

The best thing since sliced bread: the innovation lessons in depth

Oct 23, 2026 · @john.bessant

Why this case is worth studying

Most origin stories in this series are about where ideas come from. This one is about what happens next: why some obviously good ideas take hold in weeks, while others — just as good, sometimes better — wait decades, or never spread at all. Sliced bread, boiled drinking water, lime juice against scurvy and a hybrid seed corn ignored by a sceptical Iowa farmer are all variations on the same problem every teacher, trainer or product team eventually meets: proving an idea works is not the same as getting people to use it.

1. Adoption is a social process, not an information problem

The idea. Everett Rogers' diffusion-of-innovations theory (1962) argues that people take up new things mainly by watching and trusting other people, not by weighing evidence on its own merits.

In the case. Rogers' own father refused to plant higher-yielding, drought-resistant hybrid seed corn until he watched it stand tall on the neighbouring farm during the 1936 drought. The episode draws the same line to today's AI figures (MIT NANDA, 2025; PwC Australia, 2026), where senior executives already use the tools far more than the staff who would need to trust and copy them.

Contrast cases. Bryce Ryan and Neal Gross's 1943 study of hybrid corn adoption among Iowa farmers is often credited as the founding empirical case for diffusion research — check it against Rogers' own account. A sharper contrast is Ignaz Semmelweis, whose handwashing evidence was rejected by his own profession for decades, despite being demonstrably right.

For discussion. If adoption runs on trust and observation rather than evidence, what does that imply for introducing a new method, or AI, into a team that already has a trusted way of working?

2. Design determines diffusion speed: the five attributes

The idea. Rogers scores how fast an innovation spreads by five perceived attributes: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability.

In the case. Sliced bread scores five out of five: clearly better, compatible with the new pop-up toaster, simple, cheap to try, and visibly boosted a neighbour's breakfast table.

Contrast cases. Boiled drinking water in 1950s Peru, and citrus against scurvy from 1601 to the Royal Navy's eventual adoption in 1795, both had overwhelming relative advantage but almost none of the other four attributes — and both took vastly longer to spread, or never fully did.

For discussion. Score a live project, or your organisation's own use of AI, against the five attributes. Which is weakest, and what single change would move it?

3. Users finish the job

The idea. "Innofusion" (James Fleck, 1988) and the wider literature on user innovation (Eric von Hippel) both argue that the people who use an innovation often do as much to make it work as the people who invented it.

In the case. Otto Rohwedder's slicer didn't work at scale until a baker, Gustav Papendick, invented the cardboard tray that stopped sliced loaves falling apart in transit — a fix the inventor hadn't needed, because he wasn't the one wrapping loaves all day.

Contrast cases. Von Hippel's research on "lead users" found the same pattern decades later: windsurfers modifying their own boards and rigs years before manufacturers caught up and sold the result back to them.

For discussion. Where in your own innovation process do users already finish the job — and do you have a way of noticing it and learning from it, or does it just happen unseen?

4. The technology is the easy part

The idea. New tools tend to show their value only once an organisation relearns how to work around them, not simply once they are installed — a pattern sometimes called the productivity paradox.

In the case. Rohwedder had a working idea by 1912, yet nothing changed until 1928: sixteen years in which the technology was essentially ready while the trust, habit and marketing needed to use it were not. The episode draws the same line to AI today, where the tools work but the "learning gap" MIT identified is doing the damage.

Contrast cases. Paul David's well-known history of electrification (1990) makes the same point at industrial scale: factories took decades to benefit from electric motors, because the gains only arrived once factory layouts were redesigned around them, not merely rewired.

For discussion. Is an organisation's AI adoption stuck on the technology, or on the redesign around it that nobody has done yet?

5. Tacit knowledge: things you can't write down

The idea. Michael Polanyi's idea of tacit knowledge — what we know but cannot easily say — became a management concept through Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi's *The Knowledge-Creating Company* (1995).

In the case. Matsushita's engineers couldn't get a bread machine to work from a recipe alone. A member of their team apprenticed herself to a hotel's head baker to learn the "twist and stretch" he used without being able to describe it, then translated that physical knowledge into a mechanism.

Contrast cases. The same logic sits behind Toyota's long-standing practice of rotating engineers through the shop floor rather than relying only on written standards, to pick up know-how manuals never quite capture.

For discussion. What does an organisation know how to do that has never been written down — and what would it take to capture it the way Tanaka did?

6. The long gap between launch and lift-off

The idea. Diffusion follows an S-curve, and there is often a long, uncertain gap between an innovation's launch and the point where the early majority finally takes it up (Rogers; see also Geoffrey Moore's "chasm" between early adopters and the mainstream, 1991).

In the case. Even with five-for-five attributes and a 2,000% local sales jump in two weeks, sliced bread took five more years, and Wonder Bread's national marketing, to go from a Missouri novelty to the American normal.

Contrast cases. The pandemic sourdough boom of 2020 shows the opposite shape: a diffusion curve that rose fast on social media, then partly reversed once routines changed back — a useful case of an S-curve running in both directions.

For discussion. Going by this episode's own lessons, is AI currently stuck before its "chasm," or past it and simply spreading unevenly?

Using this case - some things to explore

1. **Debate motion:** "This house believes that having better evidence is usually enough to get an innovation adopted." Use the Lancaster/scurvy and Los Molinas water-boiling stories as the strongest ammunition for the opposition.
2. **Strategy exercise:** score a real, current project — or an organisation's own rollout of some new tool — against Rogers' five attributes, identify the weakest one, and design a single change that would raise it.
3. **Personal reflection:** think of an innovation you resisted for years and finally adopted. What, or who, actually changed your mind — evidence, or your own version of "the neighbour's corn"?

Related episodes and cases

- [Peanut-Powered Innovation \(George Washington Carver\)](#) — Carver's work promoting peanuts as an alternative crop for struggling cotton farmers offers some rich lessons on adoption.
- [Partying with Innovation \(Tupperware\)](#) — how Brownie Wise's home-party sales model succeeded where the product alone had struggled, and how Earl Tupper later pushed her out.

Further reading and links

The story

- John Bessant, ["The best thing since sliced bread"](#) (2019).

Primary and freely available sources

- [Otto Rohwedder, Lemelson Center \(Smithsonian/MIT\)](#)
- [Bread-slicing machine, object record, National Museum of American History \(Smithsonian\)](#)
- [A Missouri town almost forgot it invented the greatest thing since anything: sliced bread, St Louis Public Radio / KCUR \(2022\)](#)

- [Sliced bread, Wikipedia](#)
- [Otto Frederick Rohwedder, Wikipedia](#)
- [Everett Rogers, Wikipedia](#)
- [Diffusion of innovations, Wikipedia](#)

Key academic references, in full

- Everett M. Rogers, [Diffusion of Innovations](#), 5th edn (New York: Free Press, 2003). ISBN 978-0-7432-2209-9.
- Bryce Ryan and Neal C. Gross, "The Diffusion of Hybrid Seed Corn in Two Iowa Communities," *Rural Sociology* 8(1) (1943): 15–24. [Listing](#).
- James Fleck, [Innofusion or Diffusation? The Nature of Technological Development in Robotics](#), PICT Policy Research Paper No. 9 (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1988) — the source of "innofusion."
- Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, [The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). ISBN 978-0-19-509269-1.
- Michael Polanyi, [The Tacit Dimension](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966; reissued 2009). ISBN 978-0-226-67297-7. Free to read at the Internet Archive.
- Paul A. David, ["The Dynamo and the Computer: An Historical Perspective on the Modern Productivity Paradox,"](#) *American Economic Review* 80(2) (1990): 355–361. Free PDF.
- Geoffrey A. Moore, [Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling High-Tech Products to Mainstream Customers](#) (New York: HarperBusiness, 1991).

Video material

- [Diffusion of Innovations Theory: Explained \(YouTube\)](#) — a short, general explainer of Rogers' model, useful as pre-work before the session.
- [Chillicothe Murals: The History of the Town Behind Sliced Bread \(YouTube\)](#) — local history of the Rohwedder/Chillicothe story, good for the "On screen" material in Act 1.
- [This Day in History: Chillicothe Baking Company sells first commercial, machine-sliced bread \(KCTV5\)](#) — a short news clip marking the anniversary.
- [More from the Managing Innovation YouTube channel](#) — keynotes, interviews and short films on innovation
- [Song: "Proud to be a Laggard" \(YouTube\)](#) — John's own song for this episode, already linked from the episode catalogue.