



# The Innovators

Conversations

On the *Cutting Edge*

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## Interview with Ron Jonash

**Director and Senior Partner, IXL Center  
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Ron's specialties are the strategic management of innovation, technology and R&D to create and capture maximum value. Ron is currently a Director and a Senior Partner at the IXL Center. He is Chairman of the Board of the Non-profit Global Innovation Management Institute (GIMI), and he is on the faculty of the Hult International Business School. He is also a partner in Spinnaker Ventures.

Ron was formerly a senior partner of the Monitor Group. For 20 years, he was the worldwide managing director of the Technology and Innovation Management Practice for Arthur D. Little.

He is currently writing a new book on innovation management titled, *Beyond Eureka: Thinking and Acting Differently to make Innovation Real and Sustainable*. Ron can be reached at [ronald.jonash@ixl-center.com](mailto:ronald.jonash@ixl-center.com)

Interview conducted by Doug Berger, Managing Director, INNOVATE [doug@innovate1st.com](mailto:doug@innovate1st.com)

Doug: What is your vision for the innovation curriculum and innovation certification? What are you aiming to accomplish and what unmet needs are you setting out to fill?

Ron: The main thing that we have been trying to do is to build a true professional discipline and certification around innovation. We are aiming to integrate right- and left-brained thinking, tools and approaches. As a professional discipline, innovation will hold its own against disciplines that are more operations focused like Six Sigma. We want to make sure that innovation is sufficiently disciplined so that it has a seat at the senior table in terms of managing the company.

A second objective or vision for the curriculum is for it to be a common curriculum that works across industries, across functions and across the world. There is so much movement of people within corporations or from corporation to corporation. There is so much convergence that we need to make sure there is not a completely separate system and language for health care than for consumer. It is important that it is global.

The last thing is to really make innovation real and something that provides people with specific tools and approaches and ways to measure outputs and results. My vision is for a professional curriculum and professional certification, as opposed to one that is academic. However, it is meant to be something that

can still be delivered in an academic setting, as well as in a business setting, as well as in a professional setting.

Doug: You are defining innovation much more broadly than purely product development?

Ron: Absolutely. That is a movement that has been underway for close to 10 years. Innovation used to be either product development or technology development. It used to be something that fell primarily under the control or oversight of R&D. Increasingly it is being seen as much more important to define innovation as broad business or enterprise innovation.

Operationally we define it as the creation and the capture of new value in new ways. It can be through new products, new services, new business models and channels that are new to the company or organization but not necessarily new to the world. It incorporates both incremental innovation and breakthrough. It incorporates innovation that is directed to improving revenues and growth, and innovations that may be more process innovations driven toward improving productivity and profitability. We believe that the tools and approaches work across all of these different kinds of innovations, and the companies that have been most successful with innovation have defined it broadly.

Doug: I could be talking innovation in supply chain, sales, marketing, or human resources as much as I could be talking about business model or product innovation?

Ron: Yes, the highest-impact innovations usually involve innovations of multiple types. The work that we did at Arthur D. Little or Monitor, or that Larry Keeley did at Doblin innovated in multiple dimensions. That is why we think it is critically important to define innovation across dimensions.

Doug: What are some of the principles that underlie the core curriculum?

Ron: The first one that we recognized was the need to separate but relate two parts of the curriculum. One part is for practitioners, which is focused on the know-how for individual practitioners. The second part is on innovation management and know-how for leaders and managers in order to ensure that their organizations can drive innovation across the value chain.

The second principle was that the curriculum needed to be tool and software agnostic. There are a lot of training and specific tools embraced by one guru or another. They tend to be limited to a particular point of view. We felt very strongly that this curriculum needed to cover both the practice and management of innovation, and it needed to be a big enough tent to be inclusive of many theories, tools and software.

We are convinced that innovation truly is a contact sport and you need to learn by doing. Within the two categories of certification there are effectively two levels of certification. One is knowledge based. For that we provide online learning materials or there are training organizations. Then, there is certification around the actual skills that are learned and demonstrated in the practice of doing.

Doug: One thing that distinguishes a discipline is that it has a common language.

Ron: There are always going to be debates within any language be it French, German, etc., about the right word to describe something. Our focus has been to make sure that there is agreement about what the most critical competencies and

capabilities are and how they get applied, not the exact terms used to label them. We put together a board from the very beginning, four or five years ago, that included people from leading companies, from consulting firms, and from academia who could all weigh-in.

On the management side we were able to quickly get to common ground around three large buckets of competencies and their subcategories. In the large categories, one was 'Strategy'. What is the strategic imperative? What is the vision? Where to play, the portfolio and the pipeline? What are the priorities? Those are all part of the strategy bucket to be taught as part of the choice and decision making process that managers go through in either making those choices and decisions themselves or in getting alignment from others around them.

The second category is 'Capacity'. Under capacity are all of the process and people questions: what's the process from concept to customer? (customer being external or internal) How do you manage that process? What are the stages and gates in managing concept to customer? Then there is people capability. How do you put together teams that can work across functions, the enterprise or across companies? The third one was resources of people, money and also all of the intangible assets that need to be brought to bear to make innovations successful.

The third category is 'Discipline' addressing organizational structure, accountability, culture and metrics. How do you make all of that work for innovation as you're trying to drive it across different well-established functions? What is the culture and behavior of entrepreneurial and innovation culture? How do you support that through both role models and other behaviors that get everybody aligned? And then there are the metrics, rewards and recognition that affect the culture and behavior, and effect the alignment around accountability.

Doug: One of the things that managers struggle with is this whole aspect of culture and climate. Please dive a little bit deeper into the skills and competencies to promote a culture and climate of innovation.

Ron: It starts with a good understanding of the organization's existing culture and climate. What are the written and unwritten rules of the game? What drives people's behavior? How do things get done? How do things work? For most companies it is unlikely that you are going to change the cultural context. You need to be able to manage innovation in a full range of cultural contexts. It is also important to know the key things that are required for innovation, such as the ability to bring forward new ideas and new ways of doing things without being inappropriately punished or criticized. You can accomplish that in many cultural contexts. You need to have a way in your kind of culture to support innovative behavior. This includes support by people more entrenched in operational excellence cultures and compliance kinds of cultures.

You have to know the context that you are in; you have to know the key behaviors that you're trying to enable; and you have to find mechanisms that enable those behaviors no matter what kind of culture you have.

Doug: That is a terrific insight. So many people look at innovation and innovation culture. What is really interesting is the wide range of discretion about how to create an innovative culture and environment within their sphere of control, even in a company that is more risk-averse and heavier on compliance and control. That is a noteworthy distinction.

Ron: Individual managers have a lot more flexibility and ability to influence their own and others' behaviors than they may think. So we feel confident that this approach to integrating some level of entrepreneurial and innovative culture is very pragmatic.

Doug: Would you give our readers a snapshot of what a typical curriculum might look like from the point of view of a participant?

Ron: There are two categories consisting of a practitioner curriculum and a manager curriculum. The first level of certification in both is largely around knowledge, theory, case studies and experience. If the person believes that he or she already has all of the knowledge, they can just go online and take the test, although I think it will be difficult without at least doing the online portion to "pass" the test.

There are a lot of training organizations that now offer training aligned with this material. The material is open-sourced and available for anyone. A lot of case study material can be built into the knowledge element of the curriculum.

The piece that is really different is the experiential part of the curriculum, where there is a focus on action learning and working in groups. The participant actually proposes their project or joins somebody else's project and learns by doing. They design the project. They then have access to action coaching if they choose to help them through that project. Then they write up the results of that project and what they learned, which qualifies them for certification at the second level in each category.

Doug: How are some companies using the curriculum, the certification and their experience?

Ron: Natura in Brazil regularly gets rated in the top 10 or 20 innovation companies worldwide. It is largely a personal care products firm. They established an innovation academy as a stand-alone space and set up a curriculum that helps people learn how to master all of the tools of the trade. It includes very up front crowd sourcing and insight development all the way through to product and solution development, pressure testing, piloting, prototyping and so on. Everyone in the company goes through the innovation academy.

Johnson Controls has developed a standardized approach that all of their business units use. All of the staff involved in new business ventures, innovation and product development goes through these programs. They are essentially training the coaches and the catalysts for innovation so that they can spread the word and build broader organizational capability in innovation.

Cisco's approach is to pick out catalysts, pick out coaches, pick out leaders, and make sure that they know how to do it. It is 'just in time' training for everyone else.

General Electric has integrated it into both their leadership development programs and their leadership projects. SC Johnson has adopted a similar approach by focusing on high performer programs. Those companies have decided that the best way to do this is not through extensive formal training but through experience in working in cross-functional teams to make new business or new innovation happen.

Doug: As an organization that is in a sense modeling, not only teaching, what have you and your colleagues been learning as you have been teaching and extending the reach of the curriculum and certification program?

Ron: We had originally felt that there would be much more of an ability to connect the innovation curriculum for both for practitioners and managers with other aspects of a professional development curriculum. That we could fit it into any leadership development program or any training program, and if it were purely teaching knowledge then it would fit in with anything. Many programs do not embrace the kind of action learning, team learning, learning from others, learning from doing that we feel is so important in the innovation space.

It was tough for us as we would go into an organization thinking that both R&D people and marketing people would participate in the same program and work together on some kind of innovation initiative learning from that practice of working together. In many companies the barriers are just too great.

Managers and leaders have grown less and less tolerant of traditional training regimens. That was the good learning. Leaders want people spending time on doing things not learning the theories and rules. They want them to create results while they are taking classes. They want them to catch fish while they are learning how to fish. So we have gotten confirmation that this kind of training curriculum generates bigger, bolder, better, cheaper, faster results, as well as builds a sustainable long-term competency in their organization.

A very important lesson was the recognition that we could not make this happen alone. So we set out to form partnerships, alliances, lead users, and adopters. We needed and still need help in developing innovative channels to markets. We made a decision early this year to enter into a joint venture with Innovation Excellence, which has one of the largest sets of eyes and ears on the internet for innovation. Recognizing the importance of that partnership and other similar partnerships has been a critical kind of pivot for us as we continue on this mission.

For further information on certification:

**Global Innovation Management Institute  
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<http://giminstitute.org>

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