

Don't Procrastinate...Innovate!: American Ingenuity Is Alive And Kicking

Written by Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor
Friday, 14 September 2012 13:23



Jay Carney, the current White House Press Secretary, recently took the opportunity to state, “The United States of America is still the most powerful economy in the world. It is an incredible engine for creativity and innovation. And it has the smartest, most effective workforce in the world.” Carney’s assessment was spot on.

When it comes to creativity and innovation, the USA has continually held a revered position in the eyes of the world. This is evidenced by the way much of the world emulates, copies and, in some cases, counterfeits ideas, products, methods and processes born in America. Fueled by the ingenuity of its courageous forefathers, America has dominated—*and continues to dominate* — the science of “getting things done better!”

As difficult as our recent economic times have been, history will likely record the past few lean years as a mere speed bump in American industrial dominance. Unlike governments, which tend to hire more and spend their way out of austerity, most corporations will rigorously examine themselves and look for ways to be more competitive, assessing the value of their current methods, processes, procedures and product offerings to eliminate waste with precision.

History has repeatedly shown that under adversity, the spirit of creativity and innovation flourishes. Many readers will recall the near-disaster of the Apollo 13 moon mission, when after 56 hours of spaceflight, an oxygen tank on one of the spacecraft’s service modules blew up due to faulty electrical wiring insulation. The subsequent understated “Houston, we have a problem” sound-bite call from the crew is now legendary.

Apollo 13’s problems were many, but the astronaut crew and ground teams in Houston worked

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through them one by one and developed ingenious devices and protocols to avert almost certain disaster. When most people think back on the Apollo 13 saga, they remember the famous oxygen depletion problem depicted in Hollywood's version of the story. In it, the lunar module's Lithium Hydroxide (LiOH) scrubbers, used to remove carbon dioxide from the spacecraft, held insufficient capacity to get the astronauts back to earth. Ironically, the attached command module had more than adequate capacity in its LiOH scrubbers, but the crew was unable to attach the return-line hose, as the connections were incompatible. Using only items known to be carried in the spacecraft at the time, a Houston ground crew was tasked with finding an innovative solution before the astronauts passed out from lack of oxygen. The result was an object they named "the mailbox." This jury-rigged device allowed the command module's cube-shaped connectors to be linked to the lunar module's cylinder-shaped connectors. It's hard to believe that this heroic episode transpired many years ago.

More recently, we only have to look at the resurgence and rebirth of the American automotive industry that has reinvented itself in the past few years. Innovative technology, product design and manufacturing methods are setting new benchmarks for the future.

Your chance to shine

Americans are truly fortunate to live in a society that fosters and rewards creativity and innovation. We are fascinated by and love to hear and read about successful invention and innovation stories in which "ordinary" people come up with great ideas that make the world a better place. This is demonstrated through the popularity of TV offerings like *Shark Tank*, *Dragon's Den*

and assorted shopping channels, as well as magazines like *Popular Mechanics*

, *Popular Science*

and, one of my personal favorites, *Farm Show*□

(a newspaper-like publication that showcases innovative gizmos, gadgets and ideas for work and play put forth by American farmers).

Seemingly ordinary people with a zeal or knack for innovation are sometimes termed "backyard geniuses." That's because their solutions typically are not commercially underwritten, but rather are answers to problems on shoestring budgets, using only tools and materials at hand and heavy doses of ingenuity. The results aren't always pretty, but they're always effective!

Looking at the typical profile of a backyard genius, you might be surprised to learn that you fit in

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this elite group:

- Age: 3–103 years old
- Gender: Male or female
- Job title: All
- Qualifications: An open mind and a willingness to have a go at “doing it better”

In other words, successful innovators and inventors come from all walks of life. Many start by simply trying to resolve their pet peeves; or by working on a solution for a piece of machinery not quite suited for its original purpose or not likely to ever be repaired; or by rewriting a process that begs to be rewritten. The point is, most people have some type of backyard-genius story to tell. If you do, we want you to tell it to us.

For you ordinary people out there who may believe that your story is inconsequential—or *that a high-profile magazine like ours wouldn't be interested in it*—or that your gizmo, gadget or idea is of no use to anyone else or not good enough or refined enough to be showcased, I urge you to think again. Come to the aid of others and share your successes with us! I issue the same call to action to you procrastinators out there. Don't just leave it to “the other guy” to talk about his/her innovation. To paraphrase Guy Kawasaki, venture capitalist and Apple Computers Fellow, “Don't worry, be crappy. Revolutionary means you ship and then test... Lots of things made the first Mac in 1984 a piece of crap, but it was a revolutionary piece of crap.”

So, if you have a revolutionary piece of crap—or *a remarkable idea others in industry might be nefit from*

—we invite you to participate in our “2012 Maintenance & Reliability Innovator of the Year” award program. Entries will be judged based on the following elements:

Practicality...

1. Can the innovation be adopted across industry?
2. Can the innovation be replicated, manufactured or sold easily?

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Simplicity...

3. Is the ROI less than 3 months?
4. Is the idea intuitive and easily understood?

Impact...□

5. Reliability (uptime)
6. Ergonomics (operator, maintainer)
7. Safety
8. Energy reduction
9. Environmental?
10. Maintainability (reduces maintenance)

It matters not to us: Your innovation can take the form of a gizmo or gadget, process or procedure or an innovative use of a third-party tool. It can be a down-and-dirty, homemade fix or an elegant, inventive use of a commercial product or service.

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We know good old American ingenuity is alive and kicking. Submit your innovation before midnight, December 31 2012, and the world could be recognizing your backyard genius in early 2013. More details and submission forms are available at www.reliabilityinnovator.com. We look forward to hearing from you soon!**MT**

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