

Reviews

The Global Human Capital Journal

Book Review: Innovate Like Edison: The Success System of America's Greatest Inventor

By Christopher S. Rollyson — Thursday, 20 December 2007

Edison as Mashup Artist: Combining Discipline, Process and Intuition

Innovate Like Edison is a must-read for anyone who wants to thrive in the "flat world." Had it been written in the 20th century, the book would have been applicable to R&D leaders, and it would have been a nice-to-have for business and government leaders. Innovation was the place kicker on the team during the Industrial Economy because companies created value through efficiency (refining continuous processes), and innovation is about discontinuous processes.

In the 21st century Knowledge Economy, however, innovation is the linebacker. Customers merely expect world-class efficiency, but it rarely differentiates. Innovation is now a core competency at most levels of every organization.

The problem is, the authors explain, is that very few people are innovation literate, and they don't know how to practice it practically. As I've written extensively, business innovation failures are over 95%, and most new products fail at high rates. We must reposition innovation as a linebacker, and that means understanding it differently and treating it differently. It's a group effort, no longer a specialist activity. Therefore, this book is one of the key guidebooks of government and business leaders, and it's also a fascinating read. Here's why:

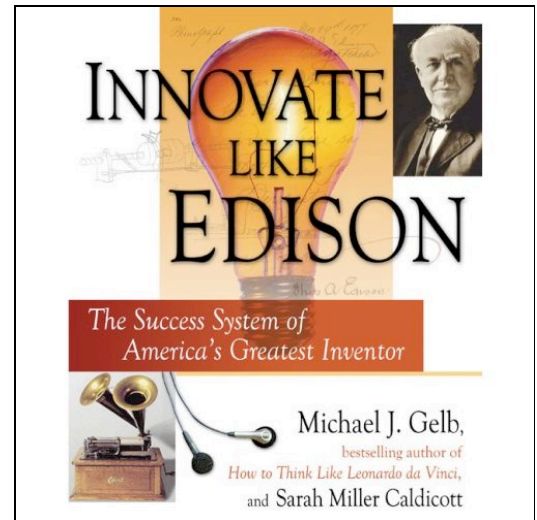
- The book simultaneously tells a fascinating story about Edison *and* uses it to illustrate Edison's best practices as an innovator.
- It presents the "Edison Innovation Literacy Blueprint," which you can use to start increasing innovation literacy, whether your context is commercial, volunteer work or government. It is well thought out and practical.
- It is a call to action for people in mature, rich economies. In the U.S., people are used to being the disruptors, the challengers. However, the U.S. is in full middle age, and it must reinvent itself if it wants to remain competitive.

For me, where the book breaks into exceptional territory is on the philosophical level. The book reveals that Edison, while a hard-nosed, practical person, also trusted his intuition and encouraged others to do the same. For example, he saw nature as perfect and that it was comprised of mathematical patterns, all we have to do is to recognize them. Think about that a minute. We find what we seek, and if we believe that patterns exist, we have a greater chance of finding them.

There is nothing flakey about intuition because it is a means to access a far greater part of our brains. We have to suspend judgement on things and hold them in our concentration (our internal "desktops"). This allows us to mash them up with other things that might reveal patterns. One of my favorites: pick two things that do not seemingly go together and explore how they might. Challenge prevailing assumptions, which are the highest barriers to innovating. Edison was a master of this, and the book includes several practical techniques to build your capability.

Another pearl refines the prevailing wisdom of "kill your losers fast." Edison recognized that innovation, ideas or products were packages of patterns. If something didn't appear to be working, he did not "kill" it. He was more mentally flexible because he recognized that the package was not working; there was undoubtedly much gold in some of the pieces, and the book gives several examples. Most corporations' innovation vaults of full of failed innovations, which never again see the light of day.

The Knowledge Economy is transforming the world into a pervasive network of people, and knowledge will be free. In the Industrial Economy, physical power became essentially free. This means that people will add value by mashing things up, by finding patterns.



[Innovate Like Edison](#) is an excellent guidebook for nurturing your own internal mashup artist.

About the Author

Christopher S. Rollyson launched *The Global Human Capital Journal* in 2005 to address the most poignant issues of day for chief executives, namely global transformation, the reinvention of the enterprise, technology and culture. Mr. Rollyson has been a technology and marketing visionary and pioneer for over fifteen years, with distinction in corporate strategy and innovation. As a consultant and marketing executive, he has had a leading role in launching such game-changing offerings as: Java with Sun, e-business strategy with PwC Consulting, and SOA, Web services and architecture solutions with IBM and nVISIA. In 2006, he launched The Consumer Empowerment Adoption Curve™ and Transourcing™, a new approach to innovation that leverages high performance collaborative partner networks. He currently advises global enterprises on collaborating with Web 2.0-enabled customers—to drive innovation and to engage emerging markets.

Recently the Vice President of Marketing at nVISIA, he developed executive marketing programs and service offerings to drive the value of software transformation through service-oriented architecture and Web services, working with IBM, Rational and Grand Central. Previously a subject matter expert for e-business and knowledge strategy in PricewaterhouseCoopers' Strategic Change practice, Mr. Rollyson developed original models and services frameworks for e-business strategy consulting. He consulted to clients in automotive, software, telecoms, consumer electronics, chemicals and petroleum industries, advising global enterprises in e-business strategy and technology start-ups on innovation and business strategy. Prior to PwC, he led marketing for KPMG's Midwest High Technology practice, where he built one of the firm's first intranets to transform the marketing organization to a real-time team. Before that the head of marketing at a leading edge Java consultancy, he played a key role in co-launching Java via marketing alliances with Sun and Netscape. Mr. Rollyson has done graduate work in corporate strategy and economics at the University of Chicago, with additional studies at Die Freie Universität Berlin, L'Université de Clermont-Ferrand in France and il Liceo Americano d'Aviano in Italy. He earned his undergraduate degree from Kalamazoo College. <http://rollyson.net>

About the Global Human Capital Journal

The Global Human Capital Journal addresses the global shift from the Industrial Economy to the Knowledge Economy, which is changing how human beings work and deliver value. In the Industrial Economy, products encapsulated the value of human work; in the Knowledge Economy, information produces the lion's share of value, and customer experience itself is the focus of commerce and government. A greater degree of collaboration among people of the world is possible than ever before, and increased interaction will bring unprecedented surprise and opportunity, especially because the potential is great to "level the playing field" among people of the world. Obviously, these developments hold significant ramifications for business and organizational strategy.

Global Human Capital covers two prongs of economic transformation: 1) strategically, how organizations can rejuvenate their relationships with customers and constituents by collaborating with them to drive innovation and 2) operationally, how organizations can build strong collaborative cultures and skills to engage the world's emergent network of expertise, both within and without their walls. We analyze how global sourcing and collaboration are transforming enterprise and government organizations, as they transition from relatively self-contained, closed entities to more networked, open organizations.

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