

Max McKeown

The difference between NOWists and THENists

Speakers:

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

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Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello, everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the Innovation & Creativity Summit. I'm very happy to have Dr. Maxwell McKeown with us today. He is a strategic adviser on Go For Innovation and also the author of multiple books on the subject including *NOW*, *The Innovation Book* and *The Strategy Book*.

Dr. McKeown, it's lovely to have you.

Max McKeown: Great to be here, Nick. Thanks.

Nick Skillicorn: No problem. So for people who aren't aware of who you are or the work that you do, could you give us a very quick insight into the sort of work you do around creativity and innovation and how you got into it?

Max McKeown: Well, my focus is very much how humans and the human groups in particular shape the future. So, how can you from one point at this point now look for and change your behavior in ways that shape events to lead somewhere? That has taken me on a path of lots of corporate consultancy but also I did research in psychology and education and MBA and doctorate but all around this point.

Nick Skillicorn: And you've written a number of books on this. The ones you're probably most famous for are *The Strategy Book* and *The Innovation Book*. But you also got *NOW*, which just came out recently. But what's the crux of *NOW*?

Max McKeown: Well, *NOW*, is about the psychology of moving forward. That's it's focused. So what do we know about that? What do we know about different personality types and how they deal with fear, stress, regret, challenge, all of those things?

So it's about the psychology of moving forward. And it's a little bit a response to mindfulness and some of the limitations of mindfulness and meditation and also this, some obsession to some extent of not being busy that people have at the moment as well that they somehow imagine a world in which nothing needs to be done and they would be happier if there was nothing to be done, which I would dispute for lots of people.

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Nick Skillicorn: I think everyone who is at this summit will dispute that as well. They want to get better actually generating ideas and making them happen. That's why it's the Creativity & Innovation Summit. And I'm glad that you have a perspective on both of those subjects.

But what is your view on what exactly is creativity and what is innovation?

Max McKeown: Let me start with innovation, my definition would be that this is about making new ideas useful. It's a form of practical creativity. There are two parts that are very important and useful and I supposed the third is about the making it useful. And that's my definition of innovation.

Creativity, in a sense, it's somewhat more difficult because creativity just means to create something. But to create what becomes the question next. Now, what most people think of when they consider creativity is coming up with something new or artistic in some way. But really, it just means creating.

Innovation is my focus because it's about making those new ideas useful.

Nick Skillicorn: I think what I found from interviewing some of the other people during the summit especially the academic researchers on creativity is within the academic field, the general definition of creativity they're coming towards is something that's new or original that also has value or usefulness. And it's those two parts together. You can't just have something that's completely new but completely useless. Do you agree?

Max McKeown: Yeah. Well, I mean clearly, you can. But innovation for me is useful if we keep it to the useful use of new ideas. Too many uses in one sentence. But it's helpful because if we just make it all creativity, what is it we want innovation for? For what?

And it doesn't even matter if it's new except that it might take us somewhere that was previously impossible, somewhere better that previously was impossible. That's what I love about innovation, not its novelty per se. But there are a lot of people who just love the novelty including a lot of people who have taken part in this.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. I know there are so many bad brainstorming sessions where it seems like the aim of the facilitator is to get a bigger wall of post-it notes for as many different ideas as possible and then lose track on what's actually important for the company.

Max McKeown: Yes, so for the company, for the country, for the organization. It seems sometimes people have two modes in meetings. There's the mode of going through the agenda, the dull meeting where people are just dying and so glad they have a smartphone with which to escape. And the brainstorm where the idea is to forget that there really even is a purpose. I think it's much more sad.

You can imagine how frustrated the two groups are. You have the groups of creatives who really hate that dull meeting and the group of people who want to get things done, the doers, who hate to brainstorm because they go, “Well, what’s the point? I don’t – there are bad ideas as the facilitator says that there’s no chance for them.”

Nick Skillicorn: You mentioned earlier that your book, *NOW*, starts talking about different personality types as far as helping innovation to happen. Is this the definition you’re talking about, the difference between doers and creative people or is it something different?

Max McKeown: It’s something a little different. As you know, personality isn’t fixed and we have multiple personality traits anyway. So not only is our behavior, not our personality, we are many, many things not just introverts and extroverts or NOWists and THENists.

But getting lots of the question, the NOWist really refers to people who are dominantly primed for action given the choice they would be looking for fastest way of starting anything. The need is to keep moving and keep moving and they will choose whatever is available to do that. Sometimes this is fantastic. Occasionally, not so good because they will choose action even if that action is just crazy.

Then the THENists, their dominant mode is to consider alternatives. And those alternatives can get in the way of action. They seek perfection or merely to discuss all the different possibilities purely as an intellectual exercise. But this stems from as you probably know but some of the listeners might not, really brains are not about hemispheres as much as they are about neural networks. And we have a lot of those.

But two particularly important networks that I refer to in this book as the NOW network where you’re continually – your brain is looking to make decisions to act the next movement. And the THENists or the THEN network which is considering alternatives. And then the literature, I would link this to the default mode network which is the part of our brain that is always on even at night, you’re thinking about what happened yesterday and what’s going to happen the day after. And these two networks are always there but you can be dominant in one or dominant in the other or find a way of mixing the two. It’s a long explanation.

Nick Skillicorn: No problem. That’s what people came here to see. They want the detail behind to understanding things better. Is that the level of detail that these personality traits go into? Because I understand in your book, you also talk about the next level of detail of how to divide people into what’s called Haha and Lala. It sounds a bit funny. I mean they both make sort of laughing sounds but is it a laughing matter or is there a serious point behind it?

Max McKeown: Well, the phrases came from a book I wrote called *Adaptability*. And the Hahas are of the high adaptability, high achievement groups and the Lalas are the low adaptability, low achievement groups.

And the difference really there is that a form of resilient role and get back up again. The hahas, they kind of laugh in the face of danger, that's one of the ways to determine them. But the Lalas really are seeking to their fix and they don't want to go anyway either. And you can imagine that as a 2 x 2 grid and how you can have people who are high adaptability but low achievement and those people can really adapt to any situation except they don't want to go anywhere near. They have the ability but no ambition.

Worst of all, the possibility that it would be to be high ambition, low adaptability because you want everything but you can't change it. And there, the Lalas are probably worse.

But there, you might have somebody who does particularly well if they are suited to their environment as it happens because if the environment changes, they wouldn't be able to change with it.

Nick Skillicorn: It sounds like that's related to a point you alluded to earlier around the mindfulness trend that happened a couple of years ago and people feeling like they don't – well, some people feeling like they don't necessarily need to be busy or get anything done. Is that fair to say?

Max McKeown: Yeah. It appears that there's some line here I think, it's a rhetorical trick but I'd say perhaps an unhelpful one in our actual lives. So it's something like people boast about being busy. Aren't they stupid? They boast about being busy to make themselves so important but we are so clever we realized they are wrong. Something like that.

But first of all, busy is fun for some people. I would guess for a lot of people that to be busy, to be actively engaged, to have things to do is certainly what I want. It's far better than boredom or to have no money, no jobs, nothing to occupy the mind or fill the bank account.

So I think that to make – what my problem with the mindfulness meditation, they occur in books, the fact is that we are only giving people tools to cope. I would say that's all you get. Unburden yourself. Step back. If your boss called while you're dealing with your children and that's impossible whenever you're in that situation. But the research suggests that there are one super jugglers, people who are fantastic at dealing with multiple things.

There was an experiment that I believe I described it *NOW*, and they found that there these people who if you put them on a driving test in a simulator and driving along, they would give them a mobile phone and ask them to perform different activities on it or give them – and they found that a set of people could do that perfectly well, talk on their mobile phone while they drive and then they started asking them mathematical problems as well. And they could do that while they drove. No problem.

So these super jugglers plainly could do it. And I'm not saying we should drive while we use mobile phone. But I am saying that we're capable of a lot of task juggling. We don't have to

do one thing at a time. And if these guys did not that the people who write these books about doing only one thing at a time, do one thing at a time.

Nick Skillicorn: It's interesting you mentioned that because there seems to be so many contradictory studies coming out around this subject of how many things can a human do. And someone was saying yesterday. I remember last year, there was some study which explained that statistically only 2.5% of people can multitask in real time.

And then there are these other studies around this concept of ego depletion where you only have a certain amount of focus in a day and after that's used up, you don't really have the ability to resist temptation anymore.

Do you have any insight into what's actually true, what there is more evidence about or which one of these might not actually be true?

Max McKeown: As far as on the first one, the one about task jugglers and the multitasking, I'm also like that. Isn't there a statement about how multitasking is a term only just invented. Previously, nobody did anything – two things at once which I've just been reading the Rome history. So back to Rome pre-Christ, Roman life was pretty complex. I don't think we've invented any level of complexity to get us above that.

So first of all, what we've been doing is a long time.

Secondly, yes, there are some people who are better than others. The super jugglers, I mentioned. But that most of us can do it really rather well and we can do it a lot better with practice.

Third, definitions of multitasking vary hugely and complicate this discussion. What do we mean? Do we mean the example I said when we drive while juggling, while smoking a joint? Do they mean that kind of multitasking or do they mean thinking about three thoughts at once? So listening to music.

And again, it depends. It depends on what – most of all, on a day a day practical race on whether you're confident and feel that multitasking is good. If you fight the multitasking, you're more effective. If you embrace it, you're better at it.

And I've heard the next point that you raised was about completion. Again, that has become a very complicated term and messed up faster discussion because ego depletion originally started the idea of willpower to do something specific that you would lose willpower and the ego depletion was just an energy source just like food.

The famous radish experiment where if you feed people radishes, they lost the ability to sort of concentrate. And now it has become linked to the idea of focus and jumble like it's a finite

resource. All is finite but that doesn't mean we should limit ourselves to one thought at a time and need for creativity would be rather foolish.

Nick Skillicorn: And let's take it to that level then. Let's focus back on the concepts of creativity and innovation now. And through all different work that you've done and the books you've written and the work you're focusing on now, let's find out some insights as to what helps creativity and what helps innovation and what sort of things might actually hurt them as well.

Max McKeown: OK. So things that hurt innovation and creativity specifically of course is to have a limited set of new information or a limited set of connections. That would be the biggest. If you have somebody in isolation from new ideas or somebody who become very fixed in their thoughts and cannot or will not make connections, you have nothing new. Nothing new will come. So it's kind of creativity buckling.

If I'll say – also, if you jug the idea too soon and if we decide that because an idea is imperfect so we don't understand it yet or it's inconvenient or unpopular that we shouldn't flip the top and look at it examine it.

So then if we look next on what could be done to improve matters, it's exactly the reverse. If you have lots of information coming in, lots of new ideas and stimulus, and you play at connecting them like Lego or like the stick-on bricks for British listeners on the car now, bricks for global audience or Minecraft. If you start connecting them then as you see those overlaps, you start to build things with them.

And it's a big difference here between the field of doers and people who have never played with ideas, they didn't hear about them. It's playing with them and making things that really sort of develop that creativity and our creative ability.

Nick Skillicorn: And what about this concept of different personality types working together? Because you mentioned at the beginning that you can be in a meeting and the doers or the NOWists are very focused on getting what's on the agenda done as efficiently as possible. And the other group, the THENists, essentially dreaming more about what's possible.

I know from my experience and my client work that this often leads to a lot of frustration within the teams in companies. Do you have any insights on how that can be avoided?

Max McKeown: I think the first thing like a lot of it is to have it described to a group so that they can see that the analysis that this is what is happening and this is why. And then you are armed. You are able to say, "Oh, OK. That's why we disagreeing." Because you've stopped listening because you're impatient to get out of the room and I'm still talking but I don't actually do anything. And I don't want to even identify the groups start to alter their behavior at some level.

And of course, there are people who overlap tremendously between these two points that's why you have the Zuckerbergs and the Elon Musks of this world who I think are doers. And they do both and that they're therefore super NOWists. They consider different possibilities and then they do what? They talk about it. And that's the problem for anybody who can't do a thing is that they have to talk about the thing, which is a little bit frustrating.

But how can you improve it? Let them know that there's a problem but then teach them how actually make things together. First, silly things just to get used it. But then to give you an example, brainstorming. You don't really want to brainstorm with a thousand ideas on sticky pads that nobody uses that go into a manager's box afterwards and they'd sort them through, send out an email with a big list of things to do and say, "We will do the three we were already doing." This is frustrating for everybody. Total waste of time.

Instead what you want to do is say, "Hey look, we'd like to solve this or improve that. Now, let's talk about it." And everybody had their one idea. But I have a technique called the Battle of Ideas. And what you do is you take that one idea that you have and you talk about it to your neighbour and you have a battle. And then if one idea gets forward to the group and you keep doing this until you only have maybe five ideas to discuss.

And then as you discuss those as a group, maybe have a skilled person helping them, you take the idea in and say, "What was that for? What is its purpose? How can we make it real?" And you use the group not to just assign over this Google Map but to nurture the idea. Ideas are like children need nurturing. They're beautiful to the person who created them. Ugly to everybody else and they're definitely not finished yet.

Nick Skillicorn: Let's talk about the corporate level of it. You do a lot of work at strategic levels with companies. And I assume this is more focused around the innovation aspects than the creativity aspects. Can you describe the sort of challenges that the companies faced and how you actually go about helping them? So people can get some tips on how to do it.

Max McKeown: Tips on how to work with the top team or to learn how to ...

Nick Skillicorn: If they have these sorts of challenges, how they approach the challenge?

Max McKeown: Yeah. Well, let me think of the ones. The challenges the organizations have, they say, "Oh, we would be creative but we don't have enough time." They say they would be creative but they don't have any resource. They would be creative if they weren't so many rules. And yeah, that's largely it, those three things.

So they say, "If you free us and ask nothing else of us then we would be mightily creative." Again, I cannot really – I mean this leads to the popularity of the so-called 20% rule of Google that I'm sure everybody listening has heard of. The idea of Google once a upon a time that they would give their engineers one day a week to work on their own project. Now, these people have time.

I would say that you have to address all of those issues but they're not the most pressing. The most pressing thing is to give people an experience of being truly creative and then productively turning new ideas into something useful. And when they have that experience, they start to copy it. We're copying animals. They start to copy it and then their next meeting is a little bit more creative and purposeful and they start to copy it because they've seen it and felt it and it felt good and they copy it because it works.

And this I think is really wild and different to the typical corporate creativity training which involves technique to tell people about different hats, tell people about brainstorming, tell people about asking some sort of puzzle or question.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. How would the activity – you can get also 101 different creativity techniques through brainstorming sessions. And it relates back to what you said earlier. You often take these techniques and you just end up with a longer list of ideas that aren't necessarily ground-breaking.

Max McKeown: No. And it doesn't – if you look at the breakthrough idea, people who are known for being creative, organizations known for being very creative or the origins of breakthrough ideas, you'll find that it didn't involve those techniques. And even if they happened somewhere, that's not what explains 99% of the breakthrough.

So I think that that's a great problem. So you have creativity training and you have creativity icebreaker then you have something else. And it's not really learning. It's one of the reasons that I encourage people to do to form innovation clubs.

And so, my clients or my readers, even those who don't have the budget for me, that was very self-important, no budget for me, they take the book. They take six copies of The Innovation Book. They give it six people and those six people spend one hour over the 6-week period just discussing part 1, part 2, part 3, up to 6 of the book, and applying it to their job and to their company. And then they split and form two new birds and then some more birds, and then some more birds.

And so the idea is that financial thing that you start with deep knowledge and you work your way up rather than starting with shallow notes for everyone. And then feeling like it was a big failure and hiring a creative agency to do your work for you.

So I think you can go deep and you can focus on the real creativity rather than the techniques.

Nick Skillicorn: I like that because as you say, there's only so much value that you can learn in a 2-hour session especially when you bring in a facilitator and it's essentially their job to be the expert of the techniques so everyone else just follow them. If you actually teach people

to think about their own creativity and the way they approach problems in a new way, then they're going to own that a bit more.

Max McKeown: Yeah. It's a challenge I have with all methods, this methodology. But it's a problem I have with over heavy, over rigid methodologies anyway. They take away the power. They take away the fun. And they take away the product, which is worst of all.

So yeah, it's the same problem I have with their Agile Software methodologies and Six Sigma because they become somehow value for themselves rather than what they might do. And yet, we have Six Sigma. The companies most famous for using them, companies like Motorola failed. IBM failed at that point. High quality, that's definitely what you wanted. So what's the point?

So I'm going to warn anyone listening to this about rigid or overly heavy methodologies. How about learn from the people who do it and then practice it just like any other skill? How does Zuckerberg did it? How did that idea come? What did you sketch it on?

Uber, and them having about cars for lease mobile, where did it come from? How did the prototype work? What did they sketch it? And then you find that with just a drunken chat and a bet and then somebody who wrote something on a piece of paper and that was how it came about. Not by somebody going through this again, rigid methodology.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. I always find it interesting that I can't name a single super successful innovation that can be definitely traced back to a single brainstorming session.

Max McKeown: Well, the only one I can give you is Twitter off the top of my head. Twitter, they were struggling to compete with iTunes. They were another company altogether. Struggling to compete with iTunes and so they sent everybody out to have a kind of very loosely termed brainstorm outside. So, one group went to a children's playground. Again, this is not strict methodology, is it?

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah.

Max McKeown: But really just have a chat. So they were out there on the swings around about and everything. And somebody said, "Oh yeah, wouldn't it be really good if I could share my SMS message with everybody in the company when I want to say something funny? Wouldn't it be a good idea if I could share it publicly?"

And they then went and built it. Doers. And then the idea of course became so successful that they bought the company and then created a rather interesting US President.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. Well, we're coming up to the end of the interview unfortunately but what I'd like to ask all of the experts is, if you've got one tip, one actionable piece of advice that people could go and actually try, I think we've covered a whole host of them already, but

if someone wants to try something this afternoon or this week, what can they do to improve their creativity and their ability to innovate?

Max McKeown: The one that comes up right now is that new experiences lead to new behaviors. And as a test of that, go and do something you do anyway in a new environment. So for instance, I wrote part of *NOW* where I stored on my mobile phone. The first book I've done like that. So I've written it in the bath. I've written it on planes and train stations. I've written it while I've been walking. And I've written it in night clubs. And it certainly led to lots of ideas as I went along.

And so, go and have your team meeting in the pub if you've never done it before. Go and have your – whatever you normally do, go do somewhere else, a theme park, a roller driveway, a lawn grass, because you will get much more from your experience if you do something new. It will automatically make you creative even if you don't want to be.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. Dr. McKeown, it has been wonderful having you here. And if people want to find out more about your work then we're going to have all of the links down in the description. Is there anywhere specific that you recommend they go?

Max McKeown: Well, all my books including my new book, *Now*, I learned this from that talk shows, American actors, they have no problem figuring out their stuff. This is a very good book.

Nick Skillicorn: Oh, it is.

Max McKeown: So if you go to Amazon, Waterstones, any book shop will have copies of all my books. You can go to MaxMcKeown.com and see some of my blogs or just hit me up on LinkedIn or Twitter.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. It has been wonderful having you here. And I look forward to speaking with again with you soon.

Max McKeown: It has been a pleasure. Thanks, Nick.