



Anthony Mills

The Undeniable Power of the “Garage Experience”

If you’re like me and a lot of other entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs around the world, then you’ve likely romanticised – at least at some point in time – about what it must have been like in great companies like Apple, HP, Google, and Cisco when they were just getting their start – in their founders’ **garages** of all places (or in some cases in their parents’ garages).

We, too, long for that same experience... those long grungy days tucked away in a hot stuffy garage experimenting, failing (time and time again), until eventually we hit upon the one big **a-ha** that ultimately leads us to business fame and fortune. We call this – not surprisingly – **The Garage Experience**, and its pursuit – however potentially elusive – is a very powerful motivator for the self-starters out there. So much of a powerful motivator in fact that it’s one of the big reasons why so many start-up founders hold such strong **survivorship bias** in their minds when starting out.

The reality, however, is that most people – even many highly driven ones – are never going to do this. They are never going to invent the world’s next great thing in their garage and become rich and famous in the process. They just don’t have everything it takes to do so, including in many cases the right timing and scenario in history.

And they know it.



The HP Garage: Creative Commons - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bragadocchio/1234911722>

And so they go to work.

In corporations. All over the world. Day in and day out. But alas! There is **hope**. Hope, indeed, for all of the world’s would-be **intrapreneurs**. That hope lies in the **open corporate innovation lab**. Not the cordoned-off workspace of the business’ formal Innovation Group (that’s usually the *closed* Corporate Innovation Lab). Rather, this innovation lab is freely open to everyone to use – to hack and to experiment in, trying to find that one next big idea for the business to leapfrog on. Labs like the Google Garage for example –

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efusv7aMc4A&t=56s> – where anyone in the business can come and try things out. A place so buzzing with activity that people cannot help but bump into one another and compare their ideas, leading to further serendipity yet as they combine ideas and insights together. Open innovation labs like this bring **The Garage Experience** inside the four walls of the corporate business environment – freely available for everyone to use and experience. And beyond the ideas it spawns, its impact on **engagement** can be powerful as well, especially when aligned with a compelling sense of **purpose** within the business – one

that creates absolute clarity around the **WHY** behind these endeavours.

The real value of the lab, therefore, is not just in the potentially lucrative new business **ideas** it spawns (though that is often reason enough). It is equally in the level of **engagement** it is able to drive within the organization (which often experiences a noticeable bump when these labs are opened). It thus carries a double-whammy impact for the business, and almost always therefore represents a net positive investment for the business, so long as the organization is aligned culturally to support its endeavours, including funding some of them for formal development and consideration.

There is a clear argument to be made then, within most mid to large organizations, for having such an open innovation lab... for gifting your organization with The Garage Experience. Indeed, in many cases, this decision is a no-brainer, assuming that other things are in place culturally and procedurally to support the lab's endeavours.

But it is also equally important that these labs are designed properly, and that staff are trained on how to use them in ways that extract the greatest value from them for today's types of challenges.

More specifically, whereas the **R&D lab** of yesterday needed only be capable of mocking up and simulating **products** – and in certain cases **services** – the **open innovation lab** of today must be capable of mocking up and simulating **customer** and **business experiences**. This means three things. First of all, certain spaces have to be designed to accommodate new types of experimental activities, especially around user and design research. Secondly, appropriate types of materials have to be stocked to use, along with appropriate tools to work with them. And thirdly – and perhaps most importantly – the people using these labs have to be taught how to go about building **Behavioural** and **Experience Prototypes** and how, thereafter, to undertake Design Methods like **Bodystorming** and **Informance** (role playing) with the mock-ups.

For the modern open innovation lab, this is often the **MLR** – the **minimum learning requirement** – if it is to be the real cradle of innovation that real garages have historically been.

I can attest – from my own work in designing these labs – that when done **right** – and when underpinned with the right **cultural foundations** (mandatory, not optional) – they really do deliver the Garage Experience – long grungy days and all – and they really do pull back the covers on lucrative new opportunities for the business to consider.

There is one **caveat** however, and it is cultural in nature. Do not institute such a lab if the business is not truly serious about entertaining what comes out of the lab... if it is not going to give serious consideration to funding and supporting some of the ideas for at least more formal development and analysis – with hopefully a few being implemented / commercialized. If the business is not serious about doing something with this lab's outputs, then the lab will just become one more (soon forgotten) piece of **innovation theater** that no one uses. So, don't do these labs for "show and tell" to your corporate investors. Rather, do them for delivering real value to your customers and markets. And do them for giving your organization a sense of purpose, and something else to be very proud of.

So get going! Get your lab designed and set up right, get your people trained, and get busy creating the Garage Experiences that will engage your organization and reward your top line with significant new growth. Most likely, you won't be sorry that you did. Just make sure you've got the culture part figured out first, as that is always the prerequisite to any of these efforts.

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About the Author

Anthony Mills is one of the world's foremost authorities on strategic innovation and hyper-growth strategies. He has taught, consulted, written, and lectured on these all over the world.

Anthony is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Legacy Innovation Group, a strategic innovation consulting firm serving clients from all over the world. Legacy Innovation helps companies tackle their biggest and most pressing growth challenges and become relentless innovators.

Anthony also serves as the Executive Director of the Global Innovation Institute (Gini), the world's foremost accreditation and standards body in the field of business innovation. GInI provides certifications globally to individuals and businesses whose lives depend on making innovation work in the real world.

Anthony's work builds on 30 years of leadership in business, design, product development, marketing, engineering, and manufacturing.

He remains deeply embedded in each of these worlds, giving him a broad and holistic perspective that is rare among business leaders. He knows how to bridge these disciplines to deliver innovations that have a lasting impact on the business and its markets.

Anthony also knows how to build and drive winning innovation strategies. In his work, he uses strategic innovation to ensure the ongoing relevance and long-term resilience of businesses. Equally important, he knows how to transform businesses into human-centred networks capable of constantly delivering new value to their markets. His methods for strategy, culture, and process have enabled business leaders all over the world to make lasting transformations in their businesses.

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