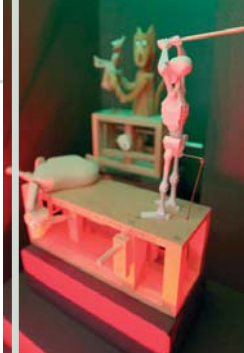


Play to win

PLAY TO WIN



BOX's Cabinet of Wonder contains artefacts of innovation over time



How can we improve the way new knowledge is shared between universities and business? The School is developing a long term partnership with EDS, the technology services company, focused on exploring innovation from both theoretical and applied perspectives. Alumni **Lewis Pinault** (MSc 1986), vice president at EDS, and **Florian Lennert** (BSc 1992, MSc 1997), director of LSE Corporate Relations, explain more about the venture.

FL: Various researchers in the School have informally collaborated for several years in investigating innovation issues, from the viewpoint of economics, anthropology, social psychology, media studies and public policy. The next step was to create a research group which would investigate the transformations in organisations and society released by technological change. We were also keen to explore new ways of making social science relevant to business users by creating a stimulating environment. We had been looking for the right industry partner for quite some time when Lewis and EDS colleagues approached us last year.

Lewis and EDS shared our interest and the result is a growing partnership with the School which encompasses not only a sponsored programme of academic research but also an innovation lab, called BOX, established on campus by EDS through LSE's Corporate Relations Unit.

The research programme now brings together academics focused on innovation in four key areas – public policy; media and communications;

productivity and intellectual property; and facilitation, mediation and complexity. Within each of these streams, School researchers develop topics for deep exploration. The outputs ultimately should be published in leading peer-reviewed journals but the journey there is at least as interesting. We are supporting highly interactive seminars and workshops along the way, previewing key results and inviting wide, cross-stream critique and insights through major conferences and practitioner-oriented presentations.

Creating BOX as part of the venture was driven very much by a belief that academic research can be valuable to business users, particularly if streamed through the right kind of environment. BOX is an experiment. While physically hosted on campus, it is currently run by a team including LSE alumni and EDS experts, led by Lewis. BOX consciously seeks to explore knowledge exchange beyond the boundaries of traditional academic research and to test out more interactive forms of collaboration between business and academia.

LP: So what happens in BOX? Well, it is a purpose built space used by LSE researchers as well as EDS staff and clients, mingling in a professionally facilitated, thoughtfully structured environment. In and through BOX, we use, test and develop new consultative tools, creating what we believe is a wholly new kind of client engagement – a model with a strong bias towards the application of complexity science to issues in both business and the social sciences – realised through things as seemingly unbusinesslike as 'serious play' and 'visual thinking'.

We make the bold assumption that people's behaviour in groups works a lot like complex systems in nature. In groups we interact with each other in numerous, subtle, often subconscious ways, forming a myriad of independent interactions that lead us to follow, or reject, or think, or switch off, depending on what's already really there between and among us, however wise or awful. A collective pattern of insight and behaviour emerges once people and ideas, and preconceptions and mental constructs, have all had a sufficient go at each other.

This is exactly how it works at BOX: we 'bound' or 'box' the ingredients as we would any complex adaptive system, borrowing lessons from nature and the physical sciences. In practice, that means we invite the right people and then we encourage them to look at an issue from a different perspective. We tease and provoke and test – often together with our LSE colleagues. It's amazing to see the natural, spontaneous emergence of new patterns and structures. We try to have the right pattern recognition gear, and we're trained to listen really well. Then, to get technical again, we iterate, as in nature, the successful emergent patterns into

higher levels of sophistication, so that we can test them for robustness and identify the 'successful attractor' of the system, in mathematical, social, and ultimately business terms.

The key is play. It turns out that one of the most powerful tools for intuiting the hidden order behind apparent complexity is play. Play is how we wire our brains as children, probing and testing for the underlying patterns and structures that help us make sense of the world. Unfortunately as adults we cast aside conscious awareness of, and much of the skill sets associated with, playing well. We work closely with the LEGO Group, among others, to reawaken these skills.

At this point I imagine sceptical readers have just said: 'Ridiculous!' But bear with me. Intriguingly, the use of our hands in playful processes seems key to innovative processes. It seems that we fire up more of our brains, and that there's good evidence of more neuronal activity, and better suffusion of blood to critical areas of the brain, when we hold and build objects in our hands, particularly when we use them to narrate stories. So you will see in our client workshops intensive use of products like LEGO Serious Play, which help us to build Identity, Strategy, and Competitive Landscapes, together with our clients. And in the space itself, you'll see a closely related emphasis on the artefacts of innovation over time, great inventions and devices which have so much to tell us about collective and intergenerational learning, objects which we feature in our Cabinet of Wonder, the centrepiece of BOX, and which we use routinely as stimulants in the workshops themselves.

What's great is that the tools required to innovate well, socially, intellectually, and in virtually any business environment, are right here in our hands,

and in our ability to play and to listen and to tell good stories. We need to embrace the complex, to allow simplicity to emerge naturally.

FL: And we hope that the LSE-EDS partnership will successfully explore these practices in both business and university settings and test them rigorously on the basis of academic research.

For more information please visit
www.BOXfoundation.org
www.lse.ac.uk/cru



Lewis Pinault

is managing director of BOX. After graduating from LSE in 1986 as a Fulbright Scholar, he began his management consulting career with the Boston Consulting Group, ultimately becoming a partner with Coopers&Lybrand before joining EDS. Author of *The Play Zone: unlock your creative genius, and connect with consumers and Consulting Demons: inside the unscrupulous world of global corporate consulting*, he is now also enrolled as a PhD student at LSE in Social Psychology, on the navigation and creation of explored spaces.



Florian Lennert

worked with the German Federal Privatisation agency, then local governments in Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia before returning to the School to help co-launch the Centre for the Analysis of Risk and Regulation. He was involved in establishing the LSE Foundation in New York, and has led the School's Corporate Relations Unit for the last five years.

The five year LSE/EDS Innovation Research Programme is jointly led by the Centre for Economic Performance, the Department of Media and Communications and the LSE Public Policy Group. It will result in working papers and seminars, with two major conferences planned in the first and third years. More details available at www.lse.ac.uk/collections/researchandprojectdevelopmentdivision