TECHNOLOGY

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Let's get positive about our future in technology

We're entitled to feel optimistic about the future of technology in Ireland

THE BUSINESS OF TECH

Denis Collins

This is an interesting moment for Ireland, and I'm positive about the future. Yes, I used the 'P' word. An Irish economic recovery and its future are being intensely debated across political, social and media lines. This is a good thing; part of a healthy democratic system.

In the midst of this national discourse, we should take note of powerful global trends, that if leveraged correctly, will create significant growth opportunities for Ireland. These are accelerating global trends toward depletion of natural resources, rising demand for health, food and the increasing role of data.

These trends create collaborative opportunities for many industries, including agri-food, ICT, medical devices, pharma, among others – industries where Ireland has an acknowledged global expertise, presence and ecosystem.

In other words, we have a nearly-ready business platform for benefiting from global changes.

Most significantly, these are not simply FDI plays, but are promising opportunities to develop new ecosystems for growth for indigenous start-ups and entrepreneurs, a vital focus area for our national economy.

How can we exploit these trends? My experiences in global leadership roles with IBM, varied boards and as chairman of the board of European Tech Cluster tells me that the road ahead of us is not a simple one.

One common driver for aligning national needs and objectives with multiple industries is effective collaboration, innovation and utilisation of technology. Analytics, cloud, social media, mobility and big data are all playing an active part.

The second driver is that successful models are predicated on innovative collaboration across government, industry, academia and the public sector. This is complex and risky stuff that requires teamwork and strong, horizontal leadership. The models that endure and grow are the ones that know how to identify opportunity and consistently fulfil unmet needs.

In 2009, when the recession seemed never-ending, the IBM Innovation Centre started a project that has reverberated worldwide ever since. We knew we needed to innovate in new ways, with new partners. We also knew our Smarter Planet and Smarter Cities strategy could effectively harness the data explosion, and provide valuable solutions. But how?

Despite our global reach, strength and skills, we knew the next wave of innovation and data analytics will come from the smartest new start-ups.

The IBM team invited the best and brightest to apply to the new SmartCamp event, which would filter and integrate the best collaborative teams and skills. The value to the start-ups was and is access to top investors, mentors, serial entrepreneurs, IP law specialists, technology experts, access to software catalogue for test and development, and IBM cloud.

It also brought together into a powerful cluster IBM, its global business partners, research faculties, Dublin city, Enterprise Ireland, IDA, universities and incubators. Since its emergence in Ireland, the model has now spread across 20 countries.

Building on a similar model, the European Tech Cluster, an organisation comprising 300 multinationals and mid-size enterprises, and start-ups, is now driving industry collaboration with government, academia and public sector.

Programmes like Upstart and Dealstart team up multinationals and start-ups in a unique manner for their first deals, references and alliances.

Adopt A School is driving industry to engage in developing local skills and our next generation of leaders, while Smarter Senses is helping pre-school autistic children mainstream earlier, selection by EU Framework 7 as part of a key EU Cluster study with global expansion potential. Innovation, collaboration and technology aligned for commercial, academic and social results is working.

Meanwhile, the world and industry are also becoming more instrumented, interconnected and intelligent. These improvements are allowing leaders, multinationals, start-ups and citizens alike to take advantage of these smarter systems for progressive ideas.

We must embrace this change.

Across public and private sectors around the world a shift has happened in the way decisions are made.

A global survey of top risk managers carried out some years ago identified the number one method for spotting and assessing risks. It was "senior management intuition and experience".

Today, we live in a world marked by an explosion of data: varied in quality, types, sources and frequency. Every two days we generate the equivalent of all the data ever created from the beginning of human history through to 2002. This data comes from more than a trillion interconnected and intelligent objects and beings.

Data-driven insights rather than intuition and experience are now the most important element in deciding where and how to innovate.

But collaboration, innovation and technology is only part of the story. We must also think about the need to create and sustain the new drive toward entrepreneurship and business growth, culture change that data and analytics enable.

As economist Constantin Gurdgiev recently spotlighted, we can potentially look at supporting and scaling clustering initiatives in tech and R&D that deliver partnerships between existing multinationals and start-ups.

To do this, we should create direct links between existent clusters, such as the European Tech Cluster, and public procurement systems, as well as global tenders that come to Ireland.

Organisations that are succeeding in this new era are shifting their thinking from "knowledge is power" to "sharing knowledge is power". Evolving cultures to make decisions based less purely on intuition and more on analysis, collaboration across cluster, ecosystems and innovation.

The biggest difference between winners and losers isn't entirely based on size or resources. It is in the ability to embrace change. Are we ready?

Denis Collins is global leader with IBM, and chairman of the board, European Tech Cluster