

Maintaining Open Innovation in Our ‘New Normal’ Through Virtual Collaboration

pharmaboardroom.com/articles/maintaining-open-innovation-in-our-new-normal-through-virtual-collaboration/



Toshio Fujimoto, MBA, MD of Japan’s Shonan Health Innovation Park explores new ways of virtual collaboration that make our lives easier while enabling us to maintain a culture of innovation and growth.

Are social distancing requirements causing the life science industry to return to an inward-looking culture of secrecy? The short answer is no

Old R&D models have long faced challenges that require a new path to be forged. Over the last decade, the life science industry has embraced the strategy of open innovation. Many companies took a geographical approach to this by ‘co-locating’ their research labs and offices within the top innovation centres worldwide.

But in our new normal of 2020, many biopharma leaders I work with are now wondering how the open innovation strategy should be applied to a post-pandemic world. The viability of open innovation ecosystems has been called into question in recent months. Are social distancing requirements causing the life science industry to return to an inward-looking culture of secrecy? The short answer is no.

Open innovation ecosystems are proven to catalyze progress by enabling collaboration between academia, startups, biopharma companies, VCs, and governments. Regardless of configuration, innovation has always been a positive outcome of diversity and

convergence, fostered when different talents and technologies meet and connect. If we are to continue driving innovation, we cannot, and must not, turn back the clock.

Many companies are turning to virtual platforms in order to keep their networks and partnerships growing during this time. Since the pandemic began, I've witnessed virtual platforms bring measurable benefits across a range of areas. Here are just a few examples that I have seen:

- **Increased efficiency:** In a world where non-essential travel is off the table, experts have more time for meetings. Informative webinars are more accessible.
- **Expanded audiences:** We can reach many more people than those able to attend in person, bringing a potentially limitless global network ever closer – especially effective for unilateral information sharing.
- **Enhanced matchmaking:** The process of finding and maintaining relationships with new business partners is greatly accelerated, for example when using shared virtual platform.

And as with anything, there are potential challenges. More of us than ever before are discovering how virtual collaboration can make it easier to get things done. However, efficiency is just one part of success. There are other areas where going virtual still has shortcomings:

- **Introductions:** Building that initial trust in order to cultivate a prosperous new business opportunity is harder behind a screen than in-person.
- **Multi-directional dialogue:** Open discussions, brainstorming and Q&As that deepen understanding require a certain presence and multiple group discussions
- **Small talk:** Human moments in daily interactions that cement relationships typically happen outside of primary discussions and hierarchies.

As virtual platforms become the norm, we must always keep in mind the goal of each communication. For open innovation, this goal is not efficiency, but rather generating collaboration. As such, there are still valuable benefits to physical co-location and face-to-face conversation. I propose that a balance of both virtual platforms and on-site interactions – a hybrid platform – is the key to success in this new normal.

Clayton M. Christensen said, *“Culture is a way of working together toward common goals that have been followed so frequently and so successfully that people don't even think about trying to do things another way. If a culture has formed, people will autonomously do what they need to do to be successful.”*

Companies physically located within an ecosystem that successfully adopts this model and build the *culture* can pave the way for growth opportunities in this new world.

Lastly, it's important to note that the virtual network connecting global ecosystems brings with it access to global resources. Companies looking to expand their growth horizons can fully leverage these globally connected ecosystems when they share the culture and make use of the local and regional links developed therein.

These innovation ecosystems will evolve into a platform that combines both physical infrastructure and a virtually connected community of global experts. If we continue to fuel openness and diversity through this operation model in this new normal the pandemic need not be a showstopper, but rather an accelerator for open innovation—the real lifeblood of our industry.

Toshio Fujimoto, MBA, MD is general manager at Japan's Shonan Health Innovation Park and recently moderated a BIODigital 2020 panel discussion: 'How an Innovation Ecosystem Enables Growth During Times of Crisis and Beyond', featuring experts from Johnson & Johnson's JLABS, AI Dynamics, UCSD, LabCentral, Mission BioCapital, and Headland Strategy Group, available to watch online [here](#).