

The fat man walks slowly

The results of the 24th EWMD International Conference in Lisbon are not surprising or new: It takes more than two to tango and more than three to innovate. As we discovered, most of the inventors and entrepreneurs are charismatic and visionary people with a lot of power and energy to get over the first obstacles.

Innovation is driven by individuals with all their power, passion and will – but to make them a real success, it needs a financier (bank, company, investor), an expert (researchers, R&D labs and teams) and the absorbing customer who has a need and the money to buy it.

Claudia Schmitz, President of EWMD International, opened the conference by providing four historical examples of indispensable well-known innovations, including pampers, the pill and the dishwasher. However, according to Claudia these innovations prove that they are only sought after if there is a real immediate need for them. Most inventors are motivated when they find a need which has to be fulfilled, a problem which has to be solved. It was a New York activist, Margaret Sanger who invented the pill which came on the market in 1960, the disposable nappy/diaper later to be trade-named Pampers, was developed by Marion Donovan in 1951, the first dishwasher was designed and constructed by Josephine Cochrane in 1886 and Hedy Lamarr, the Viennese actress, invented the technical basis for the mobile phone with her “Spread Spectrum Communications Technology”. Her need though was different as she invented it for the US-Army to stop the torpedoes from Nazi Germany in the 40ies, but was ignored and forgotten till industry used the patent later in the 80ies.

Prof. Soumodip Sarkar pointed out in his keynote speech: “Only 10 % of all innovations are radical innovations. Most of the innovations are incremental, that means an ongoing development of existing products and processes leading to a better result or use.” He stressed that innovation has more to do with failures than with success. If there is no desire to find the solution, 5.127 failures in prototypes will not be made, as reported from the inventor Dyson for his “Dual Cyclone bagless vacuum cleaner” in 1983. Most inventors have a long history of failures. Sarkar underlined that all innovation has to do with the sense of business: survival and growth. If you do not adapt to the environment, change constantly, you will not survive. So this is the driving force – and – if companies and people remain smugly in their

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comfort zone, they will just sit and eat. “The fat man walks slow” was the key message to speed and culture and an answer to the question: Why is it so difficult to innovate in the large co-operations?

However, to develop and implement innovation requires much more than this. The chemist Dr. Kaus has made astounding progress in his fascinating research in bionics , the application of biological methods and systems found in nature to the study and design of engineering systems and modern technology. Using organic glue used by mussels to stick onto rocks, boats, he has been trying to develop the perfect glue for repairing human body parts including bones and teeth. His comment on his experiences whilst researching at Fraunhofer in Bremen is simple and clear: It is critical to have personal contacts, of opportunities to talk about your ideas, to get in contact with experts of different disciplines to find the necessary partners. It is vital to get out of your laboratories and learn the language of your future disciplinary partners. It is all about communication, networking and understanding. This is how he joined the missing links: the medical partner, the industrial partner and the financial partner.

Huge investments in research and development have been made in the West however, it is now China which is beginning to see the importance of supporting innovation. According to Prof. Fernanda Ilhéu, General Secretary of the Portuguese-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, China has a Science & Technology Strategic Plan for 2020, which aims to make China an “Innovation Oriented” society and one of the leading “Innovation Economies”. If they continue on this strategic path they will move from being the factory of the world to the R&D centre of the world...

In Portugal the R&D intensity is also low, mainly carried out by state universities and other public institutions, although some recent signs are encouraging, presented Prof. Rui Guimarães from COTEC (an association of the 100 largest Portuguese companies to promote innovation).

Innovation however does not just stop at inventions and R&D centres. Maria Calvo, Director of Ashoka Spain, raised the issue of social innovation as a trigger to systematic change. She pointed out that “to bring about true social change the initiative and innovation must be developed locally and adapted globally.” According to Ashoka’s founder, Bill Drayton “there is nothing more powerful than a new idea in the hands of a social entrepreneur”.

Another very promising area of innovation considered was that concerning gender and that both men and women do not worlds apart, after all. This was outlined by Prof. Isabel Cantista, who posed the often heard question about men being from Mars and women from Venus which would infer that men care about results and women more about relationships. However, after studying two different cases: MOG and Vamaltex, she concluded that “men value relationships and women value results ... they both are from planet Earth ... and they both complement each other and simply enjoy working together.”



From an entrepreneurial point of view, Ana Paula Reis founder & CEO of SelPlus, maintains that innovation is “a long term process of watching, listening, exchanging ideas, reflecting, making sense out of reality, creating images and films of the future, documenting those ideas, images and films”. She did innovate with passion, belief, energy and especially with heart!

Finally, in this ever changing world with its varying social structures and financial restrictions, it is of critical importance that we develop social innovations. This was demonstrated by the experienced and very committed social innovator Isabel Jonet, who shared with us that it requires talent, strong goodwill to provoke change in the social environment and if we link brainpower with kindness, we will be able to produce social value for all.