

A KEANE EYE: Put your hand up

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THE Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Construction Innovation has done a lot to try to publicise innovation of recent year – after all, that is part of its job! In the past it has sought out contractors displaying innovation, and encouraged them to subject themselves to examination for possible publication of a case study based on their work.



Contractors and others who have been subject to such studies has received the benefit of significant national publicity through press releases, seminars and published material, and the examination process prior to this has not been overly intrusive.

However, the reticence of many contractors to put themselves forward for consideration as case studies, together with the need to try to meet other objectives such as a distribution of projects between states and variety in the types of work covered, have made it heavy going for the CRC BRITE (building research, innovation, technology and environment) Project research team led by Dr Karen Manley over the past three years, and a new approach is being adopted this year.

The team is now looking to build a National Innovative Contractors Database, a little like a Yellow Pages directory for innovative contractors, with the aim of promoting collaborative opportunities for these businesses, and promoting them to clients looking for innovation in their projects.

The database is not limited in the number of entries that can be made to it, although a set number of case studies will be chosen from it, for closer examination. There will be evaluation criteria for businesses nominated for listing on the database, but that should not be a daunting process.

Innovation is not a magic word or process: most people and businesses engage in innovation without being conscious of it. It can be a new product, piece of equipment, method of performing a task, or business process. If we didn't innovate in some way, we would continue to do things the same way that we did them 10 years ago, and that is a luxury that few of us can afford.

It is first necessary to recognise that we innovate, and then it is necessary to measure the results of that innovation in some way whereby we can evaluate its benefits. From that we can make adjustments to fine-tune the innovation so that it is more effective.

It's hard to make meaningful adjustments unless we have a way of measuring the results of any changes we make, and that is one area where some previously nominated businesses have fallen down.

There can be clear anecdotal evidence that a change has been beneficial, but unless we know how beneficial it has been can have trouble in working out whether it has been cost effective, or justifying any change in rates that results from using a new machine, material or process.

From that point of view, it does not matter whether a business listed is in an innovation directory or not: if it is truly innovative, benefits will accrue to the business regardless.

However, innovative businesses like to deal with other innovative businesses because ideas from multiple sources increase the chances of success, and the database is a good way to find like-minded businesses.

Even if a company puts its name forward for a database listing and does not succeed initially, that need not be a failure.

The feedback from the attempt can help the company to learn more about itself and improve its internal processes for implementing and measuring change, and that is a long-term win in itself.

Dr Karen Manley can be contacted on 07 3864 1762 (email k.manley@qut.edu.au). Make the call – you've got nothing to lose, and plenty to gain. You don't get those odds on a horse race!