

**“Growing Innovative Companies in Vermont”
by Carla Brown, Innovation Coach and Digital
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The below is an interview conducted by Carla with Patricia Giavara, VMEC Assistant Director and Innovation Engineering Black Belt

How do you leverage Innovation Engineering in your work today?

I'm the Assistant Director and Innovation Engineering Black Belt at the Vermont Manufacturing Extension Center (VMEC). As a Manufacturing Extension Partner, we work primarily with manufacturers, but also have clients in healthcare, service, technology, government and higher education sectors. Innovation Engineering is the primary growth service we provide to our clients.

What experiences in your life have been most helpful on your innovation journey?

I'm a chemical engineer by education. I worked for primarily for large companies before coming to work for the MEP system in 2003. We recognized in 2006-2007, that we needed to be working with companies in new ways to help them survive and grow. What's beyond continuous improvement? With my engineering and manufacturing background, my biggest strength is as a process engineer. When I encountered Innovation Engineering, I was immediately attracted to its emphasis on processes and systems thinking. It was such an exciting moment when I realized - I can do this - I can help companies innovate because there's an equation and a reliable system.

If you had unlimited funds, what dream would you pursue?

I would love an opportunity to work with smaller companies that don't have the cash flow to make the investment to work with Innovation Engineering.

So for example - VMEC does not pursue a lot of grant opportunities because they can be cumbersome, but have applied for a Working Lands Enterprise Grant here in the state of Vermont. The reason we did this is because we have not been able to help as many companies in the forest products and agriculture sectors as we would like to. Many of these are very small - family businesses. We know there is opportunity for them to grow to be bigger - examples being Ben and Jerry's, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Rhino Foods - these started as one or two people operations. I would enjoy working with more very small companies to help them pursue their passions and to move more quickly.

Now keep in mind, there is a difference between somebody who is an early manufacturer versus working with the real dreamers. I would love to work with small manufacturers and even people who have been in business for a long time - I call them the one hit wonders. They had a good idea and it worked well for them for a while but they need to get energized to come up with their next idea and make the connections to other people to be able to make it happen.

What has been your most satisfying moment so far on your innovation journey?

The most satisfying things are the simple moments when the process works. A client is struggling and nervous about what are going to be next steps in discovery. And you just bring it back to talking with the management coach and the project leader to address the next death threat and you can see the tension relieved. I have worked with company leaders who've said, we are not going to be able to come up with any new ideas. Then we do a create session and they amaze themselves with the ideas they can create.

I enjoy large events such as ones we ran called Business Translation Workshops. We would work with inventors, scientists and small business owners who have ideas for inventions, new products or systems, or even patented technologies that don't have a good business plan to move them forward. In the Business Translation Workshop, it's working with these individuals to put into words who could be a customer for your invention, what is their problem and how does your invention solve it. It includes helping them to do the math and using the Merwyn Business Simulations. It was very impactful in less than a day. You could really help people move forward from something that could have taken 6 months or a year - to really get them to a concrete place of what they could do next. Those can be long days with coaching in the evening and coming back the next day to the whole thing again. I'm extrovert so I find those things energizing.

What has been one of the most difficult moments so far on your innovation journey?

The most difficult thing is when my expectations are different (read "higher") than the client's expectations. I expect them to be able to learn more quickly, implement more quickly, than what they are ready for - or even what the leader of the organization thinks is possible. You talk to the leader and their expectations are? "we're learning the language, we're starting to think differently." The most difficult is when you know they could be doing so much more, but their expectations and readiness are at a different level. My observations have been that the longer a company is in business and the more degrees people have, the more difficult it can be help them change.

How has becoming a Black Belt changed your view on life?

It has reduced fear of being able to come up with new ideas or to be able to take on new challenges. It also changes how you see everything in the world because you are looking at it through a different lens. I am not a right brain person. I am the farthest from "come-up-with-an-idea-and-start-your-own-company" kind of person. Back in college, studying chemical engineering, you had to come up with some unique research project. Really? How the heck would you ever come up with that? I can remember feeling the stress of coming up with a novel project or paper idea. Now with having the skills of "go and get stimulus," "ask other experts," "do market mining," "do technology mining" - it has definitely helped me to shift from being really left brain to more whole brain.

How has becoming a Black Belt impacted your daily life personally?

The biggest thing is the community of Black Belts and the IE community. I work for a small organization, there are 12 of us. We are a part of maybe 1300 other people around the country working with manufacturers so there is a larger network there. Having the Innovation community, how it is such a dynamic learning organization, has really helped to keep me energized and motivated. Never a dull

moment. There are new things to learn, like-minded people, good leadership, challenges, a wider view of the US and the world if you will.

What do you bring to Innovation Engineering that makes you meaningfully unique in the movement?

I have been on this journey since 2006 - so I have a long history. I was involved when Eureka! Ranch was first piloting the Eureka! Winning Ways with small companies and manufacturers in the MEP network. I provide a lot of feedback and input. I often get the sense that Scott Dunkle [Vice President, Digital Systems, Eureka! Ranch] has this pile of feedback, questions and problems coming from Patricia. So I get asked for input which is nice.

How have you found willing customers?

It can be time consuming but you need to have those face-to-face conversations. Referrals are some of our best customers, such as from state and regional economic development people. It takes a lot of touches and you have got to be persistent. You have to create opportunities for people to learn and get a taste. We took advantage of having Innovation Engineering Leadership Institutes here in Vermont. We pay attention to which companies are growing. We are watching the list of top 100 companies that are growing in Vermont. Who is actively trying to grow their business by going after certain funding opportunities in the state or winning small business awards? Who is making an effort to improve and change?

If you could share one idea with all Black Belts, what would it be?

Trust the process. Stick with the fundamentals. If you are getting frustrated or overwhelmed, you have just got to go back to the basics.

If you could get advice from every Black Belt on one question, what would it be?

To the newer Black Belts - I was trained a long time ago - I went to the very first Black Belt training. My training is so different than the current people. I would want to know - of all of the learning that they have had - what have they found the most helpful to accelerate their learning? There has been so much improvement in the education systems. There is so much - how are people keeping up? If anyone has any tips about how they manage their time for their learning?


