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Caveat Innovator: Status-quo thinking and legacy technologies are slowly strangling your future

**BY JOHN P. DERHAM, FOUNDER & CEO, EASL**

The New Threshold

There's a moment just before something big happens when time seems to stretch and hold its breath. That's where we are now. Not the "brink" of disaster or the "precipice" of crisis—those words are tired and don't quite fit the moment. We're on the "threshold." It's a pause, a choice, an invitation all rolled into one.

Look around: Technology is everywhere, change is constant, and yet—most people are just standing in the doorway. The world offers us a chance to enter a new age defined by possibility, but many are frozen, half in and half out. Why? Because the threshold is unfamiliar. Out there lies uncertainty, ambiguity, and the unknown—and for many people and businesses, that's enough to keep them rooted in place, clinging to the familiar.

But the threshold isn't a place to linger. It's where you decide: Will you stand in the comfort of what you've always known, or will you step into what's possible? This moment is about more than just adopting the latest technology or following the crowd. It's about recognizing that a new set of rules, tools, and opportunities is waiting, just on the other side.

Standing on the threshold means confronting both hope and fear. You can't control everything beyond it, but you can choose to move forward anyway. The new age is coming, ready or not. The only real question is whether you're willing to meet it.
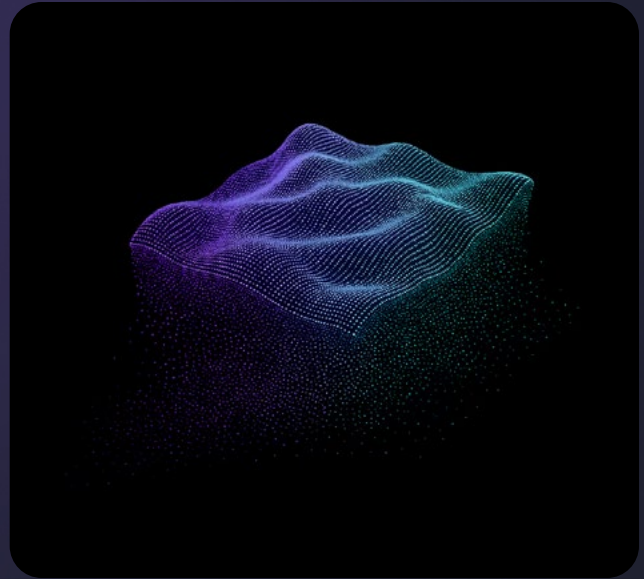
The Legacy of the Last Innovation Wave

The past two decades looked like an era of nonstop innovation. There's no question we've seen significant changes—global supply chains, smartphones, the cloud, all the rest. But scratch the surface, and you'll find that for most organizations, the last wave wasn't about doing new things. It was about efficiency. The star of the show wasn't new ideas—it was cost-cutting.

Remember the great outsourcing boom? Back-office operations, call centers, entire departments packed up and shipped overseas. The technology that made it possible—better connectivity and cheaper data storage—was hailed as revolutionary. But that wasn't transformation, it was optimization. We wrapped old processes in cheaper packages and called it innovation.

This kind of progress was easy to sell because it felt safe. It promised more profit with less disruption, but moving work to a different time zone isn't the same as reimagining what that work could be. We weren't innovating—we were adapting, playing the same game with cheaper pieces.

That mindset stuck. Too many leaders still see innovation as faster execution of the same old playbook. Technology becomes a tool to optimize, not to question whether the task is worth doing at all. Organizations are full of people who know how to streamline, but not how to rethink.

We're paying for that now. The efficiency experts of the last era—the ones who drove outsourcing and cost-cutting—often struggle to imagine what's possible today. They know how to trim. Do they know how to build?

The new threshold demands more than rearranging the furniture. It asks us to rebuild the house. But first, we have to recognize that the legacy of our last so-called innovation wave isn't getting us where we want to go. The very skills that made us successful in the past may now be slowing us down.

Why Most People Aren't Innovating Now

If we're standing on the threshold of something new, why aren't more people—more companies, more leaders—actually stepping through?

In many organizations, the most capable technologists are often incentivized, albeit indirectly, to avoid true accountability *for change.* That's

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essentially the fault of the C-suites and boards' expectations. Meanwhile, technology departments have become independent and untouchable fiefdoms, fluent in bespoke jargon, dismissing friction as "user error."

Instead of stepping forward, many corporate pundits—often those praising the future of their vision of AI—are **standing at the threshold of their corporate attics and looking inward.**

There's a psychology to this. Humans are creatures of habit. We crave certainty, and nothing delivers that quite like yesterday's routines and last year's successes. **It's like an old attic**—packed with trophies, playbooks, and comfortable shoes you don't even wear anymore but can't bring yourself to throw out. The attic is safe. You know where everything is. No surprises. There is no risk of looking foolish or making the "wrong" move.

For companies, it's even worse. **The bigger the organization, the deeper the attic: layers of sacred cows, KPIs, and institutional memory.** People get promoted for optimizing what already works, not for blowing it up and starting over. So, we slap new labels on the old processes, paint over the cracks, and call it "digital transformation."

The fear is real, and it's rarely about technology. It's about status, reputation, and the possibility of failure. Trying something new means opening the

door to criticism, sunk costs, and the unknown. Most people will choose comfort over possibility, even if that comfort quietly erodes beneath them.

And the myth that innovation is only for "visionaries" or "geniuses" doesn't help. If you're not Steve Jobs or Elon Musk, why bother? Why risk looking foolish?

But that mindset is the trap. The very things people avoid—ambiguity, discomfort, risk—are where real innovation lives. Those who stay in the attic might feel safe, but all they're doing is guaranteeing they'll miss what's coming next.

Innovation, at its core, is not about technology. It's about mindset—a willingness to be uncomfortable, to question the rules, and to act before the path is clear. Most people aren't innovating because they wait for permission, certainty, or someone else to go first.

But the threshold isn't going anywhere. The question is: How long do you want to wait?

The Mindset of Winning and Adaptation

Let's set the record straight: Winning isn't about a trick play, a lucky break, or being born with some special gene. It's a mindset—a way of seeing the world and shaping your behavior to stay ahead. In my experience, the teams, people, and companies who truly win do so because they adapt faster, learn better, and refuse to be defined by the last round.

You can spot this mindset a mile away. Winners don't fixate on the scoreboard; they focus on the process, the next play, and the things they can control. When the environment shifts, they don't resist. They ask, "What can I do with this?"

Adaptation is their secret weapon. Evolution didn't favor the strongest or the smartest, but the most adaptable. The same is true for business, sports, and life itself. The rules of the game will keep changing. Will you change with them, or will you double down on what used to work and hope for the best?

This is where most people get tripped up. They treat winning as a one-time event—something you achieve and then hold onto forever. But real winning is structural. It's about building habits, systems, and cultures that can absorb shock, learn quickly, and pivot when needed. It means seeing setbacks and feedback and uncertainty as fuel.

Innovation demands this mindset. The comfort zone is a graveyard for original ideas. When you stop adapting, you start losing—maybe not today, but soon enough.

In this era we're entering—where AI and rapid change rewrite the rules weekly—that mindset isn't optional. It's table stakes.

The people and organizations that win will be those willing to let go of the past, challenge their assumptions, and build for a world that refuses to stand still.
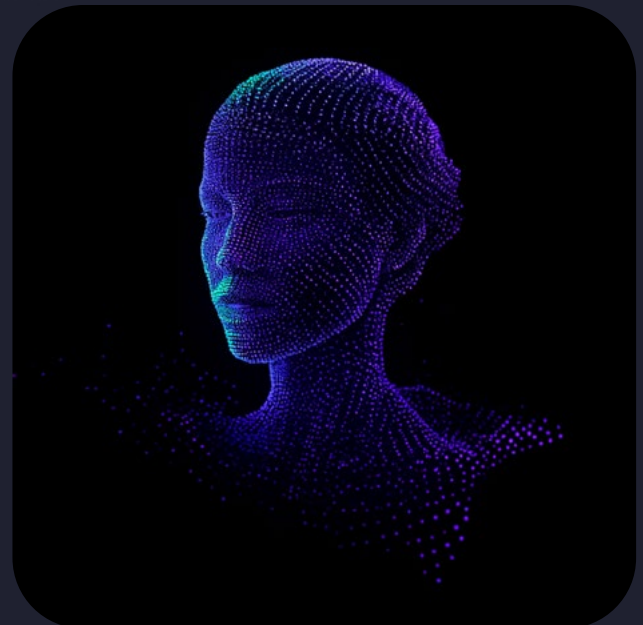
What the New Age Demands: AI, Platforms, and Unlearning

Let's talk about what's really different this time. We've seen tech waves before—ERP implementations, web adoption, mobile expansion, even the rise of ETL tools. The playbook used to be simple: buy the tool, plug it in, get a boost. But the age we're stepping into isn't just about adding tools. It's about rethinking the fundamentals.

AI and next-generation platforms are changing the game at a structural level. This isn't bolt-on software. The businesses that win now are the ones that see technology as an opportunity to completely redesign what's possible, not just automate the status quo.

But here's the catch:

True innovation in this era is less about what you learn and more about what you're willing to unlearn.

Let that sink in. Most organizations are drowning in knowledge—process manuals, best practices, and "proven methods." But the very expertise that got you here can hold you back. The habits and assumptions that worked in the last era are the same ones that will quietly sabotage you in the next.

Unlearning is hard. It means letting go of mastery that no longer serves you. It's uncomfortable to realize that "the way we've always done it" is less a roadmap and more a rut.

Platforms compound this pressure. The best ideas now come from ecosystems—open APIs, rapid partnerships, and tools that connect, flex, and evolve. The leaders won't be those with the biggest budgets, but those with the most adaptable cultures.

Still, most companies are fighting the last war. *They treat AI as a feature, not a foundation.* They're looking for a silver bullet—a product they can buy or a consultant they can hire—that will let them keep their structure and simply run faster. But that's not how this new age works.

The real opportunity (and risk) is cultural. Can you create an environment where curiosity beats certainty? Where experimentation is rewarded, and failure is treated as data, not disgrace? Can you let go of legacy logic, even if it made you successful once? The future is here for the people and organizations who are willing to start fresh—to unlearn, rebuild, and see ambiguity as the ultimate green field.

We're not talking about doing the same thing faster. We're talking about inventing entirely new ways to win.

Practical Steps: Changing Your Focal Point from Inward to Outward

Recognizing you're stuck is only the beginning. The big question is: How do you actually get out? How do you move yourself—or your organization—from the comfort of old models into the wide-open, sometimes uncomfortable space of real innovation?

Here are seven practical ways to step through the threshold:

1. Admit You're Stuck

It sounds simple, but honesty is the hardest part. Take a clear-eyed look at your habits, processes, and business models. Are you refining the past or building for the future? Call it out without blame or shame. You can't change what you won't confront.

2. Question the Sacred Cows

Every organization has them: the unwritten rules, the untouchable workflows, the "we've always done it this way" assumptions. Make them visible. Then ask: Why do we do this? Is it serving us, or just keeping us comfortable?

3. Foster a Culture of Curiosity

Hire, reward, and promote people who ask better questions—not just those with perfect answers. The people who thrive in uncertainty aren't necessarily the most intelligent or most experienced; they're the ones who stay curious. Encourage experimentation. Give teams room to try, fail, and learn fast. Make it safe to admit what you don't know.

4. Start Small, but Start Now

You don't have to bet the whole company on an untested idea—pilot something. Run a small experiment. Permit a team to "break the rules" in a controlled environment. Prove that learning—real, uncomfortable, often messy learning—is not just tolerated but celebrated.

5. Invest in Unlearning

Training is important. Unlearing is essential. Build space to reflect: What habits hold us back? What skills or "expertise" no longer apply? Let go of what worked before so you can make room for what comes next.

6. Redefine Winning

Stop rewarding just for hitting old targets faster or cheaper. Build incentives around adaptability, collaboration, and speed of learning. Winning isn't about protecting what you have—it's about pursuing what could be together.

7. Connect Beyond Your Walls

Innovation thrives at the intersections. Build networks, not just org charts. Invite outsiders—customers, partners, competitors—to challenge your thinking. Use platforms and open systems. The best solutions rarely come from within the attic.

The Call to Step Through

History is full of people and organizations that lingered—clutching the past, eyes fixed on the floor—while others, no smarter or more prepared, stepped through and changed everything.

Standing on the threshold is uncomfortable. It's uncertain, unpredictable, and—if we're honest—a little lonely. But this is precisely where the magic happens. Out there, past the familiar, is where the future is built. The new age of AI, platform thinking, and radical adaptation won't find you in your comfort zone. You have to choose to step toward it.

This isn't a call for reckless leaps or blind faith in technology. It's a call to recognize that the habits and beliefs that got you here won't take you further. Winning in this new era means accepting ambiguity, embracing continuous unlearning, and celebrating those small, brave steps into the unknown.

Most will stay put. But the future belongs to those who step through.

It's not about being ready. No one is ever fully ready. It's about being willing. The door is open. The rest is up to you.

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ABOUT JOHN P. DERHAM

John Derham is a co-founder of EASL Tech, Inc. and a longtime architect of advanced data and analytics platforms. With deep experience spanning media, financial services, and e-commerce, he's known for building high-performing teams, bridging the gap between technical and executive leadership, and developing technology that delivers measurable impact. He holds a degree in Financial Analytics from the Villanova School of Business.

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