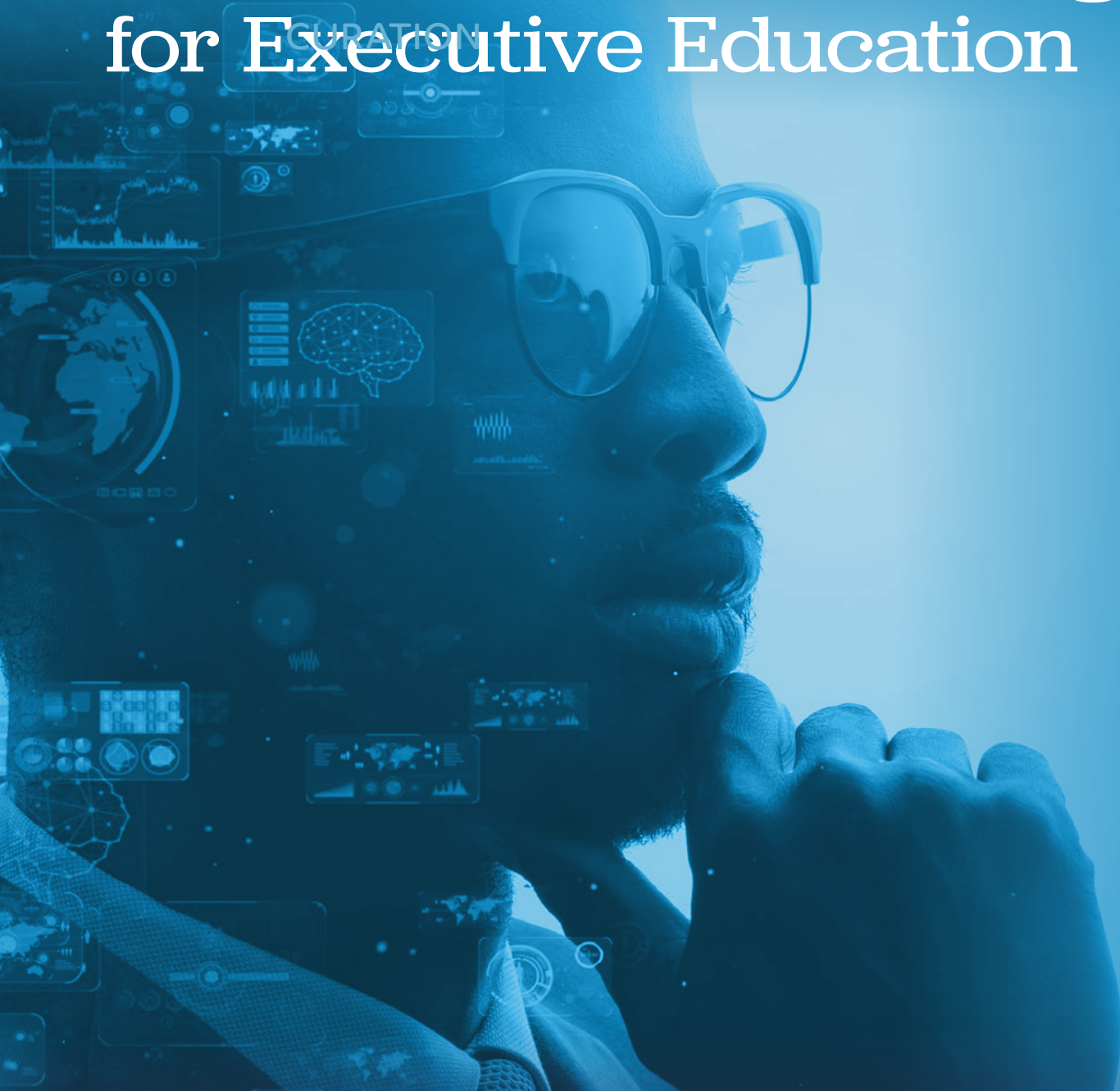# Lifelong Learning
The Innovation Challenge for Executive Education

Insights and takeaways from UNICON's annual summer workshop 2022 hosted by Wisconsin School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is an emerging trend in executive education, with strong undercurrents increasingly perceptible from all sides of the industry. A wide variety of forces—from societal and technological change, to new realities for employers and employees in the talent market—are driving this trend.

Recent research from AACSB, IEDP, and UNICON into the subject, captures this variety of factors in a SWOT analysis. Based on qualitative interviews with leading expert voices from around the sector, the research was conceived as an aid for strategic thinkers at business schools as they seek to reshape executive development in ways that forge ahead for the future.

In parallel to that strategic thinking, UNICON's annual summer workshop in July 2022, hosted by the Wisconsin School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was designed to help these same decision-makers take forward their strategizing from blue sky thinking, to black and white reality—with a workshop titled "Lifelong Learning: The Innovation Challenge for Executive Education."

In his introductory remarks, UNICON Board Chair Peter Methot describes UNICON as, "a living entity," in the way the consortium brings people together, fosters collaboration and facilitates the co-creation of value between colleagues and contemporaries amongst the member schools of UNICON. Dean of the Wisconsin School of Business, Vallabh Sambamurthy, supported this idea in his own introduction, stating that the annual workshop provides a unique opportunity for members to leverage a, "network of global colleagues," in a peer-learning, collaborative space.
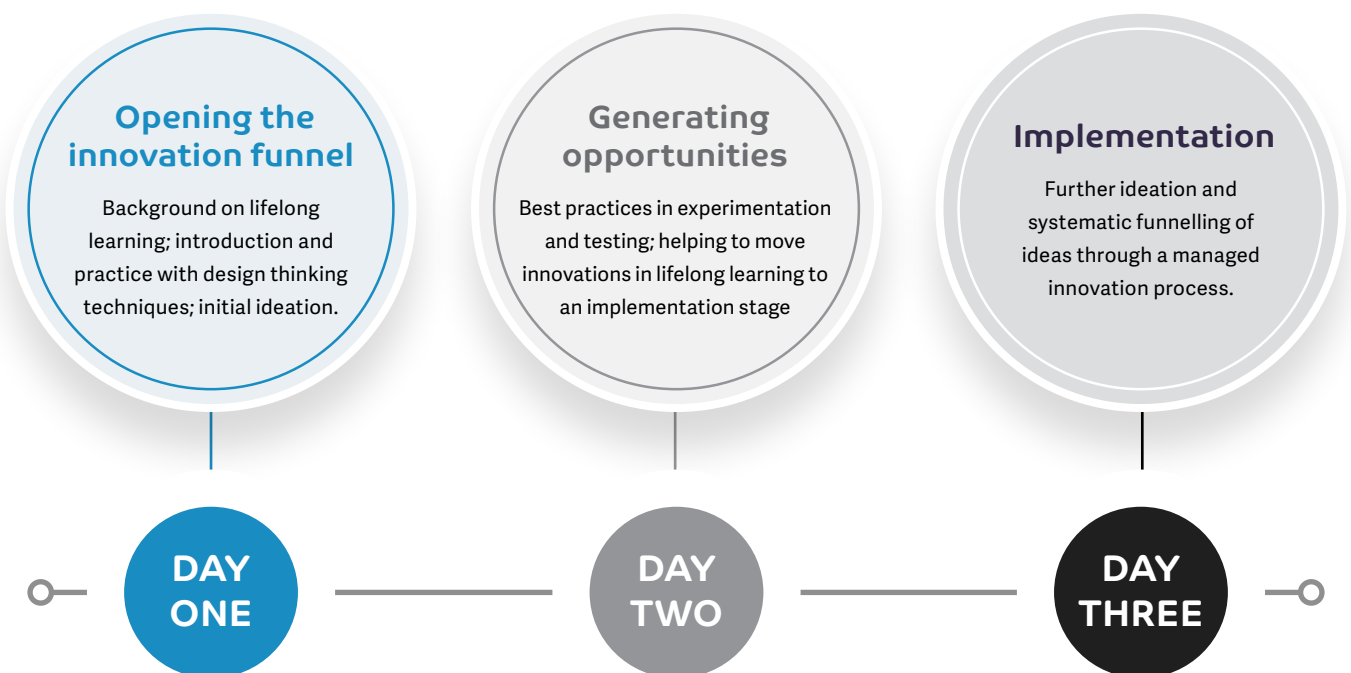
WORKSHOP DESIGN

The spirit of this virtual workshop was in keeping with those UNICON values of collaboration, in part due to its firm grounding in design thinking theory—an approach to innovation that is intrinsically linked with teamwork, cooperation, and partnership—with the generation and sharing of a large volume of ideas from differing perspectives, key to its success.

A passionate and energetic facilitator, Adam J Bock, is an award-winning academic and lecturer at Wisconsin-Madison, while as a venture financier and serial entrepreneur he has co-founded four life science companies spun out of university research.

Laying out the objectives of the workshop, Bock explained that, "Solving the problem is not the intention. We're going to practice, ponder the challenge, and give you the tools,"—the tools for executive education leaders to take back and put to use with their own teams, and innovate around lifelong learning within their own contexts.

Each day of the workshop was hands-on and interactive and designed intentionally for participants to 'learn by doing'. The workshop was formatted with three distinct components:

Opening the innovation funnel

Background on lifelong learning; introduction and practice with design thinking techniques; initial ideation.

Generating opportunities

Best practices in experimentation and testing; helping to move innovations in lifelong learning to an implementation stage

Implementation

Further ideation and systematic funnelling of ideas through a managed innovation process.

DAY ONE

DAY TWO

DAY THREE

**" **

Everyone needs to get comfortable saying, 'I don't know.'

OPENING THE INNOVATION FUNNEL

"Everyone needs to get comfortable saying, 'I don't know,'" Bock advised, at the start of a day where the onus was on discovery, wide-net brainstorming around problems, and in many ways fighting a natural urge to jump right away to solutions.

In design thinking, problem identification and definition is a key task, and arguably the toughest part of the process to crack. Without a clearly defined problem—one that is truly in need of solving by your target audience—finding genuine solutions is futile.

With that in view, multiple brainstorm prompts were given through the workshop, with a focus on problem identification. The first was around the challenges facing executive education providers in delivering lifelong learning.

Responses included;

> *"Customers not ready yet,"* "Who is the ideal customer?"
> **"Budgets," "Technology requirements,"** "Connecting with the school of business," **"Competition/differentiation,"**
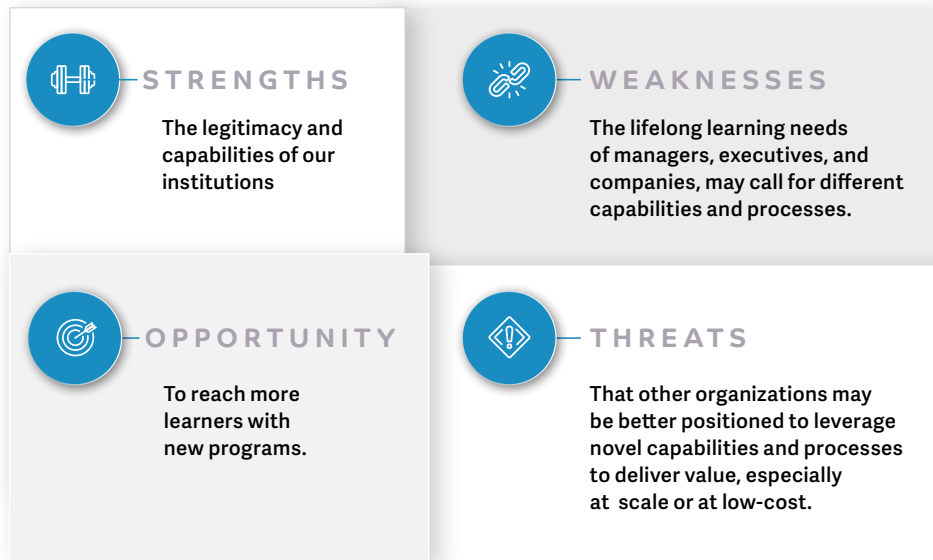
—many of which tracked through the three-day workshop as areas of focus.

"There are lots of things standing in our way," Bock summarized—noting that some obstacles represented more complex problems than others, and some may even be wicked problems—where innovation may be particular needed.

Participants were also asked to share quick-fire thoughts and impressions of the SWOT research, which included;

"Reality strikes!," "Our model needs to change, if we like it or not," *"It has to be strategic,"* "SWOT—absolutely recognizable," *"Different stakeholder lenses key,"* "Delicate balance of learning at scale while customized/personalized," *"Traditional methods work but they are not enough,"* *"Useful to gain supply and demand lensess,"* "We need to take risks to try new things," *"Many known challenges—lots of unknowns around solutions,"* "The exclusivity (perceived or real) of exec-ed being only for a few top level folks," *"Growing competition,"* *"Scalability to sustainability is challenging,"* "Partnerships and working across a full university system."

Bock added his own impressions from the SWOT analysis—a key takeaway from each data quadrant:

STRENGTHS

The legitimacy and capabilities of our institutions

WEAKNESSES

The lifelong learning needs of managers, executives, and companies, may call for different capabilities and processes.

OPPORTUNITY

To reach more learners with new programs.

THREATS

That other organizations may be better positioned to leverage novel capabilities and processes to deliver value, especially at scale or at low-cost.

A second quick-fire brainstorm queried what lifelong learning might actually look like—what would it encompass in the context of executive education? Responses included:

"New learning methodologies," "More egalitarian learning programs and opportunities than the name 'executive education' suggests," "Leadership training at all stages along a career trajectory," **"Preparation for career moves, tailored to the individual,"** "Skills gap filler for mid-sized companies," **"Continuous pathway of professional development, flowing out of the degree program experience for alums,"** "Creating a non-degree and degree learning ecosystem that is not a linear path," **"Help learners solve problems with frameworks and new and refreshed skillsets,"** *"Micro credentials,"* *"Co-creation platforms for individuals and learning leaders to co-design their own learning experiences,"* "Making content available that our customers don't know they even need," **"Access and affordability,"** "On-the-job learning," "Later career or post-career development for people who succeeded by their 40s," *"Catering to differing needs of people as they grow—like the BMW 1 series all the way to 7 series,"* "Embedding learning in the day-to-day work experience."

Participants were urged to stay supremely open-minded at this stage, "I don't want us to argue semantics," said Bock, "I want us to think as broadly as possible about how people want to learn and what they believe about learning as they get older."

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Design thinking is entirely focused on the human stakeholder need. What do your clients and learners need to accomplish?

FOCUS ON NEEDS, EMPATHY MAPS, AND 'SHIFTING THE BOX'

"Design thinking is entirely focused on the human stakeholder need," says Bock. "What do your clients and learners need to accomplish?" Generating ideas for innovations around lifelong learning is one thing—but those innovations must ultimately be utilized to support real clients. So what do they need? This is where design thinking frameworks come in.

One such framework that Bock introduces to the workshop is the 'empathy map', which encourages deeper thinking into the true needs of the client or user of a product or service. The empathy map has four quadrants (Think, Say, Feel, and Do). What might your user be thinking? What are they telling you? What emotions might they be they feeling? What actions and behaviours did you notice? Often the answers and observations collected in these four quadrants will be at odds with one another, perhaps contradictory—but always revealing.

In thinking empathetically and focusing on the needs of others, Bock warns against the notion of 'thinking outside the box'—not as a negative impulse, but as something we are just not well-equipped to do. "There is always a box. You are who you are. You have a series of experiences, and training, and history. You can't step outside of your knowledge base and experience in an effective way—but you can shift the box in useful ways." To 'shift the box' you can try incorporating more diversity into your ideation process, helping to increase the volume and broaden the horizon of the ideas that are generated.

" **How is the idea related to what real clients are; thinking, saying, feeling, and doing?**

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

One specific tool which can be employed to 'shift the box' and generate new ideas is 'reframing.' A key technique in design thinking is to reframe the problem, by always asking yourself; is this the right question?

"How can we reframe the problem statement around lifelong learning in exec-ed?" asks Bock, posing several alternate reframes to consider:

In breakout groups participants are asked to create their own 'reframes' of the problem question, and then to generate ideas to address that problem. The goal of the exercise is to come up with 50 ideas in 20 minutes—placing the emphasis on quantity over quality. At this stage no idea is deemed unworthy of inclusion.

1 How can we increase exec-ed revenues with lifelong learning offerings?

2 Why would companies buy exec ed programming that is oriented towards lifelong learning rather than company needs?

3 What is driving executive interest in lifelong learning?

4 When does lifelong learning benefit both the recipient and their employer?

More design thinking techniques are applied to these brainstorming sessions as they progress. For instance, identifying 2-3 'good ideas' and 2-3 'bad ideas'. The history of innovation carries many famous examples of 'the worst idea' leading to new paths and sometimes even to great things. Groups are challenged to, "take one 'bad' idea and come up with a way it might work." Another over-arching principle from design thinking theory is not to close off the ideation stage too quickly.

Diversity is simulated too, with people moving between breakout groups, mixing up group dynamics and transporting ideas from group to group, where ideas evolve and take on new forms as they are communicated, explained, and stress-tested in different ways.

As ideas are shared back in the main group, Bock encourages speakers to link their ideas back to their empathy maps, to make sure ideas are targeted at real client needs. How is the idea related to what real clients are; thinking, saying, feeling, and doing? Another design thinking principle in practice: the need to understand your stakeholders to drive effective development efforts.
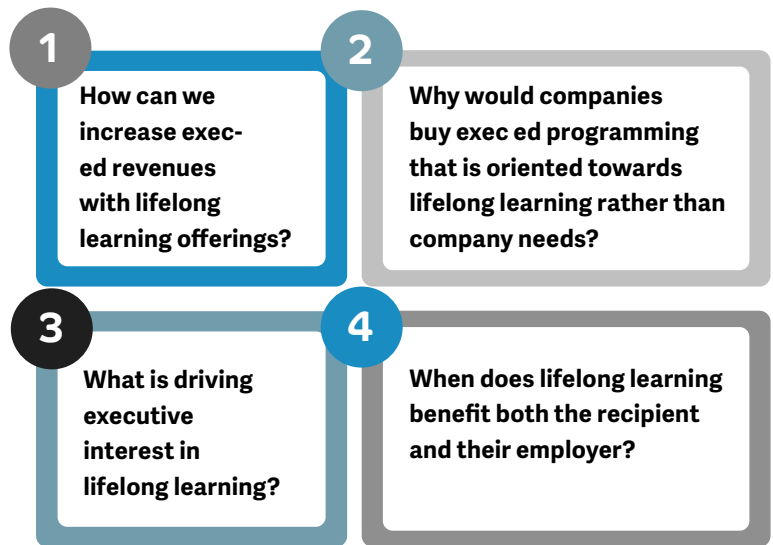
GENERATING INNOVATION OPPORTUNITIES

Having opened up the innovation funnel, the second stage of the workshop focused on a systematic approach to refining these early ideas and problem statements, around which the group can start building innovative solutions. A quick-fire brainstorm session kicked-off Day 2, with participants asked: what barriers will companies face in providing lifelong learning to managers and executives? In the responses, trends and common threads jump out again as persistent across the various exercises and brainstorm sessions. Here are some selected responses:

"Lack of understanding about what is available and the impact it could have," "Limited budgets," "BUDGET!" *"Money,"* *"Funding,"* "Personal vs. organizational priorities," *"Time,"* *"What's in it for me?"* "Understanding what will be valuable to employees," *"Platforms/ technology investments,"* "Build in-house or buy," "CEOs who don't understand or appreciate the value," "Customization for individual needs," *"Working in the business competes with working ON the business,"* "Lack of perceived tangible ROI," *"Always another more important priority,"* "Lack of executive champion(s)," "Lack of long-term commitment to the worker," *"Agreement between talent development vs C-suite around what is needed,"* "Short staffed/ overworked," "Lifelong learning has to be during working hours, if not, this is not perceived as a benefit," *"Hasn't been proven with use cases,"* "If recession, it's the first thing that gets cut," *"ROI hard to measure,"* "Volunteered = high completion; company paid for = lower completion," *"Short term thinking,"* "Difficult to persuade an investment in lifelong learning when turnover is high in many industries."

THE INNOVATION MARKETPLACE

With further foundational work done in the area of problem definition, a key part of Day 2 was an exercise called 'the innovation marketplace', in which innovation ideas are pitched by participants to their contemporaries in a bid to gain 'followers'—or buy-in for their idea. To 'follow' an idea a participant would have to 'give up' their own idea, and follow another. Participants moved from breakout room to breakout room, pitching their idea, or an idea which they had decided to follow, until there were a set of 'winning innovations'—in this case six ideas that had more than one follower by the end of the exercise.

Here are the **'Winning Innovations'**

(Numbers = no. of followers the idea gained in the exercise)

Striking a balance between organizational and individual learning needs — **2**

Individualized training tied to projects with follow-up and measurables — **3**

Linking outcomes to something pragmatic—rewards or ROI — **2**

Collaboration with partners to give unique experiences for individuals, with levels of incentives to re-engage — **3**

Mapping training to strategic goals and advancement with application post-training — **6**

Participants commit to bringing an actionable challenge or opportunity to be addressed — **6**

Within these 'winning innovations' it is apparent that ideas are beginning to be mapped on to real problems—and also how many innovations pair up solutions to tackle multiple problems.

FOCUS ON CLIENT GAINS

"What share of companies anticipate that online learning and training will become standard at their organization?" asks Bock. The answer taken from the research is close to 80%. "Companies aren't moving to primarily online based training on a whim," Bock points out, "They are doing it because it addresses issues they feel they need to address. Issues that they perceive are either pains, or can generate gains for them."

Bock's online learning example highlights another focus area of the workshop which is around identifying possible gains that can be made by the client: benefits—some of which may be indirect at first. "Meeting lifelong learning needs will generate indirect benefits for the organization," Bock observes, "But lifelong learning most directly affects the individuals. It provides them with something they are seeking. On the whole we serve companies, and it is the organizations who pay the bills. The question is: how are we going to match that up?" Looking for 'gains' in the lifelong learning space then, means exploring: what are some of those indirect benefits? For example, increased engagement and job satisfaction; modelling of behavior for the organization; resilience for unexpected events—and there will be many more.

Relating this focus on 'gains' back to 'needs', Bock asks: what is the most critical stakeholder need for lifelong learning? Selected responses included:

> "Access," "Employability," *"Talent retention,"* "Relevance," "Trust," *"Productivity,"* "Personal development," "Well-being," "Preparedness for future," "Resilience," "Organizational capabilities," "Linking individual to organizational goals," *"Growth,"* "Confidence," "Belonging," "Shaping culture," *"Applied knowledge,"* "Succession planning."

Another exercise was employed to aid the systematic funnelling aspect of the design thinking process—filtering and stress-testing ideas to counter the effects of group think, using the 'loyal opposition' technique. In this exercise groups of participants are assigned rotating roles; the 'loyal opposition' vs the 'party in power'—with the loyal opposition charged with testing innovation ideas with constructive critiques, questions, and counterpoints.

" **Lean start-up principles focus on eliminating or reducing uncertainty.**

IMPLEMENTATION AND LEAN START-UP PRINCIPLES

On Day 3, the workshop progresses to a discussion around designing and carrying out tests for lifelong learning innovations. Here the principles of 'lean start-up' are offered as another useful framework—with their emphasis on high-quality, intelligent experimentation. "Where lean principles in operations are around eliminating or reducing waste and inefficiencies," Bock explains, "lean start-up principles focus on eliminating or reducing uncertainty."

The lean start-up approach is all about, "working smarter, not harder," with the objective being to develop an MVP (minimum viable product)—and to build, experiment, measure, and learn from that process in progressive iterations.

"Some waste is inevitable in innovation. You are going to be wrong some of the time," Bock warns. "The goal is to make the smallest possible bet," he explains, that enables you to find out whether your innovation idea is worth developing or not. Put another way: "The best experiment obtains the maximum amount of actionable information about stakeholder needs and value creation with the minimum amount of time, money, and effort spent."

A lean start-up approach recommends the setting up of lo-fi experiments rather than more costly and high-profile 'pilots.' A pilot, by nature, assumes a future launch, which an under the radar experiment does not.

Another exercise is run to drive home this point around the design of smart experiments. Participants are asked to design a test that must be implementable within one week, must occupy no full-time people resources, and costs less than $1000 in total to run. Participants are prompted to think through; what data do we want to collect from the experiment? What question are we really trying to answer?

As an example, one experiment conceived during this exercise was to test appetite for subscription models (a popular area for innovation ideas in the workshop). The experiment would use small sample social adverts targeting different demographic segments—e.g. early career vs retirees—and monitor behaviour around the download of a white paper on the subject.

THE QUESTION OF FAILURE

Why do so many innovations fail and such a low percentage succeed? It is a question that can overwhelm innovation efforts, and thus one that is vital to confront. "Innovation is fundamentally harder than any other function within the organization," notes Bock.

Participants are asked to share and crowd-source some of their best practices in innovation at their own organization. These included:

> *"Piloting below the radar,"* "Question bursts," *"Involve everyone,"* *"Field trips,"* "Value progress over perfection," ***"Connecting with more open clients,"*** "Meet every 5-6 weeks for breakfast to share new ideas," *"Author's circle sessions,"* "Experimentation."

Another best practice is simply to have realistic expectations. "The majority of organizations' innovation efforts fail. As many as 95% of all new product launches fail. Failure is a natural part of the innovation process," advises Bock.

The positive side of that is that by knowing it, you can prepare for failure and have systems in place to learn, iterate, 'mine the boneyard', and continue with a pipeline of innovation rather than hoping for a 'eureka' moment, which is wholly unsustainable.

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Execution is a people problem not a strategy problem.

EXPERIMENTATION TO IMPLEMENTATION

"Execution is a people problem not a strategy problem," says Bock, citing the famous HBR article on the subject. The key part of getting from experimentation to implementation then, is to identify what or who is a critical resource at your organization, to the execution of new lifelong learning programming. Faced with this question, participants gave lots of function and role based responses:

> *"Marketing,"* "Operations," "CEO," **"Faculty,"** "Learning designers," **"Finance,"** "Business development and sales," *"Deans,"* **"Center directors,"** "Customer support," "Facilities managers."

This covers a very broad range of potentially important stakeholders to consider. One respondent said; "Everyone!" reiterating this point. Three further responses took a different angle: one identified the need to persuade or bring on-side the "Risk averse"; one suggested the existence of a "Lifelong learning team," and in a similar vein, one highlighted the importance of "Champions," to the execution any large-scale change.

CONCLUSIONS

As set out at the start of the workshop, this was a three day event designed to help executive education leaders to ask the right questions, rather than jumping quickly to answers—focusing on problem definition in the area of lifelong learning innovation, and not reach for hastily concocted solutions.

Ably facilitated by their hosts, participants were able to practice using managed innovation frameworks and techniques, that pave the way to exciting new innovations and solutions in lifelong learning to be developed.

The workshop's emphasis on interactivity and peer-based learning allowed a powerful, group exploration of lifelong learning, through the lens of design thinking—and ultimately participants were doubtless left more confident to lead innovation efforts in this area, than they were before, back at their desks and offices later this summer.

The workshop raised important questions too. We may need to learn more about the potential pains and gains associated with lifelong learning, especially at the executive level, before we can fully define workable problem statements to innovate around. Until the market and customer needs are clear, an entrepreneurial approach may be best.

Over the next 24 months AACSB, IEDP, and UNICON will continue to monitor this growth area in the sector, and share research around emerging best practices and innovation in lifelong learning wherever it evolves and flourishes.

This report has been produced by IEDP in association with AACSB and UNICON.

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