Digital Entrepreneurship: A Path to a More Inclusive Digital Future

TREO Talk Paper

Jonathan P. Allen
University of San Francisco
jpallen@usfca.edu

Abstract

Digital innovation has created unprecedented wealth in recent decades, but not always the same degree of new opportunity. Technology sector wealth creation has been concentrated in a relatively small group of companies, founders, and executives (Allen, 2017). The technology industries have not earned a reputation of being inclusive in their workplaces, in their educational processes, or in their venture funding.

Every academic discipline concerned with digital technology now has an opportunity, and an obligation, to make innovation inclusive in the digital era. This is especially true for Information Systems, as the discipline focused on the design and application of digital technology to human endeavor, whether it be code, data, algorithm, or device. While more education for labor market skills is helpful (code academies, data science courses, etc.), as is attention to more inclusive recruiting practices and workplace environments, these moves may not be enough. The total share of the economy devoted to the labor market, or wages, has been declining across the industrialized world (Autor et al, 2017). Inclusion in the growing parts of the economy may require innovation outside of the labor market.

Promoting entrepreneurship in the digital era can be part of the solution, if it is sufficiently inclusive. Entrepreneurship and new ventures do much more than provide financial success for founders, and new products for customers. Entrepreneurship keeps an economy vibrant and diverse, reflecting the values and aspirations of the people who depend on it.

Can digital entrepreneurship be taught? We think so. Digital technology makes creating a new business venture easier in many ways, but also creates new challenges. We have guided many different types of students, mostly non-technical in background, through a process of design, prototyping, and experimentation that results in the creation of a new digital venture (Allen and Wright, 2015). Learning entrepreneurship is more effective when it includes real-world experience, and digital entrepreneurship provides an exciting new way of starting in business cheaply and quickly (Allen, 2019).

Will digital entrepreneurship lead to a more inclusive digital future? There will not be a single solution to this challenge, but digital entrepreneurship is an opportunity to get new groups and new skill sets into the room. It provides a different path from the usual code and statistics bootcamps, foregrounding skills such as user experience, customer acquisition, and the critical pursuit of a viable business idea in the face of uncertain evidence. It is worth trying on a larger scale.

References


