Learning From People at the Frontier of Knowledge

Description

Corporations have an explicit mandate to innovate and reinvent themselves but, when it comes to fostering innovation, companies pay attention to easy-to-measure resources, such as capital deployed, and processes, such as technology scouting. Corporations often give less attention to the harder-to-measure people-oriented drivers of real innovation, like culture, values, and a thirst for knowledge. These so-called people issues have the greatest power to shape the culture of innovation and create a sustained competitive advantage for a business. People who are at the frontier of knowledge are typically self-driven and inspired by their quest for understanding. What can organizations do to learn from these people at the frontier of knowledge? In this episode, Enrique Shadah, Associate Director of Workplace Learning @ J-WEL, speaks with [Eugene "Gene" Fitzgerald](), the Merton C. Flemings SMA professor of materials science and engineering at MIT, and author of the book [Inside Real Innovation: How the Right Approach Can Move Ideas from R&d to Market - And Get the Economy Moving]().

In this podcast, you'll uncover:
- How and where corporate learning executives should focus their attention to enable a process of learning within a company or encourage the formation of new companies
- How company management can support people at the frontier of knowledge
- What the traditional corporate view of innovation is and why this is outdated
- Why new activity that leads to higher revenue has to come from employees
- Why a company's innovation should be reflected in its financial structures

About our guest:

Eugene "Gene" Fitzgerald is the Merton C. Flemings SMA professor of materials science and engineering at MIT, and author of the book, [Inside Real Innovation: How the Right Approach Can Move Ideas from R&d to Market - And Get the Economy Moving](). Fitzgerald is Founder and Board Chairman of Innovation Interface. Building upon his early experience at AT&T Bell Labs, he has created and led a series of fundamental innovations, from early technology to final implementation in the market. He received a BS degree in Materials Science and Engineering in 1985 from MIT and his PhD in the same discipline from Cornell University in 1989.

Some key takeaways from this podcast include:
- If organizations want to learn effectively from people "at the frontier of knowledge," they need to make a strong commitment to them
- Living at the frontier of knowledge requires creative thinking, risk-taking, living in ambiguity, and reflects the larger trend in society, which is constant change.

- Society benefits greatly from people pushing the boundaries of knowledge because they typically create new ventures that challenge the status quo and drive the creation and destruction of organizations.

Summary

The traditional view of corporate innovation consists of inventing a technology, testing it in the lab, and then making a business case to launch the venture once a new product or service becomes outdated; however, Fitzgerald argues that the *real* process of innovation resembles the scientific method, relying on experimentation and the validation of assumptions. Fitzgerald predicts that there will be a future age of innovation management, just like when we heralded in ages of supply change management. Organizations that lead in this new world of innovation management will be the ones that succeed.

For organizations to drive this innovation, becoming resilient to and capitalizing on opportunities in a changing market, they need to start with individual learning, and new activity that leads to higher revenue has to come from employees. But individual employee learning is not enough--companies also need to *want* groups of people to achieve knowledge, growth, and innovation. Fitzgerald argues that company management needs to fully understand and support innovators at the frontier of knowledge--those who are comfortable with uncertainty. Companies can do this by acknowledging that curating innovative people is important for the company's long-term growth. More specifically, companies need to understand that innovation has a high rate of failure. Company management should value the innovation process as much as the outcome; this allows innovators to feel they've contributed, even when they fail. Additionally, if companies want to be truly innovative, they need to connect their innovation process to their financial structures. This is evident from the Corning model described by Fitzgerald in the podcast. Listen to the podcast to hear all of Fitzgerald's insights into corporate innovation and the future of innovation management.