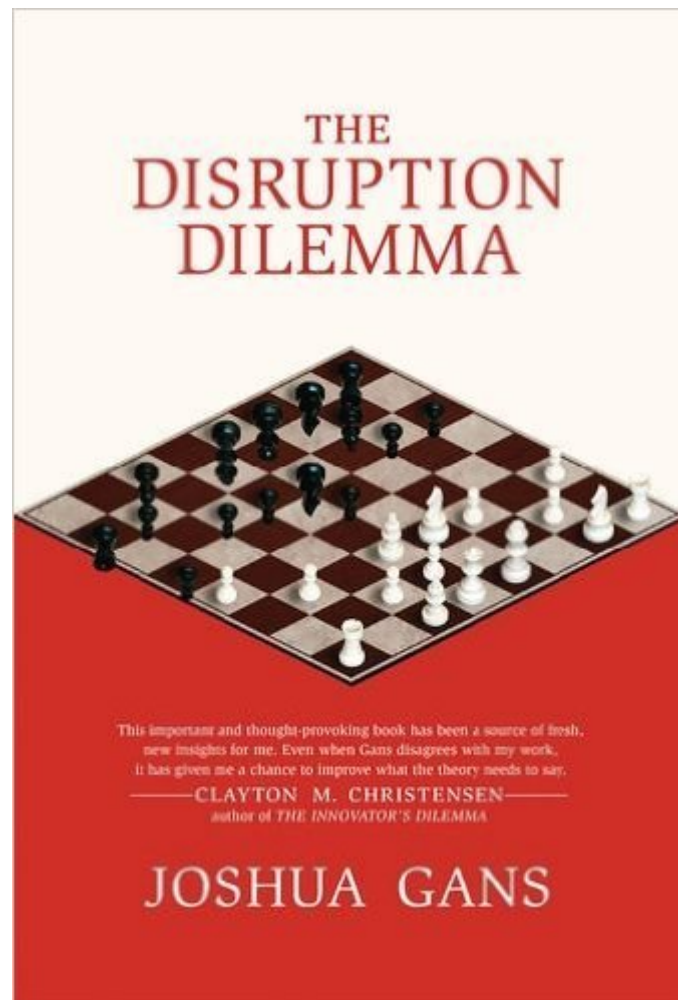


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# The Disruption Dilemma (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

"Disruption" is a business buzzword that has gotten out of control. Today everything and everyone seem to be characterized as disruptive -- or, if they aren't disruptive yet, it's only a matter of time before they become so. In this book, Joshua Gans cuts through the chatter to focus on disruption in its initial use as a business term, identifying new ways to understand it and suggesting new tools to manage it. Almost twenty years ago Clayton Christensen popularized the term in his book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, writing of disruption as a set of risks that established firms face. Since then, few have closely examined his account. Gans does so in this book. He looks at companies that have proven resilient and those that have fallen, and explains why some companies have successfully managed disruption -- Fujifilm and Canon, for example -- and why some like Blockbuster and Encyclopedia Britannica have not. Departing from the conventional wisdom, Gans identifies two kinds of disruption: demand-side, when successful firms focus on their main customers and underestimate market entrants with innovations that target niche demands; and supply-side, when firms focused on developing existing competencies become incapable of developing new ones. Gans describes the full range of actions business leaders can take to deal with each type of disruption, from "self-disrupting" independent internal units to tightly integrated product development. But therein lies the disruption dilemma: A firm cannot practice both independence and integration at once. Gans shows business leaders how to choose their strategy so their firms can deal with disruption while continuing to innovate.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The *Disruption Dilemma* is truly a refreshing and thoughtful book by a clear and decisive thinker. Joshua Gans (Stanford Ph.D., chair holder at Rotman, University of Toronto) delivers a succinct, yet holistic and complete treatise of Disruption. His deep insights allow managers to make sense out of the *disruption overload* (found in the popular press and discussions at various companies' board rooms as well as water coolers), and to leverage Disruption for competitive advantage. One of the main contributions by Gans in this important discourse is adding a *supply side dimension* to the prevailing *demand side theory* of disruption, thus providing a much more complete, yet sharp picture of a complex phenomenon. Professor Gans begins with clearly defining disruption. This is followed-up by a well-done synthesis of not only Clayton Christensen's seminal contribution (demand side disruption, where existing customers play a critical role), but important ideas of other scholars (beginning with Schumpeter) that both preceded and followed the publication of the initial work on disruption some 20 years ago (i.e., Bower and Christensen, 1995, HBR). In his trademark breathy, enjoyable, and yet reflective prose Joshua Gans walks us through different aspects of Disruption (What is it? Where does it come from?; How can you predict it?; How do you manage it?; Self-Disruption; and, If, and how, to insure against Disruption?, etc.). One of the most refreshing and novel aspects of this book is that Joshua Gans takes a second look at well-known case vignettes (Apple, BlackBerry RIM, Netflix, Fuji, IBM, Kodak, etc.) and serves up novel and fresh insights that have eluded the many other writers in this genre.

CONTENT I like that somebody takes a critical view of Christensen's work. That is how our thinking progresses. However, the book lacks an overall perspective and is loose on details. Let me provide a few specific things that frustrated me. The author seems to be an economist and writes that it is "simple logic" that a firm would adopt a new technology if it were profitable to do so (p 67). Then he references other authors that focus on how existing communication patterns inside a firm limits its ability to be rational. These two perspectives are not compatible. The failure to notice this tension has huge consequences for what practical advice should be given to companies. Even if one were to accept that it might not be rational for an incumbent to adopt a new technology in year 1, it might be rational to accept it in year 4. The author does not make a distinction of these two situations. Christensen and especially Henderson argued that it is ossified communication patterns that are the cause of a failure in both year 1 and year 4. The author mentions this, but does not draw the

consequences. The author states that Christensen talked about a demand-based disruption (i.e. listen to existing customers too much and not notice the new customers). The author adds that there is also a supply-based disruption that Christensen missed (i.e. new production process, maybe even new communication patterns). The latter he calls architectural innovation following the work of Rebecca Henderson. This is a very interesting framing so I start to think about it by going back to Christensen's original examples (e.g. minimills, hydraulic excavators). Immediately the author's theory becomes inconsistent.

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