

# What is Innovation EP70 - Doug Shapiro

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creativity, problem, creative, innovation, schooling, solve, space, workplace, discipline, doug, laughter, innovative, culture, life, llc, ai, humor, design, supporting, requires

## SPEAKERS

Jared Simmons, Doug Shapiro

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Jared Simmons 00:05

Hello, and welcome to What is Innovation? The podcast that explores the reality of a word that is in danger of losing its meaning altogether. This podcast is produced by OUTLAST Consulting LLC, a boutique consultancy that helps companies use innovation principles to solve their toughest business problems.



Jared Simmons 00:24

I'm your host, Jared Simmons, and I'm so excited to have Doug Shapiro as Vice President of Research and insights at ofs. Doug brings more than 15 years of experience collaborating with product and interior designers from around the globe. After graduating from Milliken University with a bachelor's in business, he began his career at ofs and international sourcing before transitioning to Director of Product Development. Since that time, he has held a number of roles including brand manager, director of end sales, VP of marketing, and regional vice president for the central US. A well respected and expressive thought leader in the design industry, is also the host of the highly rated Imagine a place podcast that inspires connection and collaboration while exploring the role plays plays in people's lives. That served on the international interior design associations board from 2015 to 2020, and still plays a key role in programming for Ida student members. He supports meaningful Ida programming efforts such as design your world, a program for high school students that provides educational design opportunities and addresses diversity in design at source. In addition to these accomplishments, Doug is a passionate storyteller and published children's author. He loves talking about his career and his four keys to personal growth, which he often shares with the younger professionals he mentors. Doug, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm so excited about the conversation and can't wait to dive in.



Doug Shapiro 01:49

Yeah, I'm super happy to be here with you, Jared. Thanks for having me.



Jared Simmons 01:53

Yeah, let's get going. What in your mind is innovation?



Doug Shapiro 01:58

All right. Well, to me, it's when creativity improves life. I think sometimes we get fascinated with trying to solve a problem. But sometimes there's not a problem, there's just a better way to do something.



Jared Simmons 02:12

There's a distinction between a problem and an opportunity for improvement so not every opportunity for improvement is a problem is what you're saying.



Doug Shapiro 02:20

Sometimes, if you're so busy searching for the problem, a lot of times you don't even realize that there's a different way to do something, a better way to do something, because you're searching for problems that we don't even know are there. Think about all the amazing products that came out that really didn't solve a problem for us but they created easier access to something or better sense of fulfillment, or maybe just a better way to do something or a more fun way to do something.



Jared Simmons 02:47

I see. So when you say problem, it sounds like you're looking at something that is an identifiable negative outcome.



Doug Shapiro 02:55

Yeah or something that you know is there and you're saying, Okay, well, how do I do this creatively? Of course, that requires innovation as well. But if I just found a better way, like my office right now, my office is working for me, I'm doing fine. But if I found a better way to work in here, I really didn't solve a problem but I applied creativity and used interior design and some of the skills I have maybe to improve my life.




Jared Simmons 03:21

I see. Okay, I like that. I'm trying to wrap my head around it, because the other dogma in the innovation space is, Oh, you got to find the problem to be solved and solve it. You're kind of playing with my fundamental worldview here. I like it. The problem is something that causes


pain or causes some sort of discomfort. It's not necessarily every potential opportunity for improvement.

 Doug Shapiro 03:47


I'm trying to think of what the iPad solved. When it came out, did we have (a problem)? You know, it's great. I enjoy it! I would call it innovative. But, you know, it didn't solve any problems for me. But I've certainly, it's improved my life.

 Jared Simmons 04:11

It is a very creative piece of technology.

 Doug Shapiro 04:14

Absolutely.

 Jared Simmons 04:15

It improved your life. So it meets your threshold for innovation, but it doesn't necessarily solve a problem.

 Doug Shapiro 04:21

Right. Correct.

 Jared Simmons 04:23

I see. And I guess that there are a lot of methodologies and things that do.. The mental gymnastics of saying, Okay, well, before the iPad, you couldn't do this thing on this type of screen in this place, in a box with a fox, whatever. Yep. Then that becomes the problem but if you release the need to have a problem, it really does allow you to think differently about creativity, problem solving, and innovation.

 Doug Shapiro 04:50

Yeah, that's it. That's it. It's like retrospectively, it's always easy to say there was a problem. But at the time when I'm reading a book on an airplane and I'm flipping pages with my thumb I'm not thinking this is a problem until I got a Kindle. I'm like, Well, you know, I don't want to flip another page again.





Jared Simmons 05:09

Even then you're not saying, at least I'm not consciously saying, Oh, this has solved my problem of page flipping or carrying 100 books in my bed, because having one book didn't feel like a problem, because I was just gonna read that one book. So I see what you're saying, this is interesting. This is a heresy in the innovation space, everything's built on problem solving. I'm going to use the term problem solving. I'm going to accidentally use it during this conversation.



Doug Shapiro 05:37

But that's true, too. The creativity side of that, using creativity to improve life. To me, that's the side that needs heavy, heavy focus, because I think there's a sense of urgency around getting better at creativity.



Jared Simmons 05:52

Tell me more about that.



Doug Shapiro 05:54

Yeah, sure. I really think AI is kind of the undercurrent. I'll get us there, there was a study by the World Economic Forum that came out just less than a year ago that said, 40% of workers feel their job will be obsolete in five years and it was due to AI. I'm thinking that's a huge number. There's no way, there's no way that that's true but then I started to kind of reframe that statistic in my head. I was thinking, okay, maybe it's more like 40% of the way you do your job. 40% of how you were, will become obsolete, not necessarily the job itself, which I do think is true. It's the conversion from moving from a knowledge worker to a creative worker, because knowledge is getting faster, easier, cheaper, but creativity is going to... basically, we're letting go of that, as AI scoops up some of those things. I do think, even if you think about whatever job you're in, right now, if you're in the knowledge economy, there's a good chance you've had to be more creative over the last two or three years than you were three or four before that, and that pace will increase. The big question I want to answer is, can we get as good at creative work as we've become at knowledge work?



Jared Simmons 07:08

Oh, that's interesting. I wonder. I'm fascinated with questions. That's why the name of the podcast is a question. But that question is making me wonder how many people are really thinking about that question. You know what I mean? Because trying to answer that question takes you down a whole different path, a whole different set of jobs to be done problems to be solved, how you look at it. It's probably a rabbit hole that leads you somewhere, you're not going to get to any other way.



Doug Shapiro 07:36

Oh, totally. As I started to explore this question, in my mind, how do we get as good at creative

work as we've become at knowledge work? It takes me all the way through the workplace and a whole list of things that okay, these seem wrong. It takes me into schooling, even like culture and schooling and what gets rewarded and what doesn't, how are physical spaces arranged. Early offices were arranged for the efficient exchange of information, passing, storing, teaching information. I mean, it's all been about information. There's a certain logic that requires and memorization that that requires. Then as logic and memorization, get automated, then it's really about how do we create spaces for creativity?

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Doug Shapiro 08:23

I'll go on a rabbit hole. Here's a fun one. Laughter was something I was thinking about and humor in the workplace. We've got this culture and decades of success, quite honestly, where we've grown as an economy, where being serious at work was rewarded because it was mainly an information job. The reality is, I think, being serious and making a place of work where you're not supposed to laugh. I mean, that flies right in the face of creative thinking.



Jared Simmons 08:55

Yes. Which is likely to your point be the foundation of the future of human work in the workplace, the way humans participate in this current knowledge based economy if AI continues to absorb the logic and the structure aspect of the knowledge work, what's led to creativity? Yes and yeah, creativity is fun, because requires a willingness to laugh and openness to humor. In my mind, it's hard to think creatively, in one direction without opening yourself up to other possibilities.

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Doug Shapiro 09:31

I agree. I think that word open is key. Just the very nature of humor is the connection of two disparate ideas, that surprise and delight you. How connected to creativity, is that right? It's spot on. Then this idea of openness, in terms of the cultural feeling and the vibe of a workplace. If you want people to share their silly ideas, how do you make them feel? How can you express a sense of vulnerability that I'll allow others to be them hold their whole selves and share their ideas? Laughter is proven to create a sense of friendship and activates the same parts of your brain, that friendship and love activates. If I could measure one thing in the workplace right now, anything at all, I would measure laughter as an indicator of your culture, the health of your people, the creative energy in your firm. I mean, if you're running a firm and your laughter score is near zero, after a whole week, let's say of measuring to me, that's a danger.



Jared Simmons 10:33

Yeah, because it also indicates psychological safety. On a fundamental level, because it is traditionally taboo to laugh, joke in an environment. So if you feel comfortable enough to laugh and enjoy in some humor in the workplace, you're probably psychologically safe enough to bring up controversial issues and also to bring up the like you said, the silly sort of out of left

field, what if we did this thing that innovation requires? I mean, you're not going to do something innovative, if people stay in the box that they feel like it has been predefined for them.

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Doug Shapiro 11:12

Absolutely. Then you think about the culture we're talking about. Then you imagine, well, what kind of a work space the physical space would that culture exist well in? I've thought about this too, because I would tell stories to my kids at night before they go to bed. I used it as a mental creative exercise, they would want something wild. Tell us a crazy story and I was always tired, didn't want to do it but I would get at the end of their bed and I would tell a story. In that setting, I'm in a very colorful place. I've had that sense of psychological safety, like you talked about, there was no reward for playing it safe. I was going to come up and say the most silly, outlandish things. I was super creative in that space. But you take a picture of that space, and you put it next to a picture of a traditional boardroom and you're like, come on, I actually think that the casual nature of our spaces, the way we think about color, the way we create spaces that either give you a sense of hierarchy or don't, those things are all going to play a role also, in supporting and reinforcing a culture of openness and creativity or flying in the face of it.



Jared Simmons 12:27

That's a great story, great illustration of your point. It also to me points to rewards and recognition. Because your kids, what they value is the creativity of your story and they are going to reward you with facial expressions and reactions and all those things in the moment, which I'm sure only feeds your creativity, that giant gets bigger and bigger, the dragon gets stronger and more fire and all that stuff. In a corporate environment, you don't get that real time reaction, and excitement, and engagement that naturally fans the flames of creativity. When you talk about the environment, what I think of is like, okay, there's a person with a spark in here. Does that environment fan that flame? Or does it quickly blow it out before anyone notices it?

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Doug Shapiro 13:14

Oh, that's so good. I mean, that's such a great visual. It's just like, the word judgment to me, it really captures. Judgment is the killer of creativity. Most the ideas don't even ever make it out. They just stay in our souls until we're telling a story to our kids at night. That's it, otherwise, you wouldn't let it out. So it is, it's a cultural sea change, I think that we're seeing. There's another challenge in front of us outside of, let's say, workplace culture. It's a modern day struggle of urgency and importance. There's the Eisenhower matrix, which if you don't know what that is, you can just look up the Eisenhower matrix, you've got problems in your life that fall somewhere in this matrix, the ones that are urgent and important, you're always going to do those first. Then you've got, of course, the non urgent, very important things that usually we don't touch, because instead, there's this urgent and not important quadrant that we spend way too much time in. I don't necessarily think it's like our own. I mean, it is our own fault. But I mean, we have so much access to urgent, non important problems because of technology and the speed of information flying at us, that it just makes it so easy to stay in that space and you lose moments of self reflection. That, to me, also is a natural challenge. That's another reason

even sitting at the end of that bed at night why I was more creative than I was in an office, cause all my emails were done. It was the end of the night. There's nothing more I could do. All the non important urgent things were checked in so I was able to think more freely. The thing is, we don't have to wait till the end of the day, we could just literally turn that box off but it takes some discipline.



Jared Simmons 15:08

Discipline is another great word and probably a word not always connected directly to creativity. I grew up playing the piano, choirs and things. When I think of creativity, I think of discipline, because you have to spend the time at the piano for hours and hours, honing your craft, building your technique, to have your creativity come to fruition. I think that discipline you're talking about, there's probably an analogous discipline that underpins creativity in the workplace, like what is the discipline that would need to be established in this environment you're envisioning to allow creativity to come to its fullest fruition, because that spark, it can be extinguished. But it could also just remain a spark without the right discipline around it.



Doug Shapiro 15:53

I think that's a good word and a fun one to play with. I was actually thinking about getting to your creative mindset. I related it to being like those old wooden finger traps, the Chinese finger traps that you put in your fingers. If you pull really hard, you're just stuck. You have to ease it out and I feel like creativity is a little bit that way. You can easily misinterpret trying really hard to be creative versus trying really hard to understand what creativity is rooted in. Then understand what helps you relax and get to that place then building that into your days so that you have the ability to be more right brained and think differently. I think that's the kind of discipline that we all need to get to. Then the discipline as, say, managers and workplace leaders, to build a system that allows that to happen.



Jared Simmons 16:53

Which requires more discipline than to build the business as usual system, because there's less energy required to build that system, because that's where the momentum is heading. It wants to be that already.



Doug Shapiro 17:05

That's a good point. It might be easier to stay in our left brains. We have decades of success supporting the idea that if we do business this way, we'll win. Same thing with schooling. We have decades of success. We have supported the most successful economy in the world through incredible schooling. There's no question, that's true but things are going to be so different in 10 years. The difference between 1990 (and) 1980 I'm sure.. it was an upside down.



Jared Simmons 17:39

Maximal

marginal.

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Doug Shapiro 17:41

Exactly. The difference between 2020 and 2030. I can imagine the creative mindset and revolution we need to go through to support what it will take to be successful then.



Jared Simmons 17:54

Well said. So innovation is when creativity improves life. Tell me what innovation isn't?

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Doug Shapiro 18:03

I would say, innovation isn't being creative for the sake of novelty, creating something novel. No. Just because something's new doesn't mean it's innovative. If it doesn't improve someone's life.



Jared Simmons 18:18

Why does it matter that people understand that that's not innovation?

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Doug Shapiro 18:23

I think a lot of wasted calories. A lot of failed startups. I also think that you can't, I don't want to say that everything should be innovative, because at the end of the day, you need to fail. Do the thing that doesn't improve someone's life, but it's novel, because you like it, do it. Then it'll show you something, you'll get a glimpse of something else. It'll be a stepping stone to something that ends up being innovative. The palm pilot, it didn't ever really take off and but it gave us a glimpse of something else. I don't have any proof at all that that gave us a window into like an iPhone or something. I guess the point is, we can't be obsessed with always getting it right. We have to do things that are novel at times and explore and play.



Jared Simmons 19:24

This is probably not the best way to describe it, but the side of creativity that is not productivity and outcome focused.

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Doug Shapiro 19:32

Sometimes that's art. Maybe only you're the person that will enjoy it, but you need to go through that process. Sometimes it's just like you said, it's doing something you're not sure if it's really going to check all the boxes of innovation, but you have to try this because you need to see what's going to happen.





Jared Simmons 19:50

Sometimes you just have to get it out. I'm obsessed with this thought or this idea or this concept. I just need to get it out on paper or into the air or into a prototype or whatever, that you can move on to the next thing. How has creativity shaped your career?



Doug Shapiro 19:50

For me, it's always been a personal passion. I remember getting a book from my dad when I was like maybe 15-16, it was called A Whack on the Side of the Head. I think maybe he had to read it for work. I can't remember exactly why he got it or gave it to me. He did and I read that book. I was just so fascinated by all the techniques around creative thought. It became clear to me, this is what I love, I love to do this. I kept it at bay through the rest of my schooling. It wasn't until probably I was in the product design space, where I've been at OFS. I've been a bunch of places at the company I work with now that gave me a chance to use some of those methods and be more creative. I've had the chance, where I'm at now to work with product designers, to work with interior designers, and architects really all over the globe. It's given me a window into their process and they're in the middle of it. When you're designing spaces, you have this massive palette of products, and information, and tools and ways you can address this blank canvas, you're forced to imagine something that doesn't exist. That in itself is incredibly creative and so being around that industry, and with those people have taught me a lot about creativity.



Jared Simmons 21:33

Fascinating. It goes back to the importance of environment that you were highlighting earlier and how being in the right environment can change your ability to be creative and how you view things.



Doug Shapiro 21:43

We all know there are places that we walk into and they just suck the energy out of us. Then there are places we walk into, and you feel great. This is just a little nudge for any listeners that is, you know, if you're in that home office, it's not selfish to take a day, even if you have to, to make your space great. Bring some plant life in there. If you can, get some sunlight or work it into your day, give yourself some inspiration. Don't feel like you need a blank canvas of nothingness and it has to be a serious place, bring some joy into the place as well.



Jared Simmons 22:20

Well said, you'd feed your creative energy and juices the same way you try and think about feeding our structure-logic side of things.



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Doug Shapiro 22:30

Absolutely. It goes right back to that question. How do we get as good at creativity as knowledge work?



Jared Simmons 22:35

How do we get into a world where creativity is seen as knowledge work, as well? There are still a lot of leaders that see creativity, that thing that designers do, or that thing, the innovation, you go off for two days, and you fill whiteboards, and you do this other stuff then you come back and you do the work, the real work. Creativity is for those exercises, those events or whatever. I think it's an everyday tool in the toolbox and you should bring it to how you process invoices, you should bring it to how you do everything. You may look through that lens of creativity and say, Okay, I don't see anything here but you won't see what's there, if you don't at least look.

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Doug Shapiro 23:15

I think I love the way you frame that right there.



Jared Simmons 23:18

Well, thanks. You've given me so many things to think about by starting from dismantling or decoupling innovation from problem solving, which kind of hurt my brain for me but I love it so I'm a convert. Any advice you might have for innovators out there?

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Doug Shapiro 23:36

I want to reconnect with the beginning of our conversation, when we talked about humor and laughter. My advice would be, find ways to work that into your day. If you've got a team that you're leading, find ways to bring it into your team. Whether you start meetings with a bad joke, that anybody can just laugh at, or that you encourage others to bring humor to those meetings. I think you'll just feel the nature and the culture change.



Jared Simmons 24:10

Great advice. Practical and applicable advice, and advice, you can turn into a habit. Those are the things I love about advice, and you checked all those boxes. That's fantastic. It's been a genuine pleasure, my friend. I really appreciate you taking the time and sharing with us your definition of innovation and creativity improves life. It's just been a pleasure to meet you and talk with you and laugh with you.

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Doug Shapiro 24:38

It's been really fun, Jared. I really love the time with you. I love the commitment and the

passion you have around this.



Jared Simmons 24:44

Thanks so much. I'm excited about getting to listen to your show and hear more of your perspective and your point of view.



Doug Shapiro 24:51

Thank you, Jared. Thanks for having me.



Jared Simmons 24:53

All right. Take care.



Jared Simmons 24:59

We'd love to hear your thoughts about this week's show. You can drop us a line on Twitter @outlastllc, or follow us on LinkedIn where we're @outlastconsulting. Until next time, keep innovating! Whatever that means.