can’t speak, and he can barely move. But with help from an exceedingly patient transcriber, he writes an entire book, by blinking his left eyelid for around four hours each day.

[Leena] Wow, that’s amazing. But wait a second: How does that work?

[Josh] The system is based on a frequency-ordered alphabet. So, he would blink once for the letter “E,” twice for “S” and so forth. Blink by blink, he composed his memoir. With the help of a simple technology, he could unleash his mind and share it with others.

[Leena] That’s really interesting. I’m going to add this book to my Amazon wish list.

[Josh] Funny you should mention Amazon, because this anecdote brings to mind a tool much more sophisticated than the writing-by-blinking system. We spoke with a team of people who are using Amazon Alexa’s AI-powered voice platform to enhance human potential. In this case, we’re referring to the potential of senior citizens.

[Josh] The Alexa solution for seniors is an excellent example of unlocking trapped value. Dr. Vedrana Savic, Managing Director, Global Thought Leadership at Accenture explains.

[Leena] So, what, exactly, does this journalist in the book accomplish?

[Josh]: Ok, so Bauby is in his prime—early 40s, editor-in-chief of French Elle magazine—when he suffers a stroke. When he wakes up from a coma, he is almost completely paralyzed, with locked-in syndrome, meaning he is aware of his surroundings and has an intact mind, but he
Josh] Every organization has some trapped value. But to unlock it, Vedrala says you have to put innovation to work.

Leena] Exactly. The British non-profit Age UK-London unlocked its trapped value by defying some common stereotypes: One, that charities aren’t particularly innovative, and, two, that seniors don’t like and can’t figure out technology.

Partnering with a team from Accenture and Amazon Web Services, Age UK – London, worked closely with seniors to design a life-enhancing solution powered by Amazon Echo and Alexa. Here’s Paul Goulden, Chief Executive of Age UK-London.

Paul Goulden] I think the one thing that came from the work with Accenture on the platform was that it was exactly tailored to the needs of the older people who were involved. They were asked what they wanted, and we saw the system develop and change because of that.

This then developed into some live pilots in the homes of those older people. And the results that came back were fantastic. The older people were using Alexa to play music, to listen to news, to arrange their social lives, and also to connect with the members of their family.

Leena] The mission of Age UK-London is to offer support and services to older people. The Alexa project’s aim is to help keep seniors living independently longer than they might otherwise. But as the platform developed, it ended up providing an unexpected social support, too. Here’s Laetitia Cailleateau, the UKI Emerging Tech and AI Lead at Accenture.

Laetitia Cailleateau] At the beginning when we did that little trial, we didn’t want to go into that type of positioning like a friend robot; we didn’t think that was appropriate. We were kind of thinking this is complementing physical care and it’s just going to help you on your day-to-day basis, but actually when you look at the feedback from the Age UK people, quite a lot of them have been related to the fact that they’re feeling very lonely and this is making them feel better.

Leena]: By creating a digital platform tailored to their clients, Age UK-London was able to unlock trapped value in more ways than one. In fact, it even sparked some real friendships. Here’s Paul Goulden again.

Paul] The other interesting thing is that the people who were on the pilot program who had never met each other before ended up becoming a little social network themselves. So not only were they using the system to talk to each other, but also to meet up in person afterwards. So that was an enormously powerful thing to come off the back of this work.

Josh] That’s an amazing outcome. But it’s got to be hard for non-profits to measure their ROI on a project like this.

Paul] Basically, it comes down to, can we see that our beneficiaries are getting value? Are their lives improved because of it, or, another way of looking at it, is our involvement changing the nature of a product or a service? And I think if we can prove that, then that’s where we demonstrate our value.

Josh] In fact, Amazon’s goal with these kinds of projects is to unlock more value from their technology by adapting it to specific situations. Here’s Max Amordeluso, the EU Lead Evangelist for Amazon Alexa.

Max Amordeluso] I hope that this is going to develop even further, is the way that we can use these technologies to detect the insurgence, for example, of degenerative diseases, or cognitive impairment.

I would say that there’s a huge amount of investment currently in this area of technology and the time to build is now.

I dream of a day where Alexa can adapt to our mood, to the mood of the users, or to be aware of the ambient, to be aware of the need of a specific user and by adapting it to the user even more than she does right now.

Leena] That’s what’s exciting: You never know how much trapped value could be in a person, an organization, a technology, or even an industry—until you find the right way to unlock it.

Josh] Accenture wanted to understand the keys to unlocking trapped value, so they interviewed the leaders of 840 multinational companies. What they found is surprising: Although
opportunities to invest in technology and innovation are abundant, many companies are struggling with how to fully capitalize on those investments.

According to their report, over the past five years, there’s been a 27% decline on the return on innovation-related spending. But one group of companies, 14% of the total, were effectively unlocking trapped value. Here’s Vedrana Savic again.

[Vedrana] We called this group the high-growth companies, and they are effectively the ones who have grown their profits and their market capitalization faster than their industry in the past five years, and, more importantly, that same group actually expects to outperform their respective industries over the next five years.

[josh] High-growth companies apply innovation with greater intensity and more focus on changing the way they work with their ecosystem, compared to other companies.

Vedrana says they have a distinct three-part approach to putting innovation to work. [Vedrana] What we found through our research is that this different approach to innovation is focused on being change-oriented. This means that companies need to have the courage to apply innovation in order to challenge and even reinvent existing ways of working.

The new approach to innovation targeted at unlocking trapped value needs to be outcome-led. This means that companies should foster innovation efforts across the business, so not only dedicated teams or select business divisions, and they need to have the discipline to tie these efforts rigorously to financial performance.

The new approach to innovation needs to be disruption-minded. This means committing to investing more aggressively, over time, in truly disruptive innovation initiatives that have the potential to create entirely new markets.

[josh] Age UK-London is change-oriented. It had the courage to invest in technology and to reinvent care. While the outcomes of the project couldn’t be tied to financial performance, its value shined through in the feedback from the participants. Paul Goulden says he’s also disruption-minded and willing to invest more in innovation, but he won’t impose tech on his clients unless its developed with their needs in mind.

[Leena] There are needs, and then there are wants. Let’s turn to the retail space to see how trapped value can be unlocked at for-profit organizations. E-commerce has obviously skyrocketed—thanks, again, Amazon—while in-store retail has declined.

But people still go out shopping—quite often in fact. At the same time that brands are investing more in online content and UX, people still crave exciting new live experiences.

[josh] New York-based Perch Interactive offers shopping technology that operates in the middle of the physical and digital space. It turns retail store displays into shelves with sensors and screens. The displays offer digital content to capture shoppers’ attention by giving them a more informative and richer experience.

[Leena] For example, if you pick up a bottle of rose-scented perfume on one display, a screen shows a bouquet of roses, revealing what your nose can expect. And then the sensors allow the store to track which objects you’ve touched. That’s important data for planning and sales purposes. We talked to the CEO of Perch Interactive, Trevor Sumner, about the display for the French cosmetics brand, Bourjois:

[Trevor Sumner] So this is an example of virtual try-on technology that’s powered by an augmented reality engine.

And what’s great about this is that when you pick up a lipstick, it automatically applies it to your face with a screen that is basically a mirror of yourself, except you’ve got that color of lipstick on you. Now, you can actually try on hundreds of colors at a time, and often the colors that you would never think to.

And then lastly, you can take a picture. Print out a Polaroid or even share it to your Instagram. So, this pulls that social experience more naturally into the shopper journey.

[Leena] This is awesome. I hate trying on
makeup in department stores. And the technology not only unleashes the value of a simple display unit, it’s also what Accenture calls an outcome-led approach to innovation.

[Trevor] Everything from Band-Aids to high-end Kate Spade accessories, we’re seeing that traditional 30 to 80 percent sales lift. So that creates 300 to 800 percent ROIs on average.

It’s pretty exciting, the ways that you can use digital to augment the shopping process.

[Leena] So interesting – the idea that the tech was there, the physical displays were there, they just needed to be brought out together in a new way. That’s really the classic definition of creativity, right?

[Josh] Right. And creativity and boldness often go hand in hand. Vedrana concluded that companies have to go all in to get value out.

[Vedrana]. This means that companies need to be much more ambitious and deliberate in order to unlock trapped value in the digital age.

[Leena] Investing in innovation isn’t enough to unlock trapped value. Companies have to have a distinct approach to it, one that is change-oriented, outcome-led and disruption-minded.

[Josh] Yeah, unlocking trapped value is hard. Just think about Jean-Dominique Bauby—and his blink transcriber.

[Leena] Yeah, I was wondering: What do the diving bell and butterfly of his book’s title refer to?

[Josh] That’s great question – and actually I think the answer might be helpful for would-be innovators who are feeling saddled with challenges.

In the book, Bauby describes the diving bell as being his body, trapping him inside as he sinks to the bottom of a sea. But the butterfly symbolizes the two things that weren’t paralyzed – his imagination and his memory. If he harnessed those, he could travel anywhere.

[Josh] I guess that’s the lesson. Organizations, individuals, we’ve all got limitations, but increasingly we can find ways to set our trapped value free.

This has been Innovation Decoded by Accenture. Join us for the next episode, when we’ll uncover more stories of how technology is transforming business.