



**an article about innovation**

**Diverging and converging  
on the road to innovation**

# Diverging and converging on the road to innovation

by Richard Pachter

**T**rying to go further with less? Now more than ever, innovation has a critical role to play. The development of new products and services can act as an engine of growth and a remedy for the effects of the ongoing worldwide economic uncertainties.

However, being receptive to innovation is not

enough. Forward-thinking organizations must create a culture, cultivate an environment and an infrastructure that recognizes innovation, supports it and capitalize upon it. This is far easier said than done. Change often threatens the status quo and the mission of the organization and its stakeholders, at least in the short-term. Its initial impact may appear ephemeral, as well.



Those are the obvious speed bumps. Less apparent are the aspects of innovation that go against much of our training and education, which tends to focus on skills needed for optimizing operations or improving internal performance measures rather than creating customer and citizen value.

Teresa Di Cairano, co-founder and Director of Intervista Institute, affirms. “Though there are a few notable exceptions, business schools often emphasize left-brain thinking with a stronger emphasis on analysis and planning. The result may be less innovative and entrepreneurial than you may want. Innovation benefits from both right-brain and left-brain thinking — ideally working in concert.”

And therein lies the rub. Establishing an innovation-friendly environment requires a degree of nontraditional thought — and action — that many leaders and organizations may

be unprepared to implement. And to some, the notion of innovation may simply be overwhelming.

But framing innovation as a learning process, rather than as a series of daunting tasks, may be the best way to overcome this mental roadblock. David Kolb’s experiential learning theory (wherein he identified the four steps of the learning process: experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting) can provide insights into what is required. In the same way, we can also understand the innovation process as the interplay between abstract and concrete thinking, and between the analysis and synthesis modes.

“This allows us to better navigate our thinking on the not-so-obvious road to innovation” says Robert Mazerolle, co-founder and Director at the Intervista Institute.



“ The innovation process is divided into two broad modes of thinking: Divergent and Convergent. ”

Relevant to understanding the innovation mind-space using Kolb's learning model is that it illustrates the state between experience and reflection as divergent, and the one between thinking and action as convergent. Similarly, Derrick Palmer, a managing partner of InnovationPoint LLC, states: “The innovation process is divided into two broad modes of thinking: ‘Divergent’ and ‘Convergent.’”

The divergent mode is at the heart of the Strategic Innovation approach. It's open-ended, exploratory and inquisitive, deploying non-traditional creative thinking and future visioning techniques.

It includes ‘exploratory’ consumer/customer insight research, qualitative exploration of industry/market trends and speculates on possible industry discontinuities.”

Not every organization grasps the importance of divergent thinking. As Palmer observes: “It is here, with the notion of ‘divergent thinking’ that organizations often fail in their attempts to innovate. Believing that it is frivolous, ‘blue sky,’ time consuming and slows time to market, they choose to minimize or neglect it.

Impatient for short-term success, driven by quarterly scorecards or constrained by an enterprise mindset that is compelled to demonstrate activity and quickly ‘get to the answer,’ many organizations find it almost impossible to step back and diverge.

This often results in predictable, uninspired, incremental innovations – missing out on significant, long-term growth opportunities.”

Convergent thinking is still required, however. Palmer writes: “Convergent processes call for traditional business tools, techniques and data analysis, where potential opportunities are evaluated, prioritized, refined and then often moved through a formal decision-based Stage Gate™ process until the most promising ones are implemented.

A client once confided to us: ‘We're really good at implementing bad ideas’. But what's really important is to get better, more impactful ideas into the Stage Gate™ process. You'll readily identify those better ideas when you take the time to diverge.”

“The goal is to deal with innovation in a holistic and proactive manner. The trick (if there is a trick) is freeing the organization to allow it to happen and help things along course wherever and whenever possible” says Robert Mazerolle.

At all times, but especially during this current challenging economic period, innovation can serve as a powerful and cost-effective value-creation strategy.

If you or your organization are falling short in your quest to harness the positive power of change, Intervista's new executive program — **innovationcultures** — will help you embrace this essential part of your mission more effectively.

## About Intervista Institute

Intervista Institute develops executive education programs and knowledge media on emerging concepts in enterprise strategy and innovation. Intervista's thought leadership enables enterprise transformation. Already well-known for its CIO development programs, over 8000 executives and change agents have chosen Intervista's programs for strategic advancement.

Intervista has recently launched **innovationcultures**- a leadership program targeted at change agents in Fortune 500 enterprise and large government organizations. This new web-based executive program explores the emerging discipline of innovation. Through research-based deliverables, the program provides practical insights for fostering an innovative culture.

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