

What Would Douglas Engelbart Do?

Gleaning Lessons from Our Favorite Visionary

by Björn Hartmann

For Doug Engelbart, inspiration struck on Interstate 101. In 1950, after a stagnant career as a technician at NASA, Engelbart was looking for a way to make a relevant contribution to society. But what to do? Maybe fight malaria in Africa by draining swamps? Wherever he looked, problems turned out to be more complex than he initially thought. Then the vision hit—people needed support in grappling with big issues, and computers would offer a way. Engelbart envisioned personal, interactive computing—you, sitting in front of your own screen, engaged in a real-time dialog with other knowledge workers around the world—solving problems together. At the time, no one had seen a computer run for longer than five minutes.

Engelbart's ultimate dream of augmenting our collective intelligence was maybe too ambitious to realize. However, en route, Engelbart and his group at Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in Menlo Park, CA came up with the entire paradigm of personal computing—they devised the workstation, invented the computer mouse, interactive word processing, online collaboration, and the first functioning hypertext system. Few individuals have had more of an influence on how we interact with technology than Engelbart. What can today's visionaries glean from his approach?

First off, be stubborn. Very stubborn. His adviser at Berkeley told him that he was wasting his time. For more than a decade, Engelbart couldn't find reliable financial support. He kept his project afloat with fringe grants for “wild-haired guys” because he was convinced that his ideas were important. The time it takes to convince others of your ideas is measured in years—so plan for the long haul.

Second, experiment. A lot. The mouse was not a fluke. The Augment group devised chorded keyboards, nose-controlled pointers, foot pedals, and knee controllers. They partnered with Herman Miller to develop experimental workstation furniture that you would straddle like a horse. Some innovations stuck, many did not. Expect failures—if nothing else, they make for entertaining anecdotes.

Third, put yourself out on the line. In 1968, Engelbart staged the “mother of all demos.” He introduced his mouse-controlled workstation to an audience of a thousand engineers in San Francisco by using it live. During the demonstration Engelbart brought up a data and video link with team member Bill Paxton in Menlo Park and showed how the two could remotely collaborate on a document in real time. Nothing like it had been done with computers before. It was a high-risk plan, but it paid off with immediate public recognition.

Finally, and, maybe most importantly, bite off more than you can chew. Improving the collective IQ of mankind was a larger-than-life goal. But for Engelbart it meant he never ran out of intermediate steps to accomplish. His most successful innovations were born out of necessity—they were the means needed to augment collaborative intelligence. Having a bigger picture helped him to solve the real-world problems at hand—and then move forward towards the next challenge. 🙌

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