

MANAGING INNOVATION

Creating value from ideas

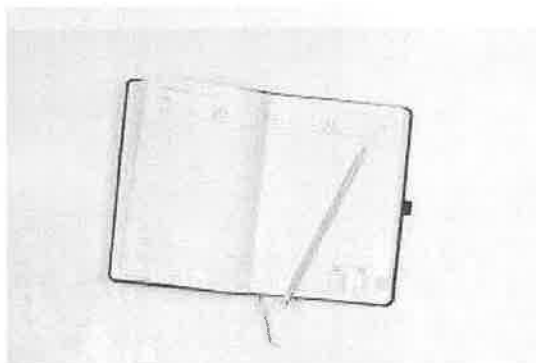
Creating innovation spaces

June 29, 2019

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management. It's a lesson which would be well taken today when innovation labs and similar ventures are becoming increasingly popular. Whether you call them innovation hubs, maker-spaces, fab-labs, accelerators or hotspots you can hardly turn a street corner or a magazine page before you bump into another example. The names may vary but the underlying idea is the same – a place where people can meet to get inspired and supported by each other, to articulate and co-create.

All of these ventures are built on the belief that innovation (particularly of the radical, game-changing variety) needs somewhere to incubate and flourish, ideally well away from the busy day-to-day mainstream. Spaces where ideas can grow, be prototyped, experimented with and ultimately taken to scale.

But there's a risk that many of these labs are being set up simply because it is the fashionable thing to do. Expectations run high but the very ease with which they can be established means that it is also simple to close them down again.

Just as Madame de Geoffrin's salons were more than comfortable surroundings and good catering so innovation labs and spaces need to be more than a chillout space with some beanbags on the floor and whiteboards on the walls.

Successful innovation spaces

So what can we learn also from the growing body of research on successful innovation labs and spaces? Five key principles seem to

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Walker's Wagon Wheel tavern in Mountain View, California was another. Its name provides a great description of its role – like spokes on a wheel people and ideas converged on its centre and on a Friday night the air was full of conversation. Ideas flew around the place, colliding and often crashing in flames on the floor. But some of them fused, became something bigger, began conversations which carried on over the coming weeks and grew into new businesses. And those businesses began the legend which Silicon Valley was to become.

What these all have in common is that they are more than simply meeting points. And they work in part because they help provide a crucible within which ideas at the 'fuzzy front end' of innovation can emerge. In this very early stage it's not clear what the landscape here actually involves – navigating it is like stumbling through thick fog while trying to move forward in a direction which you think is the right one.

Entrepreneurs rarely start with 'the' definitive version of their new venture. They may have a broad vision, a sense of direction, but their progress towards it is one of probe and learn, trying out different things, learning through failure and feedback and pivoting around the core idea until they arrive at their solution.

And established organizations operate partly in 'fuzzy' mode. Whilst their mainstream innovation offerings can be updated and incrementally improved along clear strategic pathways, finding radical solutions, breakthrough products and services requires approaches which allow for experimentation.

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The core of his theory is that where two 'knowledge worlds' possess different, 'non-redundant' information (they know something you don't) then there is a 'structural hole' between them. Brokers provide the bridge between these and are central to effective flow of knowledge across them.

A second key point in enabling effective innovation spaces is the need to promote diversity but also to retain focus and coherence. Social networks around knowledge aren't all the same – back in the 1970s Mark Granovetter showed that they varied in terms of their connectivity. Much of the time they involve dense connections or people sharing similar and complementary information – something he called 'strong ties'. But for new knowledge to move between networks we need much looser links between different worlds – what he called 'weak ties'.

Think about the challenge currently facing players in the auto industry – their world of strong ties may not be enough to help them connect to the very different knowledge worlds they will need in the emerging mobility industry. So they'd benefit from the chance encounters offered by the Wagon Wheel bar or its 2016 equivalent!

Once again we are in the broker's territory – there is a need for people or mechanisms to help cross these knowledge worlds, to act as boundary spanners. Tom Allen's pioneering work in the 1970s gave us some powerful insights into the ways this happens – for example through technological gatekeepers who are able to see the relevance of external

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Prototyping and boundary objects



Innovation begins with ideas locked up in someone's head. Creative interchange and shared exploration can give those ideas shape and energy – but sooner or later there is a need to make them real. Extensive research on innovation in a variety of different worlds highlights the value of problem exploration.

So how do we move from vague notions, hunches, half-formed ideas towards something more workable? Not by a single leap but by a series of stepping-stones, bridges, scaffolding – essentially playing with ideas about the problem. As James Dyson puts it *"..... prototypes allow you to quickly get a feel for things and uncover subtle design flaws...."*

The clue is in the name – proto-type. It's not about the finished object but a stepping-stone

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- It allows for emergence – sometimes we can't predict what will happen when different elements interact. Trying something out helps explore surprising combinations

Once again there is a clear role for innovation spaces to provide the context within which prototyping can take place. But there is particular value in doing so in a context where there is also diversity of commentary and input, engaging with prototypes and helping to refine them. This is easier to do when the prototypes are sketches but as we move towards more accurate representations and simulations so there is a need to engage technological support. This is one of the powerful arguments behind linking innovation labs to 'maker spaces' and 'fab-labs' – they become environments in which prototyping can extend deep into the development process.

Management and facilitation of innovation

By now it should be clear that successful innovation spaces are far more than physical environments. And just as Madame de Geoffrin's salon depended on her skill in organizing and managing the events so today's labs and spaces need hands-on management. This is not simply a matter of operations and logistics; there is skill in brokerage, in coaching and supporting nascent ideas, in planning events, in focusing activities. Successful

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eliminate and which new ones to add to the repertoire. In other words organizations need a capacity for innovation model innovation'. It's the same with innovation labs and spaces; whilst much has already been learned a key skill involves building build dynamic capability in order to upgrade the ways in which such spaces operate.

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