



Innovation: counting what counts

Parliamentarians recently agreed to make our national anthem gender neutral. With talk on innovation all the rage in Ottawa, perhaps their next move will be to change Oh Canada to ©Canada.

In fact, the conversation on the concept and practice of innovation is about to grow louder and longer. The Trudeau government just unveiled its innovation agenda, which identifies several core priorities. They include promoting better discovery, fostering business clusters, enabling commercialization and upgrading workforce talent.

The development and commercialization of new products and processes are primary objectives. Innovation seeks to create smarter, faster, easier and greener ways of doing things. It nurtures new ideas and methods, which subsequently are converted into marketable products and processes.

Success generally is measured through several key indicators, including productivity improvements and patents. Unfortunately, the singular focus on products, processes, productivity and patents omits an important “p” from the innovation equation.

People rarely figure prominently in the innovation discussion – other than to ensure a cadre of workers equipped with the right skills for this new improved world.

Innovation typically is touted as the ideal toward which Canada should strive in order to create a better economy. But it also should be viewed as a way of tackling the big challenges that both Canada and the world currently face. We need to move beyond understanding innovation solely as a set of technical processes toward a broader conceptualization of innovation as problem-solving methodology.

Take, for example, the importance of addressing the needs of the substantial number of Canadians with disabilities. They currently comprise an estimated 14 percent of the population and are slated to grow with an aging population and rapidly rising incidence of chronic disease.

Even though they may be highly educated and exceptionally skilled (and keen to participate in the innovation economy), many people with disabilities live on the margins of society. Physical barriers, while pervasive and exhausting, are the least of their problems.

Most face a veritable brick wall of attitudinal barriers that make it difficult, if not impossible, to work in the paid labour market. Canada virtually wastes huge pools of talent – all the while skilling up for its ‘advanced’ talent demands. A truly innovative economy and society would not blindly squander such valuable resources.

Many people with disabilities require some form of technical aid or adaptive device in order to work or simply participate in society. This need represents a brilliant market opportunity for innovation.

The problem is that there are often limited markets for certain products, resulting in prohibitive price tags for the relatively few users. Many could even pay for at least a portion of these items if they were gainfully employed.

In this case, the federal innovation agenda should include the creation of a problem-solving space where persons with disabilities, employers, engineers, design specialists, city planners and all orders of government come together to formulate new technologies, create the associated markets and ensure access to affordable adaptive equipment.

Having enabled participation through innovative technologies, this group could turn its attention to tackling the stubbornly high unemployment rate among persons with disabilities, despite their skills and impressive credentials.

Innovation should involve more than bolstering productivity within certain industrial sectors – essential as this is. Innovation is about more than producing additional mathematicians and scientists. It is more than tallying the number of new patents with trademark Canada.

Canada's innovation agenda needs to harness resources and ideas in novel ways to tackle major societal challenges: accessibility and inclusion, climate change, sustainable agricultural and food security, to name just a few. Innovation should be understood as a problem-solving process, which includes technological development. New products and processes are necessary but not sufficient.

Ideally, the success of our innovation efforts will be assessed not only by how much we count – but also by how well we tackle the issues that count.

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