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## ARTICLE INNOVATION

# Stop Calling It “Innovation”

*by Nadya Zhexembayeva*

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TIM ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

Let me start with the obvious: Innovation is *the* buzzword. In fact, it has been the buzzword for so long, you could say we’ve developed a cult around it.

[Board of Innovation](#), a global consulting firm, [estimates](#) that there are about 70,000 books on innovation available for purchase right now. If you read at a pace of 20 pages per day, it would take you about 2,500 years to go through them all. Looking for a shortcut? A Google search will yield you nearly 2 billion results. This publication alone offers 4,858 digital articles and 10,192 case studies.

Innovation's public profile is matched by its priority on the CEO's agenda. In 2019, 55% of company leaders participating in [PWC's 22nd Annual Global CEO Survey](#) claimed "We are not able to innovate effectively," which placed that skill gap on top of the list. [The 2020 C-Suite Challenge Report](#), published by the Conference Board, listed "building an innovative culture" among top-three most pressing internal concerns of 740 CEOs surveyed globally.

Whether in the classroom, the newsroom, or the boardroom, innovation is our global darling.

**There is only one problem: We might love innovation. But most of our employees hate it.**

I first discovered this dirty little secret shortly after leaving my safe job as a business school professor to start my own consulting business, focusing on, you guessed it, helping companies learn how to innovate.

Here I was, armed with the latest research, all fired-up with ideas for ways to help my first client, a global mining company, become more agile and innovative, only to find myself in the middle of a processing facility face to face with a line manager bluntly asking me: "Are you smoking something at the ExCom!?"

Since then, I've heard this same question posed in various ways at some point in every single project on which I've worked. Only a few weeks ago at the annual innovation jam of a global consumer goods company, I was told point blank: "For you people, innovation is all that. For us, it's extra work with no results or —much worse — lost jobs."

The data bear out these fears. A research team at the University of Toronto [surveyed 1,000 American and Canadian knowledge workers](#) (all employed and with college degrees) to assess their attitudes towards innovation. In addition to measuring "drive to innovate," the scientist looked into things like "grit" and "openness to risk" across two countries and three age groups (under 35, 35 to 44, and over 45).

While the drive for innovation among participants varied from 14% to 28%, only two of the six different groups measured broke the 25% mark. Willingness to take risk was even more telling: at best, 19% of your company is willing, with some age groups dipping as low as 11%.

And that's the data for the two of [the world's most innovative countries](#). What are the rest of us to do?

**Here's a thought: Stop calling it innovation**

The Nobel Prize winning behavioral economist [Daniel Kahneman](#) has spent more than six decades researching how people make decisions. His finding? The "lizard brain" — the primitive part of that is all about fear, fight and flight — is nearly always in charge of our decisions. So, while you might use

the word “innovation” to mean “improvement,” employees are hearing alarm bells ringing “Danger! Danger!” and there’s no time to put a positive spin on it.

Instead of scaring everyone off with the I-word, how about finding language that in your specific context (industry, country) speaks of continuity and benefit?

When engaging internally with employees, Danfoss, a global manufacturing company, has branded its innovation process around the simple, manageable word “idea.” While not everyone thinks they can be innovative, nearly everyone has at least one idea. Similarly, Knauf Insulation, a leading construction materials company, puts “Reinvention Days” at the heart of its process, betting on a word that projects continuity and accessibility. Others choose words or phrases for their efforts, programs, and functions that focus on the end benefit to employees, such as simplicity, organizational health, or even just staying in business.

### **Does it work?**

I don’t have formal research to prove this strategy is effective, but I can tell you that, while Danfoss used to spend 18 to 24 months getting from idea to new patent, its very first “[24Idea](#)”-branded event generated a patent within 100 days. Knauf Insulation is doing pretty well also, winning contracts in cutting-edge projects, including the building of a 57-story building [in only 19 days](#) in China.

And the mining company that started it all for me? In the past seven years, [Eurasian Resources Group](#) has created a new, child-labor free operation in Congo that extracts copper and cobalt from recycled waste. It has gone on to co-chair the World Economic Forum’s Global Battery Alliance, [uniting more than 70 organizations](#) (including corporate heavy-lifters such as BMW, Volvo, and BASF, plus governments and international organizations, such as Unicef) around disrupting the future of green energy. Innovation? Yes. Yet, inside the company, this is simply part of strategy.

The word “innovation” might speak to your external stakeholders, but when it comes to engaging your employees, it’s time to stop using the word. Whatever term you choose, make it about your audience — not you, your PR department, or the next big Davos announcement. That way, innovation might actually stand a chance.

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