

Luck, insight – or social capital?

Elements of serendipity

Discovery consists of
seeing what
everybody has seen
and thinking what
nobody has thought

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi



The background of serendipity

A Persian fable from the fifth century : "The Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Serendip"

(Serendip is the ancient name of Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka)

Horace Walpole, a British novelist, architect and politician (1717 - 1797) was fascinated by the fable and started to write about "serendipity" in his widespread correspondence

The phenomena was further elaborated and studied by sociologist Robert K. Merton and various others

Serendipity is one of the most difficult English words to translate, voted also to TOP 10 most beautiful English words

Cases throughout the history

Columbus, Newton, Archimedes, Watt, Röntgen, Walpole

**Penicilin, Teflon, Post It, artificial rubber, X-rays, SMS, Viagra, steam engine
.....**

3M, Pixar, Google, Virgin, MIT Media Lab

**List of books: Merton, Roberts, Eyre, Jaworski, Taleb, Hagel&Davison&Brown,
Hoffman, Lane&Becker....**

Some definitions

"lucky accident" --- too simple, luck overrated

"Finding something valuable while looking for something else" – is better

Original Walpole's definition driven from the Persian fable:

"They (the princes) were always making discoveries, by accidents and by sagacity, of things of value that they were not in quest of" (*Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable 1977*)

"Serendipity is the quality of mind, which through awareness, sagacity and good fortune allows one to frequently discover something good while seeking something else" --- RECOMMENDED!

**Ongoing SerenA research project in U.K. defines it with three elements :
unexpected event or encounter → insight → value**

Luis Pasteur: " Fortune favors a prepared mind"

Plan, design, harness?

I have found several terms describing the ways to harness serendipity :

"Planned serendipity" Lane&Becker

"Design for serendipity" Hagel et al

"Maximize serendipity around you" Taleb

"Engineering serendipity" ??

"Serendipity Machine" "Serendipity Engine" – these both sound way to brutal, like "push-society" terms, like the remains from the industrial age

I use "Harnessing serendipity" on individual and community level and

"Serendipity management" on institutional and organizational level

Luck

Luck is overrated in serendipity discussions – Why?

- **Luck is depending on the preparedness and ability to discover – and pure luck is just luck, like winning in lottery.**
- **Value might be recognizable long time afterwards – even years after the encounter or accident – pure luck, you know it immediately, value is an instant experience**

Insight

Insight is the key element in serendipity.

Insight is based on:

- **your personal qualities**
- **your relations to your communities and network(s)**

Insight = "the ability to discover":

- **be prepared on intellectual and mental level**
- **have a diverse network – enough trusted strong ties but also a variety of interesting and serendipitous weak ties**

Social capital – “reverse serendipity”

Social capital - the amount of the non-material assets in your community and your networks (Alexander Dill), elements like:

- * trust**
- * insight, preparedness, experience**
- * diversity**
- * collective wisdom**

“Reverse serendipity” --- an unexpected encounter or event, yet the insight comes from somebody else who is involved with it and who you trust (and he/ she trusts you), and the value comes to you (or both)

Social capital – Living Bridges

#One can not buy serendipity, so financial capital does not help

#One can harness social capital (strong ties) and increase the likelihood of benefiting from serendipity → "reverse serendipity" approach

#One can use social capital (weak ties) to create unexpected conditions like unexpected encounters, unexpected events, unexpected combinations of competences

Willi Schroll described yesterday the personal characteristics of Living Bridge

- **passion, curiosity, empathy, insight, openness, courage**
- **→ these are the key characteristics to be cultivated on the personal level!**
- **Bonding <> Bridging <> Linking**

Meurs Challenger graphs

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ype=3&theater](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151162995098472&set=a.10151162995083472.462688.787648471&type=3&theater)

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Near future – Living Bridges

Inspiring collaborative tasks ahead – a proposal to you:

- 1) To explore more this "reverse serendipity" paradigm**
- 2) To create a "Living Bridger's manual for serendipity"**

Respect serendipity!

Further information:

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