

Services science: growing a good idea

Sometimes the world will instantly recognize a good idea while other ideas take generations to gain ground. SSME — an idea that did not exist just three years ago — made immediate sense to IBM.



SSME is a relatively new research area aimed at studying, improving and teaching services innovation which has rapidly developed from a seed of an idea to an area exploding with academic interest and growth.

Sound familiar? You may remember that when IBM first started making computers in the 1940s, formal education programs in computer science did not exist — nor did the term "computer science." By working closely with universities computer science became the sound academic discipline it is today. In fact, IBM's first research lab was at Columbia University and Columbia's first Computer Science course was co-taught by an IBMer.

Formal programs providing a pipeline of educated employees needed to support the growing market for services are few and far between. Just as it did 60 years ago, IBM is working with academia to change that. Sound like a good idea to you?

Collaborating on a good idea

Recently, IBM hosted a worldwide conference on SSME education for the 21st century. Evolving SSME into a recognized discipline will cultivate a services sector that can develop and implement technological applications to help businesses, governments and other organizations improve what they do and tap new areas of opportunity.

Nick Donofrio, executive vice president, Innovation and Technology, set the tone for the conference by discussing the current status of the global skills environment. "Seventy-five percent of the world's economy is services led — GDP's reflect this — but hardly anyone is investing in services," said Donofrio. "Value has migrated, and it's not going to stop migrating. In order for a university or a company to succeed, we are going to have to recognize that. That's what SSME is all about."

Conference attendees included nearly 300 participants from more than 20 countries with representatives of government, academia, non-profit organizations, IBM clients, and others. IBM invited participants to learn about the current status of SSME, and foster its advancement and development.

Getting a good idea off the ground

But getting a good idea like SSME 'off the ground' takes more than a group of people gathering to ponder its future; it needs clear steps and tangible results. That's why, over the last few years, many universities have developed new services-oriented courses and curricula, while others are expanding existing services education. For example, earlier this year North Carolina State University announced a master's degree program in SSME.

However, in order to advance SSME, IBM and the industry must outline a roadmap for establishing it as a legitimate discipline within the academic community. Steps include identifying ways for practitioners, faculty and administrators to codevelop cross-functional, service-oriented courses and research, and recommend specific actions for academia and governments.

SSME is just one approach to integrating a variety of disciplines, including engineering, social sciences and management, to focus education and research on services. And as this 'good idea' turns into a 'great investment' for the future, IBM will lead the pack again.