



# “Discovery isn’t Enough”

John Naisbitt, an American who has lived in Europe for the past eight years, is one of the world’s most renowned futurists. *Medical Solutions* interviewed him at his apartment in Vienna, Austria.

By Haig Simonian

Naisbitt’s first book, *Megatrends*, published in 1982, has appeared in 57 countries and sold more than nine million copies. Since then, Naisbitt has gone on to write works about global trends, advising companies and governments along the way. His current focus is on Asia, particularly China, where he is spending increasing amounts of time.

**Mr. Naisbitt, thank you for finding time to talk to us. How do you understand the word ‘innovation’?**

NAISBITT: I associate it with the evolutionary development of technical knowledge. I don’t think there will be a ‘next big thing,’ as the media sometimes suggests. That’s just hype. We’re deeply into an evolutionary era, similar to the one in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Looking, as I do, at all the timelines covering very many years, it appears that great breakthroughs – and certainly technological ones – come in clusters. We get these clusters, and then we spend a very long time extending and perfecting what we’ve discovered during them.

Take the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an example, with the invention of the telephone, the automobile, the airplane, and electricity. Then we spent the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century extending and perfecting them. We’re still working on the airplane; we’re still working on all of them.

**What’s in the latest ‘cluster’?**

NAISBITT: At the start of the present century, it’s been information technology, biotechnology, and nanotechnology. We’re going to spend most of the 21<sup>st</sup> century evolving what we’re discovering now. It’s just beginning. We’re on the edge of so many things. Even with IT: The Internet was a great breakthrough, but it’s still primitive. I think 40 years from now, we’ll look back and say it was primitive. Likewise in biotechnology.

**Has the concept of innovation changed over time?**

NAISBITT: Obviously, the idea of ‘new’ is invariably bound to innovation. But it hasn’t always been linked to what I’d call ‘hard’ developments. How innovative was the language and construction of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*? Or certain structures in poetry? But certainly, we’re now in a technological era, and that’s a great reservoir for innovation.

Change is the key concept here. When things change, you get new relationships, creating new possibilities. But while they change, most things remain constant – take family, work, religion, education, even sport. So those people in business who say change is our only constant: nonsense.

**Has innovation always meant the same for all peoples or cultures over time?**

NAISBITT: The meaning of the word has been the same for a long time. But you have to probe beneath the surface. Take ancient China. They invented so many things: gunpowder, moveable type, and the origins of the compass. But they never did the development; they never moved on to the essential evolution of those breakthroughs. Just look at today’s Apple® iPhone™. It’s nothing really new, but what’s striking about it is that it has put three existing technologies together. That perfectly illustrates the evolutionary era we’re in. And, turning back to the Chinese, I can tell you: The new China has got the idea now.

**Let’s turn to business. For companies, is innovation the key competitive factor?**

NAISBITT: There’s a very good reason why today’s mantra in business is growth through innovation. It’s because we’re in a period of evolution, full of opportunities and chances to enhance what’s been done before.

It’s the innovative companies that are going to have the edge over their rivals. But just discovering something isn’t enough. It’s the skill to be able to refine, enhance, and apply that will count. So it’s about more than technology. Most people think about innovation in a purely product context, but innovation is as important in services as in products. Many companies are struggling with perfecting



John Naisbitt (left) with author Haig Simonian (right)

the innovation, for example, of online orders and reservations. The airlines are really struggling with this, but no one's got it quite right yet. We tend to forget that innovation in service is as important as purely technological product breakthroughs.

**Are medicine and medical technology any different?**

NAISBITT: At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at a forum on what had been the most important breakthroughs of the previous hundred years, most people identified the 'hard' technologies – literally hard, like airplanes. In medicine too, there have been some outstanding developments. One of the most extraordinary, to my mind, has been prosthetics, and, specifically, artificial limbs. The very fact that science has come up with artificial legs that might allow handicapped athletes to run in races is extraordinary. Even more extraordinary, some competitors are already claiming that will provide an unfair advantage. What a tribute to science! But I would say the

most important developments have come from what I describe as 'soft' technology – namely, the development of antibiotics. Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, antibiotics have prolonged the lives of uncounted millions, from the great to ordinary people in the street. In medicine, most of the businesses involved are what I would describe as 'hard.' However, I think it may be the 'softer' technologies, especially biotech, that will provide the most consequential developments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

**Why is that?**

NAISBITT: Because the development of what we already know will result in the human race being in charge of its own evolution. The same genetic technology that will allow us to cure and eliminate such terrible diseases as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's also allows us to have progeny that are taller, smarter, faster, more beautiful or whatever, and no one is talking about it.

**So not all innovations are good?**

This touches on the question of our relation to technology. It's a question of what I call the 'ecology' of technology. In nature, when things in a habitat change, like the introduction of a new species or a shifting climate, it changes the relationship within the habitat, but human beings unquestioningly introduce new technologies into their own habitat.

Whenever a new technology is introduced into our lives, it seems to me we should ask some questions. For example: By doing so, what would be enhanced? What would be diminished? And what would be replaced? Our relation to technology is the most unexamined relationship we have.

**Are you at all confident that we're starting to ask such questions?**

NAISBITT: No, I'm not. We've left it to the marketplace to sort matters out. But I think we ought to take greater charge of our own destiny. Our salvation is that things we expect to happen always happen more slowly than we imagine. It is the surprises, like AIDS or 9/11, that overwhelm us.