

Inside Innovation – Norman Apsley – August 12th 2008

TSB... the board that likes to say yes?

Setting a technology strategy for a company is hard enough, but how do you set one for a whole country?

That's a tough job, and it belongs to Ian Gray. He heads up the still relatively new Technology Strategy Board (TSB), which is part of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Science. In terms of harnessing innovation, Ian is in effect leading a national central research laboratory (CRL) – an entity format that has had a varied past.

For industry in the 50's and 60's, an independent and self-governing CRL was an absolute necessity for any company aspiring to global recognition. For example, Bell Labs of Murray Hill near New York (the CRL of the mighty Bell Telephone Corporation) was occupied extensively by Nobel Laureates and would have been the envy of most companies. These CRLs were judged only in hindsight, and by scientific success and international recognition.

Then, in the 1980's, their value was questioned seriously for the first time and CRLs began to be funded by the profit-making business units. But contrary to the expectations of business gurus, this era didn't last long and most companies lost their CRLs (while senior scientists soon found they could make a lot of money from companies that placed considerable value on the work they did and the skills they offered).

Successful companies soon realised that the objectivity of scientists was the Board's best insight into the future. Scientists were also found to be a profit units' best friend when developing new products and services. So CRLs were directly funded once again by Boards to look to the long term future –although their work was subsidiary to the needs of the business units.

The new TSB is essentially geared towards delivering the same thing. It aims to gain future insight through the use of challenge-led, technology-led, and collaborative business and science programme threads. The first seeks long-term solutions to national problems; the second tries to attain commercial exploitation of the best that the pure science programme has discovered; the third is self-explanatory and is most vital of all. The TSB oversees the national innovation landscape in recognition of the fact that, if business and science don't collaborate, it will be for nought.

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