

Orchestrating Creative Chaos: The Role and Key Competencies of Living Lab Managers and Their Team

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Abstract

Launching a new Living Lab (LL) is a challenge and identifying the right manager and team are key to enable it to develop sustainable activities. Although there is a large body of literature on the challenges and barriers faced by LL as well as their governance model, there is a gap as to which specific competencies a LL manager and their team require as individuals. The aim of this research is to dive very concretely into the roles and key competencies the members of such team should have or develop, hoping that such pointers would help developing structures recruit the right profiles. Given the limited literature on LL managers competencies, description of innovation brokers and LL stakeholders roles were analysed to find similarities and narrow them down to four roles – “Initiator and keeper of the strategy”, “Doer and value creator”, “Relationship creator and communicator” and “Business developer”. - and their corresponding competences.

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Eight semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with experts from the field; LL managers or team members that confirmed the relevance of the four profiles. The preliminary results underline the importance of soft skills in comparison to hard skills as well as intercultural team management. To further develop this research a quantitative survey will be conducted to test the framework.

Key words

Living Lab, governance, management, competencies, interdisciplinarity

Introduction

As the authors understand it

A Living Lab (LL) is an innovation intermediary, which orchestrates an ecosystem of actors in a specific region. Its goal is to co-design products and services in an iterative way, with key stakeholders in a public-private-people partnership and in a real-life setting. One of the outcomes of this co-design process is the co-creation of social value (benefit). To achieve its objectives, the Living Lab mobilizes existing innovation tools or develops new innovation tools. (Mastelic, 2019, p. 56)

An ecosystem is by definition intangible, relying entirely on the engagement and inputs of its actors and stakeholders. In the LL approach the human component is doubly important as not only the output of the process depends on the commitment of the participants but the process itself is centred on the comprehension of the needs of real-life users.



Setting up a LL therefore requires to carefully select who will embody and lead it as well as a support team with complementary skills. It is a challenge the authors faced in their practice.

They turned to the scientific literature for recommendations and although an existing large body of literature on the challenges and barriers faced by LL as well as their governance model, there is a gap as to which specific competencies a LL manager and their team require as individuals.

This led to the following research question: beyond general governance models, what are the key competencies common to LL managers and their team that support the success of their structure?

Theoretical Background

The literature on LL and innovation networks is quite recent and so far it mostly concentrated on the challenges which LL managers face to set them up (Brønnum & Møller, 2013; Nguyen & Marques, 2018) rather than the concrete competencies they should have. The topic of the specific role of LL manager, of governance and operational management is little addressed (Pikkarainen, Ervasti, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, & Nätti, 2017). This might be because “the activities within user-driven LL are quite informally organized” (Leminen, Westerlund and Nyström, 2012 in Georges and Guilbert 2017:55). The same authors suggest that facilitators (or LL manager) often come from the public sector. They do not actively participate in the activities of the LL but they help finance the innovation initiatives. Other authors diverge with this opinion : some articles underline the importance to centralise management and initiatives to be led by one voluntary and visionary person (Nyström 2014 in Kopp, Haider, and Müller-Christ 2018; Steen and van Bueren 2017), other authors focus more on the role played by the team



members (Dubé et al., 2013; Pikkarainen et al., 2017) and the fact that roles are changing. They can overlap (role multiplicity), be exchanged (role ambidexterity) and evolve over time (role temporality) (Nyström, Leminen, Westerlund, & Kortelainen, 2014). The two aspects however may not be incompatible: a visionary LL manager surrounded by an interdisciplinary team.

As Schuurman (2015, p. 185) underlined, there are three levels of LL analysis: “meta” being a constellation of LL (stakeholders ecosystem (quadruple helix model and infrastructure), “meso” being the LL project portfolio and “macro” being the LL methodologies and tools. Within this framework, this study focuses on the meso level, with the LL manager being the interface with the meta level as well as being involved and supervising the projects on which their team has to deliver.

To develop a framework to enable the confrontation of assumptions to the experience of LL managers and team in the field and given the lack of detailed and operational descriptions focused on the role of LL manager, archetypes of roles were built based on the work of different authors describing the role of network managers (Heikkinen, Mainela, Still, & Tähtinen, 2007), of network innovation facilitators (Pikkarainen et al., 2017), of stakeholders in sustainability-oriented innovation (Goodman, Korsunova, & Halme, 2017) as well as to some extent the innovation personas (Kelley, 2005). From this comparative analysis, four profiles were described. See Table 1 for the description with reference to existing literature in the last column. The work of Nyström (2014) that develops on Heikkinen research (2007), as well as Juujärvi & Pessa (2013) contributed indirectly to the framework.



Methodology

This research in progress follows an action research method design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2015) and the data collection will be done in two parts. First, qualitative data was collected through a literature review and semi-directed interviews with experts from the field.

A framework was developed based on those elements and the results are discussed in the present article. Quantitative data will be collected in the second part of the research to validate and further refine the framework and will be the subject of a second article.

A framework of 4 roles of LL managers (Table 1) was elaborated based on the literature review described in the previous section, with a focus on the meso (projects) level as well as the managerial experience of the authors. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 8 different actors who had in common a strong entrepreneurial mindset and occupied roles of LL or innovation network managers.

They were selected to report on the experience of a variety of structures with different maturity level, thematic and regional contexts in Europe and Quebec, Canada. As these interviews underlined the importance of intercultural management skills, an intercultural management researcher was consulted.



Table 1 - Framework describing the four roles of LL managers

Role	Description	Other denomination in literature
Initiator and keeper of the strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - initiates the network - decides which partners become members of the LL - makes sure the vision is maintained - breaks down silos - has the decision power because they have access to the resources - defines priorities - distributes tasks - motivates people to work together by understanding their needs 	Webber and gatekeeper (Heikinnen), Facilitator, leader, architect, gatekeeper, auctioneer (Pikkarainen) Stimulator (Goodman) Collaborator, Caregiver and Director (Kelley)
Doer and value creator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - participates in project development - plans and carries tasks - creates value and solves problems - organises the tests and collects feedback from users - it can also be someone less active on a daily basis but that shares one's knowledge and brings external ideas (advisor) 	Producer and Planner (Heikinnen), Developer and promoter (Pikkarainen), Broker/mediator, concept refiner and initiator (Goodman), Hurdler, Experimenter and Cross Pollinisateur (Kelley)
Relationship creator and Communicator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - takes care of project documentation - communicates the LL to different outside publics (popularisation, information, storytelling, brand promotion) - it can also be someone who is not directly involved in the project development but offers support services such as providing a workspace, good working conditions. 	Advocate and Facilitator (Heikinnen), Conductor (Pikkarainen), Impact Extender, legitimator, Educator and context enabler (Goodman), Experience Architect, Storyteller, Anthropologist and site designer (Kelley)
Business developer	<p>This role is necessary when the LL has self-financing goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - takes care of fundraising and business development activities - understands the needs of the market and the industry - presents effectively the added value of the LL approach - shows good negotiation skills 	<p>This role was not explicitly described in the literature but was identified through the authors experience as well as the interviews. The profile that tends towards this role could be Kelley's The Caregiver.</p>

Table by the authors



Results

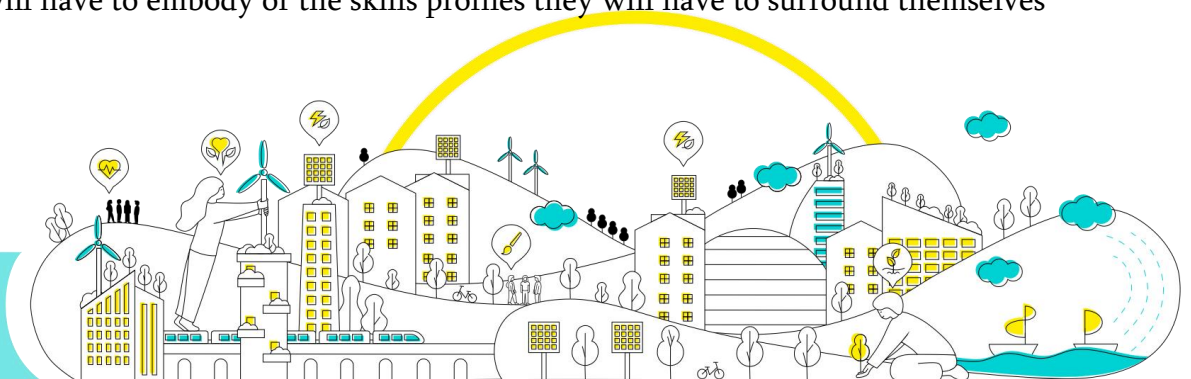
Framework of the 4 roles of LL managers

When presented with the 4 profiles framework, interviewees did not feel that any profile or role was missing from those presented - three respondents indicated that either one single person would exploit skills from the 4 different roles to different degrees at different stages of the LL development process (rarer) or the roles would be filled by different team members who can be involved to different degrees at different times. Some respondents indicated that in their experience there may be overlaps between the different roles (e.g. between the LL initiator and the business developer).

As illustration, the LLIO, a Living Lab focused on open innovation based in the province of Quebec in Canada, can count on a wide variety of profiles: from academics to designers, administrative and task-oriented people to specialist in recreology (the science of leisure). Even the leadership of the lab is shared between two individuals with complementary mindsets: one person is more disruptive and focused on divergence (stronger business developer traits) whereas the other is more structured and focused on convergence (stronger relationship and value creator traits).

The LL managers interviewed in Switzerland (Geneva, Neuchâtel, Lausanne and Valais) which are younger than the LLIO reported being led by individuals with an entrepreneurial mindset and with profiles mixing stronger initiator and business developer traits. They like to surround themselves with people more at ease with communication and operational skills when projects require it or as the LL grows.

It is certain that such a clear definition between the profiles is not representative of the variety of individuals, but it has the merit of making LL managers aware of the different roles they will have to embody or the skills profiles they will have to surround themselves with.



LL manager competencies in details

The interviews confirmed the relevance of this analysis in which the interviewees could identify themselves and their team members. They provided more insights as their way to manage a LL, which competencies to look in a LL manager. Instead of giving us a set of hard skills and techniques, they underlined the importance of soft skills and qualities such as:

- entrepreneurial mindset, sense of autonomy and initiative;
- ability to adapt your language to the person you are speaking to;
- ability to network and ease to speak to a broad array of people;
- ability to convince, obtain mandates, without adopting an excessively commercial approach;
- acceptance of not having the control over the process, adaptability, flexibility;
- to adopt a humble position, to practice humility like in systemic coaching.

Of course, knowing design thinking and the LL techniques is a must but they can be learnt quite easily compared to soft skills and interpersonal skills that are more difficult to train and are critical in the success of the co-creation processes centred around the understanding of human behaviour. Along the same lines, it appears that LL managers with a social and business background fare better than those with a technical background.

Business sensitivity which may not be the strongest trait of academics or people working in public institutions to which LL often stems for is however crucial for the sustainability of the structure. This was strongly underlined by Prof. Dimitri Schuurman which shares his experience from supporting the development of different LL structures with participants of ENOLL virtual learning lab course. It was also the



This diversity of profiles and collaborations links to related disciplines such as change management as well as intercultural team management that are found more often in LL settings than in traditional companies or collaborations.

To pursue this research the authors intend to collect quantitative data during the Open Living Lab Days to validate the framework with more LL managers or adapt it as it can be perceived as a little too rigid or stereotypical and it may not fit every kind of LL depending on its focus or domain.

It will be extremely interesting to get more insights with the participants coming from a variety of backgrounds. The second objective is to further the application of intercultural and change management to the LL teams. The results will be used to propose a full research paper and a training module for the Virtual Learning Lab to make existing or aspiring LL managers more aware of the variety of skills required in a LL team and give them tools to help them build balanced teams.

Conclusion

This article aims to bring scientific and managerial insight to the roles and skills LL managers and team should ideally have. Four roles were defined based on a literature review and qualitative interviews with field experts. Those roles are “Initiator and keeper of the strategy”, “Doer and value creator”, “Relationship creator and communicator” and “Business developer”. There might be overlaps in-between roles and they could be either found at diverse degrees in a single person or in different team members with complementary roles. The importance of the roles may vary with the objective (mandate or research driven) and the maturity level of the LL.

This study also underlined the importance of soft skills over a specific set of skills or technical expertise. Entrepreneurial mindset, adaptability, empathy, ability to network



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