



# The Sump of ASSUMPTIONS

by Mitchell Ditkoff

Thomas Edison had a very simple way of conducting job interviews. He'd invite prospective employees to join him for soup in the company cafeteria. If they salted their soup *before* tasting it, the interview was over. Plain and simple. Given the nature of his work – where even a single stone unturned could mean the difference between the failure or success of a costly product – Edison could not afford to surround himself with people ruled by faulty assumptions,

Of all the roadblocks to innovation, assumptions are the worst. Invisible, insidious and habitual, **THEY STOP US BEFORE WE EVEN START** – the default position for those of us too consumed by our past to consider the future the way it really is: pure potentiality.

*What is an assumption?* Simply put, it's "taking something for granted". A "supposition." We do it all the time – although not always to our detriment. For example, if you leave your toothbrush in the bathroom at night, it's safe to assume that it will be there in the morning. Your assumption saves you lots of time searching for it in the kitchen or garage. Other assumptions, however, don't work out quite as well – despite the seeming evidence for their veracity. Many of our ancestors, for example,

*assumed the earth was flat.* They had "proof." They saw it with their own eyes. But their so-called proof – their inaccurate interpretation of existing phenomena – was a far cry from reality. And it was precisely because of their faulty assumptions, that many of our ancestors missed out on the New World and all the fabulous beachfront property that came with it.



Think about it. If every ten years *half of* what scientists believe to be true is proven to be false, how much of what *your* decisions are based on is anything more than just a temporary – and not very elegant – arrangement of half-baked perceptions, flaky factoids, and loosely interpreted statistics?

**TAKE A MINUTE NOW TO CONSIDER WHAT YOU MAY BE ASSUMING FALSELY.** What conclusions have you drawn that prevent you from sailing new oceans? What beliefs are you bound by that are likely to be laughable three years from now? Are you absolutely sure you know what your customers want? Are you positive your manager won't free up the money to fund your latest idea? Can you say, without a shadow of a doubt, that your current strategy to accomplish your "stretch goal" is based on anything more than hearsay and hot talk?

But hey, you're not alone in your tendency to jump to conclusions. Join the club as you consider some of these (now famous) limiting assumptions throughout history:

*"I think there is a world market for about five computers."* (Thomas Watson, founder of IBM)

*"Everything that can be invented has been invented,"* (Charles Duell, Commissioner, US Office of Patents, 1899)

*"There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom would have to be shattered at will."* (Albert Einstein)

*"The phonograph is not of any commercial value."* ( Thomas Edison)

*"I don't need body guards."* (Jimmy Hoffa)

*"Man will not fly for 50 years."* (Wilbur Wright, 1903)

*“640K ought to be enough for anybody.” (Bill Gates)*

*“With over 50 foreign cars on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn’t likely to carve out a big slice of the U.S. market for itself.” (Business Week, 1968)*

- **WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST ASSUMPTION ABOUT YOUR HOTTEST NEW IDEA?**
- **WHAT IS YOUR COMPANY’S MOST PERVASIVE, COLLECTIVE ASSUMPTION?**
- **WHAT CAN YOU DO TODAY TO IDENTIFY THE ONE ASSUMPTION MOST LIKELY TO SABOTAGE YOUR FUTURE SUCCESS? WHAT CAN YOU DO TO GO BEYOND IT?**

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