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Innovation Labs: Bridging Think Tanks and Do Tanks

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Over the past decade experimental policy and program design spaces have been emerging globally. Known as innovation labs, change labs or design labs, they are collaborative places where stakeholders with diverse perspectives engage in a workshop process to understand complex problems and design new approaches and solutions. They provide the opportunity to develop prototypes designed and tested by participants from diverse perspectives before large investments are made.

Design as a “third culture” of knowledge

Design is a culture that blends the concerns of science and the humanities to search for outcomes that are balanced and opportunistic, grounded in the real world but driven by human aspirations. It is equally concerned with probing the limits of our current reality as it is with making new realities possible.

- Boyer et al p. 25

Innovation labs are both a process and a particular work space that break down hierarchy and engender divergent and creative thinking. Based in complexity, systems and design theories, innovation labs are purpose-driven, employing a think and do-tank approach. Using collaborative technology such as web 2.0 and highly visual approaches like story boarding, labs enable participants with varied skill-sets to come to a common understanding of a policy challenge, and explore, design and test user-centred solutions for potential use across the system. Using ethnography or

action research to work directly with people who are impacted by the policy or program is one hallmark of the process – design thinking as a bridging “third culture” of knowledge is another hallmark. Well known examples include **Mindlab** in Denmark, **MaRS** in Toronto, Canada and the **Helsinki Design Lab** in Finland.

It’s Not Business As Usual

In tailoring space usage to the nature of the work, innovation labs incorporate collaborative space and heads-down space as well as flexible furniture configurations to accommodate creativity and changing future needs. These surroundings, combined with cutting edge collaborative tools and technology, sends the message that the lab is an experimental place where traditional thinking, intolerance to risk, silos and resource flows are deliberately interrupted, encouraging participants to look at problems in new ways. The space and the philosophy work together to create an innovation ecosystem.

Elements of an innovation ecosystem

- **Consciousness** to be aware of the need for innovation
- **Co-creation** to leverage creative thinking
- **Capacity** to generate and implement new ideas
- **Courage** to lead innovation at all levels.

- Bason, 2010, p.22

Innovation labs exist in non-profit, academic, private sector and government agencies. While varied in their thematic content, models and tools, the common benefits of these labs include:

- Convening diverse perspectives and skill-sets to create a holistic understanding of the system in order to address complexity (in particular design, ethnography or sociology)
- Providing a creative and stimulating environment, encouraging out of the box thinking and innovative solutions
- Reducing hierarchy and empowering newcomers, creating opportunities for disruptive thinking
- Breaking through constraining factors (e.g. risk intolerance, silos, resource flows)
- Creating user-centred solutions through co-creation
- Creating horizontal innovation capacity and resilience
- Putting thinking into action through an iterative process of testing solutions, often in situ

- Adapted from Westley et al, 2011; Torjman, 2012

Co-creating and testing government interventions

Dan Ariely, the author of Predictably Irrational, has stressed the importance of experimentation, stating that governments have a responsibility to test expensive policy approaches before implementing them (Ariely, Dan. 2012. Horizons interview, April 26.) Government agencies internationally have been establishing Innovation Labs to engage in this type of policy experimentation (see Table 1). For instance, the US Office of Personnel Management recently established **Innovation Lab** to test ways to increase efficiency through the use of emerging technologies. In Denmark, **MindLab** has been experimenting with creative physical spaces, visual technology and

workshop approaches by bringing end users and public servants from different departments together to collaborate to find solutions. Supported by three government departments, they have addressed a range of policy and program design challenges including reducing red tape for taxpayers, improving financial literacy among youth, and retention of foreign workers through social networks.

Case Example: Kickstarting Entrepreneurs

When Denmark's Government decided it wanted to do more to support entrepreneurs grow their businesses, MindLab went to work interviewing entrepreneurs to understand their journey of growth. Using archetype personas and experience mapping, MindLab developed eight prototypes that were tested with entrepreneurs, resulting in a final prototype for a network that puts the bureaucracy in the background, while ceding the foreground to entrepreneurs themselves to run events that exude entrepreneurial spirit.

- **MindLab**, accessed July 26, 2012

The Danish model has served as an inspiration for a new pilot project in Australia: the **Centre for Excellence in Public Services**, which will design and test new solutions to complex issues. Lab approaches to issues of public sector leadership, social welfare, and climate change are also central to think and do tanks external to government such as **Deloitte GovLab** (US), **MaRS** (Canada), **Participle** (UK) and the **Helsinki Design Lab** (Finland). In Canada, the BC Social Innovation Council has **recommended** the province establish an innovation lab. In addition to these applications of the lab model, the UK has adopted a similar approach with the **Behavioural Insights Team**, using observations from behavioural economics to redesign government approaches and testing them before launching full-scale programs (Dobson, 2012).

Although labs may focus on different policy areas, they use a similar set of **tools and approaches** aimed at making problems more visual and producing “professional empathy” for user experiences. These include brainstorming techniques such as **ethnography; story-telling** and **story-boarding; character profiles; service journeys; experience maps; actors map; prototyping** and **modeling**; interactive tables and **whiteboards; headlines** and **postcards** from the future; and **foresight**.

Whether it is located within or external to government, innovation labs encourage the reframing of challenges. For instance, **Nesta** – a UK non-profit that promotes innovation through grants, resources and networks - suggests policy makers to move away from the question “how can we improve our services” and to ask instead “how do we improve quality of life for people” (Gillinson et al, p. 3).

Table 1 - International Examples of Innovation Labs

Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MindLab (Copenhagen, Denmark) • Centre for Excellence in Public Sector Design, (Canberra, Australia) • National Health Service, Institute for Innovation and Improvement (Warwick, UK) • The Social Innovation Lab (Kent, UK) • NASA Centre for Excellence for Collaborative Innovation (Washington/Houston, US)
Private sector with public service focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deloitte GovLab (Washington, US) • IDEO.org (various locations)
Not for Profit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helsinki Design Lab, Sitra (Helsinki, Finland) • MaRS Solutions Lab (Toronto, Canada) • Participle London (London, UK) • la 27eRegion, (France) • The Public Policy Lab (New York, US)
Universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OCAD sLab • Harvard i-Lab (Cambridge, US) • d.school (Stanford, US) • MIT AgeLab and MIT Media Lab (Cambridge, US) • InWithFor (Adelaide, Australia)



Could Innovation Labs Have Something to Offer Canada?

The Treasury Board of Canada's **Communications Policy** states: "In a democracy, listening to the public, researching, evaluating and addressing the needs of citizens is critical to the work of government. The government must learn as much as possible about public needs and expectations to respond to them effectively". The Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service has suggested that governments need to cultivate close linkages with partners both inside and outside governments to establish an evidence-based diagnoses of problems and generate creative solutions in order to provide the best services possible to Canadians (Tellier and Emerson, 2012, p. 4). Some experimentation is already emerging with collaborative models and spaces in the Canadian federal public service. Policy Horizons Canada has been using collaborative tools in a team-based approach to co-create knowledge within the organization, with public servants in other departments and experts outside of government. Using foresight methods, Horizons has been bridging people, perspectives, data and evidence in an open and constructive environment in order to explore forces of change, and their possible impacts on emerging challenges and opportunities for Canada. Efforts are also underway at Public Works and Government Services Canada to create a modern workplace that supports collaboration and will "attract, retain, and enable public servants to be responsive, innovative and efficient in serving Canadians" (Keith, p. 18, 2011). Other departments are creating collaborative virtual spaces to develop policy, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade's Open Policy Development model¹. These experiments demonstrate the capacity of Departments to engage in collaboration. Innovation labs could take this further, providing a safe experimental space to engage in co-creation with internal and external partners.

Canada, like all countries, is facing issues that are becoming increasingly complex and horizontal. Innovation labs present opportunities to overcome siloed thinking and leap-frog incrementalism to help Canada face the challenges ahead. Moreover, they can help make the Public Service an attractive workplace by highlighting non-hierarchical space and process that could engage the passion and imagination of the next generation of employees.

¹ For more on this and other experiments please see: <http://www.clerk.gc.ca/eng/feature.asp?pagelid=304>

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