



Interview with Ken Gabriel

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During INNOVEIT 2016, we met with keynote speaker Ken Gabriel, an experienced entrepreneur and founder of MEMS technology, to get his thoughts on innovation, entrepreneurship and his own illustrious career.

Ken, thanks for talking to us today. Let me starting by asking a fundamental question: what does the word innovation mean to you?

Innovation is something that is satisfying an unmet need. That's the real origins of innovation; people are trying to do something that they can't do right now, or they're trying to do something significantly better.

The EIT champions innovation and entrepreneurship through various activities and the main aim is to increase Europe's growth and global competitiveness. Why do you think these areas are so essential for Europe's future?

Well, I think they're essential for Europe's future, but I also think they're essential for everyone's future. The world is a much smaller place, we are increasingly interconnected economically and socially, and innovation is becoming important to staying competitive. If you're not innovating with speed and agility, then it's a good as standing still – you'll be left behind.

There has been a lot of talk about how Europe is doing compared to its main competitors. Do you think Europe can rival the Far East and America in terms of innovation and entrepreneurship?

Certainly. I think that Europe has innovated for centuries and it's one of the natural things in evolution that various regions in the world are more innovative than others for certain periods of time. But by no means are those static; they can be influenced or changed. The fact that we're all connected means we all have a role to play.

For example, with my start-up Akustica the original parts were from Japan, some of the processing was done in Germany, they were packaged in the Pacific Rim and then sold all over the world. Ultimately my company, an American start-up, was bought by Bosch – a European firm. So a company in one part of the world can actually touch many other parts of the world. It's not about the most start-ups or who's got the most dollars coming from innovation economies.

You have an impressive history of running your own companies, working for global companies and, recently, being in a research institution. As an experienced innovator, how do you think the innovation landscape has evolved in the last 10-20 years?

I'd say that, increasingly, you have less time to innovate. When we weren't so tightly connected as a world, you had a leisurely amount of time to identify the unmet need, develop your idea and commercialise it. Now, if you're seeing it, there are probably 10 other people around the world that are seeing it too. I'd say the environment for innovation has gotten better because there are more people taking part in the innovation process. But what that also means is there's more competition because the barriers to innovation have been going down.

You've worked in many different fields and seen different innovations in those sectors. Can you tell us about some that have had a positive impact on society?

My particular technical area is MEMS and when I first started out, most of the customers were defence,

national security and space. But increasingly we saw the technology begin to contribute across the board. For example, 20 years ago the only people who could afford receivers for GPS and inertial guidance systems were relatively large companies and platforms in space or defence. Today, all of us have at least one or two GPS and inertial guidance systems in our cars or in our pockets. That, in my mind, has had a very positive impact on society – if nothing else, by keeping people from getting lost!



"Innovation is something that is satisfying an unmet need"

We're already beginning to see examples in rare diseases and conditions that affect a few thousand people. The treatments are very expensive now and take a lot of time and effort to produce, but they're literally miracle drugs. Fast forward and we can get to a place where these types of treatments are not only available for select people, but for everybody.

As an American, what do you think are the main differences between how America and Europe approach innovation and entrepreneurship?

Recently I'd say European innovation has focused more on health, environment and quality of life, while the US has been more about connectivity, business practices and business efficiencies. So there's that qualitative

difference to the focus and I think both of us could be stronger if we learned from each other.

Do you feel there are also differences in terms of the culture and how people approach entrepreneurship? I'm getting at a comment that has been widely presented in the media that perhaps Europe is a little more adverse to risk than America. Would you agree with that?

I've heard that same argument and there may be some truth to it. But in the US, the people on the west coast will tell you that the people on the east coast are not as risky as they are. So, I think there's a little bit too much attention paid to that.

Here's my point: you don't have to turn the entire population of any region or country into entrepreneurs – you just have to make sure that the conditions are right for entrepreneurship. And in some sense, the definition of an entrepreneur is someone who's going to fight the conditions anyway and they're not going to let culture, rules or lack of money get in the way.

That's a very refreshing perspective! Turning towards entrepreneurship, you've founded a lot of companies during your career. What led you to want to do this? And has your experience changed from when you started to where you are now?

Oh, absolutely. Starting my first company Akustica, then ultimately shipping the product and having someone buy the company was a fundamental learning experience for me. It's one of those things in life that you can't teach someone. I don't care how many books you read on innovation, entrepreneurship or starting a company – there is *nothing* compared to doing it. Part of what motivated me to do it was my belief in the technology, and I also felt like I had encouraged so many other people to do it that it was time for me to actually experience it myself.

Having both owned your own businesses and worked for multinationals, what do you think are the main advantages and disadvantages of being your own boss?

I can only think of one disadvantage and I wouldn't even call it a disadvantage, I'd just call it the price of being a boss. And that's being responsible for the organisation and people's jobs. Everything else is a positive.

The advantages of being your own boss primarily lie in being able to make the decisions that you feel are right, to develop the innovation and get your product out is absolutely essential. It goes back to speed and agility: the more barriers preventing you from moving with speed and agility, the greater the likelihood that you're going to fail.

We touched upon the different experiences that you've had over your career and, of course, you've won many awards. Do you think there was one defining moment in your career?

The experience of thinking of a product, producing that product and having someone pay you to ship it to them – there's no feeling like that in anything else that I've done. It's an accomplishment that's really hard and there's no jury, except the marketplace. The marketplace doesn't care what you look like, what school you went to, how many awards you've won – they only care if you have a



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product that is worth their money. And that is an award, if you will, that's very rare and important.

INNOVEIT 2016 has welcomed many young aspiring entrepreneurs and innovators. What one piece of advice would you could give them?

Move as fast as you possibly can – time is not your ally!