



# Innovation--The Missing Dimension

*By Richard K. Lester, Michael J. Piore*

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Amid mounting concern over the loss of jobs to low-wage economies, one fact is clear: America's prosperity hinges on the ability of its businesses to continually introduce new products and services. But what makes for a creative economy? How can the remarkable surge of innovation that fueled the boom of the 1990s be sustained?

For an answer, Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore examine innovation strategies in some of the economy's most dynamic sectors. Through eye-opening case studies of new product development in fields such as cell phones, medical devices, and blue jeans, two fundamental processes emerge.

One of these processes, analysis--rational problem solving--dominates management and engineering practice. The other, interpretation, is not widely understood, or even recognized--although, as the authors make clear, it is absolutely crucial to innovation. Unlike problem solving, interpretation embraces and exploits ambiguity, the wellspring of creativity in the economy. By emphasizing interpretation, and showing how these two radically different processes can be combined, Lester and Piore's book gives managers and designers the concepts and tools to keep new products flowing.

But the authors also offer an unsettling critique of national policy. By ignoring the role of interpretation, economic policymakers are drawing the wrong lessons from the 1990s boom. The current emphasis on expanding the reach of market competition will help the analytical processes needed to implement innovation. But if unchecked it risks choking off the economy's vital interpretive spaces. Unless a more balanced policy approach is adopted, warn Lester and Piore, America's capacity to innovate--its greatest economic asset--will erode.

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## **Innovation--The Missing Dimension** By Richard K. Lester, Michael J. Piore Bibliography

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

Lester and Piore tell us that a corporate focus on core competencies will not suffice to make a brand irreplaceable and thus earn a ticket to prolonged life. Indeed great brands don't just fall from the sky, they have to be built through the carefully assembled blocks of innovation. The authors lead us to the conclusion that you have to go beyond just listening to the customer, you have to observe them and anticipate what they themselves never imagined they would want.

--Patrick le Quément, Chief Designer, Renault

*Innovation-The Missing Dimension* does have a central focus, but it is such a broad-ranging coverage of the important subject of innovation that it actually adds many dimensions to the reader's thinking. A worthwhile experience.

--Robert W. Galvin, Former CEO, Motorola

Finally, a book that blows past the one-size-fits-all answers of politicians and business pundits. *Innovation-The Missing Dimension* sets the standard for understanding how to compete in a global economy.

--Bob Buder, Editor at Large, *Technology Review*, and author of *Engines of Tomorrow*

It is pretty clear that the future of a leading-edge economy now rests on its capacity to innovate. It is not at all clear what institutions and practices particularly favor innovation. Building on a few closely observed case studies, Lester and Piore arrive at some interesting, plausible and, well, innovative ideas about the way new products and processes come into existence and sometimes flourish. Their ideas have novel and significant implications for teaching, management and governance.

--Robert M. Solow, Nobel Laureate in Economics

This book brings new insight into innovation--where it begins and how it can be introduced and managed. The authors' original and thought-provoking prescriptions reach far beyond the world of business. They explain how education must demonstrate and play a major role in innovation.

--Governor Gaston Caperton, President, The College Board

While innovation is typically seen as a single process, Lester and Piore break it into two parts: problem solving and interpretation. Companies focus constantly on the former, which tends to be a rational step-by-step process. If they talk about the latter at all, it is under the guise of 'listening to the customer,' a less well-defined discipline. Much of the book is devoted to case studies of product development in fields ranging from cellphones to medical equipment to bluejeans.

--Robert Weisman (*Boston Globe* 2004-11-05)

From 1994 to 2002, almost in parallel with the Internet-led boom in the U.S. economy, researchers at the Industrial Performance Center at MIT developed a series of case studies of technology-oriented companies. These studies allowed the authors of the current book to identify common patterns in the innovation process. What the authors found was startlingly simple: innovation was a function of two basic processes--analysis and interpretation. While there are numerous books on the topic of innovation, this volume's real value is its exposition of the two processes and the illustration of these processes through exhaustive case studies...Innovation is absolutely critical to the economic well-being of the U.S. and is the only bulwark against the migration of jobs overseas. The authors make these points tellingly, using persuasive arguments

that illustrate the innovation processes in organizations.

--R. Subramanian (*Choice* 2005-03-01)

This is an interesting and stimulating book. It argues that innovation studies have so far neglected an important dimension of the innovative process, which the authors call the interpretive dimension. This refers to managers' capability of bringing together people of different backgrounds (e.g., engineers, product designers, advanced users), engage them in constructive discussions about new products, manage the confusion and ambiguity that may inevitably arise in the interactions between heterogeneous agents, interpret such ambiguity, and eventually point to new technological trajectories that the innovative process should lead to...Richard Lester and Michael Piore develop this interesting argument by describing the results of three case studies on innovation and product design in rather different industries...The basic argument developed in this book is original, and it challenges the dominant perspective on innovation management and policy.

--Fulvio Castellacci (*Journal of Economic Issues*)

#### About the Author

Richard K. Lester is Director of the Industrial Performance Center and Professor of Nuclear Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Michael J. Piore is David W. Skinner Professor of Economics and Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of several books, including, with Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*.

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