

Meeting challenges through innovation
Santa J. Ono
March 12, 2017

Premier Christy Clark asked me to become her chief advisor of the British Columbia Innovation Network earlier this year. Of course, I said yes. But, what is an Innovation Network? Better yet, what does innovation even mean?

We are bombarded with that word, innovation. We invoke this buzz-term so often, we risk stripping it of any real substance. But, it still has meaning to me. In fact, I have thought a lot about innovation, what it means to BC, and how by working together we can help push the provincial economy to new heights.

So, what is innovation? Joseph Schumpeter argued that innovation is a process of “creative destruction,” when new technologies replace old ones.

When the OECD ranks countries on their innovation performance, they define it as “the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service) or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations.”

To me, innovation is a never-ending exchange between the realities of today and the potential of tomorrow. Today, we are confronted with the enormous challenge of a changing climate, we witness friends and loved ones battle cancer, and we struggle to develop policies and facilities for our seniors. Tomorrow holds the promise of a sustainable, resilient global economy, reduced or eliminated cancer-related mortality, and an aging population living independently and actively engaged in society.

Innovation lies between the challenges of today and the dreams we have for tomorrow.

I know that British Columbians are incredible innovators. An app that finds new uses for surplus food; imaging technologies for the inside of oil and gas wells; personalized cancer treatments; quantum leaps in computing power—these are just a few examples of new products and methods devised in BC.

The technology sector is one area of the economy you can readily find innovation—new mobile apps, virtual and augmented reality technologies and applications, the internet of things, fuel

cells, and the list goes on. In this sector alone, nearly 10,000 companies employ more than 100,000 people.

But you can find great innovation in every sector of our economy and in every region in the province, whether in agriculture, health and life sciences, natural resources, education, tourism, transportation, or the film industry.

As president of UBC, it shouldn't come as a surprise that I think talent and research are critical drivers of innovation. BC-based researchers are tackling society's grand challenges and unlocking some of the greatest mysteries of the universe. And BC universities, colleges and polytechnics attract the brightest students from across the province and from the furthest reaches of Canada and the world.

To be sure, BC benefits from remarkable post-secondary institutions. But post-secondary institutions are not the sole drivers of innovation, nor the sole source of talent.

A BC Innovation Network includes all of us: the berry farmer considering new planting methods, the programmer figuring out how to immerse a gamer in intergalactic travel, the teacher using new learning tools in the classroom, or the genomics researcher at the lab bench.

With closer ties and a shared purpose, we can work more effectively to promote stronger links between the BC companies and organizations that depend on the availability of talented people, and the colleges, polytechnic institutes and universities responsible for training and educating our students. We can build clusters of expertise across this network focused on building competitive advantages in specific research and industry sectors, and around tackling difficult societal problems facing BC and communities around the world. These, to me, are the key parts of a BC Innovation Network.

As I embark on my role as the premier's chief advisor of the BC Innovation Network at this year's #BCTECH Summit, I look forward to hearing from fellow British Columbians. What I hope to achieve is a shared commitment to learning and research, collaboration, research clusters that combine complementary strengths in a variety of fields, and partnerships between post-secondary institutions, governments and industry.

Professor Santa J. Ono is the president and vice-chancellor of the University of British Columbia and the chief advisor of the British Columbia Innovation Network.