

# How businesses can commercialize their 'secret sauce'

An idea sitting in the back of a manufacturing professional's head, untried and untested, does no one any good.

Several dozen men and women in the Canadian advanced manufacturing world invested half a day in late March to attend an 'Innovate > Forward' session sponsored by ABB, among others, and The RIC Centre—which stands for Research Innovation and Commercialization—at Sheridan College's William G. Davis Campus in Brampton.

Leading a session called "How to Evaluate Your New Ideas" was Dr. Paul Smith, the head of Xerox Canada's research facility, and the head responsible for all Xerox's research in materials, worldwide.

The research centre is located in Sheridan Park in Mississauga.

Dr. Smith was speaking at the third of six free seminars called "Innovate > Forward" aimed at advanced manufacturers in Ontario. Click on: [www.innovateforward.ca](http://www.innovateforward.ca).

"In working with more than 200 companies since 2008, we have found that about 40 per cent of companies have 'secret sauce,' but don't know how to commercialize it," says Pam Banks, executive director of The RIC Centre that serves Mississauga, Brampton, and Caledon.

"We encourage advanced manufacturers to take advantage of the free 'Innovate > Forward' program," says Banks.

RIC Centres across Ontario offer a number of programs for both established and emerging electronic manufacturers; the vast majority of services at RIC Centres are free.

While Dr. Smith's advice and experience is based on his own 60-patent career at Xerox, a giant organization with five major research centers worldwide, much of his talk rang true with manufacturing experts from smaller advanced manufacturing companies attending.

Evaluating an idea is a 4-stage process, Dr. Smith explained. Once the idea has been thought up, the next steps are Capture, Assess, Evaluate, and finally make a Decision.

The first step at Xerox is to get scientists with ideas to write them down. "They can chat and chat and chat," Dr. Smith says, but he wants to be more formal, capturing all the important information in writing it all down right near the start.

Readers of the Mississauga and Brampton Business Times can download Dr. Smith's presentation at <http://riccentre.ca/march-22-how-to-evaluate-new-ideas/>, including the actual new idea forms Xerox uses. Most of the form could be used to capture new ideas in any type of manufacturing business.

The captured information includes who is responsible for the idea (which is important in a patent application) and by getting to the written stage early, it keeps the number of people sharing the patent manageable.

If an idea gets the go-ahead from a committee of technical and intellectual property experts, the Xerox scientists get to work evaluating the idea by defining or refining the product or concept.

As would be expected, they look for customer feedback, but Dr. Smith quoted Henry Ford on the subject as saying, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse." He went on to explain that scientists often are able to look farther forward than laymen.

Or, put another way: "If you build it, they will come."

And, Dr. Smith explained, part of the evaluation is to identify "enabling technology advances" or ETAs. He refers to these ETAs as "show stoppers" or "deal breakers" which are the critical aspects of technology that must be proven to work in order to ensure success of the new idea.

"Don't work on the easy stuff for two years," he said. Instead, identify the ETAs, and then resources can be assigned.

Interestingly, the strategic goal of the evaluation process is not to find "winners," but rather to generate enough information to let Xerox make an informed and unbiased decision whether to go ahead.

He recommends carefully structuring teams and setting a timeline, with team success based on the team getting the data needed to make a decision in the time period provided, not on whether the project then moves on or stops.

And whether the decision is "go" or "no go," Dr. Smith recommends celebrating the decision. It's a morale booster, just as the idea of a skunk works is. A decision not to proceed is a decision that frees up resources to pursue another idea that may be viable.

"The real challenge for advanced manufacturers is to take the time to explore something new that may pay off big time. Our goal with 'Innovate > Forward' is to provide information, insight, and advice that manufacturing executives will agree was worth the half-day they invested," says Pam Banks, executive director of the Peel Region RIC Centre.



Dr. Paul Smith, head of Xerox Canada's research facility in Mississauga, spoke recently at Sheridan College in Brampton about how to evaluate your new ideas, part of the RIC Centre's focus on innovation in the business world.

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