

What is Public Sector Innovation?

Eleanor Glor

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This article reviews [definitions](#) of innovation. It discusses why innovation in government is slow or ineffective, and examines the [impact](#) of defining innovation properly.

Many definitions of innovation are used, often leading to a lack of clarity about what public sector innovation means.

Because innovation is portrayed as something desirable in the current public administration and business management literature, public administrators want to be innovative. Governments often assume the mantle without adopting the substance of innovation, in order to avoid real change to the existing management paradigms.

Definitions of innovation by [Lee Zhuang](#) can be summarized as follows:

- a) [unique and new activities or ideas](#),
- b) [the people who innovate](#),
- c) [improving existing processes](#), and
- d) [the dissemination of new activities or ideas](#).

a) **Unique and new activities** or ideas emphasizes the act of creation, viz. inventing something new, generating new ideas, or seeing something from a different perspective. The newness and uniqueness features are emphasized. Categories of innovation could be developed from this definition, based on how new or unique the innovation is, compared to other innovations.

Moving outside of existing paradigms and finding new ways to look at things is key to the innovation process within this definition. Process would be most important.

b) **The people who innovate** are a definite asset for governments to attract. This category of innovation recognizes the role of individuals in innovation. Recruiting the right people would be the most important factor to the capacity of the organization to innovate.

c) **Improving existing processes** and functions entails redesigning. It improves something that already exists.

This definition looks at performing a task in a new way, as opposed to inventing new and better ways of accomplishing the same (or more) objectives. Again, the management process would be most important here.

d) ***The dissemination of new activities or ideas*** emphasizes the adoption of innovations, and treats all adoptions as innovations, independent of how long the ideas have been around. This grouping includes: following the market leader, adopting something that has been successfully tried elsewhere, spreading new ideas, or introducing changes. Change management and the management process would be most important here.

Stu Conger has found that [*social inventions*](#) in the education field in the early 1900's took 50 years to be adopted by half the educational institutions. Perhaps a government adopting an innovation so many years after its invention would still be considered an innovator! Worst, innovations can be double-counted thousands of times when the same activity is re-newed in different parts of the same organization or with a ***government***.

The implications of analyzing innovation are important.

While the first two definitions (uniqueness and people) hold out the possibility of real change, the second pair (improvements and dissemination) would never challenge the existing regime to change. Using the term "innovation" to describe an "adoption" or "dissemination" muddies the challenge to innovate while allowing conservative structures and administrators to label themselves innovative. The first two can deliver good managers.

References

Lee Zhuang's article "*Bridging the gap between technology and business strategy: a pilot study on the innovation process.*", *Management Decision*, Vol. 33 No. 8. 1995, pp. 13-21, Table IV.

About the Author:

Eleanor Glor , an executive with Health Canada, organizes The Innovation Salon and is Editor of The Innovation Journal.

Eleanor D. Glor edited "*Policy Innovation in the Saskatchewan Public Sector, 1971-82*", Toronto: Captus Press, 1997.