



“With every pair of hands, I get a free brain”

An interview with Professor John Bessant conducted by Professor Peter Totterdill



Originally a chemical engineer, Professor John Bessant has been active in research, teaching and consultancy in technology and innovation management for over 25 years. He currently holds the Chair in Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Exeter University where he is also Research Director.

Professor Peter Totterdill is Chief Executive of the UK Work Organisation Network (UK WON) and a key partner in EUWIN.



Peter: *Why is innovation important to companies coming out of recession?*

John: Innovation is important because it's about survival. It is almost a truism but it is very much like Darwin - if you don't change what you offer the world and the ways you create and deliver that offering, and evolve your products, your services and the processes behind them, in a competitive world you may not be around.

Now that immediately says, 'but in the public sector it's different' but it's not. It is still a competition – a competition certainly against budgets but also against illiteracy or crime or health problems. So it's a different kind of competition but the same innovation imperative is driving it. So, as far as I am concerned, the evidence is clear, we have to think about innovation. Smart organisations think about it ahead of the crisis and that sometimes gives them some insulation. Paradoxically, a crisis can very often actually trigger innovation.

Peter: *What's the relationship between employee involvement and innovation?*

John: Innovation is important and therefore we invest in it and we typically set up specialists who are quite well paid and it becomes a bit like James Bond. They have the licence to innovate and you call them new product development or business growth managers or whatever and they're the ones we expect a lot from, and they are good.

However, they're often a very small percentage of the overall workforce and the paradox is that every single human being is immensely creative - you only have to look at any bunch of kids in a playground if ever you need reminding of it. So we know everybody can do it, the real question is, how do we mobilise that? There is a lovely phrase somebody said to me once which has always stuck with me: 'I now get it - with every pair of hands, I get a free brain'.

How do you make it happen is the challenge and that's really tricky. We have been wrestling with it for at least 250 years and that's as far as documented studies of employee involvement go although I'm sure it was happening long before that. The question is not, have people got the creativity because yes they have, it's how to unlock it and align it because it maybe not a good thing to have lots and lots of light bulbs flashing everywhere, lots of random creativity.



What really would help, was if everyone could contributed their thoughts, their ideas, their inspiration, their energy in a sort of aligned path and that's easier said than done. It can be done and there's plenty of evidence to corroborate it but it's not an instant magic wand and it's going to take a long time.

Peter: *What is it that stops people with ideas that they maybe discuss with their mates in the pub on a Friday night or their partners over dinner at home from bringing those ideas back to work?*

John: I think a number of things. If you are an ordinary person in a call centre or on the shop floor, you might think 'I have ideas, but why would anyone listen to me, why would they have value?' So there is a self-belief issue which is important.

I think the mirror image of that is the willingness on the part of many companies to accept that employees, non-specialists, have a great deal to contribute. I think we are beginning to understand that those closest to processes, for example, are probably the ones that know what's wrong with those processes and are the ones who have a pretty good idea of how to start fixing them. You then need the belief on the part of management to actually listen to and take these ideas on board.

This makes up two of the starter conditions for workplace innovation but there a number of things which do militate against sustaining it. For example, if you manage to get everybody contributing an idea every day in a workforce of 100 people, by the end of week one you have got 500 ideas, by the end of month one you are drowning in ideas and the problem then is if you don't do something with them, it's likely to send a message that says, 'well I was right, you aren't interested in my idea because you have done nothing with it'.

So we have the notion of an innovation management system, a way of actually organising and making those ideas happen. Now, many of them are very simple, 'great idea - go ahead and do it', but some will need resources and one or two might be real gems but need quite a lot of work. Managing that isn't trivial. It can be done, but it needs a bit of forethought, a bit of planning and certainly some resource.

The next challenge is maintaining momentum. It is easy to get people to start because they are contributing ideas and are being listened to and this brings a certain initial energy but how do you keep it going as Toyota has done for 40 years? It may be reward and recognition but it's not necessarily financial reward. You need to be answering the question, 'what's in it for me to keep giving you my ideas?' Undoubtedly people can contribute creative ideas, everyone can, but if you give them some tools and some training there is a lot more they can do. So there is a patchwork of

things that builds an infrastructure which then enables this to continue to grow and reinforce itself until it becomes the way we do things around here.

Peter: *So going back to those two conditions you mentioned, how do you give front line employees that self-belief, the permission to bring their ideas to the workplace?*

John: You used the word 'permission' very rightly. The implicit assumption almost goes back to Henry Ford – 'do as you are told, do the job well and I will pay you well'. What we are actually saying is, think about what you are doing and think about how you might make it different. Now that's quite a big leap and if you are offering ideas it would be nice to have a sense that you have that permission, that it's okay to say something.

It also takes self-belief and with that comes growing confidence. Your ideas may have earned a pat on the back or even a reward and this gives a sense of making a difference and it's empowering - you have actually changed some aspect of your job from within and now want to do more. This will infect other people encouraging them to have a go. Studies of this show it does have a certain epidemic effect. If you start with a small pilot group, this will spread across an organisation.

Peter: *How do we persuade line managers and perhaps middle management that this isn't just touchy feely stuff, that this is actually part of the business?*

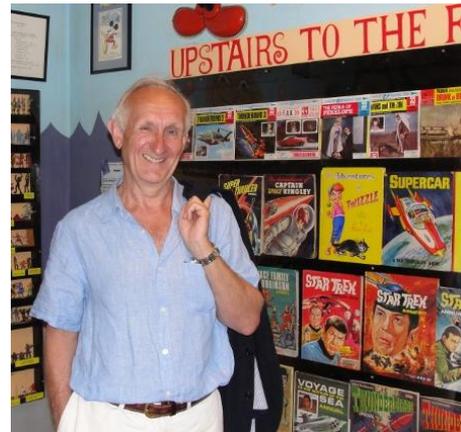


John: That's a big question. First of all there is the implicit challenge of, 'I am a manager and yet you are saying to me that I may not be doing it right'. There is a self-confidence issue for the line manager as well. Realising that setting the direction, setting the pre-conditions, making it possible for people to do what comes naturally are quite hard decisions to make. However, by allowing people the space to try new things out, then by definition they are not doing the mainstream job, so there is a trade-off. Providing training so employees are skilled and empowered and giving them the chance to make mistake is a risk because you are responsible for whatever it is you are managing.

These are difficult first steps for a line manager to take and they, too, need support so senior management sponsorship is a really important piece of this puzzle. By saying, 'we expect you to engage and mobilise the creativity of the people you are responsible for, and we will measure you on that' challenges the line managers to come up with ways of achieving it and this can have a cascade effect.

Continuity is also important here. In understanding innovation, management must realise we are not talking about one off big hit, although it happens occasionally in innovation. We are talking about innovation as frequent, continuous, small steps which add up and that's really the key to all of this - you are in it for the long haul. Giving a line manager that sense of 'it can work', giving them some direct experience of it, showing them where it's worked elsewhere with examples in different sectors, different sizes, different kinds of organisation, is a hugely powerful tool.

Whatever you think of their cars, Toyota haven't been the most productive car maker for decades by accident, and it wasn't one magic big hit. It is this absolute drive, this fundamental commitment which comes from the top and which is embedded in the company where there is a culture of continuous innovation and everyone being responsible for playing a part in that. If you then look at what they have achieved and the ways they have achieved it, that can give any line manager quite a lot of reassurance because it isn't rocket science, it's actually quite simple stuff but consistently applied.



The role of the line manager is to provide the infrastructure, the conditions and the sense of direction. It's not simply a question of 'let's innovate randomly', it's about real leadership that says 'this is what we are trying to achieve this week but it may change next week and 'that's the object now so let's get our creativity aligned behind that'.

Peter: *What arguments would you give to somebody who was trying to persuade a board that this was a good road to go on? If it's not going to produce instant returns, that can be quite a hard message to sell.*

John: The power of high involvement innovation is about a lot of people contributing their little bits, every day, so it adds up. As long as you have got the alignment, as long as you have got the sense that everyone's pulling in the same direction and all so those innovations are adding up, it does contribute some significant strategic improvements at the bottom line of the kind that would interest a board.

Peter: *How do you move from having one-off events like the ThinkUp laboratories in the Met Office to embedding the processes of reflection, improvement, innovation in day to day working life?*

John: That comes back to the role of senior managers as directors not as the ones who have to do the innovation but the ones who create the structures and give a sense of strategic direction within which people can do what they are naturally good at.

Peter: *Is there a continuum of mutually reinforcing practices between the big innovation events on the one hand and regular team meetings on the other, or even in people's day to day work when people take a few steps back and reflect on what they are doing?*

John: It is a long journey of small steps but people get tired and jaded so a sprint now and then can be valuable. So let's suddenly have a real campaign, a new focus, a big event. Let's celebrate innovation but focus on what we are trying to do. New technology is helping to create innovation contests which challenge employees to find solutions to specific problems within the context of the organisation's objectives. You set up a short term target, get everyone to chip in their ideas and perhaps offer a prize, not necessarily a financial one, but one that will motivate people and galvanise the organization. This is the sprint within the long journey and I think the two can co-exist quite well but with any sprint, you can't sustain the pace for long.

New technology via intranets and social media help to mobilise a lot more participation. In the days of suggestion boxes, it was a rather serial, linear and slow process. Technology now provides the potential to reach every employee and their involvement can be instantaneous. This can create a notion of shared creativity, the Facebook process of 'good idea, I like that, why don't you try that?' Potentially both the reach and the richness of innovation projects are enhanced.

***Peter:** What one message would you give to the President of the European Commission about how we need to be tackling these issues at EU level?*

***John:** The message that is particularly strong in a recession hit Europe, is that employee involvement and individual creativity amplified across the whole organisation can make a difference. People are full of ideas, and often surprising ideas, which could help any organisation get out of a crisis.*

What will matter is having the enabling infrastructure and that requires organisations to create them at middle and senior management levels. What EUWIN can do is to help disseminate what we already know.

Developing a Europe-wide network of, not management consultants, but innovation support consultants could be of particular value.