



# Knoco Newsletter

## August 2012 - KM, Creativity and Innovation



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### KM, Creativity and Innovation

What's the link between Creative Innovation and KM? Are they opposites? Are they the same? Are they two sides of the same coin? Where does the drive to innovate, turn into "Re-inventing the Wheel"? Where does the re-use and re-application of knowledge turn into "Flogging a Dead Horse" or "Re-fighting the Last War"? When does creativity become counter-productive, and where is innovation a better strategy than intelligent copying, or sticking with what you know?

These are some of the topics we explore in this month's newsletter

### Building Creativity into KM in the Corporate Sector through BDAL



[Ian Corbett](#)

For corporates, [Business-driven action learning](#) (BDAL) projects offer an opportunity to develop both the technical and leadership knowledge domains at the same time, providing powerful developmental experiences for people.

Although BDAL is often considered to be a tool for executive development I have found that it can be applied successfully at different levels . Based on my University of Cape Town experience (see article below) **it should also be seriously considered for accelerating onboarding of new staff to productive competence.**

For BDAL projects to successfully deliver value Knowledge Managers need to be supported by an effective sponsor within

## Lessons Learned

### Lesson-learning



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the leadership team with a proven capability to not only be open to new ideas but also implement change successfully. My experience to date is that **well-designed BDAL teams seldom, if ever, fail to find a creative solution to a challenge**. Success or failure is more commonly determined by the receptivity of the leadership team, and their openness to accept and act on innovative solutions. When they are, step-changes in performance can be delivered.

This is where [learning from experience](#) re-enters the picture. It should play a crucial role because research shows that "change-enabled" organisations learn effectively from within and build the capability of their people and teams to create innovative solutions supporting strategy implementation.

Building a knowledge base supporting continuous improvement in change management can make a real difference - but how many corporates pay attention to learning and sharing internal capability in this important area? In the rapidly changing global business context in which organisations operate **KM needs to continuously evolve to add value and be sustainable** - creativity in the form of dynamic experiential learning opportunities should be part of that. KM will then contribute to solving forward-looking strategic challenges, making it an essential contributor to business growth and sustainability. It will also assist leaders to make the transition to a learning organisation whilst delivering strategic value.

## Re-using vs Innovating - which is a better strategy?



[Nick Milton](#)

About a year ago, New Scientist magazine published an article entitled "**You are what you copy**", with the tag line "**Forget free thinking, a talent for imitation is what really makes us smart**". This describes an experiment, in the form of an online tournament, to test out various social

learning strategies.

It tested variables such as the choice between copying and innovation, whether to copy the expert vs following the crowd, or whether to rely on what you know. and looked for agents

who's chosen learning strategy gave them the greatest survival rate. This could be an experimental proxy for the world of competitive business.

**The conclusions of the experiment are very interesting.**

You can read the online summary for yourself, but here are some quotes from the magazine article.

"It seems a successful strategy rests primarily on the amount of social learning involved, with **the most successful agents spending almost all their learning time observing** rather than innovating"

"Avoiding spending too much time learning either socially or individually was just as important. **Between a tenth and a fifth** of their life seemed to be the optimal range. If they did more learning than that it seemed that life was just passing them by."

"Successful strategies were also good at spacing out learning throughout the agents' lives. The winning strategy, Discount Machine, submitted by PhD students Daniel Cownden and Timothy Lillicrap from Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, stood out because it did just this. It seems packing all your learning into the early part of your life is not a great idea - **we need to keep updating our knowledge** as we go along".

"You don't need any clever copying rules. You can just copy anyone at random. **Other individuals are doing the filtering** for you. They will have tried out a number of behaviours and they will tend to perform the ones which are reaping the highest rewards."

"In variable environments (the winner) placed **a higher value on more recently acquired information** and discounted older information more readily".

"Another attribute of the most successful strategies is that they are parasitic. This is the essence of social learning - somebody has to do the hard graft to find out how to do things before other people can copy them, so **it only pays to learn socially when there are some innovators around** . Indeed, in contests where (the winning) agents were able to invade the entire population, they actually ended up with a lower average pay-off than they did in contests where the conditions allowed some agents with more innovative strategies to survive, so providing new behaviours to copy".

So if we can believe the experiment, the best strategy for a competitive business, or for an individual team within a large organisation, to be an early follower, rather than an innovator.

However if we consider an ecosystem of many teams within one organisation, the last quote above suggests that the best result for the business as a whole will be to have some innovative teams in the organisation, and many copiers. The innovators take the risk, the copiers capitalise on the results.

## Creative Learning Experiences



[Ian Corbett](#)

In South Africa over 50% of the adult population between 18 and 30 is unemployed, and many have little prospect of finding anything more than low-paid menial work. This challenging situation has to change. As Nelson Mandela said

**"Education is the most powerful**

**weapon which you can choose to change the world"**. The tragedy is that for many children here at the moment they won't get a Starting Chance. So the challenge is "how might we change that?"

In collaboration with the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Cape Town (UCT) I have been exploring how to create high-impact learning opportunities for young, inexperienced students to develop an understanding of entrepreneurship in action - the difference is that **success is not about making money; it is about delivering sustainable socio-economic impact** to uplift the lives of young children in Cape Town's poorest communities.

Building off the basic principles of [Business-Driven Action Learning](#) (BDAL) students



"The skills and experiences that I have drawn from the course will have a significant influence on my future path; I am now convinced that entrepreneurship will be a large part of what I do."  
*David Pickup, University of Cape Town.*

are rapidly immersed in a deep cultural experience on arrival.

Essential process skills spanning creative problem solving and knowledge management are then introduced through an intensive lecture series. Participants in the course select a community-based project that they would like to work on and they are assigned an experienced coach. Students then immediately begin to apply the processes being taught to develop their project. Over a period of 3 months the students learn the importance of strategy by actively developing one related to their project, get their hands dirty with fact finding out in the community, and sharpen their word processors with an exercise in problem definition writing.

At the same time participants apply some neat tools and techniques to plan, seek and access diverse sources of knowledge very quickly, often from unusual sources - a core skill if you want to be adaptable. **The result is a life-changing learning experience** through creative and active engagement in live projects that act as a vehicle for the acquisition of practical process knowledge and experience. It also provides participants with a deep sense of purpose and personal fulfillment.

Teams have generated many creative and valuable solutions. Through a partnership with the [SASDI Foundation](#) many solutions are actively taken through to implementation.



"A course like this makes people look within themselves. People were surprised by what they could do." Amber Johnson, Wake Forest University

Challenges vary from capturing best practices to help architects design multi-purpose early childhood centres to tackling the challenge of training and development of early childhood service providers to making films to capture the impact of successful projects building early childhood centres. All of the solutions aim to improve our ability to provide children with a Starting Chance.

**Innovation Vs Lessons Learned?**



[Ian Fry](#)

Innovation and Lessons Learned - are these two fundamentally opposed? Does learning from the past, and using that to guide future actions, militate against Innovation?

**The answer is No, and let's examine how and why.**

Typically, a [Lessons Learned regime](#) is introduced to minimize downside risk, and the numerous [success stories](#) illustrate the major financial savings achieved by applying lessons from one success to future repeats of similar actions.

And this is the "innovation". It directly addresses what I have heard described as "NIH syndrome" (Not Invented Here) to illustrate that practices can be changed for the better by paying attention to past successes. While each new younger generation wants the right to make their own mistakes; that is counterproductive on a wide scale.

However Lessons are not static. They should be evolving. Each [After Action Review](#) will produce new Lessons which, if translated into action and change, become Lesson Learned.

There is often freedom to innovate within a Lessons Learned approach. Typical of this is the Military and Emergency Services. Doctrine ("How to fight A Fire") will say that the first step at an Incident is to create an Incident Management Plan ("How to fight THE Fire") selecting from checklists and standard components. In this way, the Lessons Learned regime directly supports an individual solution. The use of standard components is a necessary restraint as this aligns to the equipment available and the training previously received by personnel.

**Isn't Innovation all about making serendipitous connections NOT made in the past?** In the Product Development sphere, this is very much the case; but it is equally true that the Product Development Life Cycle is very much enhanced by Lessons Learned. And at the point of pure invention, the correct identification of the Lesson. rather than just the observation from a previous

failure is frequently the key to success.

## KM and Innovation, some thoughts



[Nick Milton](#)

Knowledge management takes over from Innovation at the point **where an idea becomes knowledge** , and that point is where you first test the idea, and first gain experience.

Innovation takes over from knowledge management **when there is no knowledge to fit your business need** , and you need new ideas. New ideas can often spring from old knowledge combined in new ways.

**Proactive innovation beats reactive innovation.** Systems where employees volunteer innovative ideas are nowhere near as powerful as systems where planned conversations are held around work problems to look for innovative solutions. The Technical Limit process, for example, where work crews are led through a structured discussion seeking new approaches, often leads to step changes in performance.

**Networked innovation is a favoured model** . Bringing together a series of fresh minds can lead to breakthrough solutions. The more diverse the network, the more radical the innovations can be, and we have experienced this ourselves at innovation-focused peer assists. Networked innovation forms the core of our Business driven Action Learning approach.

Both Innovation and KM need to sit within **a single strategic umbrella** , focused on organisational competence. This could be an Organizational Learning Strategy or a Knowledge Strategy, for example. This strategy would map out the competence of the organisation, both current and desired, and map out its knowledge, both existing and missing. Missing knowledge, if it exists, can be learned or bought in.

**Innovation and KM are both driven by challenge** . If people are not challenged, they will do what they have always done, using the knowledge they already have. The best way to get someone to actively seek for knowledge (either through innovation or re-use) is to give them a challenge they don't

know how to solve. We saw this when studying innovation in the Innovene (Chemicals) process, where innovation was driven by the sales force making promises that were beyond current technology. Ford drove incremental innovation by continually decreasing operating budgets. BP drives innovation by promising a continuous improvement in operating efficiency.

**Innovation and KM only come into conflict when used inappropriately** . Re-use of old Knowledge is inappropriate, if the old knowledge can't do the job. Innovation is a waste of time if sufficient knowledge already exists. Why reinvent the wheel?

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