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Dissertation Proposal Abstract
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Innovation Pathways:
Understanding the Emergence of Ideas and Meaning at the Front-End of Innovation

Managerial scientists, economists, and psychologists have repeatedly shown that the continuous ability to generate new ideas and to turn inventions into novel and useful commercial offerings are key for long-term organizational growth and sustainability. However, after decades of research the evidence for sequencing the DNA of innovation remains confusing and often contradictory. This proposal draws from a range of potential alternative views for investigating and explaining innovation, particularly, views that: provide for pluralistic explanation and equivocality, assume agency to be distributed across people, their actions, and the sociotechnical structures in which they are embedded, and are rooted in uncovering innovation in the everyday and ongoing practices of human activity. These views lead away from the Cartesian model of the world that occupies much of the contemporary discourse on innovation, and toward a focus on innovation as an emergent, discontinuous, and situated activity where process and product are inextricably woven together across the past, present and future.

Nowhere are these issues more prevalent than in the early stages of innovation or the “Fuzzy Front-End” (FFE), where abstract concepts of learning, knowledge and culture initially collide and are transformed into technical products and where meaning of those products is first constructed. Actors in this space must span the boundaries and structures of the home organization, act as the initial evaluators of information value, and be gatekeepers for the dissemination of new ideas into the organization. These processes are being further complicated with the rise in novel forms of social and peer production; new pathways of innovation are taking shape, which often times can stand in stark contrast to traditional production environments and management models of innovation. The recent economic downturn has also caused organizations to exaggerate their near-term focus in order to address the immediate economic crisis, which has resulted in reduction of resources, including headcount, aimed at supporting medium- and long-term innovation capabilities. While these contractions seem natural, those companies seeking to succeed beyond the short-term crisis will eventually need to restore long-term innovation capabilities and will be looking for new theories and practices to help guide their reconstruction in the modern era.

To investigate these alternative views in the front-end of innovation, this proposal revolves around three primary research questions:

- 1. How does the simultaneous engagement of different motors of change shape the emergence of ideas and meaning at the front-end of innovation?*
- 2. How do actors’ lived experiences (as conceptualizations of innovation) shape the emergence of ideas and meaning at the front-end of innovation?*
- 3. What role does information technology play in shaping the emergence of ideas and meaning at the front-end of innovation?*

I propose to investigate these questions from an action-oriented process strategy grounded in ethnographic and clinical research techniques, which I will employ during a six month in-depth engagement with a large, international computer hardware manufacturer. Results will be developed in a pluralistic and integrative narrative that is then used to explore each of three primary research questions.