INTRODUCTION

Managers and organizations need to constantly be working towards improved processes, creative solutions to difficult business problems, and products that meet the needs of the customer if they are to survive. Organizations must grow organically to a certain extent or risk failing within the marketplace. The Innovator’s Toolkit: 50+ Techniques for Predictable and Sustainable Organic Growth written by Silverstein, Samuel, and Decarlo (2009) from John Wiley & Sons (Hoboken, New Jersey) can help managers practically achieve these strategic goals through a defined process with the proper solution focus. The hard cover book retails for $29.95 and is 337 pages in length.

This book describes how successful innovators should focus on the “Job To Be Done” (Silverstein, Samuel, & Decarlo, 2009, p. xviii) rather than the traditional design improvement of existing processes. The authors suggest that by focusing in this often overlooked area, rich innovation possibilities abound that address true customer needs rather than simple product improvement. The book is well written with many authoritative sources cited for additional background that readers can later reference. The majority of the described techniques utilize documents in a group setting and the authors have created a web site with many of the forms in template format available to readers.

The D^4 framework introduces the reader to a repeatable process of creativity that can be practically applied in combination with tools and techniques described in later chapters. The framework has four main components: define the opportunity, discover the ideas, develop the solution, and demonstrate the innovation. Each step throughout the process includes a decision point or “tollgate” (Silverstein, Samuel, & Decarlo, 2009, p. xxx) to continue or terminate the innovation under consideration. Similar to Software Development Lifecycles (SDLC’s), this repeatable process can help managers achieve organic growth for products and services from...
the mundane to the genuine breakthrough. Each defined area contains roughly the same number of techniques to assist managers in getting the process started.

**DEFINING THE OPPORTUNITY**

One of the techniques that assist in defining an opportunity is the “Nine Windows” (pp. 35-39) exercise to gain systemic perspective of the job to be done and better define the potential opportunity. For example, a manager tasked with creating an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) solution to an existing process where electronic documents are required to be retyped into a complex production application may discover additional opportunities for innovation. Placing the existing job to be done (JTBD) into the “present system window,” future and past systems that address the same JTBD can be examined along with super systems and subsystems along the same time frames. By following the simple steps provided, managers can then reassess the potential innovation possibilities.

**DISCOVERY OF POSSIBLE IDEAS**

Use of the Brainwriting 6-3-5 technique (p. 111-113) can assist managers with quiet groups or individuals who challenge all new ideas. Since the point is to encourage individual innovation and not halt ideas before they get started, this technique can help. Brainwriting 6-3-5 is an individual written exercise using groups of people around six in number who create three new ideas in five minutes. Repeat the process by moving each idea sheet to the next person who then either contributes new ideas to the list or builds upon previously identified innovations. By the end of the process a total of 108 ideas will be created and should be more than enough for any practical manager looking to create new products.

**DEVELOPMENT OF A SOLUTION**

Developing the solution is often the most difficult part of innovation, taking the concepts and making them reality. These techniques can help make dreams reality through several concrete approaches. Some of the approaches within the book, such as Axiomatic Design (31), are not for the faint of heart or uninitiated. One particular technique stands out in this section of the book; The Design Scorecard technique (p. 228-239) is a great way to identify gaps within the innovation prior to and after implementation. The use of performance, component, and process levels can provide good visibility to supporting managers of how an innovation is progressing. It is very easy for development teams to become engrossed with the details of a project and simply miss larger overall design issues; the same can be said of quality issues that may emerge from prototypes that are overlooked due to the early nature of the invention. Using a Scorecard can help refocus the innovation effort and avoid these types of issues prior to full implementation.

**DEMONSTRATE THE INNOVATION**

Often, gaining acceptance of new ideas or processes is difficult once an innovation is created and working. Now that the idea is reality, an important step in gaining acceptance and practical use is in demonstrating the success of the invention. While there are several approaches within this section on how to accomplish the implementation of an innovation, the Prototyping technique (p. 263-268), a long held software process is a true stand out. A key portion of this technique is the functionality audit that is often missing or overlooked once innovations are created; this audit can provide insight to managers and stakeholders as to how well the innovation meets expectations.
LIKES AND DISLIKES

Some of these techniques and processes for innovation you have seen or heard about before. This book provides an excellent framework on how to apply these innovation techniques using stepped instructions and describes the full benefit of each approach. Solid references for each technique are provided by the authors for those looking to delve deeper into each specific technique. From my own experiences there have been missing pieces to certain techniques that this writing helps explain and expand upon. For example, the formal functionality audit of the Prototype technique (p. 263-268) was a missing component for prototype evaluations and will be added in to my own future prototypes. The authors offer downloadable templates that can assist managers in applying techniques without slowing down to create various matrices or scoring systems—a big help in the practical working world where time is of the essence.

Some of the identified techniques, such as the Six Thinking Hats (p. 169-175) or 76 Standard Solutions (p. 144-152) are very advanced and could be difficult for beginning innovation managers to apply in a real world setting. While attempting to squeeze 50 techniques into the book, some of the described techniques seemed trimmed down to fit and could use additional expansion; some are rightfully topics of their own books. Other techniques, such as Rapid Prototyping (p. 255-260), are good in principal but may be outside the range of possible options for smaller businesses.

CONCLUSION

This is a great book for managers striving to foster creative and successful approaches to new product development; not only does it offer practical advice, but there are practical exercises that can quickly produce results. Users of these techniques should be aware that there is a certain dependency between earlier technique and those found later in the book. Make sure you read and understand the techniques you select within your own process to reduce the chance of any surprises as you move through the D4 framework; many of the later techniques require statistical or business expertise to properly implement. Lastly, don’t fall into the same trap as I did thinking these techniques are solely for business processes or software development. Certain techniques are specifically designed to apply to physical production lines and different techniques will need to be combined within your own unique environment to achieve maximum innovation results.

All of these techniques offer innovation builders a better way to communicate what they are doing within their projects, a step often overlooked or missing back to managers and stakeholders as measures of progress are typically difficult to adequately quantify.

REFERENCES


David Blackman lives in Southern California with his wife of over 20 years and three children. Having a master of arts in organizational leadership, business management, he is currently pursuing a doctoral dissertation in organizational management and information technology. As vice president of research and development at First American Title, Mr. Blackman specializes in technology and innovation projects involving new product development. Working at First American Title for over 20 years, he has covered a wide range of real estate technologies and innovations that have revolutionized the title insurance industry, including three pending patents for new technologies.