

Smarter Innovation: Escaping gravity: Three kinds of knowledge as fuel for innovation in an operate and maintain company (*Abstract*)

Editor's note: T.J. Elliott eloquently describes Educational Testing Service (ETS) as part of a cadre of organizations which "operates and maintains," rather than "takes bold risks." Escaping gravity takes three types of knowledge: common language, innovation know-how, and mutual, reflective learning. Under TJ, ETS has studied and made a radical dedication to these three types of knowledge, and habits that underlie them. -- Katrina Pugh, Columbia University

Well-established organizations face a fundamental challenge today: How much of our scarce money, time, and attention do we devote to innovation, even while we must continue to operate effectively and efficiently? Few companies can afford to ignore innovation even when they have achieved decades of success with a specific business model in a particular market space. Success pulls them back to "Operate and Maintain" (O&M) activities, controls and culture that may prove inimical to innovation, especially new product development.

The experience of ETS and other similar companies is that efforts to shift the focus are akin to trying to "escape gravity." Forces within the organization restrain new ways of thinking, conversing, acting, and producing, even when the market is calling for change. ETS is experimenting with three types of "innovation knowledge" as fuel to achieve escape velocity:

1. **Common language**, shared facets and categories of innovation, is not simply a matter of issuing a glossary or holding a class. At ETS, we started by understanding the tremendous diversity of employees' lenses on innovation. From this we were able to use, as a basis, the work of Vijay Govindarajan (Three-Box Model). To build common language we helped the organization to see distinct actions -- what is currently being done, what can be discarded, and what is desired. Common language is critical: If you can't talk about the future, you can't reach for it together.

2. **Innovation know-how** is tacit project practices, such as piloting, concept mapping, and convening, or "nexus," processes. In an organization where O&M activities have dominated, such practice know-how is scarce. Therefore, our approach was to "embed" innovation experts within ETS teams.
3. **Mutual, reflective learning** is necessary to sustain gains we have made in establishing our innovation platform, and discarding inhibiting O&M habits. Our innovation teams needed to "learn how to learn." Roger Schwarz' work inspired us to shift team mindsets: To approach decisions with transparency and curiosity, and to shorten innovation implementation times.

ETS's experiment in three types of innovation knowledge is ongoing. For example, we are piloting multi-media environments (video, audio, text) that capture teachers and their students in the classroom, and send immediate feedback. These inspire teachers to shift content, delivery or student engagement. ETS still has much to learn, yet our innovation efforts are already allowing us to advance our mission of "promoting and supporting education and professional development for all people worldwide."

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