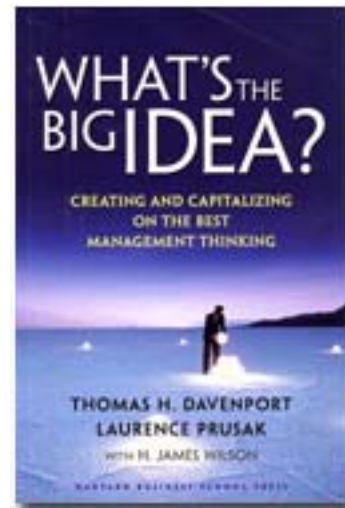


The following is a selection from chapter two, “The Idea Practitioners,” in Thomas H. Davenport and Laurence Prusak, *What’s The Big Idea? : Creating and Capitalizing on the Best Management Thinking* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003), pp. 42-43.



Blythe McGarvie

The stereotype of the Chief Financial Officer is a hard-nosed, green eyeshaded penny-pincher who can only evaluate new business ideas in terms of their internal rate of return. But Blythe McGarvie, the CFO at Societe Bic (the well-known maker of pens, razors, etc.) is not your typical CFO. We first met her at a conference on new business ideas sponsored by Harvard Business School Publishing, where CFOs were hardly common. For McGarvie, “Business is about the intellectual challenge. That’s what I thrive on and what I look for in the people I hire.” Her search for intellectual stimulation and a broad perspective has also led her to join three companies’ boards of directors, including Accenture’s.

McGarvie may have a somewhat typical educational background for a CFO, having majored in economics as an undergraduate and receiving an MBA from the Kellogg School at Northwestern. She diverged from most future CFOs at Kellogg, however, in focusing her studies on both accounting and marketing. She did become a CPA and worked for a global accounting firm for a few years, but, as she notes, “I’m not a typical accountant.” She demonstrated this with her next job, becoming a brand manager at Kraft Foods. That boundary-spanning background is typical of many idea practitioners, as is her family’s academic focus: she’s married to a professor, and is the daughter of a professor and a teacher. The mixture of marketing and finance served her well when she became CFO of Hannaford Brothers, a progressive Maine-based grocery retailer. She then moved to Bic when Hannaford was aquired by another firm.

McGarvie sees herself as playing two roles relative to ideas within Bic. One is to bring in new ideas, both financial and otherwise. She reads widely, attends conferences, and serves on outside boards in order to scan for new ideas and identify which ones might make sense at Bic. In her short time there (about three years), she’s already imported some new approaches to taxation, transfer pricing, and reporting to the company. She also sees herself as helping to shape a new culture at Bic that’s a relative novelty for a French firm. “I’m trying to bring a discipline of closure,” she notes. “What’s the next step? There’s a

strong oral culture in French business that may not ever get to what needs to be done to make something happen.”

Her other role is to influence the way ideas get circulated around the organization. “I’m trying to break the conspiracy of silence that’s often found in hierarchical French firms. For example, we organized an annual CFO and Technology Conference, with 80 people attending from around the world. I insisted that each person attending come up with an idea to improve our business. Nobody had ever asked them before! But I walk away with several really good ideas every time we have the conference.” She also tries not to throw cold water on other people’s ideas, even when they’re not very good in her opinion. “I don’t want to be the hard-nosed evaluator. I do apply objective criteria in evaluating ideas—it’s part of my identity as a finance person—but I try to put a little candy around my opinions so that people will still volunteer ideas.”

McGarvie sees the filtering out of inappropriate ideas for her organization to be an important aspect of the idea practitioner role. She notes, “If the idea isn’t right for the culture or the pacing of the organization, it won’t fly.” One idea that she believes probably isn’t right for Bic now, for example, is EVA, or economic value added. “It’s not a bad set of ideas—in fact they’re great for the right organization. But it’s not a good fit to the pace of our organization and French financial reporting structures.”

In a traditional French firm, it might be difficult for an American female CFO who is new to the company to get the credibility she would need to bring about change. But McGarvie has the strong support of CEO Bruno Bich, who brought her into the job and wants change in the organization. “Bruno’s support helps a lot—he’s the ultimate insider, and his name is on the company.” She also brought in an entirely new team for the finance function, which lets her concentrate on bringing about the kinds of changes Bic needs.

McGarvie would seem to be a prime candidate for headhunters seeking a CEO. But like many idea practitioners, she says that more power is not her goal. “Becoming a CFO was my dream, and I attained that at age 39,” she says. “My next goal is to share my ideas, mentor young people, maybe even write a column or book.” It’s a logical objective for many an idea practitioner.