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InnovationThe Missing Dimension



Synopsis

Amid mounting concern over the loss of jobs to low-wage economies, one fact is clear: America's prosperity hinges on the ability of its businesses to continually introduce new products and services. But what makes for a creative economy? How can the remarkable surge of innovation that fueled the boom of the 1990s be sustained? For an answer, Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore examine innovation strategies in some of the economy's most dynamic sectors. Through eye-opening case studies of new product development in fields such as cell phones, medical devices, and blue jeans, two fundamental processes emerge. One of these processes, analysis--rational problem solving--dominates management and engineering practice. The other, interpretation, is not widely understood, or even recognized--although, as the authors make clear, it is absolutely crucial to innovation. Unlike problem solving, interpretation embraces and exploits ambiguity, the wellspring of creativity in the economy. By emphasizing interpretation, and showing how these two radically different processes can be combined, Lester and Piore's book gives managers and designers the concepts and tools to keep new products flowing. But the authors also offer an unsettling critique of national policy. By ignoring the role of interpretation, economic policymakers are drawing the wrong lessons from the 1990s boom. The current emphasis on expanding the reach of market competition will help the analytical processes needed to implement innovation. But if unchecked it risks choking off the economy's vital interpretive spaces. Unless a more balanced policy approach is adopted, warn Lester and Piore, America's capacity to innovate--its greatest economic asset--will erode.

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Innovative ideas need space to germinate, grow, and develop into complete products. The nature of this space, how it can be created, and how to steer it are the topics of this book. The authors base their arguments on studies of companies from various industries that were either introducing new products to markets where they had no foothold, or trying to stay ahead of the competition by continuous innovation. It is very interesting to see how seemingly disparate industries such as fashion, medical imaging or home lighting face similar issues when they have to connect different departments within the same organization or interface with other companies for information exchange. While Motorola has to balance the gung ho attitude of radio operators with the more reliability-oriented approach of telephone network operators, Levi's has to cooperate with stonewashing laundries and share techniques that differentiates them from the other jeans manufacturers. The authors point out that the way product and manufacturing design is formulated and studied in the literature and in companies is through the problem-solving perspective. Design is treated as a problem to be solved, whereby an analysis is performed to split the problem into parts, which are then delegated to people with suitable expertise. The specific insight of the authors is that the analytic approach is neither accurate, in that it's not what really happens, nor preferable if innovation is to be a focus. It's not accurate, because there is something preceding the analysis step. As one executive remarks, "by the time I see the parts, I already have the answer".

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