perpetual experiments.”

6 Wider business theme – critical thinking & problem solving

a. Select an area of opportunity in your organisation. Answer the questions to analyse and propose a possible solution or improvement.

1. What solution would you like to pilot?
2. What are the risks of failure?
3. What are the risks of not experimenting?

b. Present a workflow to pilot your proposal. Try to be as persuasive as possible and use language from the activities on this worksheet. Consider the questions as you build your workflow.

1. Look at the stages of a trial below. Who will participate in each stage? How will outcomes be measured in each one?

- Define parameters, goals, timeline
- Choose testing group
- Develop a pilot solution
- Onboard participants
- Conduct the trial
- Get feedback
- Implement changes
- (Next you can get feedback again and develop a pilot solution and it can be a circular process.)

2. How will you know that the experimentation phase needs to be concluded?

Useful language

We can ... through trial and error.

While we risk ..., not experimenting carries the risk of ...

The pilot would be divided into ... stages.

We would ...

We would then launch ... when ...

In conclusion, ...