

RSA Creativity in Public Services Network – Finance and Innovation event (Nov 2019)

Ian Burbidge spoke to findings from an ACCA survey of innovation and finance, drawing on a sample of more than 5,000 finance professionals around the world, followed by Hannah Webster, who introduced signs from a recent RSA Creativity in Public Services survey on innovation and finance.

Among the ACCA sample:

- compared to private sector finance staff, public sector finance staff placed a much higher emphasis on public trust rather than competition as a driver of innovation;
- there seemed to be an inclination for innovation strategy to be given to them – “rule takers” as opposed to “rule makers”, with signs of risk aversion towards change.

By contrast, the RSA Fellows survey sample had:

- a strong willingness to move from incremental innovation to radical innovation;
- an equally strong willingness to enact change that has been co-designed by managers and staff, with a collaboration between the workforce and leaders

In the group discussion reflecting on the two sets of results, various points were made:

- while the distinction between workforce and leaders is a highly valid one, it is also important to consider service users, and the extent to which their insights are taken into account;
- faced by huge budget cuts, we have seen local authorities reacting in different ways – some see this as a reason to draw on ideas from all sources and rethink how services are delivered, while others have become entrenched and defensive in tackling challenges;
- social entrepreneurs potentially have an important role in promoting a more effective approach to innovation, but they often face major problems in terms of shortages of resources and time;
- social entrepreneurs are also often better at identifying where diversity has been lacking and finding ways to bridge that diversity gap, but there is much more that needs to be done to promote accessibility in public service decision-making and change;
- social entrepreneurs also find that public sector finance rules, and public sector cultures and behaviours have a tendency to hamper innovation, with signs of cultural bias geared towards “norms” on a variety of factors from scale of organisation, to ethnicity and gender;
- the results of the surveys showed only averages, and there may well be different patterns evident if segmentations were available (Fellows working directly to large organisations as opposed to freelance workers in the RSA survey etc). More research is needed and care should be taken in drawing inferences from the results.

The group then went on to a brainstorming and prioritisation session, from which three broad themes emerged as being of particular interest:

- Better innovation through diversity
 - decision-makers should promote and embody diversity
 - lived experience and co-design should be a deeper part of the conversation
- Better processes to showcase and nurture innovation
 - organisations need to find better ways to identify good ideas from “grassroots”
 - networking events could join up entrepreneurs, funders and project partners
 - plan and manage resources for integrated impact
 - budgets should include a set-aside for promoting innovation
- Broader perspective on commissioning
 - decision-makers need to take a more holistic, systemic look, avoiding organisational silos
 - more emphasis needed on wellbeing and “greenness”, not just economics

The Steering group welcomes thoughts and suggestions for events that could help take forward one or more of these approaches.