


John Patrick has been thinking about innovation in one way or another for most of his life. After 38 years with IBM in the US, he continues to explore new ways of doing things.

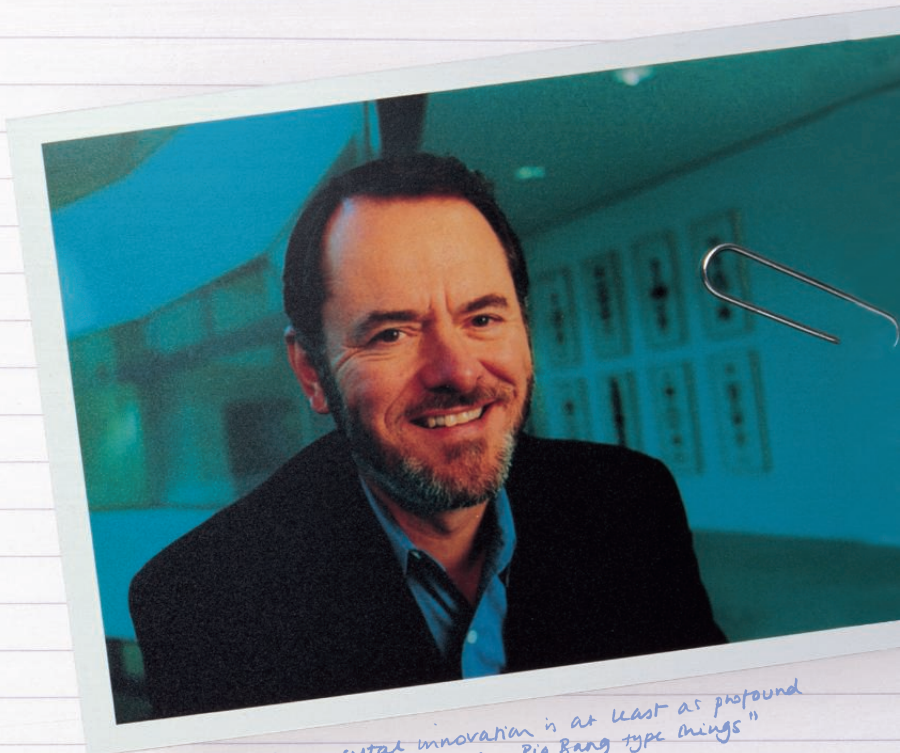
Beyond blue skies



What is it about innovation? Why has this particular idea taken such hold of the business world? It's not new by any means and it's difficult to identify. In fact, it's much easier to spot after the fact – from the flight of the Kitty Hawk to the introduction of the iPod. Examples of innovative thinking have been everywhere for years – so why is everyone suddenly talking about it?

Part of the reason it's making such corporate waves is that innovation itself has changed and this is where so many businesses lose their way.

"The most important innovation is that being done collaboratively, with people working together not just within, but between organisations," points out John Patrick on his long-running blog, <http://patrickweb.com/>. After 38 years with IBM Corporation, Patrick has seen his fair share of innovation but even he's not 100 per cent convinced that he could spot it in a line up: "In my own life,



John Patrick: "Incremental innovation is at least as profound and important as the Big Bang type things"

I constantly try to do new things because I like change. I also spend a lot of time with the boards I serve on and try my best to contribute innovative ideas.

"The biggest boost to collaborative innovation has been, of course, the internet," says Patrick. "Organisations have talked about sharing and communicating for decades but the internet has actually made it possible. eBay and Amazon are continuing to innovate and social software like LinkedIn.com and socialtext.com, and others are constantly redefining how people interact. The wiki [server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser] has made the Web writable so that will take collaboration to a new level, which in turn will lead to more innovation – it is a symbiotic cycle. The recent announcement by IBM and Nortel that IBM will be helping Nortel innovate new products is an excellent example of major companies innovating collaboratively."

Of course, not every company is seeking to revolutionise its industry – most are simply trying to build their businesses one day at a time, one step at a time. Where does innovation fit into this picture?

"Incremental innovation is at least as profound and important as the Big Bang type things," Patrick points out. "For example, the Web

JOHN PATRICK IN BRIEF

John Patrick is founder of Attitude LLC. Prior to setting up Attitude LLC, he was vice-president of Internet Technology at IBM Corporation until he “e-tired” at the end of 2001. He enjoys consulting, writing and speaking at various events around the world and serves on several technology company boards. 

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today is vastly different than it was ten years ago, but it's hard to say when it changed. It has been (and will continue to be) a series of continuous increments: Java, Javascript, Real Networks, XML, Skype, wiki, blogging, podcasting, and so on.

“Innovation is more an attitude than a methodology. There are certainly some principles that can be learned, but it mostly comes from the heart and mind, combined with good communications and inspiration.

“This is where leadership comes in.

Innovators sometimes are not able to articulate the benefits of new ideas or organise the efforts needed to carry them forward – that's what leaders do.

Leadership is a special skill, just like innovation.”

The fact of the matter is, every business must deal with innovation, whether as part of a growth strategy or in dealing with the competition – in fact, innovation has changed the face of competition for most companies.

“In the old days, you could invent something on your own and make large returns by keeping it proprietary,” Patrick point out.

“This has changed – there are not many secrets these days. Beating the competition is more about execution than it is about having a proprietary idea.

“IBM grew to be a very large company on proprietary technology. Those days ended a couple of decades ago. Now IBM is leading the charge for Linux and open internet standards. It is winning deals from customers based on having solutions and services that are built on standards that are available to anyone.

“IT executives are trying to make their organisations more resilient. It's not change for the sake of it. They want standards-based technology, so they don't get locked in to vendors, so they can centralise, decentralise, reorganise, acquire or be acquired, all without having to redesign and rebuild all their systems.

“I believe this same concept, standards-based technology and collaborative innovation, will come into other industries, just as it has in IT.”

It seems the very concept of innovation has changed and we will all need to keep the pace if we're going to stay ahead of the competition – especially when we don't even know what form that competition is going to take.