

Out of the box

An Israeli company has come up with a proven methodology of what it calls 'systemic inventive thinking'

• By MEREDITH PRICE LEVITT

On the surface, it seems like a paradox. Systematic and inventive aren't traditionally put in the same box – especially when it comes to innovative ideas. By definition, creativity relies on one's ability to transcend conventional rules, methods and patterns. But for SIT (systematic inventive thinking), an Israeli company with branches and franchises all over the world, the best solutions are often rooted in this unusual pairing.

According to Idit Biton, the vice president of international marketing and alliances who worked as the director of SIT Israel for 10 years, the idea dates back to the mid-20th century when a Russian engineer named Genrich Altschuller decided to study creativity by examining 200,000 patents. Rather than focusing on what made them different, his research looked at what they all shared. After completing his study, he determined that strong patterns exist among innovative ideas. Based on these findings, he came up with a systematic way of thinking that could lead to higher creativity.

"One of Altschuller's Russian students came to teach his methodology in Israel in the 1980s," says Biton. "But it was extremely complicated. It required something like 40 different templates and 200 diverse strategies."

Fifteen years ago, two aeronautical engineers in that Russian's university class were fascinated by the methodology's potential and set out to simplify it. They developed the five tools and two main principles (the principle of constraints and the principle of the path of most resistance) that – together with the facilitation, management process and organizational structure – form the core of SIT today.

"The first two engineers who came up with this simplified version of Altschuller's program got the attention of Amnon Levav, who was one of the managing editors of a magazine called *Status* at the time and now serves as CEO of SIT," explains Biton. In fact, it was Levav who took the idea to Haim Peres, a local businessman who challenged the engineers to find a method that could apply to companies to help them with marketing and management.

"We call Peres our 'vision man' because if he hadn't seen the potential, we wouldn't be here today," Biton says.

Once the SIT framework was in place, the first



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clients were largely from abroad because, as Biton puts it, "Israelis are skeptical." Once Israeli companies saw the results, however, they were also interested in benefiting. Today, the company employs 60 people around the world and has done consulting work for more than 500 companies. In 2003, the company was featured in the *Harvard Business Review*.

In several examples of past successes, Biton points out an innovative new level designed for working with angles that was invented by an Israeli company

named Capro. "It's a very simple concept that they applied to a new device. It didn't require technology or complicated conceptions," she says "It's just that it's odd to have a level that is actually not level, so it took some unusual thinking to come up with it."

For Philips, it was taking something away that turned its DVD player into a new product called the slim line, which has almost the same functionality but a sleeker, simpler look. For Tivoli, the innovation was a new raw material made out of vegetarian dough. The list goes on and on.

It sounds great to learn how to be creative and the examples are nice, but how does it work?

"Our model looks like an onion because it has many layers," says Biton. "It starts with a list of ideas or a product and then it moves to principles and facilitation and finally to managing the process and organizational structure. We don't just help companies come up with new ideas, we help them put them in place and make sure they are working."

SIT begins by looking at the companies' current goals, products and potential. Then, it teaches them how to think in new ways by using one of five different tools: subtraction, multiplication, task unification, division and attribute dependency. In a nutshell, the subtraction tool subtracts something from what already exists (like the Philips DVD); the multiplication adds features; the task unification tries to kill two birds with one stone (Biton points to one company that decided to print the instructions for assembly on the box instead of a piece of paper inside to save paper and money); the division tool sometimes slices things up (like a carpet for kids that can be put together like a puzzle); and attribute dependency involves creating a new relationship between two variables, such as a different texture for salad dressing that will make it spreadable for sandwiches.

"Ahava used attribute dependency to come up with a richer cream for the elbows and knees," says Biton, pointing out that each tool is designed to help companies overcome fixedness to create innovations, make more money, motivate their employees or reach a variety of other goals. "People usually say that if it's not broken, don't fix it, but we at SIT like to say that if it's not broken, break it."

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