

Sector Connector

Unknowable outcomes and the never ending story



Verne Ivars Krastins
BSc (Hons), Fellow LGPro

An example of rhetoric getting the better of a worthy cause is the idea that innovation can be the heart, soul and fabric of an organisation.



With so many synonyms to choose from, it's easy to fudge the idea. We can talk about novelty, being inventive, responding to change in new and original ways, or about improvement, doing things better and more effectively, and calling on the best of us to be problem solving trailblazers.

But I go with the scientists and sociologists, who distinguish innovation from incrementalism and invention by what it does to the human experience. If it doesn't change how we think and feel, or the fabric of how we relate to each other, it's probably not an innovation.

Of course we value the idea highly, expecting innovation to lead to improvement. But that's not necessarily so.

The inaugural nuclear bombs last century were innovative but didn't improve much, nor stop wars – just one of them – but in short time did transform humanity's view of itself. Before then only God could destroy us all; afterward we knew we could do it ourselves. That's what I call an innovation.

The internet is another example, though this story isn't over yet.

Originally invented to improve communication between research scientists, in a couple of generations it transformed how humans learn, form opinions and conduct their lives. At last count, just under three billion people frequently or occasionally use the internet* – that's around 42 per cent of everyone alive on Earth, plus the crew on the International Space Station.

We don't know yet if this will improve life on or off world, and probably won't for another generation. A key feature of innovation is that its nature is unknowable until part and parcel of culture.

Being innovative is to mix together original, diverse and disparate ideas to create a new idea. Not a better, newer or more effective one, but something we have not experienced before. To do that, you need to get out there and learn from the unfamiliar, not benchmark.

So, can organisations judged by how well they represent and regulate really innovate? Government workplace environments could be great feeding grounds for innovation with such a diversity of knowledge and intent, but structural self preservation gets in the way.

Don't get me wrong. Our colleagues in areas called innovation do valuable work. They help us question, learn, improve and adapt. But let's call a spade a spade. With continuous improvement, best practice, process engineering and the like passé, the corporate language makers have simply updated the lingo.

My plea is to be able to use the word and talk about innovation with the meaning the English language originally intended. What other word am I going to use?

Please don't take our word away! **N**

* www.statista.com