

Innovation of scale

(The Creativity Suite, Episode 23)

Interview with Saira Khan

Innovation & Partnerships Leader at HSBC UK



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Innovation experts learning from innovation experts.

One of the biggest advantages of working for a large organization is that it is big.

That might sound like an obvious statement, but for too many people in too many organizations, that's an insight that they are not harnessing.

But they should.

And imagine if they did.

The ability to acquire a "mindset of scale" is something I recently discussed with Saira Khan, Innovation & Partnerships Leader at HSBC UK.

And let's be clear: HSBC is big. With 40 million (!) customers across more than 60 countries and territories, it is one of the largest banking and financial services organizations in the world. With around 200,000 employees across the world, a person working within HSBC has access to one amazingly large network of information, insights, markets and competences.

"There is magic in scale", those were the words that Saira Khan used to describe the possibilities that come from working in an organization like HSBC, and then she added: "It allows you to think big."

The word "scale" originally comes from the Latin "scala" meaning "ladder", and when you think about what scale actually means you realize that it is something that makes it possible for you to step up (just like on a ladder) and see further. To make it possible to get a better overview of the world.

But, as Saira Khan pointed out during our conversation, as an employee of a large organization you need to understand the opportunity.

She told me: *"I don't think most people (in large organizations) understand that they have this opportunity."*

And it is true. **If you have a ladder, but you do not climb up on it, the ladder is useless. But if you do use it you can see so much more.**

What Saira Khan is advocating is, what I decided to call, "a mindset of scale".

A mindset of scale is the ability to fully understand what is possible to do due to the size of your specific organization. It consists of both the understanding of the possibilities that are available to you due to the size of the company, as well as having the imagination to think from a larger perspective.

I asked Saira Khan how a person with a mindset of scale might think, and she replied: *"It's about asking yourself how to get access to the right resources. Do you know who to speak with to get the right information? Do you know what resources are available around the organization? Do you understand what potential results those resources can bring you if used to their full potential?"*

I guess we can call it: "being internally curious".

She told me about how she had identified and contacted different departments around the organization working on A.I., consumer insights and data analytics to better understand how she could harness the power of the billions of data points on consumer insights that are stored in their servers.

To have a mindset of scale you need to know both how to take advantage of the tentinal of scale, but also be able to see how your size makes it possible to do things in a different way.

The problem is that many people in larger organizations just do not have the ability to think in scale, but Saira Khan insists that this is a skill that can be taught. *“If we can teach (people) leadership, confidence, management, and presentation skills, then we can teach them to think in scale as well”*, she said to me.

And I agree.

For example, a person without a mindset of scale will think *“How can I improve my job/position?”*, but a person with a mindset of scale will instead think *“How can the job/position that I have to be improved for everyone who has this job/position around the organization?”*

Innovation of Scale is not just about *“thinking big”*, but also about *“thinking that we are big”* - to take advantage of your size.

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Saira told me about how she used a mindset of scale when an idea of doing a hackathon in the UK and Malaysia was presented. She instead turned the success of the local hackathon into a global hackathon with participants from all over the world resulting in many more ideas and innovation than had the hackathon just been done in the UK alone. Nothing wrong with doing a hackathon in one jurisdiction such as UK/Malaysia, of course, but by thinking in scale they realized that

it was not much more work to make it a global event.

Let's use an analogy. If you are a farmer with one small plot of land you will farm in one way, but if you are a big landowner with huge areas of land you do not farm in the same way. The tiny farmer will walk around his land and inspect his crops, the big landowner might invest in drones that can inspect the crops much faster (saving time and money, even if they are more expensive initially)

A farmer with a small farmer mindset that uses the same mindset on a big farm will not take advantage of the potential of the larger farm.

And that is true for almost every time we scale something up. If you move from a shovel to a digger you can dig in a different way. If we move from a pick-up to a big truck we can transport in a new way. When we moved from Internet on modem to broadband Internet we changed what the Internet was and how it could be used. If we gave an army of 100,000 soldiers we can fight a war in a different way than if we have an army of 100 soldiers. Scale changes things. And that is why it so important to make sure that the people who work in large organizations fully understand the size, power and potential of the organization they are in.

A small, local, accounting firm might not be able to build A.I. powered audit solution, but a global, accounting network could decide to invest in building that - but it will only do that if the person in charge of the large accounting network has the mindset of scale and realizes the potential that lies in developing that A.I. solution and implementing it across the firm's global offices.

Saira Khan reminded me of the importance of large organizations to develop their employees' ability to not only *“think big”* in order to innovate - but to also *“think that they are big”*.

In your team, how many people fully understand the potential of the size of your own organization, its resources and its networks?

What could you do to improve a mindset of scale into the organization?



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The Creativity Suite consists of a series of interviews with innovative C-suite managers and innovation leaders from around the world on how they develop their own creativity and the creativity of others. It's all about innovation experts learning from innovation experts. The Creativity Suite is a project by Fredrik Haren - The Creativity Explorer.

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