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Rowan Gibson

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Few have made whole business concepts their own – but through his literature and speeches, Rowan Gibson is well on the way.

Written by Ben Lobel



It was Theodore Levitt who once said: "Creativity is thinking up new things. Innovation is doing new things". As the great economist, who coined the word 'globalization', would have attested, the disparity between the two is rooted in endeavour. How many of us have had a great idea and failed to act on it? Rowan Gibson had a great idea – not least because of the delicious microcosm at work. Championing innovation in companies, it would turn out, was an innovation in itself.

Gibson is doing new things. Maybe under a slightly different guise to other, similar things, but that is the point; through his books and speeches, his quest is to get enterprises to see the idea of innovation as a crucial component of enterprise, as of itself. And he would probably be the first to say that, professionally, he is somewhat defined by the concept.

After reading his book and learning about his outlook, one could be forgiven for thinking that Gibson was American; there is something of the all-American can-do that radiates from his buzzwords, enthusiasm and the occasional lapse into hyperbole. However, he was born in London – but so much a lifelong traveler that his accent is inflected with a range of other influences. There is South African, a little Australian, the occasional American slant – it really is one of the most unusual accents I have heard, a melting pot of dialects born of a nomadic existence.

ON THE ROAD

"I seem to have seen a lot of places in the world," he says. "Travelling comes with the job."

On any typical day at 7 or 8p.m., Gibson will get on a plane, fly through the night, arrive at his speaking destination, deliver his presentation, and is off again to repeat the process. "It gives me a kick when people ask me what I do – I'm inclined to say I'm a traveller; so much of my time is spent on the road," he says.

But at the start of his career journey, things were more easily defined: After starting out in marketing, Gibson spent time in London and later in continental Europe building up a consulting business. Gradually, he migrated from marketing to concentrating on business strategy. "You can't take the two things apart," he says. "If you think of the Apple slogan 'Think Different' – what is that? Is it an advertising strategy? A business strategy? A marketing strategy? It's all of that. So I started thinking about what I would call core strategies, which was the basis of my first book."

The shift to writing brought him the kind of freedom in his professional life unlike any he had previously experienced.

"At that time I said to my wife – 'You can live anywhere on earth' – because doing what I do we could operate from Hawaii or Australia," recalls Gibson. "And she said she'd like to live round the corner from her mum and dad, so we were based in Germany."

The success of the book led to the beginning of Gibson's speaking gigs.

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first book. After discussing plans and agreeing that the premier strategy today is innovation, the pair made the decision to write the book about how to make innovation happen.

But isn't innovation seen as a buzzword thrown around by big companies in splashy ad campaigns and white papers? Maybe, but that doesn't disguise its importance to Gibson – or its role in propping up what could turn into a succession of works. "It's about initiating things or new ways of doing things that create value for the customer," says Gibson. Call it what you want; on this basis, the book was an intriguing prospect at least: what impact would it have on the current festering business scene?

Well, this could be the crux. It might be suggested that the book's release is somewhat untimely. Inevitably, with the current economic situation as it is, the focus for many shifts away from growth and innovation and back towards operational efficiency. But Gibson's advice still has a place for the ailing industries whose one dimensional outlook is stifling their margins as much as the economic hardship is. "It's not just about new ideas – it's about looking beyond the industry you are in, looking at demographic trends, technology, deregulation of markets, everything 'outside of the box', to come up with new ways of driving forward."

During Gibson's time with Volkswagen in South Africa, he saw an opportunity for innovation in the way the car servicing functioned. "With less and less time at our disposal, servicing your car can be a real hassle," he says. "I have to give up two hours driving there, waiting for the service and coming back. But there's so much unemployment in South Africa, why don't we get people to work round the clock in our service sectors, pick the car up from your home in the evening, service it overnight and have it back to your door at 6a.m.? These are types of things I'm conducting with companies which they are now implementing."

Gibson points to companies such as online American diamond trader Blue Nile, who are selling diamonds 40 percent cheaper than in Tiffany's. A simple formula – considerably fewer expenses – but one Gibson is keen to package as cost innovation. The growth in 'cultured diamonds', however – artificial but high quality product made from the same material as the real thing – seems to somehow fit the semantic meaning of 'innovation' in a more complete way; a true Eureka moment rivaling Mikimoto's Nishikawa technique for cultured pearls.

FROM THE GROUND UP

But in many cases the best innovations come from the people on the ground. Gibson gives an example of a New York employee of consumer electronics retailer Best Buy, who realized there was a cruise ship coming in every Sunday from Brazil, and saw an opportunity to get busloads of Brazilians into the store on that day when everything else was closed. It is this culture of innovation through all levels of bureaucracy that Gibson encourages.

But what of the present financial woe? Where did innovation fit in with the cause of the banking disaster?

"I would say innovation ruined the day in this respect," he says. "The financial innovation was the subprime mortgage, but offering mortgages to people who had no chance of repaying them and spreading the risk around the world meant that innovation in this case was a bad thing; we all know how that ended."

We do indeed. Innovation can be negative as well as positive; indeed it can encompass a range of polarities, from East to West, FTSE 100 companies to startups, CEO to floor assistant. But when you cut to the core, does Gibson's approach offer much that contemporaries CK Prahalad, Michael Porter et al missed?

The answer, whatever you choose to believe, may be irrelevant anyway, when you consider the impact Gibson is having carving out a niche for himself in the field of innovation. He is well on the way to making the term his own; the topic of innovation has become his own innovation. That's why firms such as IBM and Volkswagen are willing to pay around £20,000 for two to three-day 'master classes' on the subject – and why the gigs keep rolling in.

"I have never seen or heard anyone thinking or writing about innovation the way I'm doing it, which is based on building an enterprise capability for it," says Gibson. "Innovation doesn't have to be a buzzword any more;



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And what of Gibson's professional legacy? "W Edwards Deming was a pioneer in embedding the concept of quality into the DNA of a company; I would like to be remembered as the Deming of innovation."

He may well be.