



## Bees, Trees and the Innovation Ecosystem\*

If you ever have the good fortune to spend any time with Tim Draimin, Executive Director of Social Innovation Generation at MaRS, you will learn a lot about social innovation – in Canada and abroad.

But you will also find out quickly that Tim is thinking about something that goes beyond innovation itself. He is preoccupied with a notion called the “innovation ecosystem.” You might wonder what on earth he is talking about.

Here is my interpretation. Innovation represents a product, service, process or way of thinking that is qualitatively different from what is currently in place. The innovation could be new or newly-applied. The latter refers to something that has proven successful elsewhere and is now being applied to a new context or community.

The innovation ecosystem comprises all the actions you need to take to both sow and grow the innovation seeds. A good idea – whether a product, service, process or new way of thinking – does not take hold just because it happens to be a good idea. It needs to be planted in the right conditions and carefully cultivated to ensure it can take root and flourish.

Tim has recently read a report called *When Bees Meet Trees: How large social sector organisations can help to scale social innovation*. The paper builds on earlier ideas that depicted bees as small organizations, individuals and groups that have the new ideas and are mobile, quick and able to cross-pollinate. The trees, by contrast, are the big organizations – governments, companies and large not-for-profits – which are poor at creativity but generally good at implementation. They have the resilience, roots and scale to make things happen. Both the bees and the trees need each other.

\* This blog was published on the *Social Innovation Generation* (SiG) website on December 16, 2013.

While the ideas in this report may be interesting, they will not be applied unless they are disseminated, digested, discussed and debated. Any innovation – including a new way of thinking – needs an *innovation ecosystem* in order to take hold. This innovation ecosystem comprises several components.

First, it is essential to identify the people who would have an interest in this product, service, process or new way of thinking. Among them are those who are willing to go one step further and spread the word. They may even be early adapters ready to apply the innovation to their own workplaces or communities. There is a vital *human resource component* to the innovation ecosystem.

An innovative product, service, process or idea typically involves a variety of associated changes to take root. When it comes to applying an idea, for example, it may be necessary to create new teams that work together in clusters rather than individually at desks. Community locations, such as a coffee shop or neighbourhood hub, may replace a central office. Virtual work spaces may be set up at home. These are the *physical space dimensions* of the innovation ecosystem.

Before any new product, service, process or idea is introduced within an organization or community, there must be an assessment of who might be affected by the innovation and in what ways. Innovation usually is ‘disruptive’ in that it implies a qualitative shift in how things are done. While disruption is vital to innovation, it is important to try to minimize potential harms, such as job loss or exclusion from an essential service. There is a key *information component* to the innovation ecosystem.

There are also *legal dimensions* to the innovation ecosystem to which innovators must pay attention. It is possible that clients of a service may decide to launch a lawsuit, for example, if their benefits or supports are protected through legislation. Employees may lodge a complaint or grievance if they feel that their contractual agreement has shifted fundamentally from its original signing. While these possibilities should not necessarily block the innovation, change makers must be aware of the potential legal implications of their actions.

Of course, money is always a consideration. How much will the innovation cost and from where will the funds come to support this new good, service, process or way of thinking? Will they be redirected from another activity or program or will additional dollars have to be found? Are there potentially new funders or sources of financing that might be tapped? This is the *financial component* to the innovation ecosystem.

Finally, the *policy component* of the innovation ecosystem can help or hinder the application of a new product, service, process or idea. For example, existing legislation may prevent non-profit organizations from raising new funds through profit-making activities. Enabling policies, by contrast, could help open the door to new forms of financing.

At the end of the day, an innovation that has been applied well will probably be sustained over time. If successful, other organizations and communities often want to apply it as well. *Sustainability* and *scaling* are vital features of successful innovation.

No wonder Tim is obsessed with the innovation ecosystem. Without it, innovation will likely not take hold. For sure, it will not survive or go to scale. Tim knows that it is imperative to create the conditions for success when the bees ultimately meet the trees.

*Sherri Torjman*

### **Reference**

Jarvis, O. and R. Marvel. (2013). *When Bees Meet Trees: How large social sector organisations can help to scale social innovation*. London: Clore Social Leadership Programme.

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