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Rowan Gibson: King of innovation

DATE: 27/03/2009

He is the master of inspiring things to happen in companies - Exec Digital talks to the man who gives meaning to buzzwords



By Ben Lobel

How many of us have had a great idea and failed to act on it? **Rowan Gibson** had a great, and surprisingly unique idea – he champions **innovation** in companies, which would turn out to be 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.

Gibson is a man who transcends nationality. "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 8pm, 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.

He began in marketing, and migrated to **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."

And it wasn't long before the speaking gigs followed. "The biggest impact on my current career was sitting in the audience listening to a speech by (business writer) **Tom Peters**. I thought: 'I want to be up there on the stage focusing on the issues that Tom is talking about,'" recalls Gibson.

"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 6am? These are types of things

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of 'innovation' in a more complete way; a true Eureka moment rivaling Mikimoto's Nishikawa technique for cultured pearls.

He is well on the way to making the term 'innovation' his own; the term has become his own innovation. That's why firms such as **IBM** and **Volkswagen** are willing to pay him 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; it can be a core competence that changes the nature of the organisation."

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