

The Future looks InTRIZting!

Impressions from TRIZ Future conference 2006

**Guido Giebens,
Senior Management Consultant Viisiteam**

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More than 200 participants from all over the globe registered for the annual conference on 'The Future of TRIZ', organized by the European TRIZ Association ETRIA. The conference was co-organised with the Quality Congress of VCK (Vlaams Centrum voor Kwaliteitszorg).

Some 16 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the methodology initially developed by Genrich Altshuller is gradually finding its way- if not yet to the boardrooms – at least to the community of engineers, designers and quality managers in Western Europe and the rest of the world.

Papers presented both by academic scientists and practitioners, compiled by the hosts of Creax into a well documented book with proceedings, shed the light on this new tool.

TRIZ can be seen as the name of a toolbox filled with thinking patterns, put together by Soviet engineers and scientists. Through the enthusiasm of organizations like ETRIA (European TRIZ Association) and others, it is still alive and well in the hands of their successors, who are constantly developing it further, as a useful methodology for enhancing innovation and problem solving.

The essentials of TRIZ can be summarized as follows:

- understanding the interaction between substances (tools, objects) and looking at functionalities,
- making smart use of predictable evolutionary trends when developing new products or services,
- making smart use of simple, available resources that are around,
- picturing the 'ideal final result' as the ultimate goal of improvement,
- searching for conflicts and contradictions in all our products, processes and services,
- eliminating these contradictions without re-inventing the wheel, but with the help of 40 general principles that were distilled by Altshuller and his fellow scientists from the examination of millions of patents...

There is no need to be an expert before some flavour of TRIZ can be turned into profitable improvements or developments. Learning by doing is often a good approach: like in wellness, it is not by 'googling around' on the internet or by reading books about fitness that we can reshape our over weighted bodies...

How do we make use of the knowledge of TRIZ at Viisiteam? In our consulting practice we have been applying and implementing well-known management techniques and models that have proven their merits like Six Sigma, Design for Six Sigma, Lean, and Autonomous Teams etc.

The viisiteam network:

Antrim bvba • Wouwersveld 15 • B-2630 Aartselaar • tel. +32 3 288 40 05 ☎ Eta bvba • Heistraat 41 • B-9140 Temse
tel. +32 475 71 43 12 • fax + 32 3 765 98 76 ☎ Salix.MS bvba • Outrijvestraat 26 • B-8551 Heestert • tel. +32 498 11 26 50 •
fax + 32 56 44 30 90 ☎ TimeToMarket bvba • Nieuwlandlaan 11 bus 5 • B-3200 Aarschot • tel. +32 496 52 61 01

www.viisiteam.com

Just adding TRIZ to the arsenal would not necessarily lead to better consulting practice, but we are convinced that the appropriate embedded use of some of the TRIZ tools will reinforce the thinking process in a very efficient way, once the people in the project team are familiar with the techniques.

We do not think that it is deplorable that TRIZ as such is not (yet) very well known in the boardrooms, as of course sooner or later the wave will reach the coast, like we have seen it happen with Six Sigma.

One may wonder why TRIZ has not rolled out at the same pace as other management tools in the western world...

- Is it the association with the western perception of the Soviet culture, and its connotation with immobile, bureaucratic structures?
- Is it the strong emphasis on engineering and technical problems that came forth with the first applications that tends to scare the non-techno people off?
- Is it the difficulty of translating the particularity of one's real-world problem into the higher abstract level that destroys the appetite?
- Or is it perceived as something that can only work with expensive software applications that are only understood by freaky weirdoes?

Whatever the reasons may be, the Viisiteam partners are convinced that TRIZ has its merits, when it becomes part of the thinking patterns of professionals, not just in the engineering or technical design world, but also (and maybe even more) in the world of marketing, human relations or general management.

And, dreaming along the same lines, why not in finance? Would it not be great to have innovation projects evaluated by venture capitalists, business angels or public subsidising bodies, based on the true potential of their content? If project evaluators with finance background get trained in using some of the TRIZ techniques, they will be able to make a more balanced judgment of the value of a project.

In the meantime we will not wait for the Ideal Final Result to come to us by itself: in our consulting work we have the TRIZ tools ready in our toolbox. Some of our clients will testify that in 'Lean' projects, or in Six Sigma environments, or in ideation sessions for new product development, they have heard about it, and that we have encouraged them to think along these lines.

We also consider it as a duty of our generation to introduce TRIZ to new, young professionals in production, services and industrial design environments. And, like the Russians have set the example, the best place to start it is in the schools. In Flanders, colleges, universities and management schools are starting to see the light of day: the University of Leuven, the Colleges in Antwerp and Kortrijk, and the UAMS management school have adopted TRIZ in their curriculum already, and I may be forgetting some others.

The hype of innovation is everywhere in Western Europe, and the term is worn out, abused and raped to an extent that some people begin to develop an aversion when they hear it... but returning back to what I said before: it is not by just mobilizing the media, or talking and writing about it that the West will survive the economic battle. Let's stop it here, and do something practical...

Reactions to this article are welcome in my mailbox: guido@viisiteam.com