Looking into innovation of the future

By David F. Morrill
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What’s the world going to look like in 2025? No one knows. But when it comes to innovation, Mariann Jelinek is taking innovative steps to provide a better glimpse of how steps R&D-intensive firms are taking today will shape their business in the coming decades.

“I’m fascinated about how people get their wits around new technologies,” says Jelinek, the Richard C. Kraemer Professor of Strategy at the Mason School. “So I’m looking at how industrial decision-makers are deciding on present moves to build innovative capacities for the long-term.”

Working with NASA’s Langley Research Center, IBM, and the Industrial Research Institute (IRI), Jelinek is gathering information from hundreds of IRI-member organizations through in-depth interviews, surveys, and workshops. She’s also using new technologies including a multistage Internet-based dialogue on how to characterize the innovation environment of 2025.

“Go-it-alone innovation is both costly and risky,” Jelinek says. “In-house R&D has been taken over by ‘Open Innovation,’ strategic alliances, and collaboration. Just look at the number of firms it takes to make an iPod or iPhone. Apple’s laughing all the way to the bank because they depend on collaborative innovation.”

According to Jelinek, some firms are doing well by paying attention to how they capture more information, how they make that information more broadly available, and how they push decisions down to the people who are actually doing the job, as opposed to someone on high who’s thinking about it.

“From one economic perspective, we’re in the midst of an era of technological turbulence,” Jelinek says. “Firms that can make the transition to using lots more information in lots of interesting ways will prosper, because they’re going to enable their people to think creative, wild, far-out thoughts. Others will lag behind and go over a cliff.”

The implications of Jelinek’s findings will be important, not only for enhancing academic understanding, but for informing decision-makers and advising policy makers. Getting a better handle on R&D investments, which account for most annual R&D expenditures, is critical for the U.S. innovation system and how firms position themselves for competitive advantage.

Equally crucial is heavy investment in education, which will nurture those doing the innovation. Jelinek sees such people in her own classrooms, and she is quick to praise William and Mary students in general, particularly their willingness to spearhead new ways of doing things.

“We were the first school to tackle sustainability and it was a student-driven effort,” Jelinek says. “It’s a perfect example of the best that our young people have to offer. They find out what the problems are and they take every incentive to look beyond the boxes that ordinary businesses are thinking within.”

Having spent 30 years studying innovation, Jelinek realizes that 2025 will be here soon. And as she gets a sense of what R&D labs will look like and what young researchers are capable of doing, she’s excited about the possibilities that future holds.

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