

HOW TO INNOVATE

The recent World Economic Forum rankings have been something of an eye-opener for many parties given our down-grade, but there's one area which jumped out at me. It's the low score on the ability to innovate (105 out of 138 countries).

This is more than a little strange with all the money spent on tertiary education, and the GATE free-for-all which continued up till last year. But perhaps the hard times which ended the GATE train are not entirely bad, as the slowing of the loud gush of money allows less obstreperous voices to be heard. It also provides a vantage to the critical mind, which the pushy, obnoxious one can't reach, to look around and see what can be made of what's available.

This trait is the hallmark of entrepreneurs and innovators. Times of plenty make people and institutions complacent and lazy. Hard times can make them sharper. The trait of an innovator is that he or she never loses the restless, dissatisfied way of thinking about and looking at the world. There's one example in T&T which is especially apt for the moment. And the man of the moment is Prof Patrick Hosein, a MIT scholar, and professor of computer science at UWI, St Augustine.

A little over a year ago, Prof Hosein observed that an undergraduate who had returned from a NASA scholarship was being under-utilised by the department. The professor decided to conduct an experiment. He told the stu-

dent he would hire him, and pay his salary to do nothing but research. The aim was to see if he could produce a publishable paper within three months. The student produced four papers within one year, and was secured acceptance to Cambridge University for his post-graduate work.

Thus was born TTLAB, the region's first privately funded think tank. Prof Hosein decided that the success of the experiment demanded it be continued and he sought new fellows, associates and researchers. In just over a year, TTLAB has attracted 19 fellows and produced 15 publications and conference papers, which is remarkable by any standard for a year's endeavour. The topics addressed range from optimizing electricity grids, gauging emotional responses from social media ("Sentiment Classification from Twitter Feeds"), an app for the detection of dangerous driving, and the genetics of non-communicable diseases in the region.

The project is innovative in many ways, not in the least in its funding. Rather than relying on corporate or government funding, Prof Hosein displayed the trait that separates the entrepreneurs from the goats: he put his money where his mouth is. His own company, T&T Network Informa-



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tion Centre (TTNIC), which manages the domain .tt, funds TTLAB.

Prof Hosein is a former national scholarship winner, holds five degrees from MIT, and holds more than 40 patents in cellular phone and computer technology from a career with AT&T, Bell Labs, Hua Wei and now UWI. He is also quietly outspoken about the local mangling of the term "innovation". Trinidadians, he says, from the man in the street, to business, to government, and even in the academe, do not know what innovation means. "They believe it means importing technology and adapting it. But it's more than that."

The problems go further than

mis-perception. Business is always impatient to recover its costs and see quick returns on investment so its funding research tends to desire practical application, and not pure research from which many benefits derive, but in the long term. Government packages are frequently wrapped in inextricable red-tape. And academia is not as detached and aloof as you might imagine.

In addition to all that, there is a surprising problem, given the local chest-beating about "nationalism" and local spunk. "A lot of local companies use Huawei technology," said Prof Hosein. "I worked at Huawei and have about 15 patents in my name which are integrated into their products. So my work is being used, but no one will accept my help when I offer it locally."

This was the identical complaint of the late Prof Dave Chadee, who told stories about being summoned to government meetings with foreign consultants who had used his work to develop vector and parasite control strategies. One story Chadee relished telling was being in a meeting with a (former) government minister and foreign consultants. The minister asked the consultants what could be done about the local situation. The

lead consultant said: "Why don't you ask him?" Pointing to Chadee. "It's his work we're using"

Clearly we have a ways to go before we see the emergence of a local Google or Mac. Notwithstanding, it's worth mentioning that Hosein is a laureate of the Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Awards, which is the first substantial prize for science and technology (among other things) offered across the English-speaking Caribbean. It was that award, said Hosein, that helped him to create TTLAB. (I should disclose here that I work as a consultant for the Caribbean Awards.)

But the Awards' contribution to TTLAB is especially apt, since the ANSA Caribbean Awards were launched a decade ago by Anthony N Sabga, an entrepreneur who arrived here in 1930 as an immigrant from a village in Syria. His own journey from small businessman to business magnate involved many disappointments and confrontations with issues similar to those faced by Hosein and Chadee.

I guess the final word on this is if you want to know how to innovate, there are ways to do it. Do not, for example, as Bhoew Tawarie did when he was a minister in the last government, sit people down in the Central Bank Auditorium and tell them how to be innovative. Do, however, look at innovators, and do what they're doing, and accept their help when they offer it.