Innovation: from ideation to activation
A Canadian cross-sector market study
Innovation – more than just ideas

In summer 2015, EY, in partnership with the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, conducted a survey of more than 250 Canadian organizations across a variety of sectors and industries to gain insight into how organizations approach innovation as a driver of growth. Executive-level leaders from a representative sample of Canadian organizations, large and small, crossing numerous industries and geographies, participated in the survey.

If one thing about the results of the survey rings true for organizations in Canada, it’s this: truly effective and sustainable innovation is much more than brainstorming and out-of-the-box thinking – it’s the force that enables organizations to develop new, viable offerings that create value for their business.

Today, against a backdrop of increasingly global competition, rapidly evolving technology, and fiscal, demographic, and social changes, the business leaders most likely to thrive are those who embrace the critical role that innovation plays in their organizations’ growth strategy.

In this report, we’ve broken down the results of the survey within six tightly integrated building blocks, which are necessary for any solid innovation strategy. We hope the findings not only provide insight, but spark ideas that will help your organization thrive in a new era of innovation.

The Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation is part of the University of Calgary’s Haskayne School of Business. The information contained within this report is presented in aggregate form to maintain respondent anonymity.
Innovation is the art of making hard things easy and creating value where it did not previously exist.

**What is innovation?**

Many organizations struggle to define innovation and lack a strategic approach for generating, capturing and implementing innovative ideas.

Innovation is a collaborative, structured process that involves different parts of the organization, as well as outside partners, to contribute, create and exploit new opportunities and find new ways to solve complex problems. The sole action of generating ideas is not innovating. An idea only becomes an innovation when it has been implemented in a form that generates value.

**About the market study**

Participants held executive-level positions at their organization

**Respondents**

- **Participants**
  - 251

**Organization breakdown by size**

- < 500 employees: 105
- 500 - 1,000 employees: 28
- 1,000 - 5,000 employees: 59
- 5,000 - 10,000 employees: 27
- > 10,000 employees: 32

**Organization breakdown by sector**

- Oil & Gas: 98
- Government & Public Sector: 32
- Mining & Minerals: 32
- Financial Services: 14
- Construction: 10
- Consumer Products & Retail: 12
- Technology: 7
- Power & Utility: 16
- Other*: 49
- * includes agriculture, telecommunications, aerospace and others.
In an increasingly challenging economy where costs matter, a well-balanced and focused innovation agenda can drive improved growth and, ultimately, shareholder returns. Innovation drives value for the business in a variety of ways, including: new revenue streams, enhanced engagement with staff and customers, ability to optimize operations and improved brand image.

Our market study of more than 250 Canadian business leaders found that:

- Organizations have a broad range of reasons for innovation, with the largest number doing so to increase profitability (24%), reduce costs (19%) or increase process efficiency (19%).
- 93% of leaders indicated that innovation was either important or very important to driving the growth agenda for their organization over the next two to four years.
- The importance of innovation varies by industry:
  - In highly regulated industries like power and utilities, the proportion of respondents who said innovation was very important was 37% lower than the other sectors average.
  - In industries like oil and gas or mining, where commodity prices have significantly impacted profitability, innovation has never been more important as a strategy for driving structural change in the cost base and potential growth in the future.
  - For technology companies, innovation is the backbone of the industry. It’s very much a case of “innovate or die.”
  - For consumer products and retail, product innovation is the mainstay of success.

Size matters

While larger organizations often have the people in place and investment funds to warrant a separate innovation strategy and focus, innovation itself tends to be easier in smaller organizations. There, the flexible, nimble and entrepreneurial culture can foster innovative approaches to problem-solving and a rapid commercialization of those ideas. Interestingly, it appears that despite no formal structure or funding models (as exist in many larger organizations), smaller organizations are forced to see the broader picture and as a result seem more willing to experiment, pilot and learn from failures.

How important is innovation to your organization in driving the growth agenda for the next 2 to 4 years?

[Image of bar chart showing the importance of innovation across different sectors.]
Ambidexterity drives success

High-performing organizations that innovate tend to successfully exploit the present by rapidly commercializing ideas, driving operational excellence, and embracing standardization, while they simultaneously explore future opportunities to drive more radical changes to how things are done. They usually separate their new exploratory units from their traditional exploitative ones, allowing for different processes, structures and, importantly, cultures. They also manage the organizational separation between the current, high-performing organization and the disruptive innovation team, through a tightly integrated senior team, recognizing the need to nurture what are essentially different types of businesses.

These organizations, equally adept at exploiting existing capabilities while exploring new growth opportunities, are called “ambidextrous.” Companies fail to innovate when they have too much focus on one or the other area – they explore but cannot scale and make money, or they exploit but fail to change and innovate when the external market changes. Ambidextrous organizations find ways to remain competitive and relevant even as their markets change, and tend to outlast their competitors.

Our survey of Canadian organizations shows that ambidextrous organizations:

- Have a well-articulated innovation strategy with very specific objectives that is separate from the traditional enterprise strategy
- Have an innovation leader accountable for enterprise-wide innovation, with a focus on disruptive innovation rather than operational excellence or sustaining innovation
- Have a dedicated budget focused on disruptive innovation.
- Manage a portfolio of different innovation types – from sustaining to disruptive
- Get innovative ideas from multiple sources, not just employees
- Collaborate with external parties at both large and small companies to help explore breakthrough ideas

Key success factors

The ambidextrous organization

1> Vision and values that promote a common identity but separate cultures.
2> Senior team that explicitly owns the ambidextrous strategy, with shared goals and incentives.
3> Separate units for scaling explore businesses, with responsibility to be different.
4> Integration points so the explore business can leverage assets of the core.
5> Ambidextrous leadership with the ability to resolve conflicts and allocate resources in line with goals.

Charles O'Reilly, Stanford Graduate School of Business
Innovation building blocks

Organizations seeking to reap the rewards of innovation must recognize that being innovative is not just about generating more good ideas than their competitors or taking a creative approach to problem solving. They need to create an environment where innovation can thrive.
A sound foundation for innovation should consist of six tightly integrated building blocks.

Without a balance of these, efforts to build innovation will not stand. Governance, culture and people sit at the core, but strategy, process and the all-important ideas are equally critical.

Our survey provides insight into how strong innovation is in Canadian organizations, and this report sets out the key findings, observations and analysis by building block.
Innovation strategy is different than company strategy

In the face of market, regulatory and political uncertainty, the ability to react, respond and innovate quickly is critical. While most organizations (93%) surveyed believe innovation is important to driving their growth agenda, many (70%) still struggle to articulate a clearly defined and separate innovation strategy.

Unsurprisingly, respondents in the technology sector are the most likely (67%) to have innovation strategies that are defined and partially separated from their business strategy. Organizations with more than 10,000 employees are also more likely to have defined and separate innovation strategies, due partly to their size and scale and the available resources to dedicate to such a strategy and focus.

However, the primary driver for innovation differs by sector:

- Government and public sector organizations place a premium on increasing process efficiency (72.7%) because they are not driven primarily by profitability, but by being lean and optimized.
- Mining and oil and gas respondents look to innovation as a way to increase profitability (28.9%) and reduce costs (22.8%). Reducing environmental impact is a primary driver for only 2.6%.
- Technology companies emphasize innovation as a way to move into new markets and increase existing market share.
- Power and utility organizations innovate with a focus on cost reduction (41.6%) as a result of heavy regulations.

As organizations grow in size, there is an increased focus on reducing cost and increasing profitability.

Organizations with ambidextrous or exploration capabilities typically view capital projects, product development, and operations maintenance as the most important areas for innovation. They’re also more apt to have a partially defined, but not separate, innovation strategy.

Conversely, those without these capabilities largely view operations and maintenance as most important, and they do not have a defined or separated strategy. Many construction companies (60%) fall into this category. There seems to be a perception that there is less need to innovate the business model due to protections in place. Indeed, 64% of power and utility respondents reported that they have no defined or separated innovation strategies. For technology companies, which are the most likely to have strategies, innovation offers a vital competitive advantage.

“Without an innovation strategy, innovation improvement efforts can easily become a grab bag of much-touted best practices.”


93% of those surveyed believe innovation is important to driving growth
Does your organization have a defined innovation strategy “separate” from the corporate strategy?

What is the primary reason for innovation at your organization?

Strategy: key success factors

- Set a clear, specific **innovation strategy** linked to the organization’s strategy, with a well-articulated scope and objectives.
- **Create a plan to innovate** upon ideas that spur growth, enhance experience, protect the organization and optimize the existing business.
- **Assign metrics to measure success** and drive accountability for delivery. The strategy should identify the organization’s risk appetite for innovation.
Leadership matters

Having a senior leader responsible for innovation can help a company stay focused on the innovation agenda. These leaders play a critical role in helping define the innovation strategy, promoting innovation where appropriate in the organization and ensuring efforts are coordinated and tightly integrated across the enterprise. They also play a critical role in managing the innovation process, ensuring the company can explore, but also exploit and rapidly commercialize, the best ideas.

Not surprisingly, our survey found that larger organizations are the most likely to have a senior leader accountable for innovation. However, smaller organizations are more likely than mid-sized companies to have a senior leader in charge of innovation. For many small organizations the investment pays off, as their ability to innovate is critical to rapid growth and a successful IPO or sale to a larger organization.

“In our experience, most leadership development programs give scant attention to these innovation-enabling attitudes and behaviors. Through selection, training and feedback, companies must work hard to create a cadre of leaders who are as adept at fostering innovation as they are at running the business.”


Does your company have a senior leader accountable for innovation within the company?
Money talks

Organizations with ambidextrous capabilities typically spend more on innovation as a percentage of their total costs. Those with neither explore nor exploit capability typically spend less than 1%. Only when a firm has a defined and fully implemented process are they likely to have a separate innovation budget.

The technology industry is a great example of a sector that needs to innovate to differentiate and survive, and does so accordingly. Technology companies are generally wired differently – they hire young, creative people, then reward product innovation and really drive an innovation culture. Those that fail to innovate quickly go out of business.

What is the estimated percentage your organization spends annually on innovation as a percentage of total operating costs?

79% of organizations spend 5% or less of their total operating costs on innovation.

Governance: key success factors

- Establish an innovation operating model for recruiting, sponsorship, ownership and resource allocation.
- Identify funding, including associated decision rights, and put in place measurement and monitoring (performance management and benefits tracking criteria).
- Define measures of success, goals, objectives and timeframes.
Collaboration is critical

Collaboration is considered important by most (87%) Canadian leaders surveyed. In fact, it is critical on multiple levels in order to plug capability voids and accelerate cross-pollination. Organizations need to build energy around ideas, inspire teamwork and enable rapid prototyping. Those that are ambidextrous or involved in exploration are more likely to see internal and external collaboration as important.

Larger organizations often struggle to innovate from within due to tight processes, systems and procedures and an operationally excellent culture that drives standardization rather than variation and innovation. Collaborating can be a mechanism to get around this: for example, working with smaller companies focused on the next big idea or taking a financial stake in smaller companies and using them as a source of idea generation. Once an idea becomes mature, real and commercial, the company is often absorbed into the enterprise or the idea and related intellectual property transferred.

According to our survey, collaboration is very important for small and large organizations, but less important to companies in between.

“The new leaders in innovation will be those who figure out the best way to leverage a network of outsiders.”

- Gary P. Pisano and Roberto Verganti, Networking Magazine
Pick the right partner

In general, Canadian organizations prefer to collaborate with industry service providers (35%) but preferred partners vary by sector:

- Some government and public sector organizations (30%) emphasized a desire to work with other government agencies.
- The majority (67%) of technology respondents prefer to work with customers and often run product innovation sessions selectively with customers.
- Consumer products and retail organizations indicated a strong preference to work with companies in other sectors (45%).
- Very small organizations and those with more than 5,000 employees were more likely to want to work with other organizations in their industry.

Often service providers build their business and associated fees based on bringing new perspectives, insights and ideas to their clients. Typically, the more innovative companies are, the more successful they will be in serving their clients across multiple industries.

“Firms that can harness outside ideas to advance their own businesses while leveraging their internal ideas outside their current operations will likely thrive in this new era of open innovation.”

- The Era of Open Innovation, Henry W. Chesbrough, MIT Sloan Management Review

People: key success factors

- Develop a diverse team with a range of seniority and backgrounds.
- Find individuals who are creative thinkers, have the right mindset, are risk-taking and action-oriented, to test and try new ideas.
- Invest in developing “people” capability – training, resources, collaboration platforms and more – to innovate.
- Create a network of individuals and teams both internally and externally who are skilled in the key elements of innovation.
- Embrace open innovation – innovating outside the boundary of the firm with external parties, including academe, entrepreneurs and industry partners.
- Enable employees to gather knowledge and collaborate internally and externally through networks, communities of interest and technology platforms.
Engage employees

The conventional R&D function is changing and companies now have a portfolio of ways for generating innovations, including engaging with their employees. Employee feedback is valuable, since employees tend to understand how things are done at the ground level, and how they may be done better.

Large organizations with more than 10,000 employees are significantly more likely to have formalized innovation teams and generate ideas from multiple sources. As a company becomes larger, it becomes more important not to lose sight of ground truth, what will work, what’s practical and what will drive true change. Although employees have good ideas, in a larger organization, people who have an enterprise view and can see bigger, integrated and more disruptive ideas are valuable. To really be successful, the company must manage a portfolio of different types of innovation.

Internally, where does your organization primarily get its ideas about innovation?

Manage a portfolio of innovation

Innovative ideas come in various shapes and sizes. The majority are small, incremental ideas that are easily identified, developed and distributed throughout the organization. This is called sustaining innovation. Other innovations include big bets that could revolutionize an industry and which take time and significant resources to develop. This is typically known as disruptive innovation.

Sustaining innovation is considered the most important type of innovation across both sector and organization size, while disruptive innovation is most important among respondents with more than 10,000 employees. Sustaining innovation is often easier, with results delivered in shorter timeframes. But long-term success in delivering results and differentiating an organization from its competitors depends on a portfolio of innovation types – both hard and easy.

As ideas are developed and disseminated, or as an industry adapts to a disruptive change, ideas will shift down the portfolio. A portfolio strategy ensures a consistent pipeline of ideas and can safeguard an organization from becoming stagnant or complacent.
Copy cats
A full third (33%) of respondents across industries and organization size look to competitor organizations in their industry for innovative ideas. The challenge around relying on competitors for ideas, however, is that an organization’s competitive advantage diminishes when it is mimicking versus creating and differentiating. Customers are the main source of innovative ideas (83%) for technology companies.

Encourage governments and regulators to enable innovation
Respondents view government’s role as an enabler of innovation through flexible regulation (31%), innovation tax relief (30%) and specific innovation funding (19%), but most really don’t view government as playing a driving role in innovation.

Ideas: key success factors
- Encourage co-creation of ideas and support for internal and external ideation processes.
- Define the organization’s approach for disseminating ideas for both internal and go-to-market channels.
- Manage a diverse portfolio of innovations, including sustaining, adjacent and disruptive ideas, transitioning ideas within this portfolio as the idea is disseminated throughout the organization or industry.

“A company’s innovation strategy should specify how the different types of innovation fit into the business strategy and the resources that should be allocated to each. The point here is not that companies should focus solely on routine innovation. Rather, it is that there is not one preferred type.”

What is the best role for government to play in driving innovation in your company and industry?
Process paralysis

While a structured innovation process can help organizations focus and manage ideas from creation through incubation to activation, most companies indicated that they don’t have a structured innovation process or framework in place. The reality is that structured processes can become overly bureaucratic and organizations need to strike a fine balance to avoid process paralysis.

An innovation process helps focus an organization’s investments on viable opportunities to create and capture economic value for the business. It provides an operating model and framework to validate innovative ideas and manage investment risk and helps properly evaluate partnering opportunities.

Having a full or partially defined innovation process separated those organizations with ambidextrous capabilities from those with neither explore nor exploit capabilities (although a number of ambidextrous organizations did not have structured processes).

63% of organizations either have no defined decision-making process and framework, or one that is partially defined but not implemented.

Does your company have a well-defined and structured innovation process and decision-making framework that is followed?
Scale

Large organizations tend to have the size and scale to invest time, money, and effort in driving an innovation agenda. Sometimes they even have dedicated leaders and budget. Smaller companies also tend to be focused on innovation because it often enables rapid start-up growth, eventual IPO or sale to a larger company. While they might have a similar focus, the challenges they face are different. Larger companies must guard against bureaucracy and enable their employees to create. Small companies need to find ways to commercialize their ideas and generate investment support.

Implementation and culture are harder than they may seem

Implementing innovation is the area of greatest concern and listed as the biggest challenge by 59% of organizations of various sizes, in a number of industries. In the power and utility sector, leaders are most concerned about developing the right innovation operating model, while organizational culture is at the top of the list for leaders of companies with 5,000 to 10,000 employees.

There is an association between the organizations viewing implementation as their biggest concern and those who said their organization is not able to exploit innovative ideas. Leading-edge innovation ideas are worthless in the absence of a well-planned and executed implementation approach, which ultimately drives outcomes and value for the organization.

Which top three areas as it relates to innovation are of the greatest concern to you?

Process: key success factors

- Create effective processes for knowledge gathering and dissemination, idea generation, prototyping and development, and implementation.
- Define process execution structure to manage innovation projects.
- Determine support requirements, including technology and administration.
Industry leaders

Among Canadian industries, the technology sector has emerged as the clear innovation leader. Operating in an “innovate or die” environment, it’s highly product centered, competitive and rapidly changing. Companies like Google and Facebook provide valuable case studies for other industries that can avoid the “our industry is different” syndrome.

To be successful, innovation needs to be driven through all levels of an organization and promoted by all levels. Some of the best ideas come from employees lower in the organizational structure and broader ideas come from those higher up. By enabling and promoting innovation company-wide, organizations can increase the speed of adoption and implementation, and reap the rewards sooner.

Culture: key success factors

- Develop an organization that fosters risk taking, encourages learning, incentivizes creativity and enables innovation.
- Determine the target innovation culture and define and articulate the desired values and behaviours.
90-day Innovation Roadmap

Four steps to innovate and accelerate growth

Approach
Agree on the most appropriate approach to innovation for the organization.
There are four fundamental approaches to innovation strategy - systematic, collaborative, visionary, marketplace. Pick the one that best aligns to the organization's corporate strategy. Successful innovators have an established innovation process and methodology, regardless of strategy.

Portfolio
Choose how much growth will come from sustaining, adjacent, and disruptive innovation strategies.
Innovative ideas come in various shapes and sizes. A portfolio strategy will help ensure a consistent pipeline of ideas and safeguard against stagnation or complacency.

Culture
Advance the organization's culture of innovation by embedding the four innovation pillars: People, Create, Incubate and Activate.
Innovation starts with people. Build a culture of experimentation and encourage conversations that inspire customers, partners and employees. Crowd source opportunities and partner with start-ups to curate, prioritize and filter ideas. Pilot ideas to identify investment opportunities. And, most important, activate - now!

Funding
Treat the activation of an innovation as an investment in infrastructure to improve critical business processes and give the business a competitive advantage.
Find ways to measure return on investments in innovation.

The CSO's dilemma
Most businesses are built for efficiency in ongoing operations, not innovation.
Most CSOs want innovation, yet what gets in their way has little to do with creativity and technology and has everything to do with process and management capability.
Yes, ideas are the beginning. Yet the real challenge lies far beyond the ideas generated in ideation sessions and beyond piloting prototypes. It lies in the journey from ideas to activation.
Organizations can no longer rely on an internal R&D program alone to be innovative. The context for innovation has changed. To remain competitive, organizations must look outside.

Closed innovation, where ideas were developed and commercialized internally, was a successful approach to innovation in the past. Competing meant investing more than others in R&D while hiring and keeping the smartest employees. The rise of the mobile knowledge worker has made it increasingly difficult for organizations to find and keep the smartest employees. Rapid changes in technology and the increasing availability of venture capital and angel investors now mean that if an employee has a good idea, he or she can rapidly capitalize on that idea as an entrepreneur.

Open innovation seeks to bring in and develop ideas from outside the organization, and go beyond internal channels to commercialize ideas. Organizations that practice open innovation acknowledge that the best ideas do not always originate from inside. They seek to establish external networks and partners in the belief that a mutually beneficial relationship will provide competitive advantage.

Open innovation offers a range of benefits:

- Constant rejuvenation of knowledge workers and a much larger pool of knowledge without significant capital investment.
- An ability to fill innovation capability gaps or weaknesses (75% of respondents noted they lacked innovation capability in either exploring or exploiting ideas).
- New opportunities. Now, ideas that are not internally beneficial may still provide value through external channels.
- Industry, academe and government partnerships can be extremely valuable in innovation generation, and reduce the resource investment required to develop ideas.
Challenges to implementing open innovation

Implementing open innovation within an organization is not easy - Canadian leaders identified it as their biggest area of concern for innovation. By taking deliberate steps, organizations can overcome the challenges below.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY
Intellectual property is often regarded as one of the biggest challenges to open innovation. Understanding the legal requirements of proper distribution (internally and externally) of intellectual property when developed with external partners and designing this into the organization’s innovation program is critical.

CULTURE ADOPTION
Like any change program, there may be pockets of resistance to the adoption of an innovative culture. This will likely come from those who don’t understand innovation, don’t believe they can contribute to it, or see it as just another initiative. Clearly articulating the strategy and definition of innovation, and how everyone can contribute, as well as executing a proper change management program led by accountable change agents will reduce this resistance.

FILTERING IDEAS EFFICIENTLY
Initiating an innovation program can potentially open the floodgates to ideas, many of which will likely be continuous or incremental improvement. Clearly defining the scope and definition of the innovative ideas the organization is seeking may reduce this flood. Furthermore, implementing clearly articulated assessment criteria as part of a structured filtering system will allow rapid and fair assessment of ideas.

Organizations that can marshal an innovation agenda that is well balanced and focused are likely to drive improved growth faster and enhance shareholder returns in the long term. Ideas are the beginning. But the real challenge lies far beyond the ideas generated and piloting prototypes. It lies in the journey from ideas to activation, and in embracing the advantages of the ambidextrous organization: one that can exploit existing capabilities for profit, while deploying open innovation in their strategy to make the most of new growth opportunities.
High-performing organizations don’t just recognize the importance of innovation – they actively pursue it with a proper, distinct strategy, a leader responsible for innovation and a process or framework to manage it, along with an allocated budget.

Data tells us the biggest challenge when it comes to innovation is implementation and culture. The reality is ideas are worthless without effective execution and a culture that can manage that.

To be successful, leaders need to ask better questions around their organizations’ innovation ambitions:

- What are we doing to rapidly commercialize and implement innovation?
- How do we measure our results, or success?
- Do we have the right mix of skills and expertise to manage a portfolio of innovations?
- Are we collaborating externally in the right way?

For most organizations, success will depend on creating a culture that supports creativity and fosters innovation. That culture needs a strategic focus, and leaders need to ask:

- Where do we excel?

Research indicates organizations can generally only be a leader in one of: operational excellence, product leadership or customer intimacy. That means organizations need to foster slightly different sub-cultures in order to drive different types of innovation in different areas. The culture needs to be carefully managed and, in some cases, a wider enterprise culture might be more effective or sustaining in nature, and specific pockets of sub-cultures focused on more disruptive innovation might co-exist.

Innovation is critically important for organizations to thrive in the world today that is volatile and rapidly changing. Business leaders know that – but they need to learn how to “walk the talk.” Until they close the gap between their acknowledgment that innovation is important, and their commitment to a strategy to make it real – innovation will simply not occur and will continue to exist as a management fad. And if innovation does not occur, leaders should really ask themselves: how will our organization survive today, and be relevant tomorrow?

Conclusion
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For more information on the detailed, full results of the survey – and how they may impact your business, contact a member of EY’s Canadian team.

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