

# Gijs Van Wulfen

## How to pick the right moment to innovate

### Speakers:

**Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit**

Gijs Van Wulfen

### Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the innovation and creativity segment 2017, very happy to have Van Wulfen with us today ..... When it comes to the topic of innovation and the author of multiple books on the subject including the one he's most famous for, the fourth innovation methodology which has been translated into many languages and which you give conference for around the world, Gijs it's wonderful speaking with you again.

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Yes Hi Nick, yeah nice to see you again

**Nick Skillicorn:** Absolutely so as I mentioned you've been very busy over the last year or two going all around the world teaching your fourth methodology must be quite exciting

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** it is, actually though I am now 57 Nick, I haven't travelled until I got fifty three, I made a methodology with the map and now this map takes me all over the world, so for me it's like a young dream coming, the dream of a young guy coming true, so yeah I'm feeling very blessed.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, so for people who aren't aware of you or haven't seen your work on LinkedIn, can you give us a brief background as to where you started and how you got into innovation.

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Ok, well actually I am a business economist, I studied marketing and I went to work in the food sector, food industry for seven years marketing soups and children's candy then you know and then it was a complete disaster to innovate, everybody was so conservative and I tried to push my ideas through the innovation funnel but you know they all failed and I only got a lot of trouble on my way, then I became a consultant you can always become a consultant right, so I did that very young and I was a consultant for twelve years first ..... doing strategy and marketing advise and then later for bull and crowns, nobody knows them outside the Netherlands, It's a kind of

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strategy boutique reorganizing big companies who got into trouble you know because they were too conservative and their views went down and they had to reorganize so I did that work and then I was now fifteen years ago exactly you know I quit my job, I had a wonderful job and being a boardroom consultant but what kind of added value did I have, almost none, well we got a company refinanced but in the end they didn't do anything with all the advice we gave them and I was so frustrated for me to say okay, you know I want to solve this, how is it possible that existing organizations have so much difficulty in getting innovation launched at the right time doing the right things at the right time and so I quit my job, I part timed studied creativity, we didn't call it design thinking then we just call it creativity, I did that for two years and then I combined my business insights and my experience with learning from creativity and then because I wanted to first in the front then, I wanted to make a real methodology to start innovation at the front end, this was a long time ago, it was even before You Tube existed or you know or the business model canvas didn't even exist or even .....more was not wasn't there yet and so I made this methodology I called F.O. R.T. age forth, I made it in the form of an expedition because on expedition you get people outside the box and that's where it all starts. They should all start where we go beyond our present borders you know that's the moment when we go over our present borders, that's the moment innovation we just start, it's all getting new insights first and then you get new ideas. So I structured the start of innovation in the journey of a twenty weeks and five phases, full steam ads, observe and learn, raise ideas, the case studies, homecoming so FORT is an acronym of the five first letters of each islands and It takes people in a group from inside a box of outside a box and then to inside a box again otherwise nothing happens and it goes and doesn't ever come again. So I wrote books on it, a first book and made a methodology and it really works , in 2006 and then in 2009, another book in 2012, another book and then somebody asked me what should be a dream and I say well if a book is in the Netherlands, it could work anywhere and then I started to blog and write in English and well I wrote my book innovation expedition and by being asked by LinkedIn to become one of their influencers, I just had one of a blog from several of my blogs and it was read by five thousand, ten thousand, thousands of people and this is the way our methodology is spread all over the world. So the map got translated in more than thirty languages, there is Russian and Chinese and Japanese and I follow the map, so people say hey can you train me I come over and I train you so can do apply the methodology yourself. There's no business model needed, I'll just love to stimulate innovation all over the world and that's what I do now most, doing keynotes workshops or trainings from Brazil to Japan or from Cape Town to Canada.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I think I obviously got the book as well, we've spoken about it previously what I like about the fourth methodology and I'm being quite unbiased here, compared to a lot of other books on innovation, it is very structured, it is actually a methodology and as you say it takes people through a twenty week process to help get it right of ideas for their business, don't you think it's important to have a methodology for innovation when a lot of people think that innovation should be all about being free and just trying out whatever and seeing where it goes

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Yeah well first of all you know Innovation is on everybody's calendar, it's on everybody's agenda but everybody struggles with how, what do I do, how do I start it and okay so

that's innovation but what do I have to do now, now to make it utterly simple, innovation is all about both chaos and structure, great innovation is a kind of structured chaos or that's what it is. So the more I get close to the equator, the more storms there is, the more chaos there is. so when I apply my methodology or talk, is it in Spain or Turkey or Brazil, they love the structured ness, you know that is tock, tock, tock, tock that's what I know, I am European Dutch so I'm sensing my German and that's what the German too write, tock, tock, tock, tock. Now on the other hand when I go for example to Germany where I write my methodology or it's been applied in Japan, they are two structured, so you have to bring in some chaos, so force help you to go beyond your borders first in observe and learn and to reach out to people and to get new insights and then you get new ideas. so it's a good balance between structure and chaos, chaos is wonderful to get great ideas but then in the end if there's no structure nothing materializes and when you structure you have a real good machine, a real good gun but there are no creative bullets to shoot so it's all about the balance between structuring chaos and that's what innovation is, innovation is a big pack paradox on the one hand you have to be creative on the other hand you have to be able to implement it. You first have to go outside the box but you have to put it inside a box , it's all about being flexible on those axes to get you have to be here and you have to be here and the methodology helps.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Absolutely and just picking up on one of the things you said there it's about bringing it back into the company to actually get implemented and that's where I think a lot of the other ways of innovating which are all about just idea generation and that's falling apart because unless you get someone to say yes to your idea, eventually it's just not going to go anywhere.

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** No, what I normally do suppose here is the innovation firm right, so here is the idea and here is the market introduction, what I used to do is try to push it, push my idea and the harder I push, the harder they push back, why should I here stick my neck out for your idea, you are a nice guy Nick but you know I won't stick my neck out, I would say oh no I'm sorry Nick it doesn't really fit the mission and vision of a company or it doesn't fit the ERP system, so the trick is you don't even have to use my methodology but one of the most important lessons learned is that you can invent alone but you can't innovate alone, so what I do in the methodology is if this follow we get here, the marketing guy, the sales guy, the product development, we got production, we got procurement, we got service, we got I.T, we got finance, we all get them into a team here that's a start and together we come up with ideas and we transform ideas into business cases, they get accepted and then here we work on the children we made ourselves here, so it's all about creating Internal support, they do that by innovating together in a team not pushing idea here but get the team up here, also get it connected here, nobody would have steering committee or would look how we've been doing, You know I get the steering committee on board, I call them the extended team and they join the journey and that's why I will get to learn too, that's how far they get confident, confident enough to say yes to those inaugural business cases at the end of fourth. The most important thing for people to learn is that it's not about you, it's not about ideas, it's about you know our idea and our business and creating internal support from the start is the best condition to reach the end of the follow successfully.

**Nick Skillicorn:** What about when the people who are the decision makers, which is the C.E.O. or your boss or your manager aren't able to be part of that beginning and they're the ones who usually put the brakes on

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Now why aren't they I'm sorry to interrupt you but this is what I hear all the time, now they are normal people they have twenty four hours in a day, why can't they be on an ideation team, what they say to you when they say oh no no no, no it's not for me you know, they are too busy right, but if you won't spend as C.E.O. six days in a period of twenty weeks to join the team to make the next generation projects or services what do you say, It's doesn't have any priority to me. Now and somebody's going to C.E.O. says that I said okay, if you won't spend six days to help your people create your new products of tomorrow why should I join this journey, it's your company well just wait, I just wait one or two years until the shit gets bigger and you will come back to say Gijs, we have to innovate now and then you will start smiling like you know right, they always smile and say this is a very direct actually.

**Nick Skillicorn:** And it's this concept of waiting until as you say the shit hits the fan, that's when those companies think oh now, is the time you actually need to innovate, is that a bit too late or is that actually

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Yes, well that's a good question so in my last book innovation maze, I made a kind of a bell curve, organization, I am like people you know we get born, we grow, you know we get over the hill like me and then you die right. Now when you need to innovate, know here started here you're growing but then here at the end of the growth, Innovation takes time, it takes on average for products thirty six months from idea to launch, two years and then it will take one or two or three years to generate money that means that the moment you're at the top of your ..... if you want to create a new ..... you should have started six years before that you know to generate the profit from you, so this means there's the I call it the sweet spot for renovation here, that's the moment you want to innovate but most of the time we think oh you know it goes and goes up the market and then suddenly hoops markets get saturated the common competitors, a market share drops and then you get a double blow and suddenly you can't control revenue anymore, so you have to cut costs. Now on the top here of the curve, you know a company is always in the organization, you have to cut costs again and then next year after there are more layoffs in a company, that's a very bad time to innovate why people won't stick their neck out and the pressure you know you say okay sit still, I hope nobody sees me right and then the rigor is over and then you feel comfort again and you have to feel confident and you have to feel comfortable to go beyond your borders Otherwise you sit there you know like a duck in the lights of a car driving to watch you. So this means that you know there are two sweet spots, one is here we have the moment you want to innovate and then look after the lost of the organization, everybody knows now we have to do something different, so this is the moment we have to innovate. So those are the two sweet spots for innovation and when you're not on those two sweet spots, you should wait because you know you have only one chance to start an innovation project, if you come up with an idea now, I would say no Nick, it's not really a

good time, I'm sorry you know, we're not going to give this priority and you come again three months later to say what a stubborn guy you are, you can only launch your idea once or your project once so pick that at the right moment, now on the moment here, where you're still at the end of the growth phase, the good news is yes there's money, there's money in this time because the company goes well the only point is there is no urgency on the work floor because we're still growing, so what I see is which companies big debt point for innovation, two kinds of companies first of all family owned companies who think far beyond next year or the year after we think okay what will the next generation do, so they have a much longer planning period and companies with very strong leaders this is because I as leaders say okay guys we are going great now but we have to find out the next practice in our industry and we have to do it, it's leading by example, by strong visionary leader. Now and those two things are not there, you know most of them they go, we have to reorganize once, reorganize twice and then we are here and we have to innovate. the news there is there is urgency, everybody knows well you know we lost some colleagues here so we have to step up, the bad news is there is no money or little money and we have only short term to innovate. so here it's time to do some revolutionary that's time to come to think about evolutionary innovations, here as always we have to go for the quick win or the low hanging foot or whatever you call them, I just call them evolutionary innovation because we need them next year to go to the top line again. Those are the two sweet spots and you know you just wait until you are at one of those sweet spots otherwise there is no internal support, when there is no internal support nothing materializes.

**Nick Skillicorn:** So when you're waiting for these moments of internal support, the sweet spots, there's still some tips I know that you have on how to get people to actually listen to your ideas

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Yes because it doesn't mean that you have to sit still and do nothing, it's all about making people nervous, that's what you should do as innovative or you can in the more positive way you can stay and you inspire them.

so what do you do, well just start emailing to your management team, hey there's this new business model coming in this second that's interesting, you say hey in the U.S. there are new startups doing it totally different way and you e-mail them. When you organize customer panels and customer panels on youngsters say oh you're just an old brand, a brand for old people, invite them to join a customer panel like that or for example if there are technological developments for new developments, reach out to universities and take your management team to a university seeing hey these are the next technologies coming up, the point is just try to inspire them, don't say to them to innovate No you know they're all bright people, so the point is you have to let them draw their own conclusions and you have to bring them on the right spots, so that's what you should do as innovator and then the moment it is okay, so okay guys we need to do something and then the question is well Nick do you have plan and then you put out of your bag the plan you have that already for two years sitting there, I say yes I have a plan here and then you have the right moments, now I am Dutch and in the Netherlands we plant a lot of tulips right, now when do you plant your tulips in the garden, it's not in the summer, when it's high growth phase no because too hot, it's not in the winter, not in the crisis because it's too cold, you plant your tulips in spring or in autumn. So look for spring and autumn in your company okay.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Have you got any examples to help bring this to light because I know a lot of people when they hear about methodologies it all seems a bit overwhelming, let's talk about ways that companies have actually used this way of thinking.

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Okay I like to come up with three examples, the first example is BRUIL, medium sized company work only three to fifty people, they work in concrete you know they make wet concrete try to build buildings or prefer concrete. Now we had a building crisis now from 2008 between 2013 they lost forty five percent of their revenues, they had three re organizations, this is a family owned company they try to keep the labor on but you know they had to fire some people and the margins were even worse because you know everybody gave concrete away just to keep the factories running. They had to innovate and so there was the extended team of the shareholders were on the team, the board was on the team, we had a core team of ten people, they don't have an innovation department, they were several factories making concrete and so we went with them on the journey and the first journey is observe and learn and start learning from other sectors, so they start learning from other sectors and so what are chances here for us and they went to other sectors not to get ideas, NO to get new insights, they came back in observing nearly a four workshops by the core team brings back learning, they add to this sector, I thought of this person wow and he will can learn to from this sector interesting somebody else have been somewhere else, so what you do is you get the blinders off, right if you're making concrete for twenty five years the world is like this, so you first have to open up then now this phase is the incubator phase for ideas it goes then we have the fourteen people from the team, we have three outsiders and on our ideation workshop we had 964 ideas, BRUIL it's here because they were inspired. So we selected the top fifteen ideas, we wrote them out, so now we were In the Ideation phase and then we went back to the test phase and we went back with the Ideas to customers, so we connect customers and we say ok we got these ideas, what you think of them and they came back with their feedback and we improved those ideas, in the last phase we choose five top concepts to work out this business cases and then In four weeks in pairs they developed business cases and that's the end of the twenty week journey, they presented fifteen business cases to the extended team. Now the shareholders were part of the extended team so they were on the journey and so they learned a lot too and that's why they said yes to all the five cases now this was two years ago, of course they have low hanging fruit because they need to innovate, now one of the things is that they call it the silos service for tiles you know how you make tiles without a glue, they make tile glue also and normally when you go to big supermarket, you have to have new tiles, you have all sets of twenty five kilograms sets, put it in there, put water in it and you mix it, that's been the same for one hundred years only we now have a drilling machine to do it. Now they had the idea of why don't we bring already that's glued to them so they don't have to, what you do, you got three pellets of sets there and a container full of garbage afterwards but the main problem was that the tillers didn't earn any money anymore, there was one man continuously busy with making tile glue and they had the point why, why do we make dry tile glue, why don't we make wet tile glue, so they made it, they developed a tile glue which is wet, they put it in silos, they put the silo to the floor to be tiled and they just can pour it on the floor. Now they have introduced this and it's a massive success why because the tillers normally they have four people working now they only need three, this means they can improve their margins by twenty to twenty five percent,

now every big tiller in the Netherlands want this tile glue, it's a very simple solution, this was not really huge. The most revolutionary thing they did was 3D printing, now they are in concrete, they are living example in the role of how to 3D print architectonic concrete. So what was the friction, the customer feature was of the architect, half of the architects are without a job at this moment why because the building crisis, you only build standard buildings, I mean you have to have something specially made for you, it's expensive because the architect makes all kinds of original things which are expensive to make. So what it did, that was the friction from the architect and with 3D printing with no normal prefab concrete it takes four weeks, first you have to make a mold, then you have to pour it in, then you have to check if the mold was right or not but the architects always, they are drawn to 3D, it comes to 3D, so what they developed was, they had an old backing robot in one of their old factories, they rebuilt it into a 3D printing robot they connect partnered with a start up of young guys who had the software, they developed a special concrete to be 3D printed and now they are operational for sixteen months and they are the world's leading 3D printing unit of architectonic concrete which is wonderful. Now the most proud I am is not of the business cases but they say that there's a saying in a fisherman when you are fishermen that the main catch is the by catch and the by catch is the main catch and the main catch was a good business cases to get revenues but they said during those twenty weeks, those fifteen people, they got so inspired and they know they talk to customers, they know how to brain storm, they make business cases, you know there is a different you know it really influenced their corporate culture and now everybody became so much more entrepreneurial again and that's the main catch is actually you know the people have become much more entrepreneurial. So that's the case of the concrete maker in the Netherlands.

**Nick Skillicorn:** That's a great one, it's a lovely concrete example as the saying goes but is there any example you have from outside the traditional business world.

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Yes well actually forth is used in three quarter of all the implementations in services or in social innovation, I trained in fourth Andrew ..... who was the head of Uganda from the U.N.H.C.R. they are having a problem in refugee, three refugee camps in Uganda with hundred thousand people in there. The problem in refugee camp is that women and young women are not safe for men you know they get fired laid and they get harassed and how come and they used the .....to come up with a solution, now women are responsible for cooking food, for cooking food you need fire and for fire you need pot, they make their fire from charcoal which you need woods to get it started. Now as refugee camping in one place you know first the woods are next to it but you have to travel more and more and more and farther into the woods to get wood and that's where was the moment in the place where all those women and young girls get harassed by men, so they thought how can we create a safer environment and how can we make it for women more safe, then they come up with what if we don't use wood that we use banana peelings, because they had banana plantations there, so what they do now is they thought they make a briskets of banana peelings and they use that now to start fire with the charcoal, now the advantage is that these briskets they burn very fast and easy and long, much more longer than charcoal so three times as long. Now this means when they burn three times as long, you need three times less wood to get it started with, so this means you only have to go out once every three weeks instead of once every

week and in this way women have to get out of the camps less by which they are safe, it's a very simple example of how methodology helps to generate a very simple idea.

**Nick Skillicorn:** You must be very proud of that one

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Yes I'm very proud of that one, yeah unfortunately I wasn't there but he sent me pictures you know they had all sort of thousand ideas on the go, the great thing about innovation is when you have successful innovation you know you feel so proud and it works for years and it empowers so many people that's why it's worth all those trouble Nick.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Yeah, We're coming up to the end of the interview unfortunately I'm sure like here and many other ones, I could speak with you for hours on end but one thing I'd like to ask you to leave the people with which I ask all the experts is, do you have one tip, one actionable insights that people can try out quickly in the course of an afternoon or a week to get some value out of the methodology we have been talking about today

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** Yes well the most important point is for you as innovator, you're often young guys who sit like this because you feel all the energy and you want to do it right but the point is that you have to sit back like this and the point is that you have to pick the right moment, you have to be patient, you have to build up build up awareness and that's a job in itself but you can only start innovation in your company only wants for the first time, so pick the right moment don't be too eager and start building awareness, that's what your role is, start building awareness that we need to innovate and don't blame everybody yet, oh you don't want to innovate, you don't want to innovate, people not wanting to innovate except that it's normal. Well innovation is a struggle right but what helped me a lot was that you learn to love the struggle and you're much more relaxed in it and then you get much more effect.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, we're going to get links down to all of your resources below the video, can you just let people know about what they will find I they get there.

**Gijs Van Wulfen:** What they will find yes, so well I advise you to go to [www.forth-innovation.com](http://www.forth-innovation.com), there you can find the methodology, you can find maps for you to download in twelve languages, you find twenty checklists from the book, you can download that for free please don't tell my publisher, so that's all for free and then there's also my personal website if you like to interact with me more, it's [www.gjswulfen.com](http://www.gjswulfen.com) and it has more information about me and my speeches

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect Gjis it's been wonderful speaking with you and I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

**Gjis Van Wulfen:** I like to make you a complement too, I think it's a great initiative and I hope you will have a very successful innovation and creativity summit this year and many years to come.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Thank you very much.