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*“Og discovered fire, and Thorak invented the wheel. There's nothing left for us.”*

## **Inventing for the “Next Bench”**

*By Lanny Vincent*

**I**f necessity is the mother of invention, then this period we are all going through could prove to be a golden age of invention.

The value of the “gold” in this golden age may derive more from the quality than the quantity of the inventions created during this period. By quality, we mean the invention’s impact, its breadth and duration of influence on society. While there are an enormous number of inventions clogging global patent and trademark offices, the substance, value and societal significance of many of these inventions may improve the patent holder’s competitive interests more than advance society’s intrinsic interests.

Several years ago client work took me to Cleveland, Ohio, and so I scheduled an extra day to visit the Inventors’ Hall of Fame in nearby Akron. The building itself is an interesting monument to invention and design as the architecture creates a pathway that guides the visitor through a history of invention in the U.S. and winds its way to the inventors’ wall of honor.

Hanging on this wall are over 200 photos of the inductees. As my eyes went from one portrait to the next I began to ask what all these inventors may have had in common. I also noticed some inventors were “absent,”

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## **Gentlemen, Start Your Engines**

*By Jane Gannon*

**I**n his national address last week, President Barack Obama said, “History reminds us that at every moment of economic upheaval and transformation, this nation has responded with bold action and big ideas. We are a nation that has seen promise amid peril, and claimed opportunity from ordeal. Now we must be that nation again.”

Many of our clients are considering what they can do now to strengthen their position when the recession begins to lift. They realize strategic inventions are assets that can change and advantage the competitive position of those who hold them, and one of the most cost-effective ways of acquiring these advantage-creating assets is to invent them.

We know strategic invention can be done in a reliable, efficient and targeted manner by means of Invention Workshops as we have demonstrated for the past fifteen years. An invention workshop complements the more organic stream of innovation coming from your inventor community; and it is an effective way to systematically create and deliberately improve your patent portfolio. As a result, the strategic character and value of your intellectual property portfolio can be increased.

Lanny Vincent and Jim O’Shaughnessy designed the invention workshop process in 1994, when Jim served as outside patent counsel for Advanced Micro Devices and then as chief patent counsel at Rockwell International. Since then, we have worked with dozens of companies who sponsor invention workshops.

An invention workshop has some essential elements including crafting a concise and focused Opportunity Statement. Our

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# Inventing for the “Next Bench”

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like Buckminster Fuller, who I would have expected to see, but did not. The surprise at these omissions caused me to inquire about the selection process. What criteria did they use to select these particular inventors?

The lasting and widespread impact that the invention had on society was the answer. If the inventor’s invention had made a significant impression on society—both in its breadth and duration—the inventor became a viable candidate for the hall of fame. It was not the number of his or her inventions, nor even the admiration, money or worldly success enjoyed by the inventors as a result of their inventions. Rather, it was the sustained value to society of their contributions.

Now with the banks’ plumbing clogged with mistrust, the precipitous decline in home values, and the fear based cuts being made by so many of our companies in response to what appears to be a protracted recession, mother necessity should be very fertile with invention. However, it may be a very different kind of invention—the kind not driven solely by the interests of competitors.

While our own companies suffer from their own necessity during these times, it is important not to lose sight of the necessities

affecting our customers. Inventing with their interests in mind may be more important to them and to us, than keeping our competitor at bay. The challenge is to see empathetically beyond our own necessities—those that often blind us to the needs of others—so that we can make the contributions that need to be made.

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*“The engineers’ proximity to the problems on the next bench enabled their empathy, imagination and knowledge to create a rich ground for invention to occur naturally.”*

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In Hewlett-Packard Company’s go-go years, there was a lot of “inventing for the next bench over.” Engineers would rub shoulders with future business opportunities by merely seeing a problem lying there on the next bench over that could be inventively solved. Their proximity to the problems enabled their empathy, imagination and knowledge to create a rich ground for invention to occur naturally.

Perhaps these times of necessity will bring us closer to those “next benches over,” giving urgency, relevance and necessity to our creative focus and efforts □.

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*“The best way to predict the future is to invent it.”*

—Alan Kay

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## **Gentlemen, Start Your Engines**

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experience at the intersection of innovation, intellectual property and business strategy adds a strategic focus to the opportunity statement, which is the starting point of each workshop. You also need the right mix of experts matched with the opportunity statement; clear roles and responsibilities in the workshop; and creative and collaborative invention techniques.

The workshop takes place over two to three days wherein the inventor participants, content client and legal counsel get focused on the opportunity, generate a breadth of ideas through a series of thought experiments, and develop ideas by inventing and problem solving at a level of detail sufficient for embodiments.

At the end of the session, the group harvests the output of the workshop and collaboratively articulates invention statements and drafts invention disclosures. Typically each invention workshop yields ten to twenty patent disclosures in a batch, often more.

As a result of the workshop, legal counsel is ready to draft patent applications. Selected inventions can be readied for more immediate “reduction-to-practice” and can provide acceleration for research and development efforts.

As our new president said, “The recovery plan and the financial stability plan are the immediate steps we’re taking to revive our economy in the short-term. But the only way to fully restore America’s economic strength is to make the long-term investments that will lead to new jobs, new industries, and a renewed ability to compete with the rest of the world.” □

### **R. S. V. P.**

Please send us your thoughts on this issue of *Innovating Perspectives*.  
We appreciate your ideas and we enjoy hearing from you.

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