Cross-industry innovation

*Martin Ray, director at Currie & Brown, examines how to maximise the benefits of cross-industry innovation in the construction industry.*

Sending astronauts to the Moon was one of humanity’s greatest achievements, pushing the 1960s boundaries of science and engineering to – and arguably beyond – their limits. But the Apollo programme wasn’t just about the remarkable feat of landing on another planet.

The pioneering work done on creating this new space technology created dozens of spin-offs used in everyday life, from cordless vacuum cleaners to nutritional dried food and even lagging for oil pipes. These inventions may have been the result of unintended consequences, but they have been massively useful ever since.

Building moon rockets was the result of cross-industry innovation – some 400,000 people with different skills and backgrounds pooling ideas and thinking out of the box to resolve issues as they occurred. The whole became bigger than the sum of its parts.

There are lessons in this for the construction and consultancy sectors. The sharing of ideas among professionals working in complementary disciplines can bring real and tangible benefits. By communicating and talking, ideas and solutions from one area of expertise can flow over to another. We are seeing this happen within our industry, though arguably it’s not yet as widespread as it should be.

Our collective knowledge, experience and ability to innovate needs to be captured more effectively through formal or informal collaboration and knowledge sharing. That may require a change of mindset and culture in an industry that can sometimes be reticent when it comes to change.

At Currie & Brown, we work across both different industries and different geographies. Hearing about and discussing new ideas and ways of delivering projects broadens our understanding of developments in the construction industry.

We may not be designers, for instance, but our role as a built asset consultancy means that we have significant experience in understanding and managing the design process. That in itself identifies useful ways of innovating.

This isn’t peripheral to what we do. As project management specialists, this is an important part of our business.

None of this is rocket science, and companies like ours have an important role to play in simply bringing like-minded organisations from different sectors together to share ideas and to network.

Maximising the benefits of cross-industry innovation, however, does require some technical structures to be put in place.

Certainly there needs to be a robust, user-friendly IT-based knowledge capture system. An idea or business model generated by the needs of one organisation may well fit another in the future. So data from each project needs to be logged, catalogued and stored in a form where it can be easily retrieved.

Benchmarking comparisons also help to bring rigour to the process by analysing different project performance across different industries.
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Clearly, these topics relate directly to construction. But it’s important to look more widely, too, and to relate innovation directly to service delivery.

How is this achieved across the industry? How do different professions manage their work and deliver projects? How can supply chains be improved? What about contractual and procurement arrangements? These are all questions that can and should be asked.

This cannot be a check-box exercise. In order to find innovation and efficiency opportunities across sectors, you need a broad range of career experience. It’s hard, for instance, to see a novel way forward in cost management or project management delivery unless you have broad experience in those disciplines. This, then, may well be an area in which more seasoned professionals may be of particular value.

At Currie & Brown, we have a breadth of knowledge not just within our own organisation but across a number of multi-sectoral sister companies that offer complementary services within the global market. That helps to stimulate a lively cross-fertilisation of ideas and gives us real strength.

Construction and consulting are both undergoing something of a revolution with imaginative, but sometimes disruptive, industry practices constantly being adopted. In this new world, the larger companies are getting ever bigger and the smaller ones are being squeezed out.

For the businesses which are strong and growing, cross-industry innovation poses both a challenge and an opportunity.

The opportunity is that the bigger you are, the stronger your knowledge base becomes. The challenge is that as you expand, so communications and data capture – essential to the process – become more difficult and unwieldy.

The process of bringing minds and ideas together for commercial benefit isn’t always going to be an easy one. But in the 21st century, driven by the need to innovate and differentiate, it is a cost-effective and highly powerful way of stealing a march on competitors.

Ambition and the power of collective human thinking know no boundaries. Back in 1969, the men and women of the Apollo programme made the impossible possible. We might not have the same high purpose, but we too can follow the conviction that motivated them and literally propelled them to the highest reaches of our understanding.

Per ardua ad astra – ‘through adversity to the stars’!

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