Evolution and Innovation

In the field of higher education information technology, our conversations often center on technological innovation: mobility, cloud computing, social media, augmented reality. But technological innovation is not guaranteed to have a positive impact. It can bring complexity: issues of adoption, integration, financing. In addition, the gatekeepers of success involve people and organizations, and as Gary Hamel observed in his talk at the 2010 EDUCAUSE Annual Conference, organizational innovation typically lags technological innovation.

The articles in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review are predicated on technological innovation. Yet the focus is not on technology; rather, it is on the services that technology provides. The authors of the cover feature article remind us that fundamental principles—such as equal access—should be guiding our use and application of technology. Cyndi Rowland and her colleagues point out: “Even though modern assistive technologies and digital media can enable unprecedented access to information and services, for students, faculty, and staff with disabilities, equal participation requires equal access.” Universal Design for Digital Environments (UDDE) can help create new capabilities that will serve everyone in the campus community.

In the following feature article, Molly Tamarkin and her colleagues on the EDUCAUSE 2010 Evolving Technologies Committee ask: “How is technology evolving, and how is this changing your work?” One shift they cite is from technology to service. “The growing distance between computing assets and computing services shifts the focus away from the gadget or the tool and back to the person using it—to the individual.” Those individuals may be students, faculty, or staff. Their questions are less about the tools and more about balancing technology with the business of technology and about maintaining alignment between the institution’s goals and the tools that help achieve them. Answering these questions will “require IT leaders to become, themselves, a continually evolving technology: You 3.0.”

As a case in point, Ron Yanosky traces the trajectory of enterprise IT through fifty years of changing technology—and changes in mindset. He comments on the dissipation of IT assets themselves: “The hard assets of IT are simultaneously proliferating and dissipating—moving up into the clouds and down into pockets and purses.” Control of the assets will not determine authority or effectiveness in the future. “Cloud-based services make an increasingly wide spectrum of resources—from raw computing power to sophisticated business applications and rich collaborative environments—available to anybody with an Internet connection.” For IT leaders, the keys to the future are people-oriented skills such as education, influence, and negotiation.

For the optimum effect, whether in business or in education, our organizational models must be chosen wisely and must be based on lasting principles. In his book The Future of Management, Hamel uses a variety of companies as examples of management and organizational innovation. He suggests that the Internet may be the best metaphor for 21st-century management. And, Internet-inspired management can lead to organizational innovation. For example, many successful companies have opened up the strategy-setting process to customers and the public, ensuring that “management” is not insulated from the front-line. As Hamel observes, experienced managers may not make the best management innovators. He advocates using the many ideas that can be generated to create a “just try it” culture, emphasizing that continual experimentation is the best predictor of future vitality. The Internet is a “multiplier of human capability,” making it easier for people to do the things they love to do—connect, chat, brag, opine, share, and learn.

Hamel suggests several reasons the Internet is so adaptable, innovative, and engaging:

- Everyone has a voice.
- The tools of creativity are widely distributed.
- It’s easy and cheap to experiment.
- Capability counts for more than credentials and titles.
- Commitment is voluntary.
- Power is granted from below.
- Authority is fluid and contingent on value-added.
- The only hierarchies are “natural” hierarchies.
- Communities are self-defining.
- Individuals are richly empowered with information.
- Just about everything is decentralized.

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Ideas compete on an equal footing.
• It’s easy for buyers and sellers to find each other.
• Resources are free to follow opportunities.
• Decisions are peer-based.2

Perhaps this list should form the basis for organizational design principles in higher education. For many of us in university information technology, innovation and changes in technology have been a central focus. But perhaps our focus should increasingly turn to the ways the Internet is changing us and our organizations. As the members of the EDUCAUSE 2010 Evolving Technologies Committee observed, technology requires IT leaders to continually evolve. We have an opportunity to invent the future—not just of technology, but of ourselves.

Notes
2. Ibid., pp. 253–54.

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