

IS THERE A FOLLOW-UP FOR THAT HOTBED OF UNEXPECTED IDEAS AND SOLUTIONS?

Philips Research, the once famous NatLab, was a breeding ground for unexpected ideas and solutions. Innovation was stimulated there as people from different disciplines could spontaneously meet and catch up. This led to many groundbreaking discoveries. The Brainport Eindhoven region is still benefitting from Philips’s legacy. Or is this way of working starting to wear out? Do the key players still know how to do it? How can the mechanisms to stimulate technological innovations continue to function? Early December 2023, these questions were addressed during a Techcafé at Mikrocentrum.

BART BROUWERS

Mikrocentrum’s managing director Edwin de Zeeuw discussed the matter with Guustaaf Savenije (general manager of VDL ETG), Ton Flaman (consultant at Innovation Ecosystems), Hans Krikhaar (DSPE president and professor at Fontys University of Applied Sciences) and Janne Brok (managing director of Eindhoven Engine) during the Techcafé on December 7, 2023.

As crucial as the legacy of Philips is, today’s situation is substantially different from that of the NatLab back then. “Of course, even now, there are coffee machines that serve as the place to exchange ideas with each other,” says Flaman. “But essential to this is the presence of different disciplines.

We took that for granted at the time, but of course, it’s not. In addition, there was money to allow people to work in relative freedom. And just as important, there was no whining and fussing about patents. Now that’s different; representatives from different companies are at the coffee machine.”

But there is another difference, Flaman says. “For every technical question that arose, there was a specialist. There was money for that. Such a specialist knew a solution for every problem and would be in Drachten one day and in Hasselt (both Philips locations, ed.) the next day, and then at the NatLab.

Facilitating unexpected encounters

The system devised by the Eindhoven Engine is most similar to this, says Brok. “For us, it’s all about the

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Bart Brouwers is co-founder and co-owner of Media52, the publisher of Innovation Origins. This report is the result of a collaboration between Mikrocentrum and the editorial team of Innovation Origins

www.innovationorigins.com

Techcafé, a DSPE-Mikrocentrum collaboration

Two years ago, DSPE and Mikrocentrum created the Techcafé. The concept is simple: an accessible event where high-tech professionals can go for content, new contacts and inspiration. It is the place to discuss tech challenges and exchange best practices. All this is presented in a talk show setting with experts from science and industry. And afterwards there are drinks and bites.

The Techcafé is held every few months, usually at the premises of Mikrocentrum in Veldhoven (NL). Every now and then the Techcafé is on tour, for example during the Precision Fair that is held every year in November in Den Bosch (NL). The session on December 7, 2023 focused on collaboration as an essential ingredient for groundbreaking research and innovation.

WWW.DSPE.NL/EVENTS



The Techcafé panel, from left to right: Edwin de Zeeuw (managing director of Mikrocentrum and host of the event), Hans Krikhaar (DSPE president and professor at Fontys University of Applied Sciences), Janne Brok (managing director of Eindhoven Engine), Ton Flaman (consultant at Innovation Ecosystems) and Guustaaf Savenije (general manager of VDL ETG). (Photos: Mikrocentrum)

Highlights

- The Philips NatLab served as an inspiring breeding ground for innovation, where different disciplines spontaneously came together.
- Anno 2023, there is less emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and more focus on efficiency, patents and corporate interests.
- There is a discussion on how the Brainport Eindhoven region can continue to benefit from innovation.
- For this, unexpected meetings and physical colocations are indispensable, as are incentives that stimulate collaboration instead of efficiency and publications.

unexpected encounters and the solutions that come from them. Physical colocation is essential for that. Exactly like at the NatLab, in other words.” NatLab was a flow-through model, she says. People worked there for a few years, after which they moved on to the business units. “That phenomenon is, of course, still visible for individuals and companies. People still find each other from those old connections.” She calls it “the opaque fabric” of the region. “But if you look at that now, you see it is in danger. Efficiency thinking has taken over.”

Flaman signals that it can be challenging to put people together. “At Philips, they are not always eager to deploy their developers at another location. Nor at ASML; they have problems and prefer to solve them themselves. So, you have to organise that differently. The management has to believe in it. We have seen that this can lead to excellent results at MTiC, the Eindhoven Medtech Innovation Center. There, Philips works with Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e), and hospitals in Eindhoven and Heeze (Kempenhaeghe). Maybe not colocation but cooperation within cycling distance. See, then it can work after all.”

Daring to call each other

Savenije also sees things developing in the right direction. “We used to be a collection of separate, independent companies at VDL (an industrial conglomerate of over 100 companies, ed.). Now, you increasingly see that employees from different levels and companies call each other when they have a problem. Only then do they notice how nice it is to work together? That way it can grow, exactly like at the NatLab.”

Calling people by phone does become more manageable if you know each other a bit, adds Krikhaar. “Here at the table, we know each other and dare to call each other if there is a problem. But if I call a stranger, the answer is probably that he is too busy.”

Or maybe it's because of the incentives? “Why would a TU/e employee put energy into collaboration”, Flaman wonders

aloud. “He is judged on papers and on bringing in money. Those are his incentives. But not on collaboration. For that, too, we can take an example from the NatLab. If you brought four business units together and solved their problem, you were appreciated for that. We also need that kind of incentive here rather than efficiency or papers.”

Students as examples

Perhaps the example today comes precisely from young people, Flaman suggests. “I continue to love seeing these student teams. They are given the space and time to decide how to do things. Plenty of collaboration with each other and with companies. Everything interdisciplinary. And precisely because they go through such a formative phase, they keep in touch for a very long time afterwards. And you know, these are the managers of tomorrow. So, I hope that in the future they will show again how much collaboration can bring.”

Collaboration also comes plenty from students at Fontys, adds Krikhaar. “Still too little in student teams, but we do have gold in our hands for SMEs. Because innovating is expensive, it takes time; you need focus. Well, we can solve that by bringing in our students. They are not expensive and they have time and focus.”

Brok thinks the biggest opportunities for Brainport lie “in the challenges for which we don't yet have pillars.” In other words, the big global problems. “Because those are pre-eminently the problems we all have to solve. With that view, we must look to the future: what do we need in ten years to ensure that we properly address those problems for which we do not yet know how to make money? We need to start doing that now.”



View of the large turnout at the TechCafé.