

## TRENCH WELFARE: INNOVATION ON THE FRONTLINE

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Can the public sector be innovative? Inspired by forward-thinking politicians, experts on the government payroll landed people on the moon and gave us the Internet. Enough said.

Where does public sector innovation come from? Research by University of Toronto Professor Sanford Borins suggests that at least half of it is initiated by frontline staff. Workers on the frontline can see and feel firsthand the needs that are not being met in their communities. At least as important (but usually overlooked) is the fact that they can see firsthand how people are solving their own problems.

But in New Zealand, as elsewhere, the systematic cultivation of public sector innovation is rare. In an environment where people's lives and livelihoods are at stake, risk taking is often frowned upon. Innovation is often 'no-one's job', and there are few dedicated budgets (by comparison, for example, with scientific research and development). Nor is innovation usually encouraged by being integrated into formal accountability and performance management systems.

In this sort of environment it is easy to dismiss new ideas as half-baked. The thing is, every great idea starts off as half-baked. It may come from a teacher's or doctor's lifetime of experience, but it's unlikely to emerge into the light fully formed. So if we want more great

ideas, we need to devote resources to scanning the frontlines for the best ones, and working with innovators and users to develop them into proven programmes that are scalable and replicable.

Organisations like The Young Foundation in the UK and the new Centre for Social Innovation in New Zealand work to accelerate innovation by acting as intermediaries between those at the centre and those on the frontlines – understanding the strategic pressures on national agencies whilst knowing how to spot the new ideas that could help address them. They supply a protected space for policy makers and frontline staff to float radical ideas, and to engage with people who will be affected by the innovation. They allow testing and experimenting with a whole range of methods and tools for catalysing innovation – bringing together experts, frontline staff, users, designers, ethnographers, and 'fresh eyes' from other sectors – air travel, retail, logistics. And they allow for rapid prototyping of innovative ideas – learning by doing, iterating and adapting, growing what works and culling what doesn't.

The Young Foundation, for example, is experimenting at the moment with a range of ways to help unemployed young people get into work, ranging from intensive short courses and immersions in work environments to 'finishing schools' that focus on the social and cultural skills that help people get jobs. Not all of these will work, and few will stay in their current form, but the Young Foundation's incubators are building a strong track record in delivering successful and scalable innovation.

Frontline workers not only have a role to play in initiating innovation – they also play the critical role in delivering it. Not surprisingly many resist being told what to do by governments. But when the new ideas have grown up on the frontline, rooted in everyday experience, they're more likely to spread. This is one of the lessons from the world's best public services – like the schools in Finland and New Zealand – which put a high premium on teachers' role as innovators. It's also the lesson from health-care, where ideas that have been championed by doctors or nurses are much more likely to find favour than ones that are promoted only by managers.

When resources are scarce, frontline workers often have a better idea of where there's waste, or where linking up across organisational boundaries could deliver a better service and save money. One lesson for public services from the most successful private companies like Toyota is how to mobilise employees as champions of continuous improvement and innovation.

Governments around the world are now becoming more serious and systematic in their attention to innovation. The new Obama administration has announced a US\$700 million education innovation fund. Gordon Brown in the UK this year launched a Public Services Innovation Laboratory. Getting more resources to the frontline should be part of the response to tougher times, but it must go hand-in-hand with a sustained focus on innovating the service models of the future. Will New Zealand make that investment? ■

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