

Understanding innovation

Sriram Narayan

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Scope

- No recipes
- Some stories – my opinion
- Micro level, macro level – maybe a couple in between
- Generous use of borrowed wisdom
- Occasional ThoughtWorks plugs

Why innovate?

- Our reasons
 - Mission fulfillment
 - Stature in industry
 - Ensures vitality – this is real growth
 - Helps win business
 - Helps recruitment and retention
- Find your reasons
 - E.g. survival imperative for print media in the West
 - Closer home – airline industry

How does it happen?

- Same underlying mechanism across fields
 - Cycle times vary
- How Buildings Learn, Stewart Brand



“Perhaps culture is driven by just such flea-market ideas in a vast network of un-credited influence.”

Flea market of ideas – an example

<http://blogs.thoughtworks.com>

Disclaimer: ThoughtWorks embraces the individuality of the people in the organization and hence the opinions expressed in the blogs may contradict each other and also may not represent the opinions of ThoughtWorks.

ThoughtBlogs

What time does the meeting...

Marc McNeill: Lotus Notes is a gem of a product for usability ho ...

[[Read More](#)]

Business Velocity

Elizabeth Keogh: Pascal Van Cauwenberghe has written a great post o ...

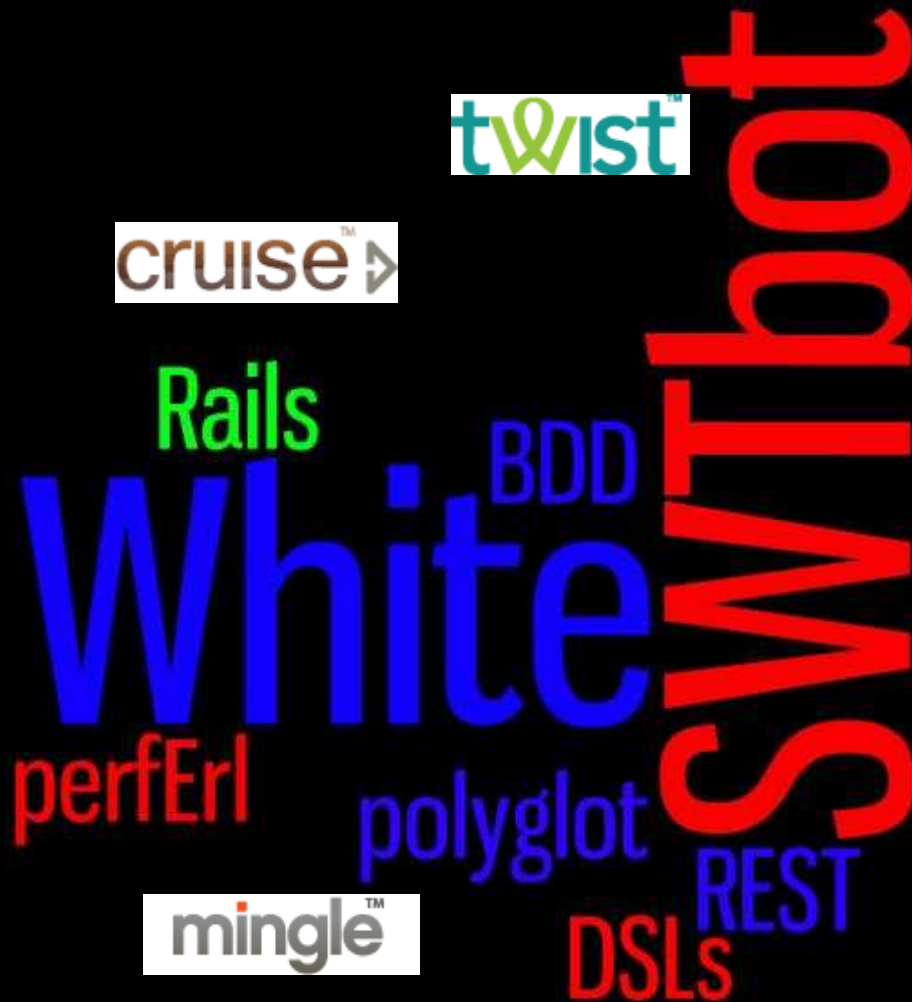
[[Read More](#)]

Selfish Superstar Inventor...

Jason Yip: Bob Sutton is creating a Selfish Superstar Invento ...

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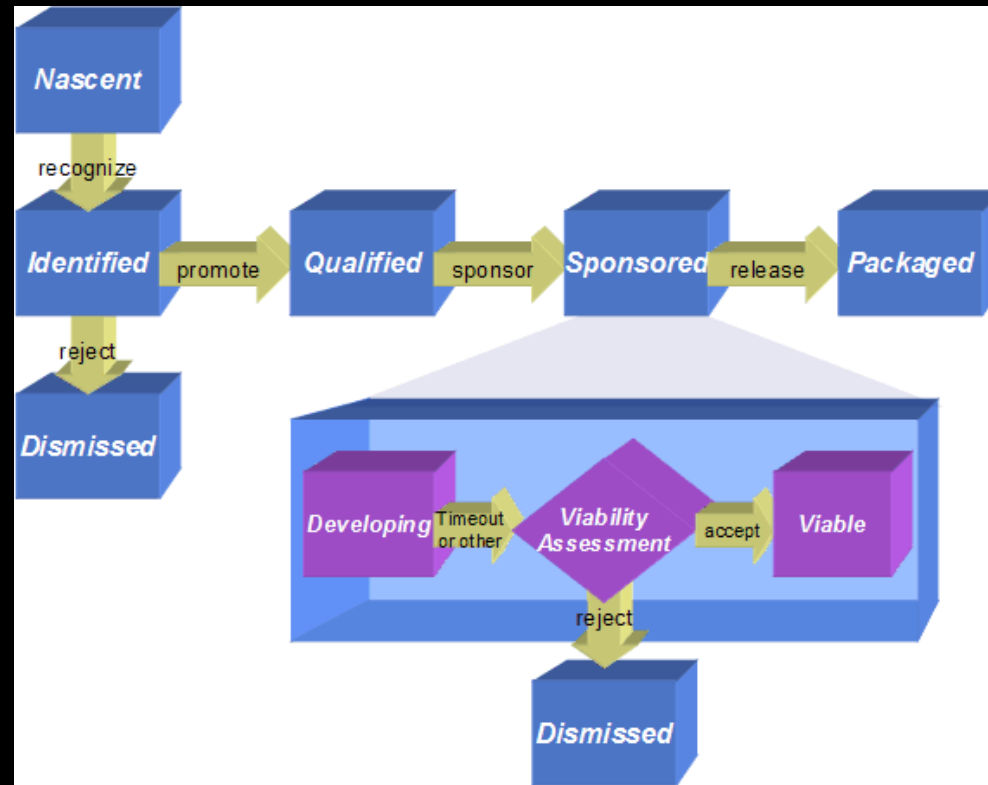
Some of our success stories



A word cloud on a black background featuring various terms associated with software development and testing. The most prominent word is 'SWTboot' in large red letters, oriented vertically. Other words include 'White' in large blue letters, 'Rails' in green, 'BDD' in blue, 'perErl' in red, 'polyglot' in blue, 'REST' in blue, 'DSLs' in red, 'mingle™' in white, 'cruise™' in white, and 'twist™' in green and blue. The background is decorated with glowing cyan and white wavy lines at the top and bottom.

Institutional support

- Ongoing journey of discovery
- Take 1: innovation pipeline
 - Didn't take off



Institutional support

- Take 2: Hot seat
 - Low entry barrier
 - Good in theory. Hasn't worked in practice
- Take 3: Facilitate alpha geeks

Evolution vs. Revolution

- Innovation
 - Incremental, evolutionary – don't rock the boat
 - Major, revolutionary
- Revolutions are often staged on the back of several incremental evolutions
- Today's revolutionary idea may (will?) become tomorrow's dogma

Most elephants can't dance

- Innovation
 - Involves high stakes
 - Most elephants don't have the risk appetite
 - Easier to take the plunge when there isn't much to lose



Fear of Change



“There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.

For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries ... and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it.”

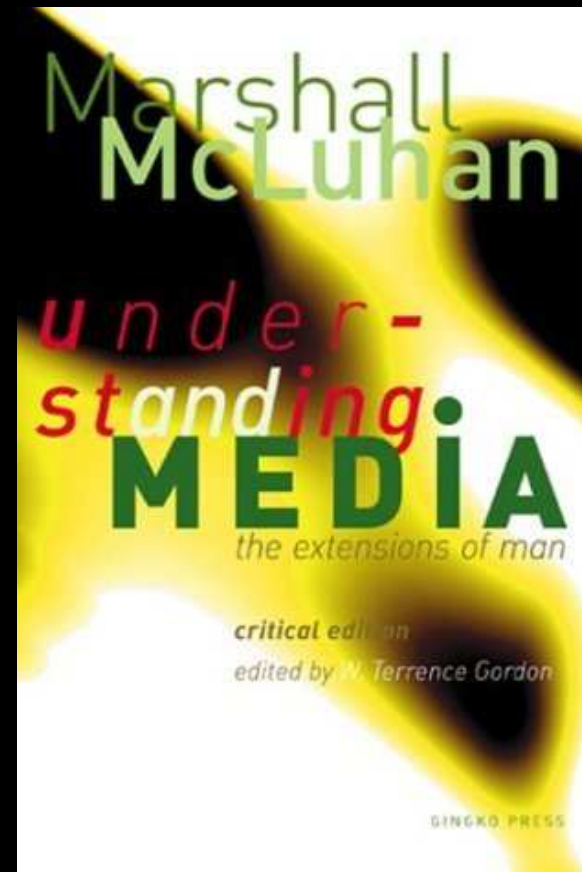
Niccolò Machiavelli

Predicting outcomes: micro level

- SWTbot
 - Started off as scratching a personal itch
 - Asked nor got much org support
 - Threatens commercial products today
 - Augments the USP of our commercial testing product, Twist
- GeekHunt
 - Sounded quite innovative on paper
 - Was implemented on time and budget
 - Ran into unforeseen patterns in user behaviour
 - Eventually funding got cut off
 - Unexpected positive side effects

Predicting outcomes: macro level

- Effects of new media
 - Wikis stymied commercial encyclopedias
 - Web killed several types of brokers
- Understanding media – McLuhan
 - Technology is an extension of man, a medium to interact with others/nature
 - Changes society in unforeseen ways
- Effects accelerate in a digitally networked world



Communications revolution: Medium is the message

In the beginning...

Development of language, Oral tradition,
Invention of writing, Printing press

Point to Point

- Snail mail
- Telegraph
- Telephone
- Mobile phones (missed calls)
- Mobile texting (SMS)
- Email
- Instant Messaging
- VOIP (skype etc)

Broadcast

- Newspapers
- Billboard advertising
- Radio
- Television
- Bulletin boards
- Blogs
- Tweets (microblogging)

Are our brains getting rewired?



“The danger with interactive media is that they draw us away from quieter and lonelier pursuits. Interactivity is compelling because its rewards are so easy and immediate, but they’re often also superficial.”

Nicholas Carr

People factors...

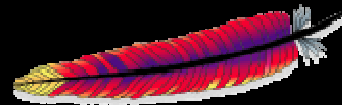
- Org culture
 - Irreverent meritocracy needed
 - Sadly, we still have a lot of corporate feudal systems
 - Culture of sharing
 - “Ask for forgiveness, not for permission”
 - Promiscuity over retention

People factors

- Dealing with potential innovators
 - Brilliance necessary, not sufficient
 - Look for perseverance
 - Creative people are sometimes secretive and sensitive
 - Don't protect ideas – let go – creativity is limitless
- Tricky situations
 - Crank or genius?
 - Encourage internal competition if innovators don't wish to work together?

Let go of your IP

- The days of profiting from hoarding knowledge are over
- Don't measure worth in terms of intellectual property or number of patents - rent seeking
- Flexible open source policy
- Participate in nurturing commons
- Parts of digital economy moving towards a gift economy model



What does it cost?

- Two options
 - Sponsored time off for experimentation
 - Show me the goods
- Some can afford to invest more than others
 - Results don't need to be in proportion
 - Not implying innovation comes cheap
- Works best with self-driven people
 - Creativity doesn't keep appointments
 - Creative work is often its own reward
 - Exploitation? No. Personal branding
- What is the cost of NOT innovating?

In Summary...

- Identify and communicate org specific motivations
- Continuously refine the means of institutional support
- Be unbiased towards evolution and revolution
- Innovation is often high stakes betting
- Outcomes often very different from initial expectations
- Brilliant, persevering people + culture of openness and sharing + meritocracy = hope for innovation
- Certainly not cheap but doesn't have to cost millions
- Learn to let go of IP

Thank you

Comments? Questions?

sriram.narayan@thoughtworks.com

<http://sriramnarayan.com/>