



Where chance discovery
meets insight

Understanding Serendipity

The power to turn
chance into success



Creating unexpected
value



Reinterpreting failure and
opportunity

What is serendipity?



The power to turn
chance into success



The power to seize chance and turn it
into fortune



The ability to make fortunate
discoveries by chance



The ability to find valuable things one
was not looking for

*"This discovery is almost of that kind which I call
Serendipity..."*

- Horace Walpole, 1754

The Origin and History of Serendipity

● Origin: a Persian fable

The Three Princes of Serendip

A tale in which three princes of Serendip (present-day Sri Lanka) travel and make various discoveries through chance and wisdom

📍 Serendip: the Persian name for ancient Sri Lanka

● 1754: Horace Walpole's letter

The first use of the term

First used by the English novelist Horace Walpole in a letter to his friend Sir Horace Mann

"This discovery is almost of that kind which I call Serendipity, a very expressive word... I once read a silly fairy tale, called The Three Princes of Serendip. As their highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of."

● Modern meaning

Expansion of the concept

Expanded beyond mere chance to mean discovery in which a 'prepared mind' and 'insight' combine



Attracting attention as a principle of innovation across diverse fields such as

The Modern Meaning of Serendipity

Rediscovering contingency

Serendipity gives significant weight to unexpected, contingent events that have previously been left unaddressed or could not be addressed. In our society, accustomed to handling matters through rational sensibility, this becomes an occasion to consider what appears to lie beyond reason.



Rational treatment of the non-rational

While encompassing cases from the non-rational domain, serendipity offers rational alternatives that can be reasonably understood. It acknowledges intuition and chance while presenting a way to harness them systematically.



The potential for ordinary people to succeed

The figures discussed in serendipity are ordinary people who worked diligently at their own tasks. They show that a prepared attitude and the ability to seize chance, rather than special talent, are the keys to success.

"Heaven helps those who help themselves" - serendipity is a fortune that comes only to the prepared.

The Key to Serendipity: Contingency

Serendipity means 'an unexpected discovery or invention,' and its essence lies in contingency. Chance has always existed as an important element of life; it was merely left unexplained within the existing framework of rationality. Philosophically it is defined as "a property not grounded in causality," but in serendipity it is reinterpreted through the lens of "necessary contingency" and "engineered contingency."



Waiting by the Stump (守株待兔)

The tale of a farmer who found a rabbit that had died after colliding with a tree stump by chance, then abandoned farming and waited only for more rabbits. As a case of failing to make use of a chance event, it suggests that true serendipity lies in the ability to connect chance to success.



Heinrich's Law

The ratio of 1 major accident : 29 minor accidents : 300 near-misses. Just as small signs precede a major accident, serendipity too does not occur without preparation and effort. Many attempts are needed before a single success.



Adding the Finishing Touch (畫龍點睛)

The tale in which, once the pupils were painted into a picture of a dragon at the very end, the dragon flew away. It signifies the transformation of a decisive moment: just as water at 99 degrees turns to vapor when one more degree is added, serendipity too occurs when a decisive element is added to an already prepared state.

Cases of Serendipity in the History of Science

Discoverer	Discovery or invention	Year	Features of the chance discovery
 Columbus	The New World	1492	Discovered the Americas by chance while searching for a sea route to India
 Newton	The law of universal gravitation	1687	Gained insight into gravity from watching a falling apple
 Röntgen	X-rays	1895	Discovered by chance that a fluorescent screen glowed during a cathode-ray tube experiment
 Fleming	Penicillin	1928	Discovered that mold had formed on a bacterial culture dish and killed the surrounding bacteria
 Pasteur	Vaccination	1878	Discovered by chance that a weakened pathogen builds immunity
 Plunkett	Teflon	1938	Discovered a slippery substance that had formed inside a gas cylinder during a refrigerant gas experiment

"The history of scientific discovery is full of chance moments that came to the prepared."

Serendipity in Modern Corporations

Starbucks

Howard Schultz drew inspiration from the coffee culture (a place of rest and exchange) he happened to experience while traveling in Italy, and developed the Starbucks business model

 G

Google

Co-founder Sergey Brin stated that "the number one factor in success is luck." Google's innovative products were born from chance discoveries enabled by its '20% time' policy

 f

Facebook

Mark Zuckerberg: "Facebook embodies the concept of serendipity, an unexpected stroke of fortune." A campus network service evolved into a global social medium

 A

BMW

Established a 'Most Creative Mistake of the Month Award' to encourage creative mistakes and turn failure into an opportunity for innovation

 U

Uniqlo

With a '1 win, 9 losses' management philosophy, it encourages employees to take on challenges and emphasizes learning through failure and an entrepreneurial spirit

The Three Features of Serendipity



Emphasis on the long-term process and structure

Moving away from a focus on short-term results, it centers on the 'process' and 'structure' that lead to long-term effort and success. Serendipity occurs in situations like adding the finishing touch (畫龍點睛), emerging when sustained effort reaches a critical point.



Multilateral and multidimensional thinking

It offers multifaceted thinking that departs from dualistic thought. Rather than a binary structure of angel and devil, good and evil, multidimensional thinking allows chance to be interpreted as another form of necessity. This aligns with the traditional Eastern spirit of 'harmony without uniformity' (和而不同).



A spirit of continual challenge

It views success not as a single event judged within a limited time, but as a continuous process. It frees those who strive from evaluation by momentary joy and sorrow (一喜一悲), and encourages sustained preparation and challenge. This is in line with the Silicon Valley philosophy that regards even failure as a precious asset.

"Heaven helps those who help themselves"

Conclusion and Implications



The value of serendipity

Serendipity is an important source of insight in a complex modern society that cannot be resolved by rational judgment alone. By reappraising the value created by chance and intuition, it opens the door to innovation.



Its impact on our lives

Through a challenging attitude unafraid of failure, a long-term perspective on the potential for success, and a multidimensional way of thinking, we can achieve meaningful discoveries and accomplishments in everyday life as well.



Practical Steps for Serendipity

1. Record and reinterpret mistakes and failures
2. Explore diverse knowledge across disciplines
3. Meet 'prepared contingency' through sustained effort and preparation

"Heaven helps those who help themselves"

Serendipity is never mere luck simply handed to you, but another form of necessity that comes to those who are prepared.