

# Helping SA companies to get serious about innovation

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*South Africa fares poorly when it comes to innovation in part because many organisations have no clear guidelines on what innovation actually entails - nor with specific criteria on innovation team composition, says newly appointed senior lecturer at the Allan Gray Centre for Values-Based Leadership at the UCT GSB Dr Christina Swart-Opperman.*

Innovation is considered crucial for economic growth, sustainability and competitiveness. South Africa, however, ranks only [58th on the global ranking of the Global Innovation Index](#) (GII). Some of the reasons for this are because many companies are unclear on their innovation agenda and lack execution success.

“Companies need to budget for innovation,” says Dr Christina Swart-Opperman, an industrial psychologist and newly appointed senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (GSB). “This does not necessarily mean monetary allocation, but that people are encouraged to take risks, are allowed to make mistakes and that space be created for innovation to be practically executed.” Teams are mostly considered as the vehicle for the implementation of innovation, but more consideration must be given to a most optimal composition for successful execution.

Dr Swart-Opperman recently joined the Allan Gray Centre for Values-Based Leadership at the UCT GSB, an institution that is dedicated to exploring new ways of doing business based on purpose, values and responsible practices that create dignity and belonging. This includes business model innovation that is values-based and inclusive, as well as exploring ways to contribute to the positive development of the economy and society.

For Dr Swart-Opperman, innovation is about creativity and creating a safe space for people to be courageous enough to improve on processes and procedures. “People need to know that innovation is not only about discovering something big, but that it can be a slight change to a procedure and method.” It is important that staff be acknowledged for improvements or new and original ideas. For her second doctoral thesis, under the supervision of Professor Kurt April, she researched innovation team composition in nine African countries within the financial services industry. Except for criteria such as relevant disciplinary expertise, experience and several diversity considerations, she believes that team members’ emotions add an additional insight into optimising implementation success.

“My research showed that most organisations don’t have a real definition of what they consider to be innovation, nor specific criteria for such teams’ composition”. She says that the Human Resources (HR) Director is an important business partner in realising the innovation agenda of an organisation.

Her research findings were that successful implementation teams depended more on the individual’s intra-psychological strengths (mental acuity, emotional self-management and emotional intelligence), with a secondary focus on interpersonal aspects and team dynamics. A specific team profile, therefore, does not guarantee implementation success.

Her professional interest in the emotive outlook of individuals is not surprising, considering she began her career as an industrial psychologist. Her first doctoral study was on the challenges facing career women and their intra-psychological empowerment. She went on to found the first HR consulting practice in Namibia and occupy various Board and managerial positions in the corporate world, as well as being the first female Partner/Director for the People Consulting Practice of PwC (focusing on human resources consulting).

She has won several awards including the IPM Award for Personnel Practitioner of the Year in 2003, the Most Distinguished Order of Namibia in 2014, Namibian Economist Business Woman of the Year in 2002, and the Namibia HIV/AIDS Community Award in 2005. She was also one of the recipients of Standard Bank’s Women of Excellence Awards in 2016.

In addition to her new role at the GSB, Dr Swart-Opperman will continue lecturing at the University of Namibia's Graduate School of Business, while working on new areas of research as well. She is excited about this new phase in her professional life and hopes to be able to use her new position to present organisations with a different way to think about their implementation teams.

"I am fascinated by the fact that there are so many excellent ideas out there, but so few of them make it to the execution phase. To me, the challenge is looking at it in practical terms and finding ways to guide organisations."

She advises companies who want to be more innovative, to make innovation part of their daily conversations, all communications channels and Board agendas. She says that people must share their stories about innovation and be encouraged to walk the talk. "But this should come from the business leadership, as there needs to be a clear directive from the top on how innovation should be encouraged at the workplace."

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