

The Boggy Back-End Video Transcript

To see the video, visit <https://geoffmarlow.com/blog/boggy-back-end/>

If you've looked into improving innovation in your organisation, you'll have no doubt heard of the "fuzzy front-end". Most advice on innovation focuses on the front-end – the challenge of coming up with new ideas – which seems sensible, because you can't very well innovate if you don't have any new ideas.

But the front-end of innovation isn't actually that hard a nut to crack. Yes, it *is* different from traditional business-as-usual, but these days it's a pretty well understood process and therefore a lot less 'fuzzy' than it used to be. Not only that, but if you need help with the front-end, there's at least half a dozen firms within 30 minutes of my office here in Cambridge UK that offer packaged innovation services covering the whole front-end from ideation, through screening and ending with investment prioritisation.

So, difficult though it may seem at first, dealing with the fuzzy front-end is a walk in the park compared to its often overlooked, silently-lurking, corridor-stalking, innovation-killing evil other half: *the Boggy Back-End*.

It's not the fuzzy front end, but the boggy back-end that will stop your new innovation making it to market. It was the boggy back-end in GE, Kodak and IBM that stopped them from commercialising photocopying when Chester Carlson – who developed the original technologies in the late 1930's – offered them to each of those companies on a plate. Their boggy back-ends ultimately forced him to set up his own firm, that went on to create a new global market and make billions as Xerox.

Ironically, fifty years later it was the boggy back-end at Xerox that prevented *them* from dominating the multi-billion-dollar personal computer market. This was despite Xerox's front-end of innovation being so effective that they developed, in-house, pretty much all of the technology behind the personal computer as we know it today.

They developed:

- bit-mapped graphics displays
- the graphical user interface where a 'mouse' controls overlapping windows
- the what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) text editor
- Ethernet (CSMA/CD) networking
- the laser printer
- object-oriented programming

How the Boggy Back-End Kills Innovation

The boggy back-end is like the immune system in a body – silently watching and waiting in the wings, ready to smother alien invaders that threaten the existing norms. Alien invaders like that radical, breakthrough, blockbuster idea that you desperately need to commercialise before someone else does – and steals your organisation's future.

The boggy back-end preserves the current orthodoxy, protecting and perpetuating the status quo – often making organisations *roll over and lay down*, when *what you're proposing* or *whatever you want* is dependent on effective innovation.

The root cause of the boggy back-end is subtle and non-obvious – otherwise everyone would have cracked it already. It lies in the legacy mindsets, attitudes and perceptions of influential people – who are not necessarily the most senior – and who rarely appreciate that this negative side to their influence even exists.

It's like the 'dark side of the force' and it's especially strong in those whose current reality is most threatened by radical, game-changing innovation. This can be anyone whose current self-perception is under threat: – the internal expert whose existing knowledge may become less relevant, or even redundant; the head of a function that was vitally important in the past, but may not be key in future; and just about anyone who rightly or wrongly regards their current personal status, position or power as under threat or at risk.

The challenge is not new. Here's how one of the world's first management consultants summed it up 500 years ago:

“There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.” – Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527)

Dealing with The Boggy Back-End

So how can you deal with the boggy back-end? Fortunately, you can tackle it in a highly focused and pragmatic way. The place to start is by gaining insight into cherished practices, perceptions and attitudes of key influencers whose current reality is most likely to be affected by the kind of new ideas that the organisation needs.

The reason so few of us focus here is that these perceptions and attitudes are tacit, unconscious and non-obvious – particularly to those who hold them. But the skills to discover and address them, effectively and tactfully, can be learned, and with a focused, pragmatic approach take less time and effort than you may think.

The boggy back-end is a resourceful adversary, whose allies include many who regard themselves as champions of innovation and would be very offended at any suggestion to the contrary. This may make them seem Machiavellian, but look deeper and you'll discover the assumptions and perceptions that people operate from tend to make it seem this way, even when it's not.

So here's the bottom-line: over-focus on the front-end and you'll not only raise expectations of significant new value creation that doesn't actually materialise but you'll also end up making the back-end of innovation even boggier.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you shouldn't work on the front-end, but don't overlook the importance of addressing the back-end of innovation too – or it will extract a painful price.