Holly Green

Triggering innovative thinking using new prompts

Speakers:

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

Holly Green

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello, everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the Innovation & Creativity Summit 2017. I'm very happy to have Holly Green with us today. Holly is the CEO of The Human Factor, a business and innovation consultancy. And we're going to be talking about how companies can figure out what is needed to improve their innovation performance today.

Holly, it's lovely having you.

Holly Green: Thank you so very much. It's great to be here.

Nick Skillicorn: So for people who don't know you or the sort of work that you do, can you give us a brief background as to how you got interested in creativity and innovation?

Holly Green: Certainly. I've worked for some of the world's greatest companies both large and small organizations around the globe. And it just continues to strike me I'd say starting about 15 years ago how although we talk about innovation as being critical for business and there are studies after studies saying that we must have it, that we weren't really living that in business.

And in fact, most businesses are set up to be anti-innovation. We protect our assets. We shut down ideas and thoughts. We're very busy. We don't have time for that, et cetera. And so that got me more and more interested in how do we really walk the talk of the innovation. And I began kind of a deep dive study in that area.

So, I guess it was 15 years ago. We were a little ahead of the curve on that. And I can remember the first 5 years of presenting about innovation, people would kind of argue with me, "Oh, open source is ridiculous and social media would not impact ideas." And now, it's such an obvious. But initially, it was a bit of an uphill climb.

Nick Skillicorn: And we were chatting a bit before we started the interview. You and I are quite kindred spirits in one particular way which is you've got a very scientific way of thinking through what actually has an impact. Can you describe that to us?

Holly Green: Yeah. I'm a behavioral scientist. And so my background is all about the brain at work and with my postgraduate work in neurophysiology was very much driven by sitting in these great companies looking around and seeing, "Well, gosh! That's not what they taught us what happen in management 101." And people are subverting the agenda, withholding information, and what's really going on here?

And if those things are so prevalent and common and they were to me across organizations, how do we actually leverage the way the brain really works and stop pretending that we're logical, rational creatures. And let's take advantage of the illogical, irrational animals that we are and use that for good to really progress our agendas at work and be more profitable and productive. That's what got me started on the journey. And so, it has been a fascinating adventure.

This field of neurosciences is really in its infancy. And we're still unlearning a lot of what we thought we know about the brain. So, the field itself is sort of constantly having to learn and unlearn. And that in and of itself helps with innovation.

Nick Skillicorn: Now, speaking of helping innovation, I want to touch on something you said just now which is, companies are set up to prevent innovation. What do you actually mean by that?

Holly Green: Well, think about what's a manager's role? A manager is responsible for planning, organizing, directing, et cetera. They're not about taking time necessarily to come up with great new ideas or pushback against what they've been told must be done in a certain way. So it's constantly, they will let us to do that, "We don't have enough time. You know how they are. We tried that once before. That would not work. That's not the way it's done in our industry."

And that is so prevalent. That those are what we call innovation eradicators, things that get said so commonly, day in and day out that stop us from actually thinking and drive to this manic behavior we have today around just doing, just run, just do, just react. We're not really stepping back in the, "Is there a better way? What else could we do here? What if we were thinking about it from our client perspective? What if we challenge the norm in our industry or the way we've always done it?"

Because by the way, the whole world has changed so what we've been doing for ten years may not still be the best way. But there is no space for that. We stripped it away.

Nick Skillicorn: And hopefully with what we are going to talk about today will help companies figure out how to get some space back in for innovation and for creativity. So yeah.

Holly Green: I was going to say, space is absolutely critical. Your brain has to have the space to think. Innovation cannot be done without thinking. It is not wrought behavior.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. Is this – when you say space for the brain, do you mean time or some other sort of freedom?

Holly Green: Well, it's really a combination of forces or factors. Time is critical. Without that, then we can't do the other things. And then we use what we call neuro prompts, ways to poke in Facebook language. How do we poke our brain just a wee little bit every now and then to force kind of some of the innovation that we need today to be successful, some new thoughts, some new perspectives and assumptions, et cetera?

So it's that combination of things. Structure helps. Innovation is a set of disciplines, skills, and focus. It is not magic secret stuff.

Nick Skillicorn: Well, I think a lot of people would suggest otherwise where they think that innovation is this magical thing where you get a light bulb goes off and that's the perfect answer.

Holly Green: Right. Yeah, and that's ridiculous. I mean we can look back on so many things that we think of as being highly innovative and people even that we think of, "Oh, they were naturally innovative." No, they weren't.

I use Steve Jobs as an example. He often comes up globally as instinctually innovative person. He wasn't. He intentionally sought to be innovative. He read across multiple genres. He had a very diverse set of hobbies. He filled his brain with things from a huge diversity. And so he was able to put together pieces and parts in whole new ways.

One of the things we learned about the brain is that even when you're sleeping today, the synopses occur in your brain at 90% the same rate as when you are awake. That 3 pounds is working for us all the time. And so, can learn to take advantage of that a little more. It does require a discipline set of skills.

Nick Skillicorn: So you're saying innovation is a skill.

Holly Green: It's a set of skills. It's a mindset and a set of skills and knowledge and ways of being that all have to work together.

Nick Skillicorn: I think you and I agree very much on that. A lot of people think that …

Holly Green: Well then of course, we're right.

Nick Skillicorn: No. I mean a lot of people, they grow up believing, "Oh, I'm not creative or I'm not an innovator or this isn't my job. And therefore, I just stick to the safe road and keep my head down and that's what I'm meant to do." But you can actually improve your ability to not only generate the right ideas but do something with those ideas.

Holly Green: Absolutely. Yup. It's a very interesting thing to me that we've convinced ourselves. For years, we said there was a right brain that was creative and a left, it's analytical. We know that's absolutely positively false. It's one of the top three myths about the brain. We're not even sure we're a facial recognition or taste buds today much less, creativity and analytical thinking.

So we convince ourselves. We're these pattern-loving, structure-seeking animals. And we convince ourselves of those patterns. We know now for more than three decades that that's absolutely false. But we like to hold on to that kind of thing. It makes sense to us.

And it's simply a false premise on which to base anything else. And so, if you kind of begin to explode some of those things we know are not true, it opens up a lot of avenues.

Nick Skillicorn: So let's talk about these prompts that you mentioned earlier. I assume they help build these skills required for innovation.

Holly Green: Right. You have neural pathways in your brain and those get created when a synopsis occurs between neurons. And so, most of the time that it's myelin wiring or sheathing that happens. It creates these very thick pathways if you will.

Imagine walking through a forest and there's a well-trodden pathway. You're more likely to stay on that pathway even if it was faster to go off into brambles. You're more likely to stay on the pathway, right? That's the same kind of, I mean in very simple terms, in our brain. And so, that's what habits are. And so, we stay on those same pathways.

Well, one of the cool things we've learned about the brain is that we have enormous neuroplasticity. We used to say, there was a cliché, an American cliché, but I think it plays out globally that an old dog can't learn new tricks. Well, we found that's absolutely not the case.

With adult humans, we can learn new tricks if you will up until the time we either die or our brain becomes deceased. So we have this neuroplasticity, the ability to create new pathways.

But in a world that values speed above anything else, think about texting while driving, running red lights, those were all indicators that even survival has been trumped by speed as a notion.

In this world that values speed so highly, we don't tend to create new pathways. It feels like it's taking longer. It feels like it's convenient if you will to us and so we don't do. We travel the same pathways and we expect different results.

Nick Skillicorn: It's one of the things that I have loved about the summit doing some of the interviews with other academics who are studying the brain and are still actually doing the experiments, there's more and more evidence which is showing as you say that the brain is a

pattern recognition machine which is always trying to find the most efficient way of doing things. And once it gets into these habits and sees the similar answers to what it has done previously, it's just a lot easier to go on autopilot straight to that same answer again and again.

Holly Green: Right. Even if we know it's not the right answer. That's what's fascinating. That's why I say we're such illogical creatures. But we can prove to you we're right because we have one little piece of data we can pull from somewhere or someplace or the woman that lives down the street whose aunt twice removed. We saw it on the internet, it must be true. So we're fascinating animals in that regard.

We call it, there's a technique we call it, it's MSU. We just make shit up. We're really good at it. We're really good at it and we do it a lot. We fill in the blanks. When we don't know something, the brain will not live with the void of information so it fills in the blanks. Nine times out of ten, what we fill in with is more negative than the truth.

So there are all sorts of, we're complex creatures, there are all sorts of things going on with us all the time. But this pattern-seeking, structure-loving behavior serves us well. We put on our pants the same way. We learn how to tie our shoes. All of those are really good structures and patterns that we recognize and people's spaces, et cetera, sort of what we would call more raise, we walk up to someone, we might shake a hand or bow and acknowledge someone, those are all habits as well.

So those are not necessarily bad. It's just that we tend to over rely on them in them every case. If we view the data through this lens one time, we always view the data through that lens instead of changing the lens.

Nick Skillicorn: So how do we break ourselves out of these patterns? I know you and I spoke earlier about these 99 neuro prompts that help people shake up their way of thinking and get into more innovative mindset. Can we go through a couple of them?

Holly Green: Sure, absolutely. There is sort of an order to some of these. And I have a lot of them we use at what I would consider more random. I'm going to go through the first two, are very much in a distinct order.

And the first one we call "balance the big picture in details." This is about the learning, relearning typically, the ability to look up and look around and see what's going on, the bigger picture, the trends in the world with our customers, our clients, our competitors, our employees, the big things impacting potentially who we are, who we serve, and what we do. And really value that information in our brain and balance that with all the to-doing. I've got to answer the emails. I got to respond to the customers. Of course, all of the necessary to-doing that we have.

But we stripped away about ten years ago what we call a bubble or a belief, a mental model if you will that the looking up and looking around is valuable. And we really over focused on to-doing. So we're responding and reacting. The world behaviors, new neural pathways do not get built there. We're traveling the same pathway every time to go fast. It saves us maybe like a microsecond. And our brain values speed.

So we got to build back in this looking up and looking around. So we teach. It's very simple actually. That's what's fascinating. Some of these techniques are insanely simple on the surface and that the hardest things you have to do because all of the forces out there tell you to just run.

Eight percent of people check their smart device before they get out of bed in the morning. Just run. Just run. Even though the most important thing is not necessarily on there.

So, a couple of things you can do in looking up and looking around. Go and watch videos. TED is a very popular site globally. Those are great videos to watch. Don't watch them by yourself. Watch them with your team. Discuss it. What does this mean? What might it mean? Should we do anything with this? Sometimes, nothing at all. Sometimes, it requires some action or reaction.

Go out and look at your industry publications, et cetera. And a monthly leadership teams, have somebody on the team come in and do a 5 to 6-minute executive summary of some cool idea they saw, something that you should ponder. Maybe it's an ancillary industry to your own. Is it going to affect you at some point? Should you take advantage and move quickly? Maybe not. But we just need a lot of stuff in there.

Some other simple things. Trend watching sites. I really encourage people. There are some great global trend watching sites. We need to be paying attention to that because there is something called expectation transfer. If I can go online right now, with a click of a button order a product, have it delivered the next day. Don't even have to input any of my data. They've got everything in there. It's very easy. I expect other things to work that way. I expect government agencies to work that way. I expect to be able to go and do my banking that way, et cetera.

So, this expectation transfer is huge. So we have to pay attention to these global trends. So once a month, carve out 30 whole minutes. Once a month, 30 minutes. It's nothing in the scheme of things.

And fill your brain with diverse data. Have somebody who has to report in on competitor's websites regularly, what new things are they saying. Just things like that. It's that we assume people know. When was last time most of us really did those things? We're too busy.

Nick Skillicorn: I agree. There's also this – a couple of scientific studies that I really love which are very much in line with what you talk about. When people get new experiences and

unexpected experiences more importantly, it does two things. It give them more seeds of information from which you can form new ideas but it also just jolts the system and says, "You can do different things." And that is just by itself showing to be a great facilitator for creativity.

Holly Green: Absolutely, unquestionably so. I always say, you cannot connect dots if you haven't gathered dots first. Your brain needs diverse data to work with. We know our own little world very well. And we can prove that we're right. We're better at proving ourselves right than anything else we do as an adult human, which by the way is the sort of the greatest barrier to innovation because I go instinctually instantly to proving myself right, which means I don't consider ponder, wonder, explore options.

But I got to have stuff in there. I got to have some cool stuff to work with in my brain. It would be like telling a child to put together a really cool puzzle but I'm only going to give you two pieces. It's not going to be too cool.

So the brain needs interesting things to work with. And I always say that is the ground floor of innovation. If I've got nothing interesting in there to work with, it's near impossible to come up with new ideas. I've got to have some food for my brain, which leads me to the second technique which is kind of the core of every single thing I do and we call it focus on the target which is the antithesis it sounds like to the first one.

But it's not. They're actually very highly correlated because a lot of people decide what to focus on without having first explored any options. So they're very much in line. I've got to fill my brain with cool stuff which gives me the ability to determine the right focus.

Now, focus on the target is insanely valuable and we've known about it since 1950s, the power of it. You're going to see the technique. It's called a lot of different things. You will see it used by every elite group of people or individuals in the world. So think about Olympic athletes. Think about elite military. Think about musicians. All of them are crystal clear, crystal clear on the target or the outcome long before they get in the race. OK?

This was actually developed originally by a guy out of the UK, a runner at the time who broke the 4-minute mile, Roger Bannister. And that's one behavioral scientist begin to understand the power of the brain over the body. If you think about up to that moment, we always thought all the urges of the body drove the brain.

So once we're clear on the target, what's really cool, what's totally and completely amazing about our brain is you better remember at proving yourself right than anything else you do. So once I'm clear on the target, my brain kicks in to prove-myself-right-mode. And as soon as I kick in to prove-myself-right-mode, I start exploring options, alternatives, new ways to get there because I am going to prove that I can do it.

So it's a trigger. We always say it's a button that we can push with people. But if I can't define the win with specificity at the start, that button never gets pushed. So I work with CEOs of multibillion dollar companies around the globe, their inability to articulate the win is the greatest challenge. OK?

First of all, I've stripped away the time to even fill my brain with cool stuff. That's a big problem. That one we can fix relatively simply, right? We can create habits and processes. But this inability to articulate the win is a real opportunity because if I can articulate it and define the win with specificity, my brain works really hard to prove it right. And that's when we come up with cool stuff.

And you can go back and you can look at almost any invention over time. We often say, necessity is the mother of invention, et cetera. It's all the same thing. We've seen this play out literally thousands of times with products and services around the globe. There was something we had to do and by golly, amazingly we figured it out. That's innovation, new ways, new process, new system, new technology, et cetera.

So it's really tapping into some simple instinctual things that we have as humans that have gotten stripped away mostly by speed, mostly by speed.

Nick Skillicorn: It's fascinating. I know what you mean by speed because there's also so much to be said about the expectation that innovation is the same as the light bulb going off moment and therefore, it is just this fraction of time that's required. But when you actually look at all the time that's required before an idea is generated and all the time after an idea is generated, that all needs to be allocated as well.

Holly Green: Right. And innovation, that's an idea. Obviously, the light bulb going off is an idea. It's not innovation until I've done something with it. So there's all the before and then there is the instant and then there's the after because if I don't turn it into something of value, that's not innovation. That's just a cool idea.

Nick Skillicorn: Exactly.

Holly Green: So it's always fun to be when people talk about it as an idea or just the before or just the after. It really – it's not – innovation is a complex set of inputs, outputs, deliverables, et cetera. And we try to boil it down into A thus B thus C and really, there's just a lot more to the equation. We're very complex animals.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. We were talking about another prompt as well which I think we've touched on already which is around challenging assumptions. What do you mean by that?

Holly Green: Well, there are all sorts of fun exercises that we do to kind of prove out some of these to people because most successful people will nod their head, "Oh yes, of course I do that. Well yes, I understand that." So we often will do the exact opposite. We'll set them up,

give a brain technique or an exercise and of course, they'll fail and we prove, we'll see that's the pattern.

So you might be familiar with the 9-dot exercise where we have to connect them only three lines or less and just a couple of other rules. And it's fascinating because people – it's proof-positive that if I only give you three rules, your brain will come up with a lot of additional rules that really constrain our thinking.

And that 9-dot exercise is the origin or think outside the box. People use that phrase a lot. They toss it around, et cetera. But without really understanding kind of the origin and what we're trying to prove there. We make up these rules and that's the MSU that we're so good at doing.

Most of the rules are negative. Well, I can't do this. I can't go outside the box. I have to go through the center of the dots in that case in particular. And yet, I never say those rules. People just make them up.

So we're taught very early in life, in school in particular, that we have this framework of rules. We have to – we can't talk to our neighbour. And yet, almost every company in the world has a value of teamwork but the deep, deep mental model is the antithesis of teamwork. I'm not allowed to talk to my neighbour. I've learned that really well. That's cheating.

And all of these other sorts of rules that we learned early on and we forget to refresh our brain. They don't serve us well as adults necessarily. But we don't do the refresh. So, challenging those assumptions.

So I always tell organizations, if you are experiencing the same problem over and over again, the same glitch, the same failure and delivery to a customer, whatever it is, the same thing you know you've talked about a thousand times in meetings before, pause. Get some of those ubiquitous post-it notes which by the way is a great example of innovation because it was a product failure.

So get some of those post-it notes. Sit down in a room with five or six core people involved with that failure and have them jot down the rules in their head. And that you're going to have to help them a little bit. But the rules are usually where we don't have time to do it different. That's the way you have to because one time a hundred years ago, the CEO said blah, blah, blah. A lot of the corporate myths will come out in those rules.

Jot a rule per post-it note and pop those up on the wall and spend two minutes just what if the rule. What if this is no longer a rule? What if we can do it this way? What if we could reduce process time on this? What if we actually could invest another $10 per unit? What if?

And it's shocking how quickly that opens people's brain to possibilities. And it doesn't have to take more than five to seven minutes total. That's what's really amazing.

We always tell people, we're not going to teach you omphaloskepsis. That's the art of staring at your navel. OK? So you don't have to do that. You do need 3-second tier, a minute or two there to be innovative.

So challenge assumptions is, you first have to name or know the rule, the assumption that you have. Very important. Most days most of us operate without knowing all the rules that are driving our behavior. So you do have to slow down enough in a minute or so to name the rules. And then just play for a minute. What if this is no longer a rule? What if I can? What if it's possible? And that is the simplest way to just open our brain too well then we could do this or we could do that. That's all innovation is. It's all it is at its core.

Nick Skillicorn: Great. And then the last one which I think is related to this as well is I think it goes back to the question of speed. It's the mental prompt of selecting the next answer.

Holly Green: Yeah. You're looking for the second right answer.

Nick Skillicorn: The second right answer.

Holly Green: Yeah. And there are a lot of exercises to do around this too. Cookie Monster, Sesame Street is a fairly global phenomena and even Cookie Monster I always say colluded with this notion that there is one and only one right answer. And we're taught that consistently throughout our childhood. We take tests. You're only allowed one answer. It's a very, very well-trodden path in our brain that there is one answer. It's the right answer. It's the only answer.

But there are some interesting notions on exercises you can play with where I can look at things. For instance, let's pretend that I have a picture of a strawberry, an orange, and I don't know, banana. And I say, "So tell me which one is different?" Well, I could actually come up with probably ten answers to define and describe differences, right? That was actually a question on a school test and there was only one right answer. Just really, really interesting.

We're taught that and it's so deeply ingrained. So I always tell people, just when you think you got the right answer, you're absolutely positively sure there's no question about it. I want you to take one minute and I want you to consider what's the second right answer. You can't do the first one, so now tell me what the second one is.

And this is very important. Language choice is important. Language prompts our brain. So it's not the next best answer. It's the second right. So what's the second right?

And it's shocking what people will come up with. And sometimes you're going to say, "Well, the first one is still the best one." OK. We go with that. But at least we've spent a minute or two exploring.

And every now and then because you spent that minute or two, you have spent the time your competitor didn't spend. You will come up with something that dramatically changes things. Simple or could be a simple process refinement. Innovation is not restricted to million dollar ideas. It can be the smallest of things.

So it's just that minute or two. It sort of releases the boundary in our brain and forces us, what we call, think new songs, right? So we come up with our own language around a lot of it of how do I think new songs? By forcing me to do it every now and then. Every now and then.

Nick Skillicorn: I love the idea of the second right answer because it goes back to what we were talking about earlier which is the brain is on autopilots and people in these companies, they know what the right answer is because it has always been the right answer.

Holly Green: Yeah. And it pleases the boss. And there are thousand reasons that we might resort to it. And yet, I always ask people, how often do we behave that way? As if there's one and only one right answer. And everyone always says almost always. And how often is that accurate? Almost never.

Nick Skillicorn: Exactly.

Holly Green: And I can – we probably have 15 fun exercises, everything from Cookie Monster to the movie, *Men in Black* about getting so locked in. You know, 1500 years ago, the world was flat. Five hundred years ago or 1500 years ago, the earth was the center of the universe. Five hundred years ago, the world was flat. Things changed.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah.

Holly Green: A few years ago, Pluto was part of – was a planet. It was part of the mobiles that we have to build in school representing the planet. Well, Pluto got ejected. Things changed. But we don't tend to refresh. We don't tend to change those rules in our brain. So, how do we force ourselves with a simple prompt every now and then to do that?

Nick Skillicorn: And we could keep going on and on. I know on your website, you've got tools and free resources. And I know you've got about 99 of the prompts in total.

Holly Green: Right.

Nick Skillicorn: But unfortunately, we're coming up to the end of the interview. So what I want to leave the listeners and the viewers with is if you've got one tip or one actionable insight for what individuals and companies can try out this afternoon or this week, what would you recommend they do?

Holly Green: Unquestionably define the win. Sit down with your team whether it's the win for this week, the win for the project, the win for the company, for the year, and never go

beyond a year. We're overly optimistic creatures by the way after about 13 weeks. So I tried it. I tend to restrict to usually quarters. Even in some strategic planning work, we really bring it in.

But define the win. Define it with specificity. Every aspect of it you can think. And then use what we call active past tense questions. So let's just do a very quick example.

Let's pretend your sales quota is a million Euros next month. OK? And you're the salesperson. So that's the win. We've gotten very, very clear on what to close, a million Euros with X margin. So I want us now start refining the win. So the future piece of it has got to be really clear.

Then I'm going to use what we call active past tense questions. So let's talk about the language you use. How you leverage the current testimonials most effectively to achieve that? What new marketing tools were most effective for you in doing that? How did you approach clients differently that really enabled your success?

And what you will notice is I'm asking questions in the past tense, what did, who did, when did, how did as if it has already happened because the coolest thing about your brain is it doesn't discern that it hasn't, and you start figuring it out.

You see, I can manipulate human creatures insanely easily. We're the easiest animal on the planet to manipulate. Cows are much more challenging. Humans are pretty easy. Language is important. And when I ask you as if it has already happened, your brain kicks in to prove-myself-right-mode. And you start coming up with cool ways to get it done.

Nick Skillicorn: Very cool.

Holly Green: And that is power.

Nick Skillicorn: Now, I think a lot of people are going to want to find out more. We're going to get links down to your resources below this video. But can you just let people know where those links are going to take them?

Holly Green: Certainly. Our website is TheHumanFactor.biz. And if you go into the store there, you will find quite a few categories. One of them is innovation. There will be some free tools, et cetera. You can get my latest book, *Using Your Brain to Win*, which has 33 of the neuro prompts in it. That's on Kindle globally. And we certainly also have the book as well.

So you know, ask. You're going to find these techniques in there. And on the surface, they're going to sound simple and then you're going to try to do them with real humans and realize the complexity that we're faced with. But your brain is an absolutely astounding tool. So I recommend you visit.

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely. Holly, it has been wonderful having you here. Thank you so much. And I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

Holly Green: Thank you.