

Regent Business School alumni deems innovative thinking a scarce commodity in the public service sector of Africa

By [Patrick Matijila](#), issued by [Regent Business School](#)

30 Mar 2016

I have always been intrigued by the high levels of sophistication and development defining the standards of living and professionalism in different sectors and or industries of both the Western and Eastern worlds. From the perspective of the public sector, my recent tour to the UK of the British Civil Service suggested that the answer was in the willingness to evolve with changing times, and by inference, to innovate perpetually.

According to *The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, Volume 17(3), 2012, the British government created the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to stimulate innovation and a more integrated policy approach to skills, higher education and innovation. With regard to the Public Service, the author, Su Maddock, argues that innovation is essential to the UK's ability to meet the economic and social challenges in the 21st century. Education, health and transport provide the underpinning for all innovative activity. Demand is growing therefore, amongst public service users for more efficient service that are personalised to their needs. I argue that this trend is evident in the Public Services of many African countries. More and more clients and users of public service are more vocal these days than ever before. They expect almost personalised attention and quality service and outcomes.

It is in the course of my study tour to the UK and my life-changing experience with Regent Business School as an MBA student in yesteryears that I became hooked to the innovative masterfulness with which the UK Civil Service in this instance stimulates progressive liberal thinking. The argument is, for the UK Civil Service to move forward and remain relevant to its clientele, it needs to be competitive especially in the face of innovative drives that are taking place in other sectors. The UK Civil Service has a cordial relationship with the private sector. This relationship makes it possible for the two sectors to accommodate their best brains in exchange programmes and sharing experience. The objective is to ensure that the best brains recruited straight from the University are empowered through fast-tracking to the benefit of both sectors in the interest of the country. There are of course problems in the process but they are not insurmountable.

Think of Public Services in Africa, one struggles to find a model so accomplished that one can use in another country. I believe that the creation of a space or a "lab for ideas" in Africa's Public Sectors may enable their human resource to unleash its brain power in the pursuit of "**next**" **best practices** that may provide solutions to the challenges of the present and the future. In the Public Services of many African countries, the lack of continuous source of great ideas or perhaps the presence of the so-called "**empty innovative pipelines**" where some African Civil Servants appear to lack a sense of urgency and refined professionalism to execute their responsibility with pride and patriotism is a major concern. Many of African countries' Civil Services are retarded by political ideologies that still equate ones' ability to perform with political credentials and loyalty to a political leadership. Meritocracy is seen as a menace to political power and comfort.

You see, according to John Milton in his *Areopagitica*, where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinion - for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. In his writings, *The Great Conversation*, Robert M. Hutchins argues that the tradition of the West is embodied in the great conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day. Maybe the "Innovation Hub" in the Civil Service of the UK is testimony to that continuation and should be embraced in our developing world, and not that there is nothing to emulate from the East.

The creation of an "Innovation Hub" in the Public Services of Africa should be agreed upon and be embraced before anything else can be done. In other words, there should be a political and **managerial will** for such an idea to take off. Politicians should feel comfortable with such an idea and like Hutchins argues, the goal of such a space should be to move the Public Service towards a dialogue and enkindle a spirit of inquiry among its staff members from top to bottom or from

bottom to top – for it is my conviction that where individuals are allowed space to speak their mind, no proposition can be left unexamined. This space should be intended to be a place of ideas geared towards improving the way things are done in the Public Service of Africa in order to fine tune and deliver quality service to all stakeholders and business partners. Such a space should be a well-resourced place where ideas can be brewed and distilled; where the imperatives for change can be debated and understood; a place where thoughts can be provoked to offer solutions to local problems. Regrettably, countless brilliant ideas seem to be deliberately ignored by politicians and the connected few in many African countries because such ideas may have emanated from people and or citizens who are not politically connected and or “correct”. One can only imagine where the developed world would be at today if citizens were defined by the political party they follow. In the big democracies of the western world, ideas and not party colours define character and dreams to innovate are nurtured and embraced.

Of interest to share is the thought that a positive mind attracts a positive event. In this context, positive thinking that speaks to the law of attraction where “like attracts like” should be encouraged in such a way that colleagues working together should positively influence and learn from each other. This should in turn nurture positive attitudes where each person can appreciate and notice positive qualities instead of wasting time on the negative. Naturally the Public Service is a huge employment space and relies on the integrity and honesty of its employees to deliver services. But without a positive attitude on their part flamed by innovativeness, citizens of Africa will continue to be on the receiving end of poor and compromised quality service. So, let’s start now, through innovative thinking, to develop the best practices for Africa so that others can also come to Africa’s shores to learn and emulate!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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