

How do we get innovation acceptance?

We read and hear a lot about innovation, both here in Highways, and more generally across the media. The UK Government is backing innovation, particularly innovation aimed at the big challenges our society faces. Private investors too, who are seeking the elusive unicorn, back innovative companies and start-ups. Both the public and private sector want to see a return on their investments. The private sector's outcomes are typically of a fairly direct financial nature, those of government are of a more indirect economic nature, upskilling the country, improving exports, raising the quality of life, etc. For both the challenge is how to turn innovation into the less exciting but more sustainable business as usual, how to ensure it gets traction and earns money. Typically that means getting the innovation accepted by the intended user community and buyer community (and these are not necessarily the same thing). So easy to write, so difficult to do.

Having offered that probably obvious thought I also offer a second thought, and then will have a go at tying them together.

It is an often-stated concern that organisations put a lot of time into delivering outcomes, but not always enough into communicating, either internally or externally, their activities and achievements. Typically, the left arm doesn't know what the right arm is doing.

Where innovation is concerned the situation can be worse, because, even if it does know what the right arm is up to, the left arm may not fully understand why?

At first glance, you might expect that it is those of us who are faced with new and innovative activities that influence our normally familiar terrain are the ones not understanding how this wonderful new technology/service/solution delivers what it does and why it is so useful. Unsurprisingly, it is not that simple. It is equally likely that the new kids on the block (and I hope that they will forgive that label) maybe haven't yet fully got to grips with how and why things work the way that they do and how we got to where we are now. The path to acceptance of new products and services by the traffic control community requires understanding of what users are doing now, and why they are doing it. As a consequence, getting acceptance of innovation may not be as straightforward as it first seems.

So having outlined, albeit very simply, a problem, where does the Association for Road Traffic Safety and Management (ARTSM) fit in to a solution?

As a trade association that represents a substantial fraction of the providers of traffic signs, traffic control equipment, street furniture, vehicle and pedestrian detection equipment, and many other related products and services ARTSM might reasonably be seen as the old guard. However this is not strictly true. Many of our members are active in consortia and projects that draw on innovation funding, helping to tie the work and achievements of new businesses and providers into their own business models, and simultaneously informing their consortia partners own business models.

In the last 18 months recognising the changes that are happening, the Association has create a new class of membership opening access to designers, consultants and other businesses with specific knowledge and activity in the traffic control and ITS sectors. These members typically have a client base that spreads across the sector bringing a horizontal view of themes and ideas that are occurring in many places at the same time.

By now it should be becoming reasonably clear why this article is being written on behalf of ARTSM.

For those businesses who are established in a market where there are many changes currently occurring it is important to be aware of these changes and assess how these changes may impact their current portfolio of offerings, or their product development roadmap. They need to understand where there could be conflicts and competition and where there could be opportunities. For new businesses to share a table with those already engaged with the users, there is an opportunity to assess the current issues and challenges that are being addressed, so achieve a better fit between a new solutions and the current issues faced by users and thereby optimise the delivery of their products and services. Membership of the Association provides routes to these opportunities. The traffic control and ITS sectors will be stronger and more effective where left and right arms have a better idea of each other's concerns and objectives. Looking outwards from ARTSM, the Association is a founding member of the Highways Industry Alliance, bringing together the Institutions, Associations and related bodies to share knowledge and concerns.

Looking inwards, ARTSM's four working groups currently represent the range of members business interests. Each working group shares awareness of issues, supports standard development, raises concerns about developments and obsolescence in the sector. The working groups inform the Association's Executive committee and thereby its strategy and policy. Working group members sit on standards committees along with users and government, developing the standards that are used to procure the products and services of members.

And if you are thinking that innovation in the sector is all about autonomous vehicles, and so is pretty well covered by the automotive sector then may I suggest that the picture is larger than that, with pedestrians, cyclists, and other road users not being autonomous, it is larger even than that, taking in monitoring and predicting the condition of the assets, the presence of roadworks, road closures for events, for bad weather and so on. It is about demands for public and private mobility and managing urban and rural networks, and many other areas, so there is still room for lots of new innovation, and this innovation will be more likely to deliver its promises if it understands the ground it is building on.

We are keen to support those new kids on the block by offering the benefit of an appropriate, supportive and knowledgeable forum.

Contact our secretary (general.secretary@artsm.org.uk), look at our website, become part of the community and help the left hand know about the right hand.

Mark Pleydell, PTC Ltd

ARTSM

Executive Member