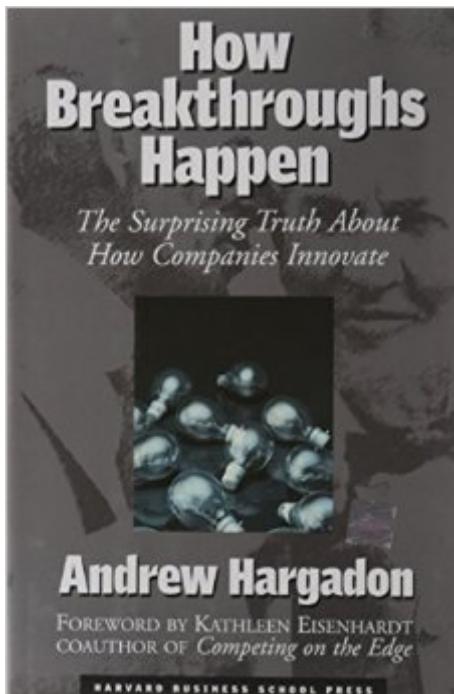


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# How Breakthroughs Happen: The Surprising Truth About How Companies Innovate



## Synopsis

This book presents lessons from the famous 'Invention Factories' past and present. Did you know that the incandescent lightbulb first emerged some thirty years before Thomas Edison famously 'turned night into day'? Or that Henry Ford's revolutionary assembly line came from an unlikely blend of observations from Singer sewing machines, meatpacking, and Campbell's Soup? In this fascinating study of innovation, engineer and social scientist Andrew Hargadon argues that our romantic notions about innovation as invention are actually undermining our ability to pursue breakthrough innovations. Based on ten years of study into the origins of historic inventions and modern innovations from the lightbulb to the transistor to the Reebok Pump athletic shoe, *How Breakthroughs Happen* takes us beyond the simple recognition that revolutionary innovations do not result from flashes of brilliance by lone inventors or organizations. In fact, innovation is really about creatively recombining ideas, people, and objects from past technologies in ways that spark new technological revolutions. This process of 'technology brokering' is so powerful, explains Hargadon, because it exploits the networked nature<sup>&#151;</sup>the social side<sup>&#151;</sup>of the innovation process. Moving between historical accounts of labs and factory floors where past technological revolutions originated and field studies of similar processes in today's organizations, Hargadon shows how technology brokers create an enduring capacity for breakthrough innovations. Technology brokers simultaneously bridge the gaps in existing networks that separate distant industries, firms, and divisions to see how established ideas can be applied in new ways and places, and build new networks to guide these creative recombinations to mass acceptance. *How Breakthroughs Happen* identifies three distinct strategies for technology brokering that managers can implement in their organizations. Hargadon suggests that Edison and his counterparts were no smarter than the rest of us—they were simply better at moving through the networked world of their time. Intriguing, practical, and counterintuitive, *How Breakthroughs Happen* can help managers transform their own firms into modern-day invention factories.

## Book Information

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## **Customer Reviews**

The Summary: This book looks to answer the question, "Can Innovation really be routine?" This book not only answers that question but actually gets into the details of "How". The title of the book is "How Breakthroughs Happen" and Hargadon definitely successfully explains the 'How'. He doesn't proclaim that it is easy, but he does give a road map of how to achieve innovation through technology brokering, he even explains the different paths that apply to different types of companies. This book is ambitious since it is going to go in the face of popular belief that innovation is the sole province of geniuses. But it also isn't just another create an "innovative work space" through giving break/games rooms, adding free soda machines and providing all employees with Herman Miller chairs! This isn't a superficial answer to innovation; you can't just throw money at this and hope that innovation will just happen! But follow his rules and strategies you should be able to create an environment where recombinant ideas can flourish. The central thesis of the book is that Innovation can be achieved through some best practices but first companies need to overcome the romantic preconception that innovation is the sole province of lone geniuses. Hargadon is a social scientist that has been researching innovation for the past decade. He explores the concept of technology brokering and creating Innovation factories a subject he first wrote about in a Harvard Business Review article - Building an Innovation Factory. Hargadon's research explores in detail Edison's Menlo Park as an example of one of the first documented innovation brokerages. He also looks at modern day examples such as IDEO (a company he has worked at) and Design Continuum.

For many who read this book, it may well be a "surprising truth" that innovation succeeds "not by breaking free from constraints of the past but instead by harnessing the past in powerful new ways." I am among those who agree with the prophet Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun; also with the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who asserted that everything changes...but nothing changes. I also agree with Hargadon's emphasis on the importance of an innovation strategy which

seeks to take full advantage of what can be learned from the past in order to create the future. His core concept is "technology brokering" which he introduces and then rigorously examines in Part I; next, in Part II, he describes the "networked perspective" of innovation, explaining how this strategy influences the innovative process within organizations, regardless of their size and nature; finally, in Part III, Hargadon provides specific and practical examples of how various organizations have designed and then implemented technology brokering strategies. Throughout the narrative, Hargadon explores in depth with rigor and eloquence his core premise: "that breakthrough innovation comes by recombining the people, ideas, and objects of past technologies." In this context, I am reminded of what Carla O'Dell asserts in *If We Only Knew What We Know* when discussing what she calls "beds of knowledge" which are "hidden resources of intelligence that exist in almost every organization, relatively untapped and unmined." She suggests all manner of effective strategies to "tap into" this hidden asset, capturing it, organizing it, transferring it, and using it to create customer value, operational excellence, and product innovation -- all the while increasing profits and effectiveness.

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