

SHIA Morning Keynote 5/19/08

Dr. Curtis Carlson, President and CEO, SRI International Innovation in Education: A Process for Greater Success

In its entirety, Carlson's keynote presentation highlighted the opportunity businesses and individuals have to make major productivity improvements in today's innovation society. Carlson summarized the ways in which the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) approaches innovation and made correlations to the educational technology industry.

Carlson first underscored the importance of innovation in today's world, noting its ability to improve educational results, increase the success rates of educational technology companies and significantly impact the educational process. He then outlined the Institute's Innovation Partnership Programs, observing their ability to share and develop innovative ideas and practices among leading companies, universities and governments. We live in a world of abundance, not scarcity, and our failure to capitalize on that abundance inhibits growth, prosperity, and environmental sustainability/security; it is up to us to embrace the limitless scope of creativity and knowledge in today's society.

The challenges unique to our innovation society, Carlson then noted, are exponential growth, global competition, the unwillingness of the media and government to acknowledge more incremental opportunities for innovation (i.e. small businesses), and the enormous waste created by the poor performance of U.S. companies.

Third, Carlson proceeded to discount common myths associated with innovation. These myths tend to link the practice of innovation exclusively with certain kinds of people (i.e. the "lone genius"), behaviors (i.e. entrepreneurs take risks, discipline destroys creativity) and circumstances (i.e. innovation is all about creativity and culture). The propagation of such misconceptions prevents corporations and individuals from innovating on their own terms. It is important to create an innovative economy and determine the appropriate strategies of innovation for specific cultural spheres (i.e. government, corporate, education). This approach should aim to maximize quality and focus on customer value.

Carlson then described the Institute's five disciplines of innovation: consciousness of important customer needs, value creation, passionate champions of innovation, innovation teams and organizational alignment/deconstruction of barriers to innovation. The combination of these variables—each one of which is crucial—equals success. The most important definition in any business is the customer value in a given enterprise. The second most important definition in any business, including education, is determining the value proposition. If these most basic definitions of business are not broadly understood across a given company, then competitors have the advantage.

The four variables of the NABC Framework, as outlined by Carlson, are: need, approach, benefits/cost, competition. He claimed that too many presentations focus solely on the approach or idea instead of determining benefits/cost or a need for the product/idea. The purpose of the vast majority of education is innovation.

In knowledge age, Carlson concluded, we live in a world of abundance if we have the eyes to see it and the skills to develop it. Innovation is now the only path to growth and prosperity, sustainability and security. The way we work is the most important innovation.

Q&A:

What is the optimum number of people on a team of innovators? Carlson replied that small teams (but no smaller than necessary) between three and seven people are effective and that it is a mistake to put too many people on a team in the beginning.

What are your thoughts on moving to a post-capitalistic society such as socialist? Carlson said that while most economics is about the distribution of scarce resources, the only scarce resource in terms of business opportunities is only what we imagine it to be.

Upon request, Carlson reflected on his statement regarding unmet need and the problems accompanying it, claiming that many companies claim to focus on the customer need but few actually do so. The successful companies go through the process of figuring out how to come up with a solution of satisfying all potential customers.

By the time you have identified customer need and created a product, customer needs may have changed—how do you forecast customer need? Carlson responded that there are parts of value that are preference-based and therefore difficult areas in which to create a business. The good thing about the educational technology industry is that it sells real value instead of perceived value.