



Innovators and the challenges they face

by Pieter de Villiers

One of the significant characteristics that many companies have in common today is the desire to be recognised for their innovation by developing new products, being different and being unique.

Too many companies attempt to build their market presence with words such as 'market leader', 'innovative', 'different' and 'radical'. The directors, employees and shareholders of these companies use these words freely and with relative ease when talking to their customers. Their marketing departments dream up images to drive these concepts in their marketing campaigns. However, once the content of their 'innovation' is tested, it is revealed that they have nothing in place that could even vaguely be defined as 'innovative', 'new', 'radical' or 'unique'. The fact is that the majority of these 'innovative' concepts are old ideas in a new packaging, old methods with a different look and feel, or ideas taken from their opposition with different pricing and packaging.

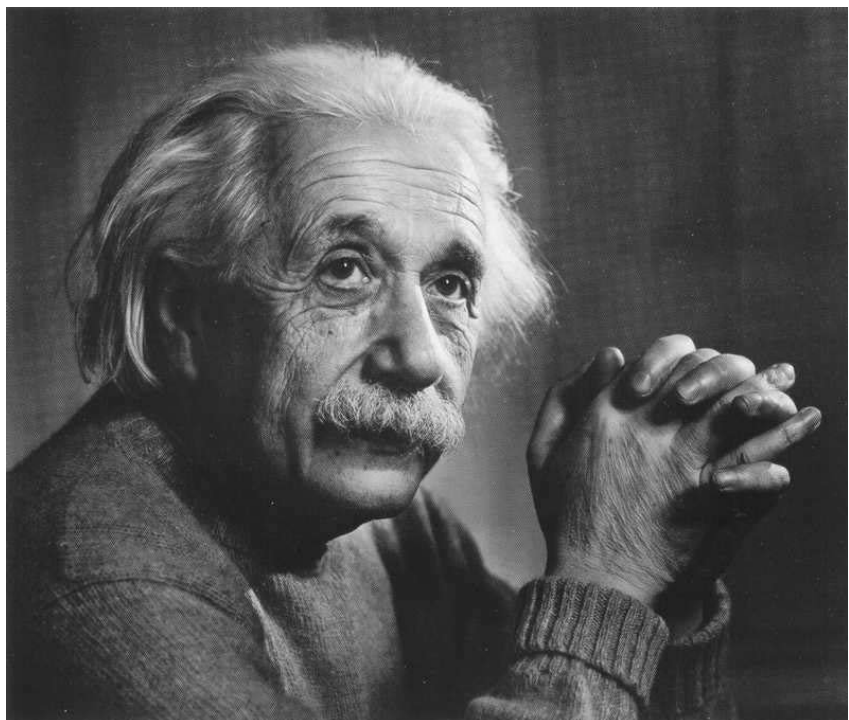
The innovative framework of a business is tested when it is approached by an innovator with

a strong new concept, product or service. When this happens, innovators are required to explain the following:

- Who else uses this?
- What is its track record of success?
- What is the reaction of the market to this?
- Provide some references to substantiate your ideas.
- This has never been done before. What makes you think your idea will work?
- Show us the marketing research that identifies potential markets for your idea or product.
- Many people must have tried this before. You can't be the first person to think of it. What makes you think that your approach will be any different?
- We've never done things this way. We aren't convinced that your idea will work.

"The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education."

– Albert Einstein





→ Innovation is a combination of guts, resilience and an adventurous mind.

Many businesspeople seem to think in boxes and apply 'out-of-the-box thinking' as new packages for old ideas. During conversations with the inventors of some of the smartest ideas, it is clear that the resistance they met made it impossible for them to get their ideas and innovations off the ground. The most troubling stumbling block also seems to be the training people received with regard to specific methods, products and functions already known in the world of science and business.

Defining innovation will help understand the fact that many people in business (and in science) are uncomfortable with the reality of smart, innovative concepts, products and service offerings. Innovation can be defined as doing something that hasn't been done before or building something functional that has never been built before.

This is not to be confused with 'smart' ideas. A 'smart' idea is something that is done in such a way that it changes efficiency, but results in the same outcome. Many companies are not even open to smart ideas. They are stuck in their old thinking and old methods of doing things, despite the existence of very advanced and 'smart' methodologies. There are no innovative practices at work in their businesses. Introducing the managers of such companies to innovative concepts is a waste of time and valuable energy.

A few examples will clarify this. The Internet is probably the greatest

innovative
technology
since the

Wright brothers invented the flying machine. Many business leaders still see the Internet as a 'gimmick'. They don't grant their employees access to the Internet. They don't see the possibilities the Internet holds for their businesses and they don't see the need for them to embrace this powerful, world-changing application. In medicine, modern computer software can accurately diagnose many diseases in seconds through extremely smart artificial intelligence software systems. It has been revealed that less than 5% of general practitioners are willing to work with these smart systems. The others don't believe that they work and were not trained to understand or accept the capabilities of smart diagnostic systems.

A disturbing experience is to approach the leadership team of a company that takes pride in its innovative product design and leading edge technologies. This business is in desperate need of an organisational development programme that will take it to the next level. It is introduced to software that will enable it to obtain results within one day for a fraction of the price it would cost to appoint an experienced consultant. The company refuses to do so, saying that the value of such an organisational development programme is proportional to the human effort that went into compiling the programme.

Innovation is not a function of intelligence, training or academic learning. Innovation is a combination of guts, resilience and an adventurous mind – attributes not easily found. 🍀

Pieter de Villiers is an alumnus of the University of Pretoria. He registered his first patent while still at high school (in Grade 11). As a business consultant, he designed the architecture of *NXTmove™* and *Shadowmatch™* – both advanced application software products that never existed before. He also co-developed the winning product of the BPO Technical Innovation Award for 2009, *yourcallcentre.com*, which defines customer service call centres in terms of their functional impact on the business and its customers by deriving operational benchmarks for any call centre operation.

