

Book Review

Bettina von Stamm and Anna Trifilova, eds.
The Future of Innovation
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Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

In their acknowledgements, the editors of *The Future of Innovation* thank the people at Gower Publishing who, they say, “really got it.” No doubt they did. Me? Not so much.

The Future of Innovation is testimony to endless enthusiasm, relentless dedication and highly focused imagination (the latter a possible oxymoron). The editors truly believe that they are on to something and that their work will be its own reward. They desperately want it to stimulate, excite and involve like-minded people the world over. The thrill of innovation is conceived as an almost spiritual journey.

The book consists mainly of statements of about four hundred words each by two-hundred-and-twenty-nine fellow travellers. Each one begins with the phrase: “The Future of Innovation is ...” and the contributors fill in the rest.

Some of the results are mildly charming. Some are banal. Some require a second reading to make any sense at all. If you like what you read and you wish the book would go on and on, relax: there is an associated website <www.thefutureofinnovation.org> which offers over 350 snippets of passion and foresight. The contributors are drawn from government, business, education and the ever shimmering world of “consulting.” They offer visions and dreams—each in about four hundred words.

The contributions in the book are divided into fourteen sections. Beneath each contributor’s name and identifiers are key words and phrases. Terms such as social, technology, communication, system, knowledge, collaboration, energy, creativity and words starting with “eco-” pop up a lot. I didn’t do a careful count, but I’d be prepared to wager that “innovation” pops up most of all.

The arrangement of the contributions into groups is not entirely whimsical or capricious, but it is sometimes hard to winkle out a coherent theme. That is, I suppose, as it should be, for the editors are not in the business of presenting a linear argument. Each little bubble of delight is intended to stand on its own, or to be made into a pattern of the reader’s own choosing. The way in which the separate items are joined together invite audience participation. Had they been printed on cards, they could be endlessly shuffled, each time revealing new connections and insights.

Von Stamm and Trifilova weave their own way through the book. There is plenty of potential white space. Each item begins with a title, a photo of the contributor, a brief identity kit—name, affiliation, position, country and area (of interest), plus an e-mail address (about 1/3rd of a page). The mini-essay follows and concludes on the facing page. The editors normally add a helpful comment on the contribution which shares the second page with a drawing of a ball of yarn in varying stages of unwinding. Mostly, the white space is simply filled with a more or less complicated squiggle, a simple piece of string.

As for the content of the contributions, there is a great deal of hope expressed by entrepreneurs and academics alike. There are challenges, of course—economic, environmental and ethical. And they can be daunting. But, we are assured, if we will just put our shoulders or, rather, our minds to the wheel, we shall take the dangers as opportunities and transform them (and ourselves) into something much, much better.

Lynne Schneider, the President of Enterprise Strategies and Solutions Inc. in the USA, tells us how innovation can alleviate poverty. Dr. Petra Köppel, the proprietor of Synergy Consult in Germany, explains how global competition can lead to intercultural collaboration. Paul Sigsworth, a Learning and Development Specialist at Nestlé in the UK, dares us to be brave, to take risks. The editors have little to say about this last entry: they are in awe.

I do not mean to mock the book. It has an arguably noble purpose, and it can certainly entertain those among us who possess (or are possessed by) a “hallelujah” outlook. It even allows an occasional display of faint dissent. Tugrul Daim is an Associate Professor (we are not told of what) at Portland State University (it turns out he is in the Department of Engineering and Technology Management as I learned when I “googled” him). Dr. Daim is concerned about there not being *enough* innovation, especially in corporate research and development, and especially in the United States. He mentions the automobile industry, and frets that it has been preoccupied with incremental rather than transformational innovation. He worries that we (i.e., Americans) have become complacent and timid. The ideas for hybrids were developed somewhere else. He is called “gloomy” by Von Stamm and Trifilova. I don’t see why. He is an advocate, a booster. He certainly presents no alternative view. He advocates no critique of the theme of industrial, commercial and social innovation. He just wants us to try harder because, if we don’t, he hints, there may be no future at all.

The emphasis in *The Future of Innovation*, as you might imagine, is not on the public sector. We can, however, pay special attention to Part VI, which is ominously entitled “The Roles of ‘Big Brother’ and Education.” It is supposed to be about government. It begins with Professor Doctor Atta-ur-Rahman, whose identifiers are too long and complex to be repeated here. Atta-ur-Rahman hails from Pakistan. He starts out by informing us that “we live in a world in which natural resources have diminishing importance.” He champions incentives for private sector R & D and for information networking. He seems relatively unconcerned about the passing of peak oil, the devastation of crops by desertification, lowering water tables and rising oceans. Perhaps he drives a Prius. Perhaps he lives on a well-shaded hilltop. Dr. Hyam Nashash of Jordan then confides that “dreams are our path, and activating those dreams is the process of turning hopes into plans.” The editors share that they “just love this statement.” Other authors hail the virtues of competitiveness in which, they say, the public sector can be made a “partner” of the private sector. Democracy wins some applause, and we are called upon to develop “innovation with a public face,” a call for innovation by local governments. Real vigor, however, only comes when Rodica Doina Dănăiată, a professor at the Universitatea de Vest Timisoara in Romania, dings the bell for e-Government (electronic government. It is the key to t-Government (transformational government) and an overarching “Information Ecology Approach.” She concludes with an appeal for “further thinking, experimenting and debate.” For once, the editors have no summary comment, but Dănăiată’s contribution is followed by a very large ball of twine.

The section on “Big Brother,” alas, has remarkably little to say about Orwell’s literary invention, a fact that struck me as odd since we are finally deploying the surveillance equipment to make corporatist tyranny a reality. Still, it was there that I found the best bit in the book. It was written by Alisdair Wiseman, Director of “The Innovation Zone” in the UK, and it is a cautionary tale that is just a shade short of tragic. It is called “The Future of Innovation Is about Aliens.” It’s a wonderful vignette about a ten-year-old boy who has the creativity snuffed out of him by an insensitive, dim-witted teacher. (You can look it up on the website.) Whatever you think of techonophilia and the celebration of the possibility of a wonderfully well-wrought technological future, Wiseman’s story is a cogent reminder of how easy it is to do harm through thoughtlessness alone. Equipped with computers, of course, thoughtlessness, never mind mendacity, can be limitlessly lethal.

The book itself? I quite enjoyed flipping through the pages for a while, hoping that the next contribution would be better than the previous one, but mostly being disappointed. Then, it became something of a chore. On the other hand, I can certainly see why people of a certain mind-set would read it with glee. If you were once as enchanted as Newt Gingrich was when he read Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* or if, from the flip-side of the political spectrum, you believe that Al Gore is a scientific genius and an iconic world-historical citizen, you’ll probably get a kick out of *The Future of Innovation*. If you have a bit of a curmudgeonly streak, you may find its purpose somewhat ignoble, but it is an occasionally tasty way to scout the enemy.

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