Is **Australia** really an innovation nation?

By Gaia Grant and Andrew Grant

Australians may be the proud originators of a range of interesting inventions including the Hills Hoist, the refrigerator, the black box flight recorder and the electronic pacemaker, but can we call ourselves an innovation nation?

A timeline of Australian inventions shows that the production of recognized useful inventions has in fact slowed a fair bit in the 21st century. Additionally, Australia appears to be stalling or slipping in global innovation rankings, with a 17th position in the 2015 Global Innovation Index.

What's more, recent studies have revealed that only 16% of Australian businesses have a high performing innovation culture, compared with 44% of the global top 100 companies.

So what's the problem? Is it time to change the game and start competing differently?

First, build a creative culture to support innovation

Australia actually comes top in the global rankings when different measures are used. When creativity capability measures are used, instead

of simply calculating the number of patents registered (which has been the standard innovation measure until recently), Australia excels.

Out of 139 countries measured in the 2015 Global Creativity Index, Australia has been identified as having the best culture to support innovation.

The key factors that build a creative culture, according to urban studies researcher Richard Florida from the University of Toronto, are what he calls the three T's: Technology, Talent and Tolerance. Australia has scored highly on the last two of these measures,

Empowerment becomes possible through decentralizing power, setting shared goals, and allowing for participative problem solving and decision making.

Where an appetite for risk is then built into a group culture as a norm, and where people feel equipped (through better training and education, as well as through having access to the latest technologies), innovative ideas can flourish. When they are then enabled to prototype and trial solutions for practical application, innovative implementation is then facilitated.

Let's continue to develop our strengths, and we might just be able to step up on the podium and truly claim that coveted 'innovation nation' title.

with our high quality education system being credited as helping to build creative thinking and problem solving skills, and with the recognition that we are one of the most diverse multicultural countries in the world.

NEXT, DEVELOP A TOLERANCE FOR MORE DIVERSE IDEAS

Diversity, particularly cultural diversity, has been found to be linked to innovation and better economic performance. The problem is that diverse groups can be volatile and unproductive if there is limited respect. Group diversity has been found to be linked with more perceived conflict and a lack of trust.

While groups of likeminded people come up with solutions faster, the solutions are inevitably mediocre. Groups that are made up of people from diverse backgrounds, on the other hand, will contribute varied opinions and ideas and explore more options. As long as the process is well facilitated, and although it will typically take longer, these groups can come up with superior solutions.

Homogeneity can be damaging, because there can be a tendency towards conformity and groupthink – which in turn limits the exploration of different ideas. Strong connections between individuals can become protective walls which are barriers to new ideas.

Encouraging and valuing diversity, on the other hand, is essential for starting the innovation journey.

FINALLY, ENABLE TALENT FOR BETTER IMPLEMENTATION

To support talent development for better innovation, individuals will need to be empowered, equipped, and enabled.

Empowerment is a first key to helping to develop the sort of curiosity and imagination that can lead to breakthrough applications. And this can happen at any level. A study of garbage collectors in San Francisco found that if the collectors were free to select their own opportunities they were more innovative.

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