THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

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A Think Piece

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How do we create the environment in which the power of data and technology unleash improvements in social provision and unlock sustainable economic growth?

As a small-business leader for over a decade, I naturally pay significant attention to the wider market conditions we are operating in and trading conditions have not always been kind. Starting in the wake of the global financial crisis, austerity, Brexit uncertainty, COVID and the increasingly volatile economic and geopolitical environment of recent months has created its fair share of challenge and anxiety. Largely serving government institutions, navigating the vagaries of public sector procurement, we have nevertheless enjoyed some success in pursuing our passion, developing partnerships, securing growth, generating meaningful employment and leading innovation that influences our sector.

That said, I find myself repeatedly wrestling with the question of 'why is our sector moving forward so slowly?' This isn't a hunt for personal pity, rather it's a strategic question about the structural deficits that sometimes make it so difficult to thrive even if you have been patient and persistent in seeking to grow your company with all the care and creativity that is needed to nurture a small business.

While there is undoubtedly a continuing need to invest internally in developing talent, embedding culture and mobilising processes that are critical to any healthy organisation, there are external factors that can make a significant difference.

Just as business leaders face these challenges, there is mirrored debate for government. Desperate for growth to reboot the economy without enlarging the public sector, deepening the national debt and with rising demand for public services that address our present needs whilst averting the most unpalatable and indefensible costs to people and planet. We continue to look at stagnant productivity and wonder why the newly available technologies aren't stimulating the economic and social change we're looking for.

In recent months I have found myself talking on several occasions about the need for an 'enabling environment', terminology which is often reserved for educationalists and organisational psychologists, but which seems to speak powerfully to the interface of public and private sector enterprise. How do we create the environment in which the power of data and technology unleash improvements in social provision and unlock sustainable economic growth?

As someone who has spent the last twenty years operating at the intersectoral interface of public services, private enterprise and social concern it seems clear that the opportunity exists to embrace a more radically enabling approach, unlocking entrepreneurial potential and addressing serious social deficiencies in concert. To frame the discussion, here are some of the qualifying conditions that might make for a more enabling environment.

Ambitious Atmosphere

We should never underestimate how important it is to feel that we have something to aim for and the role of leadership in creating this atmosphere is key. When John F. Kennedy announced "We choose to go to the moon" he was creating an enabling environment. It raised the temperature, created a unifying purpose, unlocked resources, spawned whole branches of scientific endeavour. A singular goal that engaged millions with its breathtaking audacity. Targets of this clarity may be infrequent for our developed economies, but the role of leaders to galvanise the collective ambitions of the many, rather than serve the narrow ambitions of the few, remains paramount.

Positive Relationships

The quality of engagement in ideas that can transform society has been significantly weakened by the polarisation in our public discourse and concomitant degradation in relationships between those capable of bringing forward change. An enabling environment can only be created where there is genuine partnership around shared ambition. Where suspicions are set aside for a more collaborative way of working. Where expectations are clear, boundaries well regarded and processes easily navigable. This doesn't mean we need to do away with competition, but we embrace competition to drive the best behaviours (inspiring innovation and improving performance) rather than in its destructive and divisive effects.

Resource Availability & Market Certainty

Entrepreneurialism cannot survive in a vacuum, and whilst we often marvel at the creativity of breakthrough disruptors to create new markets apparently 'ex nihilo' these are rare exceptions. In The Entrepreneurial State, Mariana Mazzucato pointed to the key role that government actors have played in driving radical innovations in their early stages and there is a continuing requirement for public sector bodies to invest in innovation and provide market conditions that will permit great ideas to flourish. This cannot and will not offer guarantees of commercial success to all enterprise working in these markets but will create the economic oxygen that will allow the strongest to flourish.
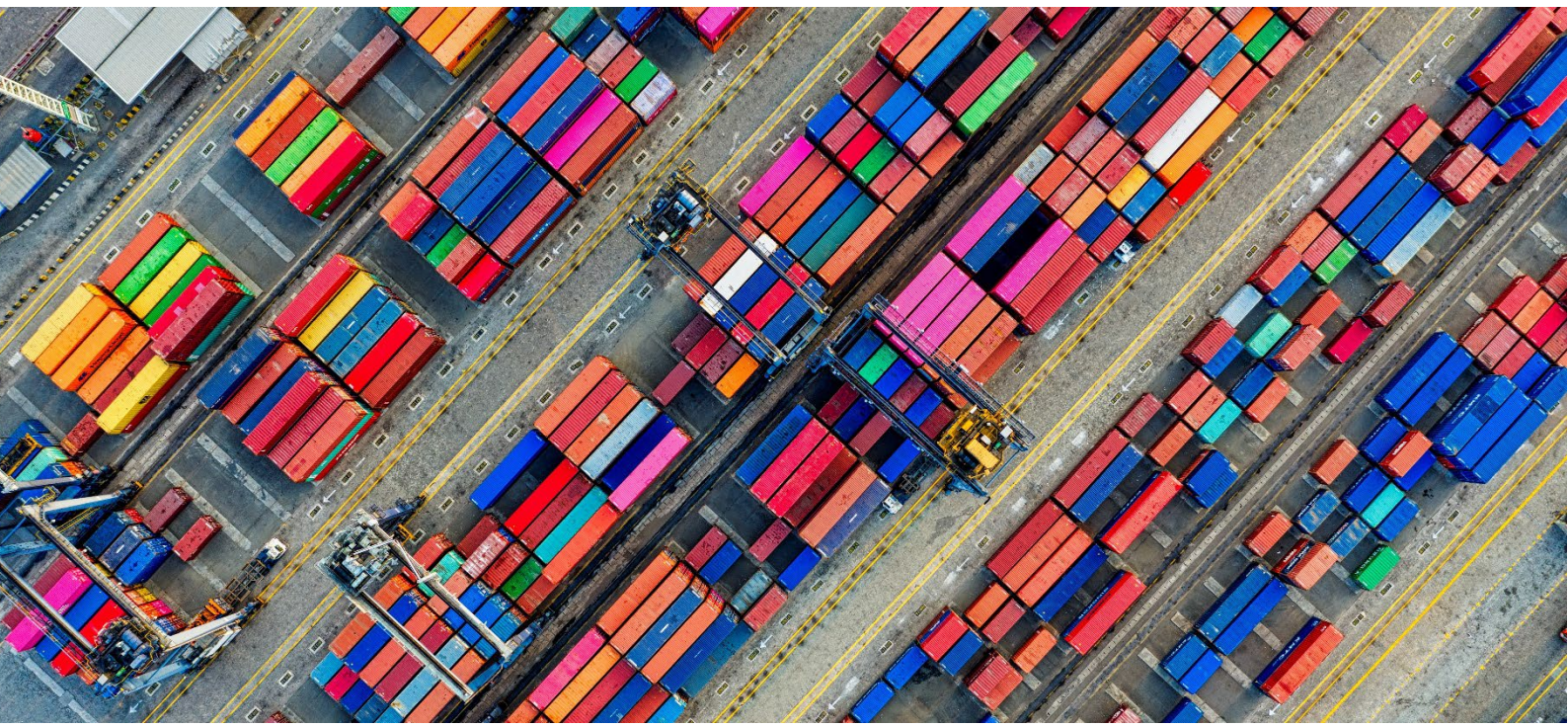
Multi-Sectoral Engagement

Addressing the complexity of any public policy area will necessitate extensive engagement with actors bringing diverse and differing perspectives. Sometimes these will be complementary, though often competing, and therefore synthesising these perspectives demand significant discipline and skill.

Vertical engagement – in most areas there will be tiers of responsibility, whether they are political jurisdiction or role-based divisions. The needs of service commissioners, designers, managers practitioners and regulators are all likely to be different but equally need to be understood.

Horizontal engagement – activity is rarely limited to one agency or organisation and the need to be broad as well as deep will persist. From politicians and public servants to product manufacturers, service providers, allied professionals, academics and advocacy groups, the opportunities will be best understood by engaging widely.

Push & Pull Innovation

When public sector actors want to improve efficiency or minimise liabilities they may push out a call for innovation, whereas inventors and entrepreneurs might see opportunities to pull the sector in a direction by embracing new technologies. These are both legitimate drivers for innovation, however, the former tends to be the commissioning model (where innovation is commissioned) whereas the latter is where real leaps are generally made. A more embracing view of innovation would provide for both push and pull elements, requiring a more significant role for open design competitions, hackathons, incubator programmes, technology partnerships and academic support.

Regulation & standards

Crucially, there is no point in designing products and services that cannot meet the needs of the service provider and this will be addressed by the appropriate regulatory standards and compliance framework that exists. Often projects are derailed because of administrative obstacles such as data sharing arrangements and format for data exchange, which could be harmonised and regulated to ensure that the most competitive environment is created without compromising on standards.

Clearly, my perspectives are shaped by the areas of public policy I have worked in and the kinds of services that I have worked to develop, but there surely exists the opportunity to aim for a more integrated, efficient and productive relationship between the entrepreneurs who are desperate to deliver social benefit and the public service providers who share their ambition.

Dan Campsall is an entrepreneur and business leader with significant experience in chairman, director and non-executive roles. He has extensive experience leading projects across all three sectors with a focus on training, research and innovation through big data analytics, machine learning and behavioural science, particularly in Road Safety. Find Dan on LinkedIn