

Innovation Research Park – Why it Works - ACT

Written by An interview with Mr. Tom Osha, IRP at Old Dominion University conducted By Mr. Wayne Buck and Dr. Eric Pouliquen, ACT Capability Engineering
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As one of the only research parks in the nation to be located on the campus of its research institution, Innovation Research Park (IRP) sits at the heart of Old Dominion University's intellectual capital, research infrastructure, and student and faculty innovation.



Tom Osha is President and CEO of Innovation Research Park (IRP) at Old Dominion University (ODU), where he provides leadership in creating a knowledge community that utilizes intellectual capital, innovation, infrastructure, and sense of place, to create companies, expand markets, and attract business opportunities to ODU, the Hampton Roads region, and the Commonwealth of Virginia. Osha also serves as the Executive Director of Economic Development for ODU where he advises the President and senior leadership on matters of economic development policy and business strategy. He was recently appointed as the founding director of the ODU Innovation Foundation.

Q Why is Innovation Research Park needed?

A My parent company, Wexford Industries, believes in the concept of a Knowledge Community. A Knowledge Community has several components. It has a space component. There needs to be iconic, spiritual gathering places. It has an ecosystem component which is everything from programming, events, and the mix of stakeholders versus constituents. It has an anchor component that, in the case of IRP, is ODU and specifically different research centres of ODU. The final component within the Wexford world is a networking component. Companies that are here have the opportunity to collaborate for scale easily across all of our projects and more broadly to collaborate within all of our relationships in our industry and others. We believe that all of these components taken together form this Knowledge Community. We believe that the Knowledge Community is a more powerful construct than just the traditional office or science department setting.

Q You mentioned "collaboration for scale." You mentioned this also at Industry Day last

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year, what exactly do you mean by this?

A One of the challenges that small companies in particular have are how can they become large without taking on a lot of debt? How can they become large without becoming so distracted with outside activities that they cannot stay true to the essence of their business? We find there is far more power in putting together a group of organisations, companies, and individuals that together is far more powerful than they are separately and that they complement each other. Let us say, for example, that NATO is seeking a solution in a certain domain, perhaps ASW or C-IED. Those solutions are not going to come from the traditional routes through the nations, MODs, etc.

Where the new ideas will come from is the emergence of new players with new ways of thinking with new capabilities, particularly with different cost structures. So, if we threw a problem into the middle of this table that was a problem of say, how to defeat an IED. If sitting around the table was General Dynamics, Finmeccanica, Lockheed and all the rest you would get a solution. You would get a solution most likely based on the legacy solutions of platforms that they already provide. This brings with it its own cost structures, timelines and so on. If you wanted to throw the same problem out to a group populated by Google, someone in social networking, somebody in cloud computing, somebody in graphic design, you will get an entirely different solution due to the cross domain collaboration.

Where the construct of the collaboration for scale comes in and perhaps where it can help the Innovation Hub is when you have an idea ready to demonstrate. Now you can plug into your already existing capability development process and a small company can get access to opportunities that they have never seen before. Your collaboration allows you to scale an idea that you might never have scaled before at a cost structure that you might never have had.

Companies that are here have the opportunity to collaborate for scale easily across all of our projects.

Q So the scaling is finding the right interlocutors?

A Yes. Let me give you a telecommunications example. In 1998, DSL was just starting to get market penetration. We at Broadwing went to Cisco and said "We, Cincinnati Bell, would like to become your exclusive partner for the implementation of DSL." Of course, Cisco worked with all of the big companies like Verizon, AT&T and so on. But, our proposal was one of collaboration for scale. If in 12 months Cisco sold 30,000 DSL units across the US West that would be a lot of units. But, if they sold 30,000 only in Cincinnati then they would have a penetration that would allow them to start testing applications along with selling the units. Having a small partner brought Cisco a different dynamic than it otherwise would have had. That is collaboration for scale. Without that idea we never would have gotten their attention. Cisco was able to test many new applications on this network largely consisting of their hardware creating a win-win situation for both companies.

Q It would seem that this type of collaboration is the DNA of IRP.

A We think that collaboration is the DNA of a Knowledge Community.

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