



Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries

Peter Sims

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What do Apple CEO Steve Jobs, comedian Chris Rock, prize-winning architect Frank Gehry, the story developers at Pixar films, and the Army Chief of Strategic Plans all have in common? Bestselling author Peter Sims found that all of them have achieved breakthrough results by methodically taking small, experimental steps in order to discover and develop new ideas. Rather than believing they have to start with a big idea or plan a whole project out in advance, trying to foresee the final outcome, they make a series of little bets about what might be a good direction, learning from lots of little failures and from small but highly significant wins that allow them to happen upon unexpected avenues and arrive at extraordinary outcomes.

Based on deep and extensive research, including more than 200 interviews with leading innovators, Sims discovered that productive, creative thinkers and doers—from Ludwig van Beethoven to Thomas Edison and Amazon's Jeff Bezos—practice a key set of simple but ingenious experimental methods—such as failing quickly to learn fast, tapping into the genius of play, and engaging in highly immersed observation—that free their minds, opening them up to making unexpected connections and perceiving invaluable insights. These methods also unshackle them from the constraints of overly analytical thinking and linear problem solving that our education places so much emphasis on, as well as from the fear of failure, all of which thwart so many of us in trying to be more innovative.

Reporting on a fascinating range of research, from the psychology of creative blocks to the influential Silicon Valley-based field of design thinking, Sims offers engaging and wonderfully illuminating accounts of breakthrough innovators at work, including how Hewlett-Packard stumbled onto the breakaway success of the first hand-held calculator; the remarkable storyboarding process at Pixar films that has been the key to their unbroken streak of box office successes; the playful discovery process by which Frank Gehry arrived at his critically acclaimed design for Disney Hall; the aha revelation that led Amazon to pursue its wildly successful affiliates program; and the U.S. Army's ingenious approach to counterinsurgency operations that led to the dramatic turnaround in Iraq.

Fast paced and as entertaining as it is illuminating, *Little Bets* offers a whole new way of thinking about how to break away from the narrow strictures of the methods of analyzing and problem solving we were all taught in school and unleash our untapped creative powers.

Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries Details

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From Reader Review Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries for online ebook

Corina says

This book collects a lot of design thinking principles together under the umbrella of "little bets," i.e. prototyping and the "fail early and often" idea. There are basically just a few case studies that get brought up repeatedly (Pixar, The Sketches of Frank Gehry, Chris Rock) but a smattering of interesting other research comes up too. Like how lucky people actually just are more open-minded/observant. So it's Malcolm Gladwell -esque but the fact that I found myself most skimming is a sign that it's less insightful/engaging than one might hope.

Marc Brackett says

This was a fascinating little book. It pulls from numerous studies, books, and real life examples to make a most convincing case.

Overlooked I think were the differences between self identified lucky and unlucky people. The study had the two groups count the number of pictures in a newspaper. It took the unlucky group on average 2 minutes while the lucky group finished the task in seconds. What could possibly explain the difference in performance? Turns out on page two which had a picture that took up half the page had a very large caption underneath it, "Stop counting, there are 42 pictures."

The subtle hint is that unlucky people are that way because they focus on the problem to the extent of ignoring obvious solutions. It would seem it is possible to make your own luck. The solution would appear to be taking a bigger view of things and fully engaging with whatever you are doing versus narrowing your focus and rushing through things.

The other missed message seems to be creativity and great ideas are not instant products as the story on a model Microsoft employee showed. Richard Tait went through some very dark periods (years) before a seemingly routine activity (board gaming with another couple on a rainy day) triggered the moment of connection. Cranium has since sold millions.

In all cases there is an openness to question the existing order and not get caught up in the imperfections of what is being created. It's also not surprising that most of these people shared what could be called a diverse educational background (formal or informal)- no Warren Buffets in this crowd. I think a good follow up read after this one would be The Renaissance Soul Life Design for People with Too Many Passions to Pick Just One

J.F. Penn says

Interesting for creatives in dealing with experimentation, failure and improving creativity. Good anecdotal examples.

Laura says

Some take-aways that I appreciated:

- Ask people what they think before you have a professional looking model. Create something out of cardboard or duct tape (everyone's favorite). People feel more free to make recommendations or give honest input when they see it's a work in progress.
- When people provide feedback, there's no penalty. Create an atmosphere where it's okay to disagree. Humor is key. Too bad I'm not funny.
- Success hides problems. (This makes a lot of sense to me)
- When going somewhere big, find the small piece to focus on. It makes it easier to prioritize and complete projects. It also allows for a flexibility.
- Create mixed tables. Sims calls it cross-functional teams or teams with a variety of people attached to the project.
- Don't ask people what they want; they don't know. Create something, get feedback, adjust, get feedback, adjust. As interest grows, users will have feedback and major changes will be made.

I liked this book for it's acknowledgement that big vision needs a starting place. And that starting place should be a low risk. The bigger the roll out, the more difficult it is to respond to feedback and alter the direction.

As for the writing, too often, I read something in the current business genre that feels like an extended blog. The idea may not actually warrant a book, but somewhere along the way it became one. This is a quick and easy read that for the most part fills the book with content.

In some ways, I think this book comes at things from an opposite place of Gawande's The Checklist Manifesto (another book that trumped my assumption of being an extended blog masquerading as a book). In the Checklist Manifesto, Gawande writes about how to execute complicated procedures often in emergency situations. Checklist attempts to take what we do know and organize it in a manner for greatest success. Little Bets is taking what we don't know and organizing it for greatest success.

Heather says

Good book. I like the premise and reminder of looking for small connections that lead to innovation....and practicing in small arenas where you can learn from your mistakes quickly in order to move on and grow and improve. There are some great references and stories and examples of innovators who were willing to learn. I like the tie to anthropology and social science and how people use their diverse experiences to make connections and create something new, as well as the examples of people talking to and learning from everyone and then going out and making things happen and learning and adapting from there. Good ideas.

"'The best way to predict the future is to invent it.' After all, life is a creative process. It all begins with one little bet. What will yours be? (p. 162)."

Taka says

Cool concept, not very detailed--

The book's concepts are all cool and interesting.

The book combines the findings of Carol Dweck (fixed vs. growth mindsets), Eric von Hippel (active users and innovation), Csikszentmihalyi (problem finders vs. problem solvers), Richard Wiseman (being open to experiences increases your luck), and other research and innovations in psychology, economics, and business.

The concept of little bets is basically this: creative things emerge from random, non-linear, unpredictable processes, and so experimenting with something is crucial in coming up with something creative. It is, as Ed Catmull at Pixar says, "going from suck to non-suck." The original idea may suck, but through other people's input, you can make it into something "non-suck," and that takes a lot of openness, playfulness, and determination to fail quickly to learn faster.

Other cool things to be learned from this book include:

- ask if you can afford it, not if you can profit from it
- "smallify" problems and add constraints to boost creativity
- learn little from a lot to increase your luck

But the central problem with this book is that it seems to lack elaboration and applications of the concept of little bets. I was left a little dissatisfied with the contents, though I found the concepts covered very interesting.

Overall, an interesting read that would've been satisfactory with a little more elaboration.

Evan says

If you are the kind who actively seeks out advice on how to succeed, you won't be surprised at the advice Peter Sims has given. I most certainly was delighted by how having the mindset is so vital in succeeding in your endeavors.

In this book, there are a few mindsets, namely

- 1) Making little bets so that you can make big bets
- 2) Cultivating a growth mindset - To deal with failure / obstacles
- 3) Being proactive - Proactively failing so that you can learn faster
- 4) Knowing how to play - To make each other look good by 'plussing', and stop inhibiting ideas from flowing

- 5) Getting wide social networks and actively learn from them
- 6) Finding small social networks to test out your ideas
- 7) Actively seeking small wins to build yourself up.

Creating these mindsets sound so simple, but simple doesn't mean easy. It isn't easy to bounce back from failure just like that. It is a habit to develop. One needs to be aware that you need these mindsets in your consciousness. It is far too easy for one to read and forget about it, because there isn't deliberate practice to enforce these concepts.

If there is anything one should take away, it is that this book is lasting. It isn't for you to read and throw away, but it is a constant reminder for you whenever you need a direction to point the way in life. Keep reading it, and if possible, internalize it such that it becomes a part of you, and not in a superficial way.

After taking a good focused 2 weeks to read this book, I'll safely say that it is enduring and it will follow me throughout my life!

Disclaimer: It can get tempting to breeze through the book and skip the meat to see what else the author has to say. Please don't. Enjoy the meat and savor it to get its full essence.

Brian says

(3.0) Note: do not audiobook this because of the reader.

John Britto says

"Little Bets" is good motivational book by Peter Sims. Though out this book Peter talks about how the great innovators/successors have reached that level is that they dreamt of the success at initial step itself or they started with small idea and that payed off and emerged as great thing. Entirely this was like an argument to achieve innovation in a particular way. There are so many examples that authors brings to user's consciousness like growth of Pixar, comedian Chris Rock, architect Frank Gehry, etc... Peter Sims has given a guidelines to innovation through this book.....

John says

This book is about using small failures to define the path to large successes.

It's OK to feel around in the dark with the only plan to move forward once the path becomes clear. This is not a passive strategy by any means; but it respects that you can't plot a straight course from where you are to where you want to be, and that this is acceptable.

"The best way to predict the future is to invent it." -- Alan Kay, technologist & inventor

I had an epiphany while reading it; I left a job of 18 years for many reasons, but this book crystallized for me one of them. For the first 15 years of my career, it was OK for me to look dumb: I could ask questions of

anybody at any time -- I was dumb but trying to get smarter -- and such self-improvement was encouraged by the culture. Around 2007, this changed, probably due to the intense pressure the firm was under. If you looked dumb, maybe you were, so people stopped asking questions and started covering their a\$\$es. It seemed to me that folks there have stopped allowing themselves to make the necessary small errors. Too bad.

(A similar theme emerges in Rework. Small companies make mistakes on purpose; in big companies, failures are not tolerated. Perhaps that's because in big companies the failures are bigger.)

Neil says

I finally read another book. I'm really proud of myself. It only took a month to get through 160 pages.

Anyways, though, this book's fine. I like the attitude of books like this, though the content never really set me on fire -- this guy seems to have interviewed like 6 subjects and just reintroduces them constantly, especially Pixar. (Every chapter, each of which teaches a supposedly different lesson, will have a moment like "...FOR INSTANCE AT PIXAR" or "...REMEMBER AT PIXAR WHEN..."). The message of, you know, small bets, fail quick, etc., all good stuff, but the truth is that one must also make huge bets, too, sooner or later. Amazon chose to gamble it all on books, whether or not they then made marginal adjustments; Starbucks on coffee; Pixar on movies. Little bets help us get there, but we gotta bet bigger eventually.

Boni Aditya says

The book is good, it is well structured. It has good reasoning, good research behind it and it is true about taking little risks while attempting to reach some huge goal. But, the book fails to create the WOW effect! I am happy that the author kept it short - with less than 250 pages - some authors pull it to 600 odd pages only because they can!

The concept is pretty straight forward, this was explained to me in a famous folklore of Indian History.

Alexander was Invading India, i.e. he was at Punjab and was hesitant to enter. A young prince - Chandra Gupta Maurya was dethroned after his father was killed in battle by the Nanda kings and is taken into tutelage by the greatest scholar that has ever lived in India - Chanakya - who was humiliated in open court by Nanda kings and he sought to take revenge by destroying the kingdom. Chandra Gupta Maurya and Chanakya created a huge network of spies, who disguised themselves as saints. Chanakya, at the strike of midnight on an auspicious day attacked the Nanda Dynasty Capital, and as expected was severely defeated, losing all his men, murdered in cold blood in the pitch black night by the mighty Nanda Army. Chanakya and Maurya barely escaped with their lives and covered up their wounds and went from one village to the next to escape the wrath of the Nandas who's spies were searching with an intent of kill ASAP. They halted for a night stop and sat before a home and begged for food. The woman in the house, welcomed them and poured a thick porridge into their plates right out of the hot boiling pot. As she did this, she also put the porridge into her kids plate. The kid was extremely hungry and was happy to put his hand into the porridge and cried out loud in pain as the heat from porridge stung his fingers which were dipped into it. The mother said "You are as dumb as Chanakya and Maurya - How stupid of you to put your hands into the center. You should eat the porridge by starting from the edges of the plate"

Chanakya and Maurya over heard this and had a facepalm moment. WTF! they thought. Literally, they went to the edges. They left the Nanda lands immediately and understood that Alexander was ready to attack, so Maurya seizing the opportunity joined the Alexander's forces to learn the war tactics of the invaders. Eventually he wanted to team up with Alexander to defeat the Nanda's, but that did not materialize due to Alexander's change of heart after he faced stiff resistance from Paurava on the banks of INDUS - He decided to drop the idea of invading the massive India - defended by Nandas - Maurya siezed this opportunity to defeat the remaining forces of Alexander - stationed at punjab and married one of the daughters of a general to earn their faith. He then used these military forces to attack the and defeat the mighty Nanda Warforce. Chandra Gupta Maurya became the first Greatest emporer of India - with his lands expanding from Afghanishtan to Burma, with Chanakya at his helm - His successors expanded far into the south India - His Grandson ASHOKA the great would fight a bloody war with KALINGA before annexing into to Mauryan Empire. After the sight of such brutal blood shed of the war - Ashoka gave up his kingship and became buddhist monk.

The crux of the book - can be understood from the life of Maurya. Don't attach the center - start from the edges. An entire book to address this topic is repetitive. I wouldn't recommend this book! When someone is ready to invest a lot of effort into reading a book - They do it with an intent to learn something from it - They don't do it with an intent to learn - ONE THING AND ONLY ONE THING - in 200 pages. That is not what a book is supposed to do - More over this is not a novel - This is a business book! So there is little or no scope for entertainment.

THIS BOOKS ADDS MORE FUEL TO THE FIRE OF MY THEORY THAT "WE CAN LEARN WHAT IS INSIDE EVERY BUSINESS BOOK BY READING ITS SUMMARY AND SAVE TENS OF HOURS OF TIME WHILE GAINING THE SAME AMOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE"

Beginning with a stand up comedian's approach, then going forward with a war general's little wins in IRAQ, then moving on to PIXAR and the little wins with their short films, the agile and scrum methodology of software development, there are tons of examples to make the reader understand how various people used the one step at a time to get great things done.

But, what i really love about the book is the number of references to other materials are mentioned in it.

Fog of War

The structures of Frank Gherry

The Pixar Touch

Banker to the Poor

Learning to eat soup with a Knife

Route 66 - The mother road

Inside Steve's Mind

The audacity of Hope

The Group Genius

Seven Pillars of Wisdom

Medici Effect

Cities and the Creative Class

Good to Great

IN search of Excellence

The Luck Factor

The diffusion of Innovation

The Tipping Point

Crossing the Chasm

Made to stick

Switch

Life Entrepreneurs

Sway and Click

Pour your heart into it

Rework

- There are a lot more mentioned - but I could not get them all - But I appreciate the author for curating them all!

BLACK CAT says

Fixed vs. growth mindset (Carol Dweck): develop growth mindset.

Embrace failure and learn from it.

Don't build a whole final solution, iterate through small experiments (bets) and see what works.

Minimum viable product: prototyping, fail fast/fail forward, learn, pivot...

Be a curious person and question everything to learn more. Meet new and different people, diversity will bring creativity.

Small Wins: signs that you are on the right track.

Clif Hostetler says

The "little bets" referenced by the book's title are low-risk actions taken to discover, develop, and test an idea that represent a potentially better way to do something. Numerous low-risk trials can allow appropriate mid-step adjustments and changes that can improve the prospects of success. Failures that occur along the way can be accepted as positive feedback that point toward a change in direction or perhaps ending the proposed venture before large financial losses are experienced.

There's really nothing all that new in the concept of little bets. It's actually describing the logical approach to new ventures whether in one's personal life or in business. What is new in this book are the stories, examples and cases used to illustrate the concept in a variety of domains and differing perspectives. The author's journalistic skills in reporting on these examples make the book an interesting and entertaining read. The following are some of the examples cited in this book:

- The humor publication The Onion
- Stand-up comedian Cris Rock
- Amazon.com's Jeff Bezos
- Film company Pixar and Steve Jobs
- Micro lending developed by Muhammed Yunu of Grameen Bank
- Television newscaster Tim Russert
- Architect Frank Gehry

The book's narrative follows a circular pattern where many of these examples are repeatedly revisited in subsequent chapters as they are viewed from different points of view. Forty percent of the book is taken up by notes and index. The Notes section includes some fairly lengthy elaborations which are interesting stories in themselves.

Mary says

This was interesting and entertaining. I liked the approach of the book and the tons of examples.
