

Co-crafting Innovation

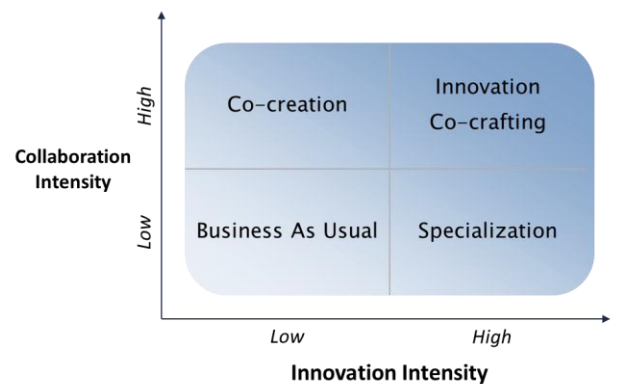
Co-creation primarily represents a shift in the customer-supplier relationship, where the end user or customer becomes an integral participant in the creation of a product. Just compare predefined menus in restaurants with open kitchens where customers can interact with chefs to select an assortment of ingredients that they would like to go into their dish! In a larger sense, co-creation is “collaboration on steroids”, where multiple stakeholders work together as one to create an end product. Given that most innovation pundits vouch for it, why are enterprises taking so long to embrace it as the de facto model for innovation?

Firstly, the complexity of co-creation seems to be a deterrent. Co-creation between one customer and one supplier is simple. Just add a competitor or partner or even one more supplier to the mix - the complexity of co-creation increases so much that participants tend to fall back to less intense forms of collaboration – division of work, outsourcing, islands of core competence etc.

Secondly, the future is inherently unpredictable. Henry Ford famously commented - “If I’d asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses”. Innovation is like excavating in the dark; most of us can only see the next couple of feet. Small teams are nimble, but they cannot see too far ahead; large teams enjoy slightly better visibility, but progress can be slow.

In effect, co-creation serves innovation objectives well when the number of unknowns is small in number. For example, Toyota in its ‘Ideas for Good’ campaign asked end users to imagine new ways of using certain new technology capabilities that Toyota had already created. P&G on the other hand, employs its famous ‘Connect and Develop’

open innovation model to rope in partners to co-create products that can reach the market faster, having already determined what its customers want (through surveys and discussions with end-users). Even within an enterprise, co-creation is fruitful when it is restricted to a small number of localized teams.



When the number of unknowns increases, collaboration and innovation tend to pull against each other, and co-creation merely scratches the surface. To pull them together, a more intense form of co-creation – co-crafting is required! *So, what goes into innovation co-crafting?*

First, create a common language for co-creation.

One of our customers wanted to create concepts for next-generation shampoos. End user surveys did not throw up any new ideas and the chemistry of shampoos was well known; creating new shampoo compositions required large number of trials with very few successes at the end. Using a combination of systems and inventive thinking approaches we were able to view shampoos as products that perform the generic function of “cleaning solids”; this opened up a world of generic solutions to generate new shampoo concepts e.g. how anti-stick properties of a lotus leaf could be brought to bear on human hair using a shampoo composition.

Another customer of ours, an IT services SME, was confronted with an attrition problem that was fast ballooning into a crisis. Regular HR approaches to stem attrition had proved ineffective. We brought in a Network Analysis perspective to analyze employee work interactions and identify key opinion leaders. Interesting insights from this analysis led to a quick resolution of the attrition problem, which otherwise looked unsolvable.

Second, design a continuously growing and self-evolving set of change experiments. While championing an organization wide process innovation initiative at one of India's largest software services firms, we were confronted with a tricky situation. The standard training model had proven ineffective in achieving innovation outcomes. A more hands-on facilitative model achieved small breakthroughs in live projects. However, since the onus of innovation was on the facilitator, the model proved difficult to scale - innovation DNA did not set roots. We had to create a system where innovation could sustain, reproduce and evolve on its own.

With this objective in mind, we started designing "change experiments" - co-crafting vehicles, if you may. Every change experiment introduced a relevant innovation framework, produced small but credible outcomes and posed new questions to seed more change experiments. Practitioners evolved into innovation champions. Some innovation frameworks were so widely adopted that they were integrated into regular project management practices – a testimony to the success of the initiative.

Innovation co-crafting requires deep immersion into every innovation context, which tends to be unique. Scientific approaches provide a common platform and language that enable multiple kinds of

specialists to collaborate. You can get a mathematician to work on an HR problem or an ecologist to contribute to an advertising campaign. Co-crafting is also a journey into the unknown – direction and speed cannot be pre-determined and adaptive vehicles are needed. Change experiments provide practitioners the freedom to explore and improvise on the move and co-craft innovation at a sustainable and scalable pace.

About the Author



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Over the past decade, he has facilitated innovation conceptualization and execution in various contexts including processes, business strategy, products, technology evolution and intellectual property. His current areas of interest include technology evolution, inventive principles and innovation sociology.

Karthik devotes some portion of his time (as Visiting Faculty) in passing on innovation memes to students at some of India's leading business schools. He writes a blog at www.karthikeyaniyer.in and can be reached at karthikeyan.iyer@crafitti.com.