Interview on Open Innovation,
John Cooke, Co-Catalyst, August 2007

1. Can you tell us a little about your background and about the Innovation Leadership Forum

The Innovation Leadership Forum is the umbrella under which I conduct all my activities: anything to do with understanding and enabling innovation, primarily in large organizations. This includes teaching, writing, working with companies, and running a networking initiative. While I have been thinking and working around innovation for the past 16 years, the current networking group has been running since 2004 – though it built on a networking initiative, the Innovation Exchange, I ran for 5 years on behalf of London Business School. We started with 4 companies in 2004 and are now up to 17 subscribed members, some more are currently considering to join us. I would talk a lot more about this wonderful group – but I think the real interest here is around Open innovation. Those who'd like to find out more can always email me or have a look at the website ☺.

2. What would you say are the main benefits of engaging in Open Innovation?

I always say that innovation happens when you connect previously unconnected bodies of knowledge. For me, that is what open innovation is about.   It is also about allowing people with different perspectives and different backgrounds to take a look at our issues, problems, opportunities with a different set of glasses, a set of glasses that we would never put on. The way the human brain works means that we organize things in boxes, and not only that, we tend to stick new things into existing boxes, often ignoring the fact that they don't really fit… This is one of the barriers innovation comes up against. By opening up to the outside world, and inviting others to look at issues through different glasses we might come up with entirely different solutions.

That was a rather long answer to your question; the short one would be: the main benefit of open innovation is that it allows us to access a large group of people with diverse backgrounds and ways of thinking, which is key to innovation.

There are other benefits, for example, working with external partners on an idea makes it more difficult for it to be killed; it would plainly be too public and embarrassing; especially with radical innovation this can be a considerable benefit.

Another is that all organizations have to manage their resources carefully. Tapping into outsiders can provide a useful additional resource.

However, I believe that at some point in the future this may raise interesting questions about what organizations actually stand for – that becomes a rather philosophical discussion…

3. In what ways is Open Innovation different from earlier models of collaboration?

I think that most other forms of collaboration are about problem solving – rather than uncovering opportunities. In more traditional forms it seems to be the case that we identify a problem and then start to look for the right partner who can help us solve it. Open innovation is different; we are looking for external parties to help us uncover new areas of opportunity that we can, perhaps jointly, pursue.

Implicit in the above is that we have to have a different mindset if we want to engage in open innovation. Here all the arguments about believing that we have all the talent inside our own organization, that we know best what our customer wants etc. come into play.

4. What steps would you advise an organization interested in engaging in Open Innovation to take?

Talk to some organizations who are doing it. but be careful, what is right for one organization is not necessarily the right approach for another. You need to understand your organization's culture; you need to know which aspects would support open innovation and which aspects would get in the way. You need to work with both.

You should also think about what the areas are where you are willing to share, where you are truly willing to open up. True collaboration only works if there are benefits for both parties, and both parties share openly and honestly. If it is one-sided – as much of traditional subcontracting and outsourcing is – it will not work.

This also means that you need to think about what you can do to help develop trust and respect between the collaborating parties. Given that they might come from quite different perspectives, with different values and mindsets, you are in trouble otherwise (the prejudices we have against those who are different from us can be quite a powerful obstacle).

5. What are the critical components you need for successful Open Innovation?

In a way I have already mentioned it above:
A willingness to share
Trust and respect between
A win-win situation
Structures and processes that enable and support open innovation, and provide a solid link back into the organization

6. Specifically in terms of Breakthrough Innovation, why can an Open Innovation approach help?

This comes back to my first point. We all suffer from what is called so wonderfully 'Betriebsblindheit' in German. It basically means you cannot see the wood for the trees. We get so used to our way of thinking and doing things that, at least for most of us, it is quite difficult to still see the patterns and rules according to which we are behaving and judging. As we all know, for radical innovation we need to think 'outside the box'.   Given the way our brain works this can be rather tricky, and it can be much easier for an outsider to see an entirely different approach or solution.