

The societal incubator

A tool for responsible innovation in industry

“There is a need for appropriate spaces and institutional venues for all agents to have meaningful conversation around the question of responsibility of each innovation and to shape desirable futures”
Mahmud Samandari, Secretary General of Ethical Business Building the Future

Innovation can help solve major problems facing society, but in practice innovating firms find themselves facing many uncertainties with regard to public support, policy, regulation and liability. That uncertainty is felt not only by innovators and businesses but also by other stakeholders, such as public authorities, risk assessors, and civil-society organisations. The players involved adopt a wait-and-see attitude, not knowing what others are going to do. This leads to *waiting games* that perpetuate the uncertainty. As a result, potentially useful innovations are “left on the shelf”.

A shared learning process

Because the parties in a waiting game are dependent on one another, reducing uncertainties requires a collective effort. It involves a shared learning process in which innovating firms need to gain an understanding not only of technical and commercial requirements but also of issues regarding (risk) regulation, public needs, and social/ethical acceptability. The aim of a *societal incubator* is to make such learning processes possible, thus offering new perspectives for action.

Involving societal stakeholders

The idea of the societal incubator is inspired by the practice of the business incubator. A business incubator provides resources, protected space, and coaching to enable innovative ideas to develop into commercially successful products. In a similar way, a societal incubator aims to provide a protected space in which various interested parties can learn about the societal opportunities and conditions for innovation in a timely manner. Whereas a business incubator focuses on individual businesses, a societal incubator specifically brings together a broader group of stakeholders for the sake of a shared learning process in which it is possible to prevent or break free from waiting games.

The aim of the societal incubator is to facilitate the development of a promising innovation into a socially accepted product with added value. We distinguish three crucial steps toward achieving this.

Starting point	I – Information and interaction	II – Analysis	III – Continue or discontinue?	Ideal endpoint
A firm has an interesting innovation but faces major uncertainties (“waiting game”)	Draw up <i>social map</i> , collect <i>information</i> , and organise <i>interaction</i> between stakeholders	<i>Understanding</i> of societal issues, views of actors, problems, possibilities, commitment etc. (<i>reporting</i>)	<i>Action plan</i> with follow-up steps or <i>Discontinue</i> development process in good time	Socially <i>accepted</i> product with <i>added value</i> for society

A new form of organisation

As a new form of organisation, the societal incubator can also serve as a shared platform for a more programmatic approach. Here, innovators, businesses, stakeholders and civil society organisations can explore a range of possibilities for technological innovation with an emphasis on important and pressing challenges facing society.

Knowing more?

See: <https://www.rathenau.nl/en/knowledge-policy/beyond-public-acceptance>

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