Reconsidering Best Practices

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*"It's not what we don't know that gets us into trouble. It's what we **do** know that just ain't so."*

—Will Rogers

Progress in any field happens in fits and starts. That's as true in innovation as anywhere else. Often, a best practice emerges because it has demonstrated the potential to significantly improve a key function. It becomes widely adopted, refined, and somewhat stable in implementation. The Stage-Gate process in new product development is an example. Open innovation is another. Design for usability is in an early stage of adoption; it has been fully embraced by only a few companies.

Any practice has its limitations and challenges, of course. The new practice may bring improved results but not without some pain. Often it makes some things worse even as it makes others better. As a result, the proposal to adopt a new method, or modify an old, trusted one is often resisted. Even when the resistance has been overcome, a fear of falling back into the old ways and losing what progress has been made remains. But each change, each attempt to improve on what we're doing today, is a stepping stone to a more innovative future.

Ironically, the very success of an approach can be the biggest impediment

to its improvement. We feel secure where we stand, and tend to accept that we have found the best "best practice." It's what we think we know that keeps us from learning. That is where a journal like *RTM* comes in. *RTM*'s mission is to share what works and what doesn't, even before it becomes a best practice. This means seeking out cases that provide disconfirming information as well as those that show what works. In that spirit, this issue includes several articles that reconsider established practices.

In our lead article, "Agile–Stage-Gate Hybrids," Robert Cooper discusses the evolution of the Stage-Gate system he helped to create. The adaptation he describes, which has already been adopted by several companies (especially in Europe), integrates the Agile development approaches that emerged from the software industry into the process of designing and developing physical products. Cooper summarizes the benefits of Agile methods, especially in today's world of shorter life cycles and intelligent products, but notes a continued need for some aspects of Stage-Gate in governing product development processes. The hybrid method he describes was derived from work with manufacturers who are early adopters. It is unusual for the developer of a methodology to advocate such a major revision of it; the fact that the "father of Stage-Gate" is arguing for such a change is likely to be important to the acceptance of the new hybrid method.

In "Frugal Innovation and Knowledge Transferability," Peter Altmann and Robert Engberg challenge current thinking about frugal innovation. Frugal innovation, reverse innovation,

and its cousins have been discussed in *RTM* and elsewhere as important elements of innovation strategies to penetrate emerging markets. Generally, advocates have argued that a crucial element of these approaches is the local development of products for these markets. But Altmann and Engberg, reporting on product development work in a Swedish medical device company that aggressively pursued such a strategy, find that in some cases frugal innovation works better when R&D happens at home. The key factor: it may be harder to transfer knowledge about technology than it is to transfer knowledge about users and the context of use. In some cases, the authors conclude, central research, not localized teams, leads to success at the bottom of the pyramid.

This issue's Conversations piece is an interview with Don Norman, director of the Design Lab at the University of California at San Diego. Norman has challenged established design practices for decades, acting as an advocate for users. He has also worked with organizations, from Apple to HP, to integrate design thinking into their development efforts. In this interview, he discusses principles for designing usable things—physical as well as digital products—and addresses the challenges of integrating design into product development. One of Norman's current areas of interest is autonomous technology—the design of things that operate without users most of the time. This evolution in technology is forcing a rethinking of design interaction principles in an entirely new context.

Some of the other articles in the issue also touch on reconsidering

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established practice in order to create progress. In "Bureaucracy as Innovation," Roger Smith asks us to reconsider bureaucracy, a favorite bogeyman of innovators, as a tool to drive innovation. Laura Schoppe and Richard Chylla, in a Resources column on "Collaborating with Universities and Government Labs," note, among other things, a reversal in thinking about intellectual property agreements at universities as a result of their experiences trying to turn IP into a profit center. And Randall Wright of MIT, in a Point of View article entitled "The Doers Are the Major Thinkers," makes the contrarian suggestion that it is practitioners, not theorists, that drive scientific progress, even in areas that might be considered fundamental science.

I suppose in some sense we all enjoy challenging the status quo. If we didn't, we would have chosen different fields. At the same time, though, we can become captive to what we know has worked in the past. As a community of innovators, we need to continue to challenge conventional thinking and to share what we learn. Otherwise, our best practices will become less effective—things we know that just ain't so. We hope this issue helps in the reconsideration of some of those practices.

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