

FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, IN ARTICLES (INCLUDING FOR THIS MAGAZINE) AND BOOKS, U.K. WRITING TEAM STUART CRAINER AND DES DEARLOVE HAVE CHRONICLED, ANALYZED, AND EXPLAINED THE WORLD OF BUSINESS THINKING. THEY'VE READ EVERY STRATEGY BOOK AND INTERVIEWED EVERY MANAGEMENT GURU.

From the beginning, Crainer and Dearlove tried to compile the most valuable and relevant ideas for senior executives without the time to sort through an entire bookshelf. And a dozen years ago, they formalized that process by creating Thinkers50, a biannual project identifying key thinkers around the world and ranking their influence and importance.

Consultants and B-school professors were interested right away—who wouldn't leap at the opportunity for wider recognition?—but only recently has Thinkers50 broken through to another level of interest and awareness. The 2013 awards drew a great deal of publicity, making clear the general interest in business thinking. And McGraw-Hill just published the first four Thinkers50 books—on management,

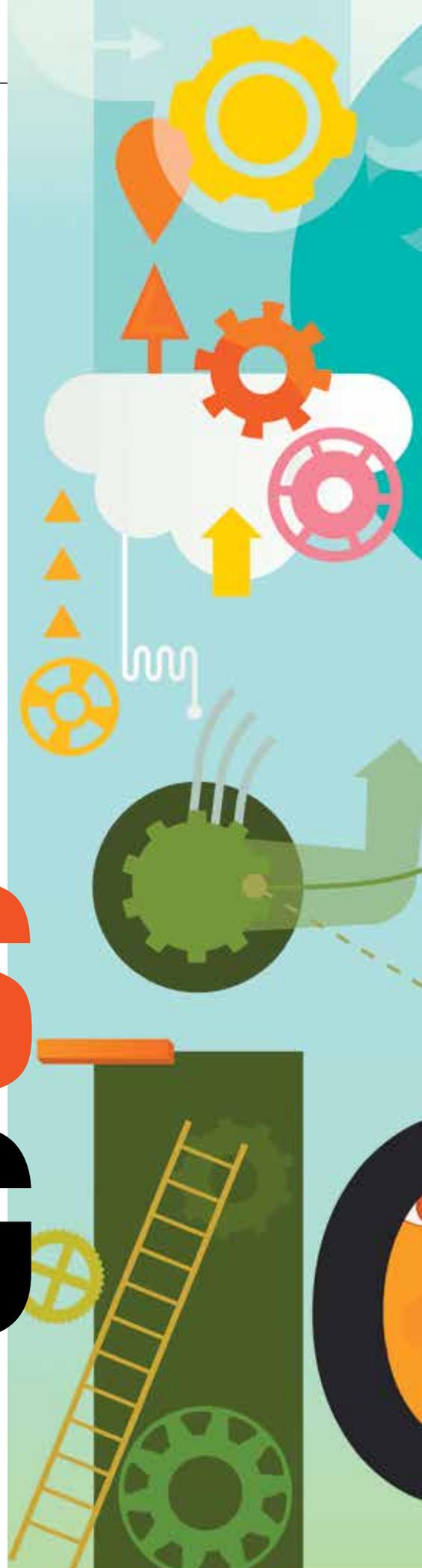


strategy, leadership, and innovation—with two more in the works, on future thinkers and Indian thinkers. Crainer wryly describes the series as “kind of a guide to the best thinkers in each of those fields, with witty and insightful commentary by Des and me.”

Crainer spoke via Skype from his U.K. home, shortly after the Thinkers50 gala awards ceremony in London.

WHAT'S THE BIG

STUART CRAINER SEES MORE INTEREST IN MANAGEMENT THINKING THAN EVER BEFORE.



BY MATTHEW BUDMAN



OF COURSE, YOU PREDICTED THERE WOULD BE INTEREST IN THE THINKERS50 IDEA—OTHERWISE YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN THE TIME TO LAUNCH IT. BUT DID YOU EVEN HOPE IT WOULD GET SO BIG?

We've been surprised. And the awards gala was as good as it could have been, really. We got people flying in from around the world, from California, just for the day. People from Japan, China, Turkey. Clay Christensen came.

YOU'VE BEEN WORKING DIRECTLY WITH TOP THINKERS FOR YEARS. BUT WERE YOU SURPRISED AT THE LEVEL OF INTEREST IN HIGH-LEVEL THINKING AMONG BUSINESSPEOPLE IN GENERAL?

Not really, because the nature of business thinking has changed. When you and I started writing about business, twenty years ago, all the business thinkers were geared around making corporations more effective, more efficient, improve performance. It was quite narrow. And over the years, that's changed; now the scope of business thinking is much broader. Thinkers have moved from improving organizational effectiveness to tackling some of the biggest issues facing mankind.

Clay Christensen is looking at education; Michael Porter has looked at health care. C.K. Prahalad started off looking at core competencies, talking about strategy and co-creation and innovation, and then moved on to the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid. The issues these people are talking about are hugely important—and global.

WHY THE SHIFT?

There was a realization that if you apply organizational and managerial learning to big issues, you can actually make a difference. After all, a lot of the problems with big issues have to do with efficiency and organizational effectiveness. The biggest employer in the United Kingdom is the National Health Service; in fact, it's one of the biggest organizations in the world, after the Chinese Red Army, Indian Railways, and Walmart. We spend a fortune on it—billions and billions of pounds. And the issues with the Health Service are managerial: making a big organization efficient. Going after the problems wouldn't just increase shareholder returns—it would actually directly improve the lives of millions of people.

OF COURSE, MOST READERS ARE LOOKING TO GET THE SAME THING FROM BUSINESS BOOKS THEY ALWAYS HAVE, RIGHT?

Well, sure, that's still why managers buy books—they want that nugget of information, that slightly different perspective, in the hope that it gives them a competitive advantage. Managers read books because they think that little bit of

information will get them ahead of the competition. There's nothing so practical as a good idea.

AT A TIME WHEN MANAGEMENT IDEAS ARE OFTEN COMPRESSED INTO 140 CHARACTERS AND A LINK, ARE PEOPLE TAKING THE TIME AND MAKING THE EFFORT TO READ AND DISCUSS AND ACT ON REALLY BIG IDEAS?

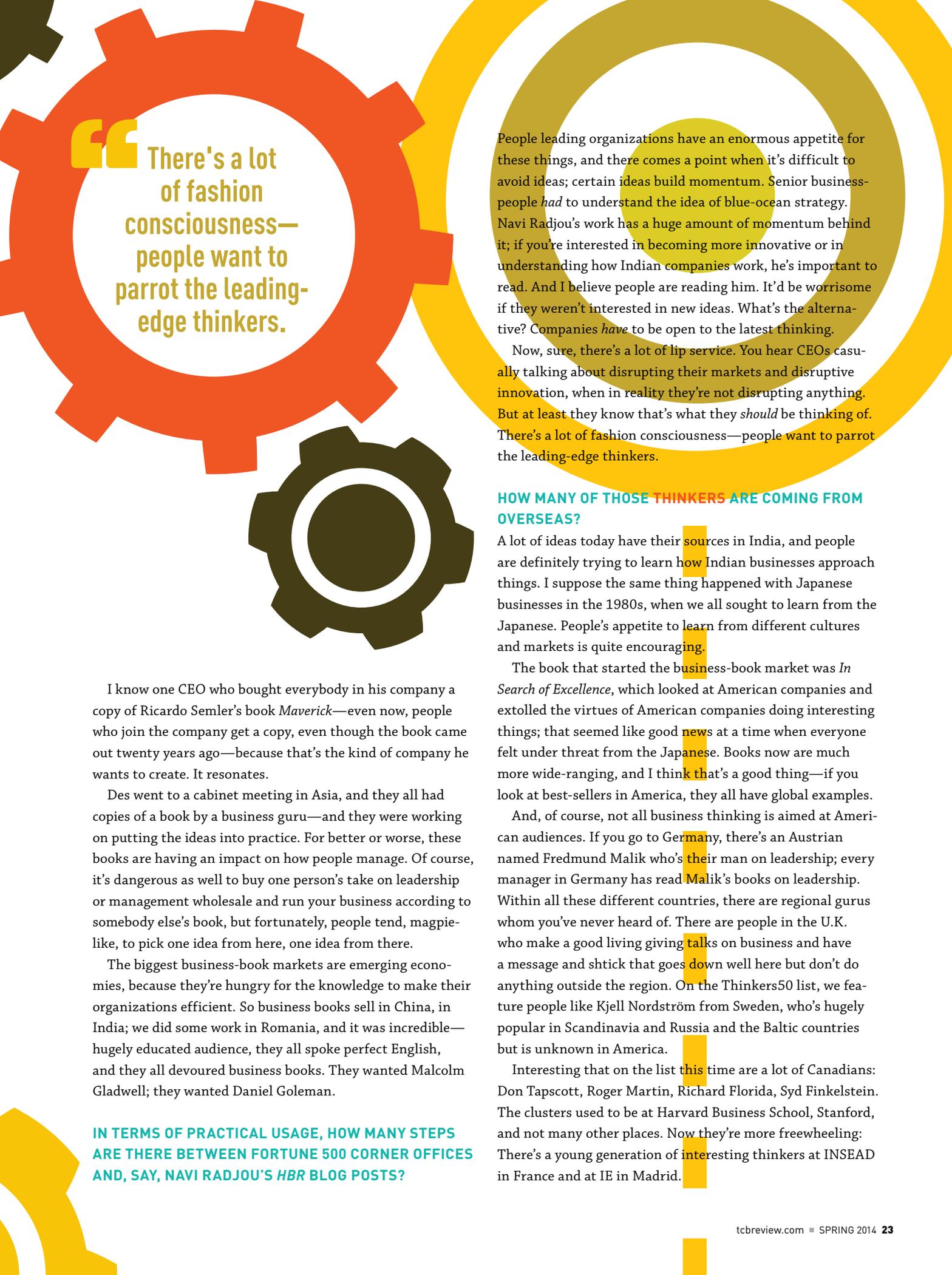
Well, some ideas can be compressed into a tweet. And some should probably stay there, shouldn't they? But the best thinkers can distill ideas down to a phrase or sentence that resonates with people. Think of *The Tipping Point*: It's a tweet-sized idea with, obviously, stories and information behind it. Vijay Govindarajan at Tuck is a serious thinker, but his phrase "reverse innovation" is simple and understandable while encapsulating an important idea.

Distilling things is part of the challenge. The best thinkers can actually do that. We meet lots of business-school academics who say that's dumbing down ideas, but really it's dumbing it *up*. That's the hard bit: making sense of a trend and compressing it into a compelling idea that people really understand. Clay Christensen talks about distilling his ideas into something a 12-year-old could understand. For these top thinkers, that's really important.

I remember filming interviews with C.K. Prahalad, who was a really great guy who wanted to change the world for the better. At the end of the interview, you always say to the cameraman, "How was that for you? Did you understand what I was talking about?" That was his measure of success—he didn't really care whether Des or I understood. He cared about the people operating the cameras, who weren't really his natural audience. And when we interviewed him, they always said yes, and they wanted his books afterward. That doesn't usually happen when you interview a business thinker. The best ones make that effort—they're capable of summing up an idea in few words. That's what connects with audiences.

GREAT THAT PEOPLE ARE BUYING AND READING AND EVEN UNDERSTANDING BUSINESS BOOKS, BUT HOW MUCH ARE EXECUTIVES ACTUALLY USING THEORY? HOW OFTEN DO YOU GET THE SENSE THAT A CEO RETURNS FROM A BUSINESS TRIP AND SAYS, "I JUST FINISHED BLUE OCEAN STRATEGY, AND WE NEED TO CHANGE EVERYTHING WE'RE DOING"?

Well, that book sold two million copies—it's probably the biggest serious thought-leadership seller over the last few years—and it was criticized initially for being rearview-mirror strategy. But there are all sorts of tools in there that companies really do use.



“There's a lot of fashion consciousness—people want to parrot the leading-edge thinkers.”

I know one CEO who bought everybody in his company a copy of Ricardo Semler's book *Maverick*—even now, people who join the company get a copy, even though the book came out twenty years ago—because that's the kind of company he wants to create. It resonates.

Des went to a cabinet meeting in Asia, and they all had copies of a book by a business guru—and they were working on putting the ideas into practice. For better or worse, these books are having an impact on how people manage. Of course, it's dangerous as well to buy one person's take on leadership or management wholesale and run your business according to somebody else's book, but fortunately, people tend, magpie-like, to pick one idea from here, one idea from there.

The biggest business-book markets are emerging economies, because they're hungry for the knowledge to make their organizations efficient. So business books sell in China, in India; we did some work in Romania, and it was incredible—highly educated audience, they all spoke perfect English, and they all devoured business books. They wanted Malcolm Gladwell; they wanted Daniel Goleman.

IN TERMS OF PRACTICAL USAGE, HOW MANY STEPS ARE THERE BETWEEN FORTUNE 500 CORNER OFFICES AND, SAY, NAVI RADJOU'S HBR BLOG POSTS?

People leading organizations have an enormous appetite for these things, and there comes a point when it's difficult to avoid ideas; certain ideas build momentum. Senior business-people *had* to understand the idea of blue-ocean strategy. Navi Radjou's work has a huge amount of momentum behind it; if you're interested in becoming more innovative or in understanding how Indian companies work, he's important to read. And I believe people are reading him. It'd be worrisome if they weren't interested in new ideas. What's the alternative? Companies *have* to be open to the latest thinking.

Now, sure, there's a lot of lip service. You hear CEOs casually talking about disrupting their markets and disruptive innovation, when in reality they're not disrupting anything. But at least they know that's what they *should* be thinking of. There's a lot of fashion consciousness—people want to parrot the leading-edge thinkers.

HOW MANY OF THOSE THINKERS ARE COMING FROM OVERSEAS?

A lot of ideas today have their sources in India, and people are definitely trying to learn how Indian businesses approach things. I suppose the same thing happened with Japanese businesses in the 1980s, when we all sought to learn from the Japanese. People's appetite to learn from different cultures and markets is quite encouraging.

The book that started the business-book market was *In Search of Excellence*, which looked at American companies and extolled the virtues of American companies doing interesting things; that seemed like good news at a time when everyone felt under threat from the Japanese. Books now are much more wide-ranging, and I think that's a good thing—if you look at best-sellers in America, they all have global examples.

And, of course, not all business thinking is aimed at American audiences. If you go to Germany, there's an Austrian named Fredmund Malik who's their man on leadership; every manager in Germany has read Malik's books on leadership. Within all these different countries, there are regional gurus whom you've never heard of. There are people in the U.K. who make a good living giving talks on business and have a message and shtick that goes down well here but don't do anything outside the region. On the Thinkers50 list, we feature people like Kjell Nordström from Sweden, who's hugely popular in Scandinavia and Russia and the Baltic countries but is unknown in America.

Interesting that on the list this time are a lot of Canadians: Don Tapscott, Roger Martin, Richard Florida, Syd Finkelstein. The clusters used to be at Harvard Business School, Stanford, and not many other places. Now they're more freewheeling: There's a young generation of interesting thinkers at INSEAD in France and at IE in Madrid.

ALONG WITH PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT PLACES, ARE YOU SEEING MORE INTEREST IN UNUSUAL CASE STUDIES AND RESEARCH?

The appetite for coming up with companies in strange places doing really innovative things is much greater than it used to be. If there's a company in Sichuan Province that's doing something wildly interesting, the chances are that somebody will write about it and research it and interview people there in the relatively near future.

There was a time in the 1990s when every single management article featured ABB, General Electric, and Dell. Over the last decade, everyone has talked about Google and Apple. And of course, there will always be researchers who just want to do another take on Google and Apple; there are lazy people in all fields. But I think what we will see in the future, with the changing shape of business education, is that business researchers will *have* to get out there. That will be their job.

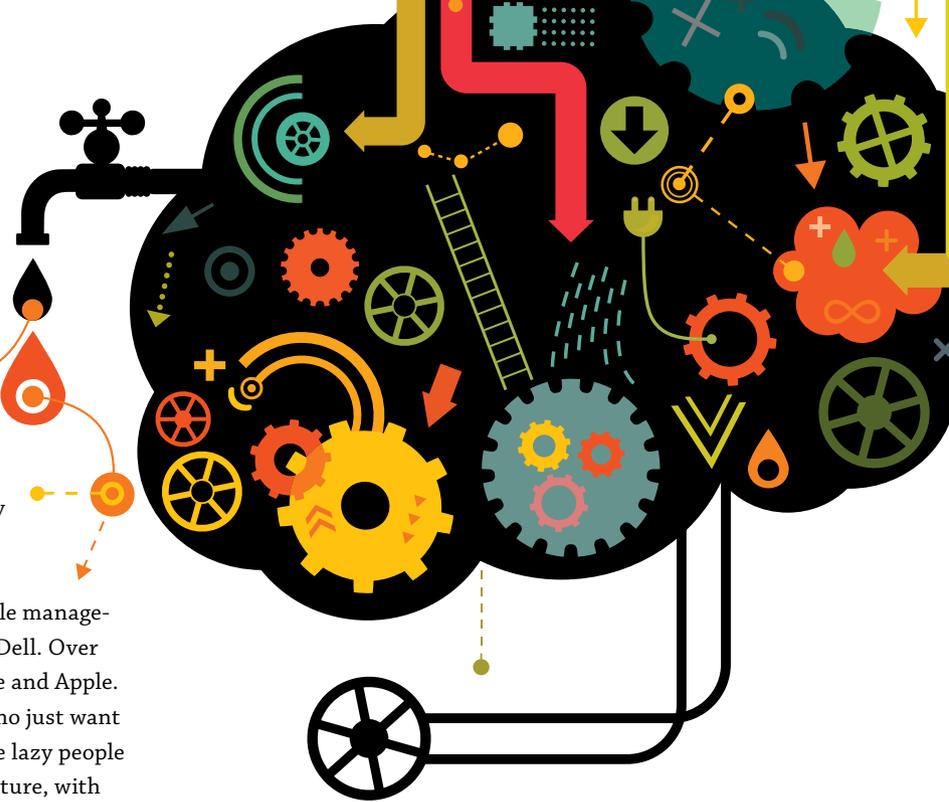
HOW MANY OF THESE NEW IDEAS—BREAKTHROUGH AND OTHERWISE—ARE JUST THE SAME OLD THING, WITH NEW CASE STUDIES?

Ideas come and go, and some come around again; they tend to build on each other and be rephrased and repackaged and refreshed. Everyone talks about innovation now, but years ago it was called something else. There's a circularity to it. Peter Drucker was talking about knowledge management in the late 1960s, and we're still dealing with how to manage knowledge workers—look at *Clever*, by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones of London Business School. Quality was big in the 1980s, was still around for a bit of the '90s, and then disappeared, but quality is fairly timeless, so on our list is Subir Chowdhury, who talks about quality. These issues are being revisited all the time.

And it's related to the economic situation: When things are tough, the emphasis tends to be on the hard stuff, so in the 1990s we had reengineering. When things are better, the soft stuff, like leadership, has a renaissance.

THERE IS GENUINELY NEW THINKING, THOUGH. I HAD NEVER HEARD OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY, WHICH WON THE THINKERS50 BREAKTHROUGH IDEA AWARD FOR 2013.

Nor had I, until recently. It's a brilliant idea about how much money we could save by reducing waste, such as converting food waste to energy. I interviewed Ellen MacArthur, who's very famous in the U.K. and in France for sailing around the world—she held the world record for solo circumnavigation. An inspiring woman, and now she's championing the



concept of the circular economy. I asked her where the idea came from, and she said, "Actually, it was China's last five-year plan—it mentions the circular economy," as well as the "cradle-to-cradle" idea that comes out of architecture.

There's one U.K. carpet company that has bought into the cradle-to-cradle idea and is using old carpets to make new ones, with no diminishment in quality. Tens of thousands of carpets are thrown into landfills in the U.K. every year, and this gets around that problem.

WITH THE GLOBAL SOLUTIONS AWARD, YOU LOOK TO RECOGNIZE "THE THINKER WHOSE IDEAS HAVE HAD THE BIGGEST IMPACT IN TACKLING SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS." DO YOU REALLY TRY TO MEASURE IMPACT?

To some extent. It's hard to quantify, of course. We look for people with practical ambition and ideas that have an impact. Don Tapscott won the award this year, and his stuff is all about bringing networks of people together. It's powerful and ambitious and trying to change the world for the better.

There's been a lot of research at business schools in the last fifty years that hasn't been grounded in having an impact; it's been research for its own sake. I think the tide is turning: Managers want research that has relevance; they want to know what to do with it, how it helps them run their businesses, how it gives them new insights.

THERE'S A NOTICEABLE DEARTH OF ACCOUNTING PROFESSORS ON THE LIST.

That's our inherent prejudice, I think.

“ People will emerge from unlikely and unusual places with great stories and interesting takes on business. Managers in the West would be foolish to ignore them.

ARE YOU CONFIDENT THAT BUSINESS THINKERS ARE KEEPING UP WITH, AND CAN HELP MITIGATE, THE CHALLENGES THAT COMPANIES TODAY FACE?

Their ability to keep up to date is pretty impressive. Again, managers are very fashion-conscious, things are changing very quickly, and if you're talking about old technology or appear out of date, managers give you pretty short shrift. If you appear before a group of managers and give a presentation based on a best practice of GE under Jack Welch, they're not going to be very impressed. But if you have an insight into what the Tata Group or Infosys is doing different, they're going to be interested.

I'M CURIOUS: CAN A BUSINESS THINKER TODAY BE A PURE WRITER AND RESEARCHER, OR DOES SHE HAVE TO BE A POLISHED KEYNOTE SPEAKER AS WELL?

Most of these people know that they need to get out there and sell their ideas. There aren't many people on the Thinkers50 list who are poor presenters. In the past you could stay in your office, but that's part of the job these days. Take Richard D'Aveni, a strategy guy who came up with the term *hypercompetition*. Richard is a really serious intellectual, but in the classroom he's brilliant. He brings in *The Godfather*; he's very interactive.

AS A FACULTY SPOUSE, I KNOW ANY NUMBER OF ACADEMICS WHO PREFER TO BE AS PRIVATE AS POSSIBLE, WHO HATE THE WHOLE IDEA OF SELLING THEMSELVES AND TWEETING AND BUILDING A PUBLIC BRAND. BUT LOOKING AT VIDEO OF THE THINKERS50 AWARDS CEREMONY IN LONDON, I WONDER WHETHER THAT WOULD CHANGE IF THERE WAS THAT KIND OF PUBLIC RECOGNITION INVOLVED FOR, SAY, FRENCH HISTORIANS.

I think getting out there and resonating with audiences is part of the job these days. And a lot of people actually come alive with a group—Tom Peters is really a shy guy face to face, but put him in front of an audience and he's evangelical.

Like so many other fields, business thinking has traditionally been dominated by men, and of course you want to balance Thinkers50 as much as possible. It must be something of a relief to realize that there are so many top women now that you don't have to artificially tweak rankings or anything else.

It used to be pretty much just Rosabeth Moss Kanter. But the faculty at major business schools has changed over the last twenty years, and our list is now massively more diverse in terms of nationality and gender. Our first female Chinese

guru is on the list. It's all to be expected—that's progress.

The stereotype is that women excel at the soft side. But I don't think that's necessarily true—Rita McGrath won our strategy award, which is one of the harder intellectual subjects. And Herminia Ibarra is bringing analytical rigor to the leadership field. Plus, in the traditionally softer areas, look at someone like Stewart Friedman, who's doing really interesting work on diversity. So I don't think the divide still exists.

PRESUMABLY YOU ANTICIPATE THE GENERAL TREND CONTINUING AND BUSINESS THINKING BECOMING INCREASINGLY DIVERSE. WHERE WILL TOMORROW'S THINKERS COME FROM?

Tomorrow's thinkers will come from China. Initially, people are looking to practitioners in China—we feature two Chinese thinkers on the new Thinkers50 list, and they're both practitioners—but in the next few years, a generation of Chinese thinkers on business will emerge. There are new frontiers opening all the time.

Where is the most interesting business practice going to be in the next twenty or thirty years? I would guess it's not going to be in the industrialized Western world. Increasingly we get emails from people introducing us to thinkers from Latin America, South America, China, and India. I think there's going to be a new generation of best practice and interesting practice.

Or maybe Russia. I don't know of any Russian management thinkers, but I would guess there's going to be one.

SO YOU'RE LOOKING FOR THE REGIONAL GURUS WHO WILL BREAK THROUGH.

Right—the search is on for the North Korean business guru. People will emerge from unlikely and unusual places with great stories and interesting takes on business. Managers in the West would be foolish to ignore them. It's easy to go with received wisdom. And it's not only about regions—it's about other disciplines. Management has been very good about taking good ideas from sociology, psychology, literature—wherever they find them. How is neuroscience going to affect how managers manage? That seems like a rich area.

The chances of a manager knowing about all these ideas are not great. But they need just one idea. Some companies put a lot of importance on following the world of ideas. I was talking to a guy who runs an innovation center at a multinational, and his job is to keep up to date on all the people writing about innovation, all the weird and wacky ideas, because just one of those ideas could make a lot of difference. Ideas are a source of differentiation. ■