

Article

# Exploring the potential of art-based workshops for solving complex problems in companies

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**Abstract:** The current business environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) advances numerous challenges for organizations. To respond effectively to these changing demands, traditional approaches to solving problems often prove inadequate in this dynamic context. A new approach, the ProCESS methodology, was developed and tested in the last three years within an Erasmus+ consortium in four European countries. This approach stimulates unconventional thinking and the finding of creative solutions for real-world business challenges. The aim of this perspective paper is to present the research data collected in two Romanian companies by testing ProCESS methodology. In the discussion section, the paper highlights the potential of this methodology that uses various artistic tools like drawing, music, modeling, or meditation to encourage participants to tap into their sensory, emotional, and spiritual sides for finding new and unexpected solutions. The paper also discusses potential influences on organizational culture and employee well-being.

**Keywords:** SES skills; sensorial; emotional; spiritual; teamwork; communication; training

## 1. Introduction

The end of the book “The Future of Management” highlights that the 21st-century business environment demands a new approach for managing people, systems, and technology in organizations (Hamel and Breen, 2010). Indeed, companies face an external and internal VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) business environment that presents significant challenges for organizations leadership (Eskola et al., 2022b). Traditional problem-solving methods are often insufficient in a dynamic environment; therefore, innovative organizational approaches to adapt and to thrive are needed. To be competitive and oriented to future opportunities, companies must remove the limitations of traditional management approaches in addressing complex problems and must prioritize human resources by fostering a culture that values initiative, creativity, and collaboration.

In the context of developing 21st-century crucial skills for solving complex problems in companies, exploring the potential of short-term, on-site, flexible, art-based tools and work-based learning training programs for adults can provide insights into the organizational training process.

The aim of this paper is to present the author's experience in the process of developing and implementing two pilot training sessions in Romanian companies using art-based workshops. Based on qualitative and quantitative feedback received from participants, the results show promising results and suggest new directions for

future research. However, more research data is needed, since the two training sessions involved a small group of participants.

The paper is structured in five sections. After the introduction, it presents the research context and methodology, followed in the third part by results description. The fourth section is allocated to discussion, research limitations, and further research directions. The last section highlights the main research conclusion.

## **2. Materials and methods**

### **2.1. Research context**

Creative thinking and cognitive skills, particularly complex problem-solving, are crucial skills for employees in the next five years, followed closely by self-efficacy (resilience, flexibility, agility, motivation, and self-awareness) and interpersonal skills like empathy, active listening, and social influence (World Economic Forum, 2023). Some cross-functional skills have become essential for the future of work. The increasing importance of collaboration, adaptability, psychological flexibility, curiosity, lifelong active learning, and ethical focus is indisputable in organizational well-being (Waldeck et al., 2021), Industry 4.0 (Hecklau et al., 2016), Industry 5.0, and in green-oriented occupations (Firescu et al., 2022; OECD, 2024).

#### **2.1.1. Leadership challenges in a VUCA world**

Leaders should understand that new ideas and opportunities arise within the organizational community created by them, and the organizational culture plays a crucial role. New solutions can be co-created by managers and employees in collaboration with other internal and external stakeholders if they understand and admit that considering new perspectives can bring innovative solutions to organizational challenges. New approaches can be successful if people debunk the false perception that they know all the answers, they know the processes and strategies to follow, they have all the resources needed, etc. (Burnett and Evans, 2016, pp. 200–201).

Great leaders, with exceptional experience and emotional resilience, make the work meaningful for employees and understand the importance of supporting organizational cultures (D'Oliveira and Persico, 2023). To that end, they identify employees' strengths, focus on positive contributions, and eliminate awkward criticism (Clifton and Harter, 2021, pp. 151–152). Active listening is a key workplace skill and a powerful leadership tool important for building trust, fostering stronger relationships, ensuring meaningful communication, motivating employees, and boosting team productivity (Abrudan et al., 2022; Castrillon, 2024; Erikson, 2019; Kriz et al., 2021).

#### **2.1.2. Solving complexity in organizations**

The world is complex, and complexity involves many stakeholders with different priorities, values, and needs. Even though organizations face new challenges nowadays, the way of working, the thinking patterns, and the management style remained largely unchanged (Eskola et al., 2021).

Most companies neglect innovative approaches to complex problem solving and employee well-being, ignoring that a wide range of human capacities like emotional,

sensorial, and spiritual dimensions can be integrated into organizational training to significantly improve both individual and organizational performance (Clifton and Harter, 2021; Fisher and Phillips, 2021; Wigglesworth, 2014). To that end, to help leaders in leading their teams to solve challenges in addressing complex problems, a holistic approach that integrates elements of art, religion, and philosophy is needed (Eskola et al., 2022b). Employees emotional engagement is extremely important for raising awareness and driving behavioral change. A substantial transformation of the organizational culture requires repeated interventions and sustained effort for both employees and the organization. Traditional training methods often prioritize cognitive skills over emotional intelligence; therefore, organizational training should consider practical and experiential approaches, along with theoretical ones. To foster holistic development and enhance both personal and professional growth, the potential of using artistic practices in training should be considered (Mistretta and Goubier, 2022).

Three years ago, the European Union allocated funds for an Erasmus+ Knowledge Alliances project designed to develop and test a methodology to revolutionize management education. Four higher education institutions (HEIs) and five companies from four countries (France, Finland, Latvia, and Romania) signed a consortium agreement and took part in the ProCESS project (Processing Complexity with Emotional, Sensorial, and Spiritual Capacities) between January 2021 and March 2024.

## **2.2. The framework of ProCESS methodology**

ProCESS methodology emphasizes the integration of Sensorial, Emotional and Spiritual (SES) skills with traditional rational thinking, aiming to equip managers and decision-makers with tools to navigate complex organizational problems effectively, as the guide for this innovative methodology mentions (Goubier et al., 2024).

The operational objectives of the project and the public intellectual outputs were: (1) developing ProCESS methodology and four training modules for SES skills development (Eskola et al., 2022a; Goubier et al., 2024), (2) testing the methodology in real-life situations with students (Eskola et al., 2024), (3) creating a global network of trainers in SES skills (SESS trainers) able to implement project methodology (Leen and Trenvouez, 2024; Leen et al., 2024; Ludviga et al., 2024), and (4) testing the training modules through pilot training sessions in companies.

### **2.2.1. Testing ProCESS methodology with students**

The ProCESS methodology was developed during the three years of project implementation and tested with students in real-life situations. To achieve this goal, four partner companies from four different countries have written 12 real-business case studies to be solved by 192 students involved in the three rounds of case studies (four case studies per round) (Eskola et al., 2024). The fifth partner company has developed a SESS evaluation tool to assess students SES skills before, during, and after the training process (Trenvouez et al., 2022).

During the training program that took place over the course of one semester, students worked in teams to find innovative solutions to the complex problem raised by the case study they worked for. The four partner HEIs followed the ProCESS

methodology, organizing six workshops to empower students to enhance their SES skills. By engaging students in a variety of art-based activities—using tools like music, dance, meditation, poetry, sculpture, theatre, etc.—this holistic approach fostered innovative thinking, enabled students to develop “out of the box” solutions for real-world challenges, and encouraged them to tap into their creative potential (Kakko, 2022; Lungu et al., 2023; Sava et al., 2022; Sluka and Ludviga, 2022).

### **2.2.2. Pilot training sessions at companies, based on ProCESS methodology**

Using the experience gained by testing ProCESS methodology with students, each partner HEI in collaboration with national partner companies, associated partners, and other entities has organized seven pilot training sessions at companies during the last part of the project. These pilot training sessions—a total of 28 trainings in four countries—aimed to test the effectiveness of the SESS training modules developed by each country involved in the project (Eskola et al., 2022a), using the expertise of SESS trainers’ community (Ludviga et al., 2024). To collect participants’ feedback regarding the training experience and the pilot training sessions value-added, a common feedback questionnaire was designed and used in all four countries.

The Romanian partners in the ProCESS project have implemented a total of seven pilot training sessions with a duration of 21 hours (three hours/training session) and a total of 67 participants. The participants that tested ProCESS methodology for free during July 2023–February 2024 were students from Romanian partner HEI (one session, with 13 participants), teachers from different educational institutions (two sessions, with 19 participants), managers from clients of a business consulting company—Romanian partner company in the project (one session, with 6 participants), or employees in companies with different fields of activity (three sessions, with 28 participants; one of these sessions brought together 13 employees from three different companies). As a quick analysis of this data can show, the main technical issue faced by implementing training sessions in the real business world was to find companies open to allocating resources (time and people) for these free-of-charge trainings.

The author of this paper was one of the SESS trainers certified to implement ProCESS methodology, besides her role as project manager of the Romanian partner HEI in the project. In this role of SESS trainer, she was involved in designing and implementing pilot training sessions at two Romanian companies, described in this paper as Company A and Company B, to maintain confidentiality.

Due to the profile complexity of participants involved in the seven pilot training sessions, based on a preliminary analysis of research data and considering that the author of this paper was directly involved in designing and implementing two training sessions, this perspective paper presents a comparison of results obtained through the implementation of pilot training sessions in two companies.

### **2.3. Designing two pilot training sessions for Romanian companies**

This section presents the main coordinates of designing the pilot training sessions in two different Romanian companies.

The selection of the participants in both pilot training sessions was made by company representatives after a preliminary discussion about training objectives,

methodology, and requirements (maximum 16 participants per session, managers of different levels, engineers, or team leaders). In the first case, the selection was made by Company A' owner (general manager of the company for 25 years, male, 73 years old) complying with the requirements mentioned by trainers. In the second case, the participants were selected by the commercial department manager (leader of a group of 42 members, female, 50 years old).

As **Table 1** shows, both companies have chosen to test ProCESS methodology in on-site trainings with a duration of three hours at company premises. Companies' headquarters were in different geographic locations, in two different counties in Transylvania (Romania). After a preliminary discussion with the managers of the employees selected to attend, the pilot training sessions were scheduled differently: in the middle of the day before the lunch break (Company A) and at the end of the working day (Company B). The period of the year in which the pilot training sessions took place was different: September (Company A) and February (Company B).

**Table 1.** Main coordinates of pilot training sessions.

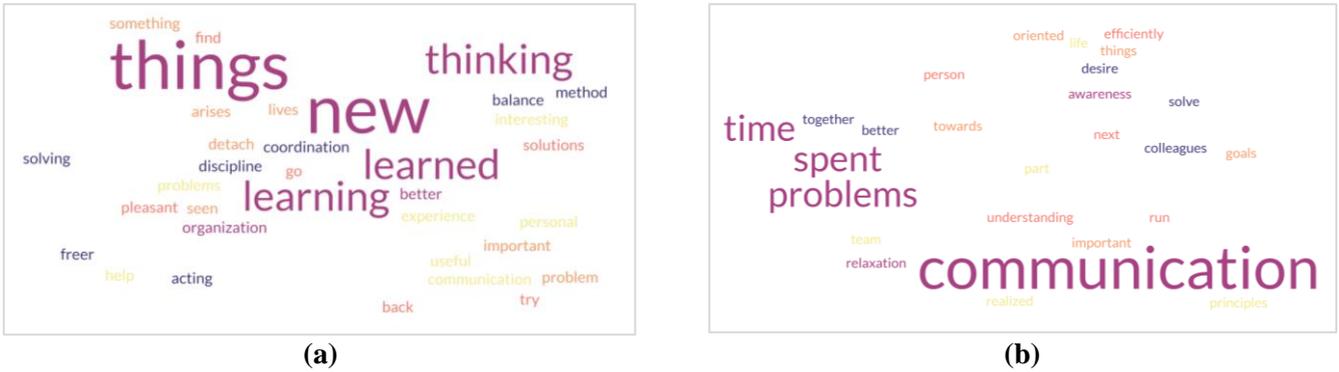
Data description	Company A	Company B
Company profile	Wood processing company, 170 employees	Wholesale trade company, 240 employees
Company headquarters location	Center of a commune located in a hilly area of Transylvania (Romania)	The industrial area of a municipality, in the central part of Transylvania (Romania)
Training location	Company premises*	Company premises**
Training duration	3 hours	3 hours
Schedule	11 a.m.–2 p.m. (September 2023)	2 p.m.–5 p.m. (February 2024)
Training type	On-site training; On-the-job training	On-site training; On-the-job training
Number of participants	8 (eight)	7 (seven)
Participants' profile	Employees from different departments (engineers or middle managers/team leaders)	Employees from the same department, in different teams that work together
SESS trainers' profile	Team of four SESS trainers, led by a SESS trainer with large experience in companies training	Team of four SESS trainers, led by an entry-level experience SESS trainer
Strategy used for choosing the problem to be solved	Asked by email before training. The director of the company research center suggested a list.	Asked from participants at the beginning of the session.
Complex problem discussed during training	Being productive maintaining the work-life balance	Improving team communication to reduce the impact of errors
Training methodology:	ProCESS methodology	ProCESS methodology
Phase 1: representing the problem	Drawing and modeling	Drawing and modeling
Phase 2: relaxation	Meditation and active listening	Neurography
Phase 3: finding solutions	Drawing and modeling	Drawing and modeling

\* Bistrița Năsăud county, Romania, \*\* Cluj-Napoca county, Romania.

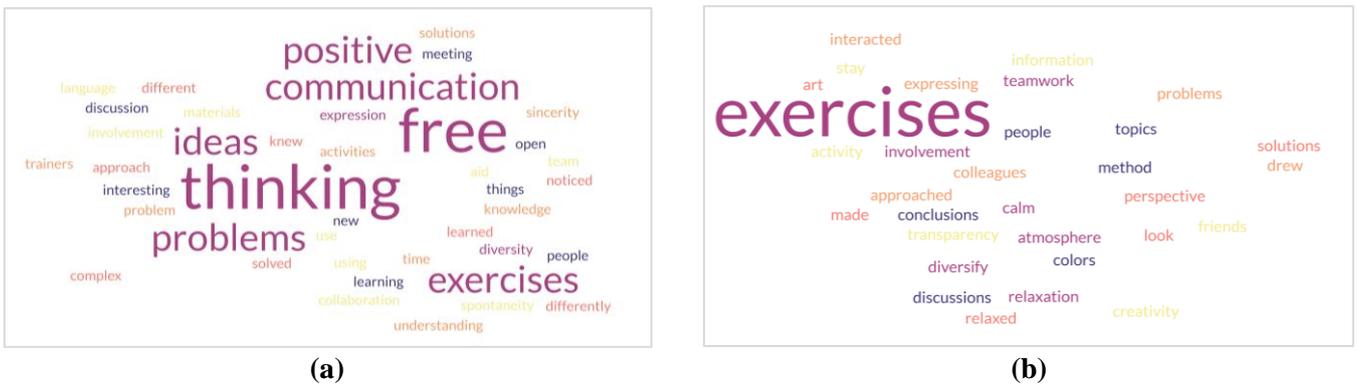
### 3. Results

This section presents the qualitative and quantitative data, and the results obtained at the end of each pilot training session, using a common feedback questionnaire. All participants in the training sessions have completed the survey.

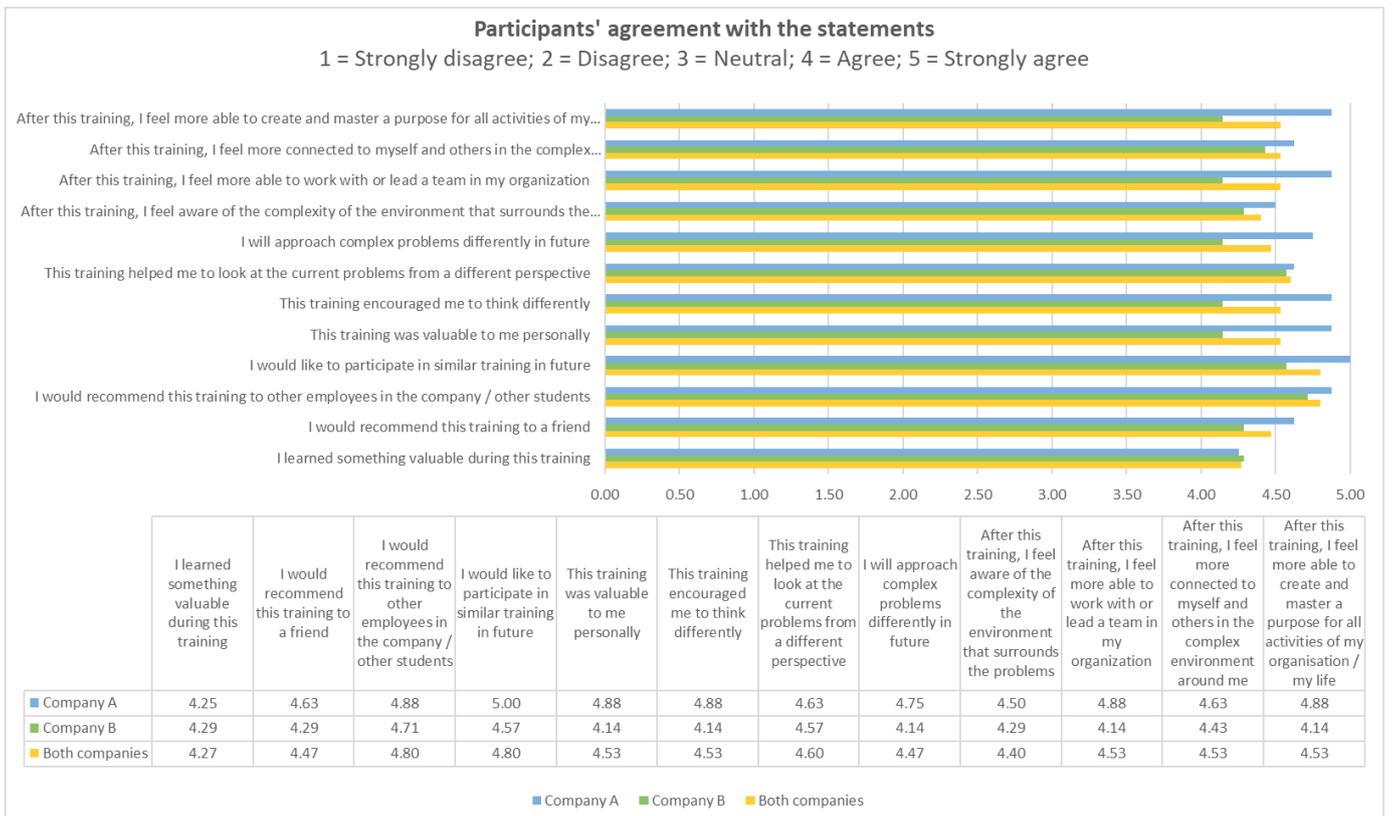




**Figure 4.** Participants’ main gains from the training session: **(a)** in Company A; **(b)** in Company B.



**Figure 5.** Things that participants liked most in the training session: **(a)** in Company A; **(b)** in Company B.



**Figure 6.** Comparison regarding participants’ opinion on the training sessions, by average scores.

### 3.1. Participants' overall feedback regarding training benefits and implementation

Research qualitative data was collected using two open questions and analyzed with free online tools ([www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/generatewordcloud](http://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/generatewordcloud)). Participants' feedback regarding the main gains of the training and things they appreciated most in the training session are presented in **Table 2** and figures below.

**Table 2.** Participants' overall feedback on training experience.

Question	Company A participant's opinion	Company B participant's opinion
My main gains from this training are:	<i>We learned many interesting and useful things that help us in our personal lives. /Learning a new method of thinking for solving problems. /I have seen that when a problem arises, it is very important to detach yourself from it, to do something. /Discipline, coordination, balance. /Better organization and freer thinking.</i>	<i>That I realized that I am part of a team with the same life principles and that we are oriented towards the same goals. /Communication is very important for things to run efficiently, but also for understanding the person next to you. /Better communication /Time spent with colleagues /Time spent together /Relaxation, awareness of problems, desire to solve problems.</i>
List 3 things you liked most in this training.	<i>(1): I noticed that problems can be solved by thinking differently from what I knew before. /I learned to approach complex problems in a different way. /Learning interesting things /Understanding the problem /Using positive thinking /Free expression of ideas /Diversity of ideas /Solutions (2): Communication/Open discussion/Involvement/Team collaboration/Spontaneity/Sincerity/Positive thinking of trainers/Exercises/Activities/Use of aid materials/Free time/Meeting new people</i>	<i>(1): Information transparency/Diversify/Topics/Discussions/Conclusions (2): Interaction with colleagues/Teamwork/Involvement/Creativity/Relaxation/The calm atmosphere/People/Exercises/Activity/Method/That I drew/Colors</i>

### 3.2. Participants' opinion on the training value-added and impact

Using one question based on the Likert scale, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with twelve statements related to their perception of the value-added and impact of training on solving complex problems differently in the future. The average scores were calculated using Excel, and research data are presented above.

## 4. Discussion

This perspectives paper introduces an innovative methodology for managers training. The results described in the previous section show promise in considering the organizational training based on art as an innovative way to train employees to find creative solutions to complex problems (Goubier et al., 2024).

Besides the fact that during the training sessions participants have found solutions to the selected complex problem by learning a new method to approach complexity, the feedback received from participants involved in two art-based workshops implemented in Romanian companies shows possible additional training impact on teambuilding, employee well-being, and team collaboration.

In line with the literature review, as Clifton and Harter (2021) stated, when work is stressful, it becomes difficult for managers to inspire enthusiasm for initiatives aimed at improving employees' well-being. Maintaining the work-life balance was one of the topics of interest suggested and chosen to be discussed in Company A training. Following the ProCESS methodology to come up with solutions, participants worked in groups and came up with new solutions for this complex problem that

included many stakeholders with different needs and values (Eskola et al., 2021). For example, using his talent for drawing, one of the participants represented this complex problem by two animals (a horse and an elephant) going in opposite directions. After an exercise that included meditation, in the last part of the training he used drawing again to represent ideas for solving the problem. In the new representation, he reorganized the animals walking in the same direction, adding other elements to inspire positive emotions and possible solutions.

Exploring another research direction, the importance of team collaboration and building authentic connections at work was highlighted by many authors (Erikson, 2019; Fisher and Phillips, 2021). Finding solutions for improving team communication to reduce the impact of errors at work was the aim of ProCESS methodology-based training at Company B. As **Table 2** presents, participants appreciated not only the fact that they found new solutions and realized the importance of communication and understanding others, but also the time spent with their colleagues during the training session. Within an informal discussion between the author of this paper and colleagues from the ProCESS Committee Board (Leen and Trenvouez), it was proposed that this innovative methodology could be a novel approach to teambuilding, an idea supported by the research data collected at Company B.

Turning to a different research question, creativity used during training sessions can improve training results and participants motivation (Zhang and Chen, 2021). As **Figure 4a** shows, the feedback received from Company A participants highlights learning and novelty as the main gains for attending the training session.

In addition, as shown in **Figures 1–2**, analyzing the research data globally, the results obtained indicate that the participants' main gains through the training sessions were communication and learning new things. By contrast, analyzing separately the research data, differences between participants' opinions can be identified as shown in **Figures 4–5** and **Table 2**. The main gains mentioned by Company A participants were learning new things and freer thinking, while Company B participants mentioned aspects related to communication and team collaboration. Differences can be observed also when analyzing participants' opinions regarding training experience. For example, freedom of expression and thinking was most appreciated by Company A participants, while the things most liked by Company B participants were training exercises and relaxation, brought by neurography and music used in the second part of the training session. Following **Figure 3** and **Figure 6**, the research supports the fact that training sessions brought value-added for participants. Slight differences can be observed between average scores calculated separately. For example, Company A participants "strongly agree," while Company B participants "agree" with statements describing training added value (this training session was "valuable to me personally" or "encouraged me to think differently") and impact ("after this training I feel more able" to work with or lead a team in my organization" or "to create and master a purpose for all activities of my organization/my life").

Thinking about previous discussions and the main limitation of this research, given especially the number of participants involved and the limited number of training sessions analyzed, further research using statistical analyses and artificial intelligence tools can be considered for gathering more insights into:

- the potential of art-based workshops for: (1) solving real life complex problems in companies; (2) increasing employees' performance and innovation impact.
- the influence of ProCESS methodology-based training on: (1) team collaboration, (2) organizational wellbeing; (3) employees' motivation for learning and (4) knowledge sharing effectiveness in organizations.
- the influence of company organizational culture on art-based workshops results.

## 5. Conclusion

Using art within organizations should be more than just for teambuilding, facilities design and wellbeing, but also for organizational training based on artistic tools. Talent managers and human resources specialists should recognize the potential of art in organizational and professional development, because “artistic employees” can perceive the world in new ways and come with new insights for boosting innovation.

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