



SOSa The Open  
Innovation Company.

PAPER

# The innovation leaders.

Who are they, and why are they essential.



# Contents

Forward 03

Who is an innovation leader? 05

*Persona & responsibilities*

*Omniscience*

*Leadership & analytical skills*

*Entrepreneurial spirit & mental toughness*

Pain points 09

*Internal corporate culture*

*Competing agendas*

*Mid-management tundra*

*Foot-dragging*

The road ahead 12

---

# Forward

As the demand for innovation continues to rise and current innovation leaders become more seasoned, it would prove constructive to devise a better definition of what an innovation leader does, thereby eliminating much of the ambiguity surrounding this role.

This paper will examine who an innovation leader is, how we can best define their key responsibilities, and state some of their common pain points.

“ Companies that maintained their innovation focus during the 2008 financial crisis, outperformed their peers by 30% during recovery.”

Any company attuned to today's rapid technological shifts understands that charging towards the future of business is an imperative endeavor in vying to sustain a competitive advantage. Thus, demand for innovation is on the rise across industries, even more so as studies show that it can be key to unlocking post-pandemic growth.<sup>1</sup> A McKinsey report recently noted that companies that maintained their innovation focus during the 2008 financial crisis, outperformed their peers by 30% during recovery.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest crisis to challenge this notion. Innovation leaders and their respective companies were pressed to not only reassess the present state and projected longevity of their business, they also had to understand how an accelerated adoption of innovation could reinforce or enhance their technological infrastructure. In the end, we've witnessed an ushered embrace for permanent technological and cultural changes within companies. More importantly, the drastic shifts have stressed why innovation will remain an integral part of forging our digital frontiers in the decades ahead.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Become 2021: Business Innovators Index*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.becomeindex.com/en?source=pr&cmp=global.en-us.global.b2b.mastercard.com.mc.report..gen.become-21..learn-more-become.newsroom-article.#/>

<sup>2</sup> Furstenthal, L., Hirt, M., & Roth, E. (2021, March 22). *Innovation: Your launchpad out of the COVID-19 Crisis*. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from

<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/innovation-your-launchpad-out-of-the-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>3</sup> *Technology and innovation REPORT 2021*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://unctad.org/webflyer/technology-and-innovation-report-2021>

**So if innovation is here to stay**, this brings us to a critical, yet often misunderstood stakeholder at play: innovation leaders. While their formal titles, scope of focus, and responsibilities dynamically differ depending on several factors such as industry and company maturity, innovation leaders are uniquely anchored to a common creed, and that is to enable innovation. Innovation is, "...the multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new or improved products, service or processes, to advance, compete, and differentiate themselves in their marketplace."<sup>4</sup> But practically speaking, what does all this mean? Who is an innovation leader? What is it that they do precisely? What authority do they possess to "transform ideas into new/improved products, services or processes?" How do their responsibilities and roles outline how to address innovation challenges successfully? And how are they managing to achieve their KPIs with all this ambiguity?

---

<sup>4</sup> Baregheh, Anahita & Rowley, Jennifer & Sambrook, Sally. (2009). *Towards a Multidisciplinary Definition of Innovation. Management Decision*. 47. 10.1108/00251740910984578.retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://unctad.org/webflyer/technology-and-innovation-report-2021>

# Who is an innovation leader?

Our first matter at hand are titles. Currently, there is not one title or job description to apply to individuals spearheading innovation, although 61% of these leaders have 'innovation' in their title.<sup>5</sup> Among the titles ascribed to this job are: Chief Innovation Officer, Innovation Project Manager, Director Technology Innovation, Innovation Manager, Director Of Innovation, Digital Transformation Officer, Head of Transformation, Vice President of Digital Transformation, Vice President Innovation, Head Of Innovation, Transformation Director.<sup>6</sup> To minimize confusion in this paper, we will use the title 'Innovation Leader.'



## Persona & responsibilities

Contrary to conventional assumptions, innovation leaders are not the actual innovators themselves within organizations. Instead, their mission is often focused on shaping the culture and processes required for successful innovation; the vagueness and fluidity of their responsibilities make their job all the more difficult.

---

<sup>5</sup>The corporate innovation imperative: How large companies avoid disruption by strengthening their ecosystem. (n.d.). Retrieved March 26, 2021, from

<https://pdfslide.net/business/the-corporate-innovation-imperative-how-large-companies-avoid-disruption-by.html>

<sup>6</sup> LinkedIn campaign manager. (n.d.). Retrieved March 16, 2021, from

<https://www.linkedin.com/campaignmanager/accounts/503686751/campaigns/new/details?campaignGroupId=608707003>

While there is no clear job description or formal training for an innovation leader's role, a resounding set of attributes often characterize the persona of a successful innovation leader. At its core, innovation leaders must possess strong omniscience, strong leadership and analytical skills, an insatiable entrepreneurial spirit, and the cognitive acumen to demonstrate mental toughness. According to the aforementioned character attributes, we've categorized their responsibilities to better conceptualize and define an innovation leader's position. We've outlined their responsibilities into three categorical roles: the interpersonal, informational, and decisional.<sup>7</sup> Each of these roles are then parsed into specific responsibilities. The interpersonal role encapsulates their responsibilities as a figurehead, leader, and liaison; the informational embodies the responsibilities as a monitor, disseminator, and spokesperson; and the decisional assumes the responsibilities of an entrepreneur, resource allocator, and the negotiator.

### **Omniscience**

A decade-long study found that the most important skill harnessing the synergies between all these responsibilities is an innovation leader's omniscience, or rather their ability to understand all aspects of both business and technology. Innovation leaders navigate a complex organizational landscape, where much of the support for their efforts derive from strategically leveraging their relationships with a number of stakeholders. They must possess the ability to work effectively as group members and build cooperative teams; mutually reconcile interest and activities; publicly represent the organization's values and vision; show empathy for their team's challenges, while motivating and building enthusiasm. Innovation leaders often spend 3.2 years in their current role and have experience in three different industries before assuming the position.<sup>8</sup>

**“ Innovation leaders often spend 3.2 years in their current role and have experience in three different industries before assuming the position.”**

---

<sup>7</sup> Mintzberg, Henry. *Mintzberg on Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organizations.* , 1989. Print.

<sup>8</sup> *The corporate innovation imperative: How large companies avoid disruption by strengthening their ecosystem.* (n.d.). Retrieved March 26, 2021, from

<https://pdfslide.net/business/the-corporate-innovation-imperative-how-large-companies-avoid-disruption-by.html>

As they strive towards omniscience, it's imperative that innovation leaders cultivate deep insights into the business as well as emerging and relevant technologies. Additionally, they must nurture relationships with internal business units and stakeholders in the wider tech ecosystem, not only to maintain an upstanding rapport with their network but to also stand as a figurehead that conveys industry thought leadership and be a source of inspiration. Leveraging their responsibility as a liaison of its unit and the organization at large, innovation leaders source for valuable information, such as emerging trends in the tech ecosystem or internal sentiments towards potential change in organizational processes, which could prove critical to upselling their strategy for innovation across business units and management.

### **Leadership and analytical skills**

To lead innovation requires not only vision, delegation, and empathy, but also a keen strategic insight into future trends and technologies. Innovation leaders are often tasked with solving complex challenges; they must holistically envision a project, understand the organizational stakes involved, and compel management and their team to buy into their vision. Designated as the chief resource allocator, they are tasked with making long and short-term resource commitments in "real-time," ensuring that its unit's pivot does not overextend and, or can be a feasible execution. Thus, they are responsible for designing the innovation team structure, determining how resources are allocated, and deciding how work and information are disseminated accordingly. It comes as no surprise then that the average career duration of innovation leaders is approximately 18.6 years.<sup>9</sup> Over the years, what distinguished them to rise into this specific leadership position is their refined command to be organized, punctual, decisive, flexible, systematic, thoughtful, optimistic, and self-critical.<sup>10</sup>



---

<sup>9</sup> *The corporate innovation imperative: How large companies avoid disruption by strengthening their ecosystem.* (n.d.). Retrieved March 26, 2021, from

<https://pdfslide.net/business/the-corporate-innovation-imperative-how-large-companies-avoid-disruption-by.html>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

An innovation leader can only be as effective as the information they gather. The breadth of technical and industry knowledge of an innovation leader cements their ability to not only establish information networks, but discern what external sources or privy information are credible or relevant to their innovation strategy. Their degree of technical or project expertise also enables their ability to articulate and translate their ideas into practical methods, procedures, and techniques. As a monitor, innovation leaders maintain a keen pulse on the latest tech news, trends, shifts, and other internal and external information that may prove critical to their overall innovation strategy. In other words, innovation leaders position themselves almost as a powerful database of information, or rather the informational nucleus of the organization.

“ *Innovation leaders must → holistically envision a project, understand the organizational stakes involved, and compel management and their team to buy into their vision.*

### **Entrepreneurial spirit & mental toughness**

An innovation leader's entrepreneurial drive and confidence enable them to spearhead the organization's efforts to improve its efficiency, adapt to technological shifts, and adopt unconventional methods that would perhaps be seen as too risky. It is their passion for innovation that maintains their ability to provide a clear vision of what they want to achieve and fuel the agility needed to accomplish those objectives.

Innovation leaders understand that many of their decisions will be drawn in conditions of extreme ambiguity; they expect to confront a plethora of critiques, limitations, and even failures that will demand their innovation strategy to be negotiated and renegotiated. In these challenging conditions, an innovation leader's persistence to carry on is attributed to their refined mental toughness.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, innovation leaders are driven to get things done and effectively deploy their creativity and passion for innovation. They're proud of their work, and are motivated to execute action; just give them that innovative space to do so.

---

<sup>11</sup> Feng, Jin. (2016). Relationship between mental toughness, stress appraisal, and innovation performance of R&D personnel. SHS Web of Conferences. 25. 02016. 10.1051/shsconf/20162502016.



# Pain points

As the interpersonal, informational, decisional roles of innovation leaders often relay themselves in different capacities, so do their pain points. Below are some of the most common pain points that these drivers of innovation wrestle with:

## Internal culture

An organization's internal culture plays a critical role in ushering in experimentation and innovation. Internal culture can also stymie these innovative changes; more often than not, people are reluctant to change.<sup>12</sup> Whether it's collaborating with an external team, strategizing towards a tech-enabled approach to promote efficiency, or incorporating a new set of processes, people will often be dismayed to change their habits.<sup>13</sup>

“ Leadership consists of a number of capabilities, among them the ability to lead people, processes, and influence. The goal is to take an idea or technological concept and convey it into the corporate. In order to achieve this goal I need to lead a process that starts from the startup and continues into the corridors of the corporate, which can sometimes be complex and long, coordinating expectations with all parties, and convincing peers and colleagues that the technology is valuable to our organization.



**Doron Kruphman**  
Israel Innovation @ Edge  
Program Leader at  
Schneider Electric



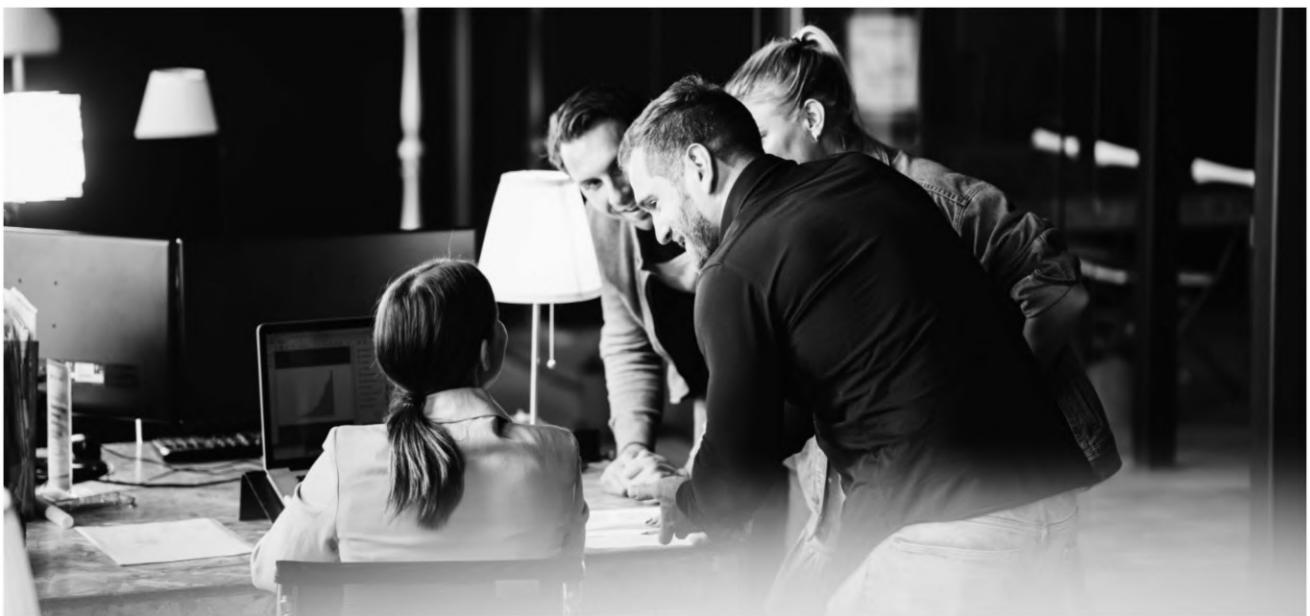
<sup>12</sup> Ten reasons people resist change. (2018, September 26). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://hbr.org/2012/09/ten-reasons-people-resist-change>

<sup>13</sup> How to deal with resistance to change. (2014, August 01). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://hbr.org/1969/01/how-to-deal-with-resistance-to-change>

Suppose a segment of the innovation leader's unit or the greater organization can not get behind the plan to make structural changes. In that case, their efforts to innovate and enable tech transformations will not be as effective or may stay on the ground altogether. As such, fostering a flexible internal culture can be seen almost more important than the technology itself.<sup>14</sup>

### **Competing agendas**

As innovation leaders vie to execute their innovation strategy and notably contribute to the organization's goals, so do other internal competing agendas. Finance wants to reduce costs and bolster the organization's capital structure; sales just got approval to expand their prospect's activities and plan to do more in the following fiscal year; executives seek to increase operations efficiency. And the list goes on and on. Amidst all this, fear harbors the minds of the business unit leads of these competing agendas; fear that existing revenue streams will be cut and placing someone's role in jeopardy. Due to the complexity, large and long-term scale of innovation projects, an innovation leader and their team's is often misunderstood. Rather than viewing the company strategy of innovation as a complement to every other business unit's desired agendas, securing resources and support for the innovation becomes quite challenging.



---

<sup>14</sup> How covid-19 accelerated corporate innovation. (n.d.). Retrieved March 29, 2021, from <https://www.sosa.co/stories/no-time-for-fluff-how-covid-19-refocused-corporations-and-accelerated-innovation>

## Mid-management tundra

Confronting mid-management 'permafrost', or rather resistance, is not a phenomenon exclusive to innovation leaders, as comfort for the status quo is a psychological and physiological reaction that many organizations struggle to mitigate. When people are presented with a new project or process, the common inclination is to revert to the familiar, even if the idea is promising and relevant. It's not that humans can't adapt; it's that the process itself can be difficult and at times, daunting. In the context of innovation leaders, proposing to management that new technologies need to be adopted or that restructuring internal processes is critical for organizational efficiency, can be perceived as intimidating changes.

“ Amidst all this, fear harbors the minds of business unit leads of these competing agendas; fear that existing revenue streams will be cut and placing someone's role in jeopardy.

Mid-management may express skepticism towards the innovation leader's ability to execute their innovation strategy successfully, be concerned about what these changes mean for their own career or question the project's relevance altogether. Consequently, innovation leaders struggle to secure appropriate funds for their projects, lack support from key stakeholders within the organization, and may experience motivational fatigue from their team. One might ask, how can their innovation team carry out their plan, if they feel this may stymie their department's job security?

## Foot-dragging

Innovation projects are imperiled when executives defer commitment and delay actions, a phenomenon rather known as foot-dragging. Receiving feedback on a project proposal that requests "additional research and analysis before moving forward" is trepidation that innovation leaders face more often than not. The hesitation in giving sponsorship towards a project stymies innovation leaders to be effective, meet their KPIs, or simply contribute to the organization.

“ I see the innovation leader role as a part of growth hacking. Innovation should bring value, and the innovation leader's role is to be an enabler; to set the infrastructures, and define processes that will support the flourishing of new ideas and initiatives.”



**Mali Marton**  
Head of Corporate Innovation  
at Elta Systems Ltd.



## The road ahead

**Today's unprecedented pace of harnessing innovation paints an optimistic future for innovation leaders.** As they strive towards being ubiquitously understood as an integral pillar of their respective organizations, innovation leaders must utilize their distinct persona and accelerate innovation. Even so, these individuals are also entrusted to solve some of our most pressing and evolving notions of what it means to work, live, and innovate for the decades ahead. Some of the ambiguous transformative challenges listed on innovation strategies include clarifying our deepening convergence with AI, combating climate change, technologically and culturally supporting our shift towards a hybrid workstyle, and securing the cyber frontier.

So where and how should innovation leaders practically focus their energy on getting their organization on board with their innovation strategy? They should prioritize cultivating an internal environment that extends an open invitation for people throughout the organization to feel involved in the innovation process. Outlining how collaborative efforts can spur direct and indirect benefits across business units is critical for closing the gap between competing agendas and cultivating deeper support. The global and versatile nature of innovative solutions demands that innovation leaders prioritize building and nurturing strong relationships across ecosystems. Doing so not only widens their access to deep industry knowledge, but also cements their authority as a multifaceted, passionate, and informed innovation leader that seeks to bring about holistic change and succeeds at doing so.

We know there's a difference between wanting innovation and converting it into results. Finding the right path for your organization is the first step.

[Book a consultation with a SOSA innovation expert here.](#)

\* **SOSA** The Open Innovation Company.

*SOSA is an open innovation company. We work with innovation teams and business units in corporations (like HP, Schneider Electric, RBC, Swiss Re), and governments (like Australia, Brazil, Canada and Taiwan). We scout and validate startups and technologies in order to bring our clients the solutions they need to solve use cases, identify opportunities, or build new products. Think noise-canceling headphones for the endless supply of startups.*

*Since 2014, we've literally been in the room facilitating discussions between large organizations and tech companies. From the first touchpoint all the way to pilots, implementations, and investments, we bring our clients precisely the technologies they need to advance innovation.*