



NAVIGATING THE NINJA FUTURE

Gary Shapiro

We are entering a new era of innovation.

The pace of change is accelerating. More fundamental human problems will be solved in the next two decades than have been solved in the last two centuries.

Self-driving vehicles will dramatically reduce the more than one million driving-related fatalities around the world each year. Diseases will be cured and treated by focused ultrasound and gene-specific treatments. Food production and clean water supplies to sustain the world's growing population will improve. We will reduce our reliance on limited energy resources such as coal and oil. We will outsource dangerous and tedious work to robots.

These innovations will bring with them tremendous changes—and tremendous challenges. And in the midst of this change, stability seems sensible—but sameness is not a winning strategy. In our fast-moving economy, businesses and governments that stick with what's worked in the past will be left in the past.

In my last book, I coined the phrase “ninja innovation” to describe people and organizations that demonstrate the attributes of ancient ninjas—Japanese warriors who survived battles against extraordinary odds. Using stealth and surprise, they triumphed over adversaries, despite often being outgunned and outmaneuvered by fierce competition or hostile conditions.



But in the years since, I've learned that the characteristics of the "ninja" don't apply simply to individual innovators or organizations. Ninja attributes are characteristics that will power our future. Everyone—from individuals to small businesses, from corporations to nations—will need to adopt the flexibility, creativity, and ingenuity of the ninja to succeed.

The future belongs not to siloed industries or solo endeavors, but to the groups that can bring together expertise from all different industries, backgrounds and walks of life. What follows are a few ways individuals, companies, and nations can adopt the attitude of the ninja.

Ninja Individuals, Ninja Consumers

Although I can think of dozens of principles that can transform the average person into a future ninja, two lessons strike me as particularly important: be curious and be collaborative.

The key to the ninja future is access to information. And thanks to innovation in IT, that's never been easier. But for many of us, the fact that information is so readily accessible—just a few taps and swipes away—has caused us to take it for granted.

That's why curiosity separates the ninja from the normal. Curiosity leads to better decision making. Everyone is afraid of looking stupid. But asking questions is a life skill that's worth practicing every day. Plus, you never know when inspiration will strike or where your next idea will come from. Keeping your ears—and mind—open will allow you to ask the questions and make the connections that will keep you ninja-nimble.

Collaboration goes hand-in-hand with curiosity.

There's no shame admitting you don't know something; there's a good deal of shame in being too proud to ask. Other people have different backgrounds and experiences, and that means that they have insights that we'll never share unless we ask. The more you listen to your customers, your colleagues, and your teammates, the better—that's where you'll get the best ideas.

This goes for ninja leaders as well.

Great CEOs know they are not always right, not always the best source for new ideas, and could not have achieved success without teamwork. They drive transformational change by listening to other people's ideas, adopting the best ones, and encouraging everyone in the company's orbit—including customers and external partners—to pitch ideas for the next ninja innovation.

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The pace of innovation isn't going to slow down anytime soon. Every business, no matter its size or sector, will have to change to survive. But future ninjas will be the individuals and companies that thrive. And a critical component of that future flourishing is refusing to plan ahead.

It sounds counterintuitive, I know. But my experience at the Consumer Technology Association (CTA)TM and at other companies on whose boards I have served has taught me that the standard strategic plan is a lengthy document that's time-consuming to create, requires a high level of detail, and is premised on tactics for addressing an uncertain future. It often discourages quick, opportunistic moves and decisions down the line. Business leaders tied to a strategic plan are more inclined to double down on losing strategies and tactics, instead of pivoting when circumstances change. Too often, they end up following "the plan" rather than the market.

I am not suggesting that corporations reject strategy altogether. But our strategies must be tailored to the times; they must be big, change-oriented, and measurable. For us at CTA, a single page of big goals is enough to equip us to navigate the ninja future for half a decade.

Another critical component of success for corporate ninjas is leveraging your strengths. Those strengths likely look very different depending on the size of your enterprise. Big companies have resources. They have money. They have people. They have customers. They have specialists in marketing, sales, distribution, manufacturing, law, and public relations. They are big machines ready to do, well, big things.

That, of course, brings its own challenges. Larger companies often waste money and time because they can't easily modify bad ideas. Big companies can't change course too quickly; they aren't that agile.

Startups, entrepreneurs, and smaller companies, by contrast, have one huge advantage over big companies: speed. They can move light-years faster without five or ten levels of approval, each incentivized to kill, table, or delay any idea with an element of risk.

The result of these different strengths is that, all too often, big and small companies fear each other—which is unfortunate because the truth is, they need each other to succeed.

The key? Collaboration, of course.

Small companies have vast opportunities because big companies need them in order to stay adaptive and nimble. Big companies can buy smaller companies. They can invest in them. They can partner with them. They can mentor them. By working together, they can change the course of the ninja future.

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Ninja Nations

Thanks to my position as head of CTA, I've been fortunate enough to travel all over the world and see what innovation looks like in different countries. Our International Innovation Scorecard identifies the critical areas of national policy that spur innovation. I've also heard from innovators across the globe at CES®, gaining remarkable perspective on the benefits and challenges of innovating in various nations. One trend that's held remarkably consistent is that ninja nations regulate like Goldilocks.

In “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” our heroine tests porridge, chairs, and beds in search of the perfect balance—not too hot or too cold, not too hard or too soft. Simplistic as it might seem, the story of Goldilocks is a useful way to think about the role of government regulation on business and technology.

Different countries, different states and different municipalities take different approaches to regulation. The European Union and China are prime examples. The EU and China take extreme, opposite positions on privacy. They've also staked out diametrically opposed positions on a variety of other rules regarding innovation.

The EU's approach is decidedly too cold. Its policies of protectionism mean that governments favor incumbent companies and disruptive innovators often seek other shores. It's a backward approach: In a global, digital company, consumers care less about where a company comes from and more about whether its services are accessible and impactful. Massive, overbroad data privacy laws such as GDPR will hold this region back from experiencing the ninja future.

China, on the other hand, represents a “too hot” approach. It pushed hard to help develop Chinese companies and advance its own industries, leveraging a combination of intense focus

on STEM education, industrial espionage, and mandated sharing of intellectual property by companies wishing to do business in China. It also limits and censors the digital content available to citizens and imprisons dissidents. By doing so, China has maintained control of its population and chilled expression and creativity.

So—where does that leave the US? As of today, the United States remains the world’s unquestioned innovation leader. American companies are the most innovative in the technology industry. US-based platforms are the global online standard for commerce, education, and entertainment. This is in large part because of our approach to regulation, which, while not perfect, makes the most sense. We understand that “one size fits all” does not work, and different data merits different levels of protection. We recognize that narrowly addressing specific problems works better than imposing complex, top-down compliance regimes. And we generally favor a light-touch policy approach that ultimately supports progress and disruption over the status quo.

In other words, it’s not too hot, and not too cold—it’s just right. It’s what has made America the world’s best place for entrepreneurs to bring extraordinary new ideas to the public.

Another reason for our nation’s success on the global stage is our commitment to diversity. One of the surest ways to become a future ninja is to be open to new ideas, and new ideas are best fostered in organizations and nations where people come from different backgrounds.

This is not to say that a heterogeneous corporation or nation’s path to success will be smooth. A diverse population produces diverse ideas that, from time to time, can generate conflict. As a relatively young country, the United States is divided over highly-charged social issues, which are often less front and center in countries with common religions, cultures, ethnicities, and deeper histories, or which have smaller immigrant populations.

But that same diversity collectively makes us the most entrepreneurial and innovative country in the world. First-generation immigrants account for 30 percent of all new U.S. entrepreneurs, according to a Kauffman Foundation study. High-skilled immigration has allowed the United States to attract the world's most talented software developers, engineers, statisticians, and mathematicians to help create and maintain the technologies that keep us healthy, safe, connected, and entertained.

But, as CTA's Scorecard shows, if we wish to continue our global lead in innovation, we must take advantage of the critical benefits of our nation's approach to regulation and diversity. In instances where the government doesn't mandate change through regulation, industry may need to step up and partner with the government. Such proactive engagement is vastly preferable to having the government craft clumsy, overbroad rules that inhibit innovation.

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Sustainability is one area where such industry leadership will be critical. Only ongoing partnerships between public works services and private sector supply chains will enable us to offer consumers goods that are environmentally friendly. Many companies directly support such efforts—such as those of the Recycling Partnership, the ENERGY STAR® program, and energy efficiency voluntary agreements—that substantially affect recycling and efficient use of resources.

We must also continue to champion diversity in our hiring practices and federal policies. Restricting immigration only throttles our economy and betrays our values. We must embrace strategic immigration reform that boosts our industry without compromising our humanity. We must strive to be a nation that prioritizes excellence—in products, in policy, and in people. This alone will guarantee our place in the ninja future.

The Ninja Future

Our world is changing rapidly. It's understandable that some of us are wary. But our moral obligation is clear: We must be proactive in setting up future generations—our children and grandchildren—for success. It's up to us to ensure that innovation can flourish. It's up to us to empower future ninjas to create the life-changing products and services of the future. Above all, we must do it together—as individuals, as companies, as industries, as nations, and as a global community.

If we embrace innovation boldly and with our eyes wide open, we can cure previously incurable diseases, solve environmental challenges we thought impossible, and create unimaginable opportunity and prosperity. Today, these are tantalizing possibilities. **I have every confidence that innovators will turn them into realities in the ninja future.** 🇺🇸



Info



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About the author

Gary Shapiro is the president and CEO of the Consumer Technology Association, the U.S. trade association that represents more than 2,200 consumer electronics companies, and owns and produces the annual CES, the most important innovation-oriented trade show in the world. He is the author of the New York Times bestsellers *Ninja Innovation: The Ten Killer Strategies of the World's Most Successful Businesses* and *The Comeback: How Innovation Will Restore the American Dream*. He lives in Arlington, Virginia.



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