

Debunking the Myths of Innovation: An Interview with Scott Berkun

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In his research, Scott Berkun, the author of the popular new book, "The Myths of Innovation," has done a fantastic job of demystifying innovation and debunking dangerous assumptions about how breakthroughs happen. UIE's Christine Perfetti recently had the chance to talk with Scott about his new book and his research in the area of innovation.

UIE: In your book, you discuss the misconceptions about many of the biggest innovations in history. For example, you mention that Newton didn't discover gravity by watching apples and Thomas Edison didn't invent the light bulb. Why do you think these false beliefs are still so popular and memorable?

Scott Berkun: One of the biggest reasons is that the myths are fun. We all love stories that entertain or mystify us, and it's natural that given the choice between a dull story for how something happened, and an odd, curious or funny one, we'll tend to want to hear, and tell, the latter.

There's nothing wrong with this, unless you actually want to learn how to innovate: in which case we have to dig deeper and find out the truth. That was the primary goal of my book.

When you use the word "Innovation," what do you mean?

It's funny, I spent a great deal of time looking at different definitions of the word, but in the end decided not to bother with a long-winded exploration of what the word means.

In my book, I'm deliberately sloppy with the definition. Invention, discovery, innovation, creative thinking, and progress are all in the same ballpark and that's the field of myths the book explores.

In your research on Innovation, you debunked the myth that the best ideas win if the design is better than its competitors. Can you give an example of the best idea failing to win?

I think it's pretty rare that "the best" idea among experts in any field becomes the dominant, mass popular leader. HTML is not the "best" programming language. Certainly few computer

scientists believe Microsoft Windows is the best operating system, and very few doctors believe Airborne is the best cold remedy. In my research, I've explored all the factors that contribute to innovation adoption, and surprisingly only a few of them have to do with the abstract quality of the idea behind the innovation itself.

What advice would you give managers who want to encourage creative environments and innovation within their team?

There's no magic secret. Most of the teams I researched that did well had smart and motivated people and an environment that rewards those people for taking risks, experimenting, and using their own initiative. It's also important for the team members to have clear goals or problems that needed to be solved. If a manager can truly provide these things, they're ahead of most of the working world.

Are there any circumstances where you would recommend teams avoid focusing on designing for innovation?

Yes! Thanks for asking! I think innovation is overrated. Customers don't care about how innovative you are. They just want to be happy and satisfied. And that's about good design.

The best advice I can give is to focus on people and their problems. Few great innovators worried about anything else. The fact that they found a new idea had more to do with their passion for solving someone's problem than anything else. Innovation is a huge distraction these days. That's one of the myths I hope people will understand how to dispel from reading the book or attending my seminars.

In your opinion, what are some of the obstacles that prevent design teams from creating innovative products?

The biggest obstacles are political and psychological. Design teams are sometimes so detached from what the business or engineering leaders are doing that their big ideas are stillborn - the designers aren't innovating in ways that the rest of their organization could possibly be receptive to.

Some call this politics, but that's half of the innovation game: lining up the resources and relationships needed to support a brilliant design idea. There are countless innovations that never became products because their champions ignored the politics necessary to bring their ideas to the world.

On the psychology side, designers can be surprisingly conservative and almost shy about presenting their ideas to others. They're so afraid of criticism that they never allow their passions to show, especially in a confrontational situation, which ironically is exactly where their passions might be of the greatest use to them. One chapter in my book focuses on the psychology of ideas, and how creators always face the same criticisms and challenges. Being aware of those challenges and preparing oneself to handle them gracefully is a large part of being a successful innovator.

What are some of the reasons innovation efforts fail in an organization? Are there some common mistakes you've encountered?

The two big ones are 1) a failure to let ideas grow and 2) an unwillingness to take risks. In the first case, ideas are like plants - the seeds don't look much like the final flower, and need time and nurturing to blossom. If there's no incubator in an organization, there's no way for new seeds to develop, and therefore, not much innovation is going to happen.

In the second, innovation is change by definition. No matter how you define it, it means doing something different. This demands risk. The bigger the innovation, the bigger the risks. Any organization that claims they want innovation but isn't willing to take risks is lying to itself.

For innovation to thrive within an organization, you've argued that it's important for someone in power to support the project. How would you recommend designers go about getting buy-in from that person?

Yes, if the person guarding the door between you and your customer doesn't at some point support the project, there's really no point, is there? If they're going to say "no," then all your great ideas won't help anyone.

There are three easy tricks for getting buy-in.

1) Watch others who got buy in. How did they do it? Why did they get support? What questions did they ask? Every executive is different and the best advice is to watch your VP, see who they grant buy-in to and why, and learn from their successes and mistakes.

2) Go and ask for it. There's no reason to be shy. If you have an idea in progress that you want support for, say, "Hi Mr. VP. I have a proposal for X that needs your support. What's the best way to get your feedback on this?" Often a 30 second 1-on-1 conversations yields more useful information than a 10 minute presentation in a big meeting

3) If #2 is scary, go to whoever you saw do #1 above and ask them for *their* input.

In your book, you talk about Flickr's success. Yet, Flickr was originally conceived as an online game, The Game Neverending. What can design teams take away from Flickr's story?

The lesson is simple: never stop asking, "what else might this be good for?" Design is the application of ideas to problems, and even if you're half done designing a toaster oven it doesn't mean that the same design might not be useful for something else as well (say, a doorstep, a boat anchor, or a footwarmer for Eskimos).

At a higher fidelity, it might even be a great sales tool or in some cases, a way to explain to users what a tool does as part of the marketing. But the tool doesn't replace wireframes, specifications, use cases and all sorts of other tools that we employ throughout the product cycle.

There's a common belief that it's more difficult to innovate in larger organizations. Have you found this to be true?

It is often harder but not because of size. It's because of the diminished ability for people in large organizations to take risks. That's the real problem. Many big organizations continually innovate: 3M, GE, even Google now can be considered a large organization. So, there are cultures and management styles that allow for innovation at any scale - and that's the real thing to focus on - culture and management, not size.

Thanks, Scott!