

Nokia and Microsoft: Creativity is still cultural

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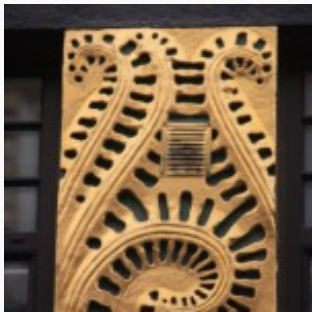
No Finns

As Nokia and Microsoft line up a partnership that they hope will revive both their fortunes in the mobile market, I am reminded of a trip to Nokia a couple of years ago.

Visiting their Helsinki HQ to talk to a senior scientist made me aware of what a remarkable enterprise Nokia is. This globally-important mobile phone is based in a rather small country on the fringe of northern Europe squeezed between much larger economies.

Yet one bold decision by the company back in the 70s combined with an intelligent and well-educated workforce turned an old industrial concern into a high-tech world leader. Recently, however, competition from more innovative companies like Apple and some clumsy, slow strategic turns, have left it lagging.

One reason, the Nokia scientist explained to me, was that they underestimated developments such as touch screens while sticking with keyboards. But he also said that there was a cultural problem for this Finnish brand.



Finnish design

Finland is a very cohesive society with strong bonds and an ingrained propensity for collective endeavour. This is fantastic for fostering disciplined team-work and incremental progress. You only have to look around at Finland's clean lines and efficient society to see that.

But, he argued, it also produces creative conservatives. Things haven't moved on much since the design classics in the Helsinki Museum. Finns are programmed not to take risks or go out on a limb. They like consensus.

I am always loath to advance national stereotypes like this (it must be my English reserve ;)) but this was a Finn's view, not mine. But when I see two Americans making this deal for Nokia I suspect that the tie-up with Microsoft is about more than a technical or commercial deal. It's another sign of how innovation benefits from crossing

borders. And I suppose that is what the Internet is all about.

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