

## The Myths of Innovation by Scott Berkun

### Review by Indranath Neogy

I was attracted to this book because I have, as I suspect we all do, my own feelings about what makes for innovation, heavily influenced by time spent at MIT. Of course, one can't help but suspect that some romanticism about "how innovation happens" lurks not only amongst those memories of MIT, but also in the way innovation has become a buzzword throughout commentary on business and national affairs.

Scott Berkun, then, gives us a chance to step back from all the hype about innovation and take a critical look at some of the common beliefs circulating around us. The book is composed of ten chapters, each dealing with a mythical aspect of innovation that has gained common currency. As the author notes, the chapters are independent enough to read out of order, but the sense of the book builds if read conventionally.

The book is written with a light touch, which definitely brought a wry smile to my face every now and then. This is especially useful because I think all of us will have assimilated at least one of these myths in part and the gentle and humorous tone gets past the inner defences and lets us admit that maybe "I did tend to think that and it doesn't look that correct in the light of day." Of course, it also makes for easier reading and whilst there are quite a few footnotes, many of them are references to retellings of history (including quite a few Wikipedia links) rather than heavy duty academic studies. As such this book is more a narrative of our relationship with innovation than a cast iron hypothesis.

The chapters cover:

- 1) The myth of epiphany.

Berkun reminds us that, sadly, ideas don't really come out of thin air. I think we all fall into hoping they will at times, but this chapter reminds us that when the "final piece of the puzzle" arrives, it's only valuable because of the hard work put into assembling all the other pieces first.

- 2) The belief that we understand the history of innovation.

Here the major culprit is our human tendency to make narratives out of history. We draw a straight line from (for example) the silicon chip to the iPod with a few stop for the Walkman and the hard disk, but forget all the small inventions, especially the dead end ones, along the way. That leaves us with

an impression of brilliance followed by further brilliance, ignoring the experimentation and necessary following of leads into blind alleys that brought us to the present day.

3) The myth of a method for innovation.

Scott Berkun uses the narrow sense of the word method, as in an instance of a methodology, a formula that you can articulate for everyone else to just follow along, like a cooking recipe. His point is that no such recipe for innovation exists, rather every innovator takes a slightly different route. He identifies some general conditions that could be helpful, but that is as far as he feels we can go.

4) The idea that new ideas automatically find a welcome.

In this chapter, the author undertakes to remind us that while everybody “talks the talk” about innovation being a vital part of modern life, when faced with the reality of an innovation people often don't like to change. This isn't just because they are obtuse, but because they may often have a lot to lose from the change involved.

5) The myth of the lone inventor.

Instinctively, we should know this, but we often forget. No work stands alone, it builds on the work of others. Sometimes it is the “prior art” of others in the field, sometimes it is the teamwork of a design collaboration, but nothing comes into this world purely through the aegis of one person.

6) The concept that finding good ideas is the key stumbling block.

If you're willing to put some effort in, Berkun demonstrates that there are multiple techniques for coming up with ideas and these work for all sorts of people, whether they label themselves as creative or not. Of course, the second edge to this sword is that innovation isn't just about coming up with the idea, but the hard work to make it a reality.

7) The idea that your boss knows more about innovation than you.

This chapter doesn't just concentrate on the fact that managers can kill innovation through cynicism and conservatism, it usefully explores how managers can help create an environment where innovation is more likely.

8) The myth that the best ideas win.

Disappointingly, this chapter recycles (like so many) the stories of firearms in Japan and the QWERTY keyboard. That aside, it is a useful listing of many of the oft-forgotten factors that influence the adoption of an innovation.

9) Myths about problems and solutions.

There are three main arguments in this chapter. The first is that the nature of innovation is such that you do not always find the solution to the problem you were investigating. (One example involves the creation of the microwave oven.) This then raises two issues: How can you ensure that you benefit even when this occurs? The author's answer is in an open state of mind, to make sure you inquire into various phenomena that cross your path. The other issue is how to improve the alignment of problems and solutions. Berkun here emphasises the framing of the problem and the use of experiments and prototypes to keep the solution domain focused on the problem at hand.

10) The myth that innovation is always good.

I think this one is not a surprise to any of us. Not only do most innovations lead to changes that are positive to some, but negative for others, but the history of technology is shadowed by the example of nuclear technology, which has had positive aspects and seems to have even more in the future, but has attached to it the horrors of annihilation. Thus, we are reminded that the rush to innovation has unpredictable effects and we should be wary of those who preach only constant change, because they likely haven't thought through what they are talking about.

I found that the most useful aspect of the book was the perspective on "how we got here" in terms of modern technologies. The reminder that things progressed in an evolutionary manner, through experimentation and with plenty of dead ends along with way not only explained for me why innovation needs special attention if it to thrive, but gave me a little more hope for my own creative efforts.

Likewise, I must admit that the reminder that good ideas don't always get a welcoming reception is a reminder to keep trying, even when people don't seem

interested. For all that some parts of the book strip away the romance of innovation (the epiphany and the lone inventor) and precluded easy answers (especially Chapter Three) I felt that the narrative here was definitely encouraging and I'd recommend it not just to those who might manage innovation but those involved at the ground level too.