# Enemies of innovation: What they look like, and how not to become one

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*Executive summary – Understanding opposition to innovation can help protect and strengthen the initiative. In addition, the same characteristics that are found in opponents often are found in innovators themselves. When they can be acknowledged and dealt with, the potential for success can be improved, in many cases.*
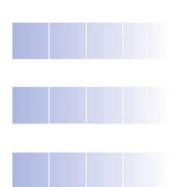
*This Executive Technology Report is based on a personal essay by Peter Andrews, Consulting Faculty Member at the IBM Executive Business Institute in Palisades, New York.*

Innovations usually fail because they were bad ideas to begin with. One in a million genetic mutations is beneficial, and I sometimes think humans have a success rate that is only slightly better.

Blaming others for the failure of an innovation is usually a mistake and a distraction. It is much more likely that the environment (timing, resources and competition) was wrong or the execution was faulty. However, there are active innovation killers out there. Most are "just doing their jobs," but, from an innovator's perspective, it doesn't make any difference whether the creation was blocked by ineptitude or malice.
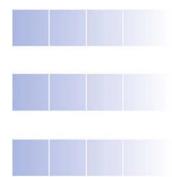
Recognizing the enemies of innovation can be an important step toward preparing a defense. It can also help you avoid becoming one. Here are my top six:

1. **Bureaucrat.** The job of the bureaucrat is to help ensure consistency, set limits and reduce risk. It's not hard to understand why these goals would be at odds with innovation, especially 1) as rules, classifications and processes begin to age, or 2) something really new and "out-of-the-box" is in play. The damage that can be done includes slowing progress, draining talent and initiating specific prohibitions.
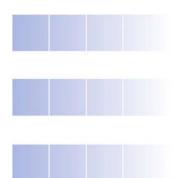
- *Bureaucrat quotes* – "That's not allowed." "Fill out this form." "Use the process." "Propose this next year; you just missed the budget cycle." "Your project will create unacceptable exposures."
- *Unkindest cut* – Killing the innovation with imaginary downsides.
- *Value* – Clearly articulates the status quo that must be addressed.

2. **Gatekeeper.** This person blocks access to resources, power and decision makers. The Gatekeeper can starve an innovation. He or she can establish unrealistic criteria and set the bar at a height that is unreachable.

   - *Gatekeeper quotes* – "Has this been approved by X?" "How does this fit our business model?" This isn't in the plan." "What's the ROI?" "This doesn't score well." "No one else has shown success here, sorry."
   - *Unkindest cut* – Frittering away all advantage by stalling.
   - *Value* – Saving you from embarrassing yourself in front of an executive and pointing you toward folks who can help.

3. **Deadbeat sponsor.** A champion of innovations must have an attention span greater than that of a gnat. Real innovations stumble, miss deadlines and fail. Executives who pull resources and don't return phone calls can not only starve an innovation, but make it unavailable to more appropriate sponsors.

   - *Deadbeat sponsor quotes* – "Let's study this some more." "Everyone is taking a ten percent cut." "We are redirecting operations."
   - *Unkindest cut* – Hollowing out the project, then replacing the staff.
   - *Value* – Leads to exploration of other options, including informal routes.

4. **Wimp.** Some people on an innovation team are jet propellers and some are anchors. Innovating is necessarily a delicate activity, and those who are negative, inept or unreliable jeopardize the whole operation. (Grouchy people, on the other hand, are just fine. And don't argue with me about it.)

- *Wimp quotes* – "Sorry, I don't have it." "I can't work with X." "Can we reschedule (again)?" "Yes (meaning no)."
- *Unkindest cut* – Disrupting and maligning the team.
- *Value* – These people make you treasure those who have talent, optimism, persistence and commitment.

5. **Owner.** Generally, power is more important than success to the Owner. The Owner is often a pop-up enemy, appearing out of nowhere to claim jurisdiction over a whole realm of human activity (as in, "I own security.") The Owner stakes out his or her claim by denying the innovator access to authority, resources and even legitimacy. What they can't kill outright, they grab in a hostile (and often corrupt) takeover.

- *Owner quotes* – "We're already taking care of this." "You don't understand this." "I'm shutting you down."
- *Unkindest cut* – Grabbing your best people.
- *Value* – Helps you define your position in terms of your market and your benefits.

6. **Rival.** Competitors, both inside and outside the company, pull every trick imaginable. If they move faster, maneuver better, adapt more quickly and execute more effectively for advantage, then shame on you. If they co-opt your ideas, at least the innovation moves forward. If they slander you or your work, that's a different matter. If they pull rank and use the hierarchy, bureaucrats and gatekeepers against you, there's an important lesson there. The most troublesome rivals change the context. They manage the measurements of success, and they spin the story.

- *Rival quotes* – "Mine is better." "I am better." "He doesn't know what he's doing."
- *Unkindest cut* – Being right.
- *Value* – Creates urgency and force re-evaluation.

There are other enemies, of course. There are those who steal ideas, abandon partners, grab the pizzazz and destroy the spirit of a project, or just drape the innovation in "an ugly dog suit" so no one will come near. But the most common enemy is closer at hand.

"We have met the enemy, and he is us." – Pogo

Usually, the enemy cannot actually stop an innovation. Innovators have a lot of cards in their hands, including vision, creativity and imagination. But innovation is hard, so innovators need to be persistent. They need to build alliances. They need to find alternatives. People who are inflexible, credit-hogging, unfocused, sloppy loners do not make good innovators. The best innovators often have a generosity of spirit, an openness to the ideas of others and a sense of purpose that enemies rarely can match.

### *Related Web sites of interest*

Creativity: Concepts and tools http://www.infinitefutures.com/resources/frm/frmcreativity.html See especially the Innovation Roles list.
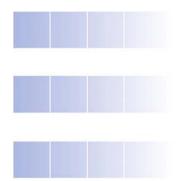
"Team dimensions profile: Helping people work more effectively in teams." Momentum Coaching. http://www.momentumcoaching.com/care.html

Drucker on innovation
http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/categories/businessInnovation/2003/11/13.html#a515
Go to the original book (*Innovation & Entrepreneurship* at http://www.peter-drucker.com/books/0887306187.html ), or read the precis in this blog.

"Primary difference between innovation and operations." Ten3 Business e-Coach.
http://www.1000ventures.com/business_guide/innovation_vs_operations.html

Kamm, Lawrence. "Responses to your new ideas." Consulting Engineering.
http://www.ljkamm.com/inov.htm   A collection from sympathetic to hostile.

Habits that block creativity http://www.carleton.ca/~gkardos/88403/CREAT/Block4.html

Meyer, Marcy. "Innovation Roles: From Souls of Fire to Devil's Advocates." *The Journal of Business Communication*, October 1, 2000.

### *About this publication*

*Executive Technology Report* is a monthly publication intended as a heads-up on emerging technologies and business ideas. All the technological initiatives covered in *Executive Technology Report* have been extensively analyzed using a proprietary IBM methodology. This involves not only rating the technologies based on their functions and maturity, but also doing quantitative analysis of the social, user and business factors that are just as important to its ultimate adoption. From these data, the timing and importance of emerging technologies are determined. Barriers to adoption and hidden value are often revealed, and what is learned is viewed within the context of five technical themes that are driving change:
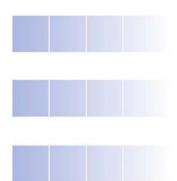
**Knowledge Management**: Capturing a company's collective expertise wherever it resides – databases, on paper, in people's minds – and distributing it to where it can yield big payoffs

**Pervasive Computing**: Combining communications technologies and an array of computing devices (including PDAs, laptops, pagers and servers) to allow users continual access to the data, communications and information services

**Realtime**: "A sense of ultracompressed time and foreshortened horizons, [a result of technology] compressing to zero the time it takes to get and use information, to learn, to make decisions, to initiate action, to deploy resources, to innovate" (Regis McKenna, *Real Time*, Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997.)

**Ease-of-Use**: Using user-centric design to make the experience with IT intuitive, less painful and possibly fun

**Deep Computing**: Using unprecedented processing power, advanced software and sophisticated algorithms to solve problems and derive knowledge from vast amounts of data