

The Peaceful Productivity Podcast
**Ep #94: Creating Innovation with Rachel
Backer**



Full Episode Transcript

[The Peaceful Productivity Podcast®](#), with your host *Kim Christiansen*

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[00:00:00] Kim Christiansen: Welcome everyone. I'm Kim Christensen and this is The Peaceful Productivity Podcast, where I share strategies to help you get the most outta your time and feel better in the process.

Welcome to the podcast everyone. I'm really excited to be joined by Maya Guest today. Rachel Backer is here, and Rachel and I were having a bit of a discussion recently around innovation, and she happens to work in the industry of innovation.

If I can call it that.

She works for a company called Mitacs, and so I thought what a great opportunity to bring her onto the podcast.

For my listeners who are primarily business owners, entrepreneurs, small business owners who are looking for ways to create more innovation in their businesses, I thought, who better to bring onto the podcast than the expert? Rachel, would you mind giving us a little bit of an introduction?

[00:01:05] Rachel Backer: Thanks so much for having me.

My background is in research. Before I worked at Mitacs, I did a PhD at McGill University in Plant Science and a postdoc. After that I worked in industry for a little bit and then I wound up at Mitacs and I was always very interested in how companies and academic researchers can work together to bring knowledge from the institution out into the world, and also feedback from the company to the academic institution to say, here are our pressing needs.

Can you incorporate this into your research program? A big part of my role is matching up companies with academics to develop projects to work on together. That is brilliant.

[00:01:55] Kim Christiansen: Makes me think about a lot of my work as a coach with business is around not so much what we know intellectually, but actually applying that into our business.

And so what you are doing is this marrying up of the intellectual with the actual real life application of it sounds amazing. How does that actually happen in practice? What does Mitacs do?

[00:02:26] Rachel Backer: Great question. It happens in a variety of ways. One way is that we mobilize academics to go out and find these partnerships on their own.

So we do a lot of presentations to professors, to administration at universities, research offices, to tell them about the program so that they're aware. We've been around for over 20 years now, but there's still, there's a good amount of awareness, but you can always find pockets of academics who aren't familiar with the programs or knew about the programs in a different iteration years ago, and didn't think it was relevant to their research.

For example, we used to focus on STEM fields specifically, so only science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. But now we've really moved to be able to support any kind of research, so reminding those social scientists, the psychologists, the humanities, all those folks that they can also apply for funding from us.

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So that's one piece of it is talking to the professors and then encouraging them to reach out to organizations they're interested in if they meet them at a conference or come across their work in another way. The other piece is companies will often come to us and say, Hey, we're having this problem.

Can you help? And then we offer a service where for free, we will talk with you about your project, help you write a description, and then post it on the Mitacs website. The people in my role, the advisor role across the country, will also share that opportunity with professors directly. To see if there's somebody who's interested and has the relevant expertise to contribute to the project.

We facilitate an introduction and help both parties decide if they want to work together.

[00:04:22] Kim Christiansen: So what might be A business problem that you see that attracts business owners to Mitacs?

[00:04:31] Rachel Backer: It's such a range. So first of all, we have a variety of different programs and each program you can work with students of different levels.

So for example, from my background in agriculture, we have companies who are developing a new fertilizer product and they want to test it for a certain crop, or they want to test it in a certain environment. That could be a project that we could support. And oftentimes, you know, maybe the company is small and doesn't have access to a farm where they can test it or a greenhouse, but oftentimes the universities do have those facilities.

So that's sort of a way that it can help. We also have other programs that are able to support business innovation. So this could be things like marketing innovation, for example. Are there new markets out there that we haven't tapped into yet that would make sense for us to look into? Those projects would be more geared towards business students, probably.

[00:05:31] Kim Christiansen: Oh, beautiful. I love that. And that makes a lot of sense to those businesses that are doing research and development, they're testing new products, like the fertilizer example that you gave, especially if they don't have access to do that testing, but a nice relationship that could be formed there.

[00:05:51] Rachel Backer: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:05:51] Kim Christiansen: Between academics and the businesses. What I hadn't thought of was the example around marketing innovation, and you mentioned social sciences too. What might a small business want to be reaching out to an academic or to get more support in those areas?

[00:06:13] Rachel Backer: One example that I often think of is related to psychology.

Looking at where is the market at and who are the people that we want to connect with and help with that product market fit to understand a little bit who they wanna be targeting, for example.

[00:06:32] Kim Christiansen: Yeah. It sounds like some market research opportunities.

[00:06:36] Rachel Backer: Mm-hmm. Or process innovation.

[00:06:41] Kim Christiansen: Now you're talking about language.

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[00:06:44] Rachel Backer: Yeah. Yeah. That's a, a good one as well. The definition that we use for innovation versus research is research is something that is publishable at an academic level, so this very traditional science, whereas innovation is more, is it new for this company and is it gonna help them grow in a way that they wouldn't have been able to previously?

In terms of process innovation or marketing innovation so much. The stuff that we see right now is digitization for small businesses, especially. How do we improve our website, for example, to help sales and help us reach the customers that we're most interested in?

[00:07:25] Kim Christiansen: Oh, that resonates with me. I'm a small business owner, but it feels to me like right now my technology is very disparate, like very scattered.

I have this application that does this very specific purpose, and then I have another one over here and it does this thing. So I'm not inclined to get an overarching system without some sort of orientation or understanding of what it does. But I don't know how to marry all of that up together because I am a small business owner just operating my business.

So would that be something that would bring me to Mitacs?

[00:08:02] Rachel Backer: Yeah. How can we operate more efficiently? How can we put these pieces together in a way that's going to help us take things to the next level? I think what you're describing is so common because the solutions that you need will change as the company grows and matures and more people become involved and yeah.

Is a real struggle. How do you adapt while continuing to operate?

It's not simple.

[00:08:30] Kim Christiansen: Yes. That is a common business challenge that I see all the time, is it's almost like, I'll call it a, a cycle. When we're first starting out, we're focused on generating revenue, getting clients, testing our product, creating value, all that kind of fun stuff.

And then as we get more efficient with creating that value, then we start to create a little bit of more capacity in our business to focus on either like creating some balance for ourselves or growth scaling. And so the more that we create that capacity, the more we can start to generate more value, the more we can generate more value, create capacity.

It's a cycle that goes on. And so where people often get stuck is right at the beginning part of that cycle when they're focused on generating revenue and testing value, they're in that experimentation phase. They can't necessarily create capacity at the same time they feel like they're like kind of stuck a little bit.

What do you see around all of that?

[00:09:41] Rachel Backer: Yeah, I think that's exactly it, and it means doing something a bit different outside of the day today, which is scary. And also where do you get the time for that, right? And so I think that's, To bring it back to Mitacs. I think that's one of the advantages is, first of all, we'll co-fund the project and the funding goes towards hiring an intern.

So this is the opportunity to hire somebody to work on this innovative project, and we can support students from the college level all the way up to postdocs. So really wide range of expertise and depth of

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knowledge. This de-risks it. It allows you to see, okay, is this a good working relationship? Are they a good fit for the company?

And then if it works out great, you can hire them on and they can become a part of the organization as it continues to grow and evolve or, or strike that balance.

[00:10:37] Kim Christiansen: Oh, that's a beautiful model. I can think of so many different advantages to that, including what you said about being able to test out that relationship, see if it's a good fit, but also it gives the business owner the opportunity to delegate in a really safe way and practice delegating.

[00:10:55] Rachel Backer: Mm-hmm.

[00:10:55] Kim Christiansen: Cause that's a skill in and of itself.

[00:10:58] Rachel Backer: Exactly. Exactly. And you know, you'll also get. Some help from the professor who's involved with in the project as well. So you know, it's not, you know, you need to come up with something all day, every day for this person to do because you'll be sharing that supervisory capacity with the academic partner as well.

It's a good way to let go of having control of everything a little bit and allowing somebody with new ideas and fresh ideas coming and test some things out for you.

[00:11:29] Kim Christiansen: Such a smart idea. Such a smart idea. Because we get used to doing things on our own, and we've got our own particular way of doing things.

[00:11:37] Rachel Backer: Mm-hmm.

[00:11:38] Kim Christiansen: And so we get to a point where we can't make time to delegate, but we also can't continue the way that we're doing. We can't sustain it. So this seems to answer that in a lot of different ways.

[00:11:51] Rachel Backer: Mm-hmm.

[00:11:51] Kim Christiansen: In a safe, secure way. Yeah.

[00:11:53] Rachel Backer: Yeah.

[00:11:55] Kim Christiansen: So is this program, is it appropriate for someone as small as myself, like a solopreneur, or is it more geared towards slightly medium sized to larger sized businesses?

[00:12:11] Rachel Backer: We work with kind of the gamut. The, the eligibility requirement is business needs to be incorporated. It doesn't even need to be a business necessarily. It can be an incorporated not-for-profit organization. It can be a municipality, it can be a hospital, but that's the requirement. We have programs to support student entrepreneurs where they can be the company.

In those cases, we would add some oversight from a university linked incubator to support them as they work on their company. The project contribution start at \$5,000 to hire somebody for four to six months to work on the project. So as long as the business is able to pay that amount in one chunk, then we would be able to work with them.

[00:12:57] Kim Christiansen: Amazing.

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[00:12:58] Rachel Backer: So yeah, really we see a wide range of businesses. We work with many small businesses. That's actually quite a large focus of what we do. Small and medium-sized organizations, but then we also do work with many of the larger corporations in Canada as well.

[00:13:15] Kim Christiansen: So, good. And so switching gears.

[00:13:18] Rachel Backer: Mm-hmm.

[00:13:18] Kim Christiansen: I'm curious about your own approach to innovation. What does it mean to you and how do you see yourself applying it in your own work?

[00:13:30] Rachel Backer: Ooh. That's a big question there, but I love it. I think innovation to me means thinking outside of the box. It means taking a departure from how things have been done previously.

But not in a reckless way. I think innovation that's done well tends to be calculated. You don't wanna waste your energy. We all have a limited number of hours in the day, so you want to come up with lots of different ideas, but then practice crossing some off the list that might not have the biggest impact.

And that impact could be, like you were saying before, it could be. Growing the company, or it could just mean you spending less time on administration or some task that doesn't bring you joy as part of your day. For me, my role is very much about looking for opportunities, looking for academics, looking for businesses.

So when I came into this role, it was what businesses have we already been in touch with and who are we already doing projects with and who are we not working with? And so one of my innovative approaches I would argue, was looking to see in agriculture, you have a lot of industry associations that are sort of these hubs within the different areas of agriculture.

So you have one for Christmas tree growers in BC. They're very, very specific, right? These are the people that are connected within those industries. And so I would argue that's a bit of maybe process innovation in the sense of, you know, I'm not just relying on leads that come in through our marketing team, for example.

I'm looking, okay, how can we cast a wider net? How can we reach out to people that are these nodes within the network of people that I think our programs could be good to support.

[00:15:24] Kim Christiansen: Mm. That brought up quite a few things for me because I think that innovation is often thought of as synonymous with creativity.

[00:15:34] Rachel Backer: Mm.

[00:15:35] Kim Christiansen: And what I liked about what you said was when you said, using a calculated approach. It brought to mind the scientific method in a sense. You know, like doing a little bit of a controlled experiment. It almost suggests like bringing together a creativity in a systematic way.

[00:15:59] Rachel Backer: Yes, I think a hundred percent.

That's what I'm getting at. There's a million experiments that you could do in plant science. A huge number, but some of them are gonna be interesting and some of them aren't. And I think business innovation is the same. What's gonna give you the best return on your effort and the money that you're putting forward?

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I think always making sure to try to evaluate that. But I will add a caveat of sometimes you'll start something and you won't know what the outcome will be until you're partway through it. And sometimes it could be you start something that at the outset you didn't think was that exciting, and all of a sudden you've stumbled on some gold nugget, so you gotta leave a little bit of room for, maybe I'm wrong.

[00:16:42] Kim Christiansen: Mm-hmm.

[00:16:42] Rachel Backer: Maybe I don't know what I'm getting into.

[00:16:44] Kim Christiansen: Yeah. That's so good. I love your use of the word experiment because in business, I feel like in the beginning especially, but throughout the business life cycle, I think it is a lot of experimentation. I. And when we adopt this, this is my coaching coming in, but when we adopt a mindset of experimentation, then there's less pressure that we're putting on ourselves on the business.

The more pressure there is, the less innovation there is. The more rigid we become, the more closed we become. So when we treat it like an experiment within constraints, like you said, within boundaries, then it gives us the opportunity to open up to other possibilities in our mindset and in our business as well.

What do you think about that?

[00:17:34] Rachel Backer: I completely agree, and I think what's coming to mind is my PhD supervisor would always say, Rachel, you need to learn how to fail quickly. And what that meant was you need to be trying different things and you need to be okay if some of them don't work out, because that is the nature of experimentation.

You're going to do some things that just don't work, and that's scary. You know, when it's your business and you want it to work, they think approaching it with almost a little bit of playfulness of what result will I get if I try this approach? So I think those are the kinds of things that do come a little bit more with experience because then you start to develop a little bit more of an instinct of, okay, maybe this approach is one that is worth trying, and then also recognizing when the result is interesting or more exciting than maybe you thought it would be going in. It's not a straight line. It's not easy to put in a box, and I think that's why it's a little bit scary, but I think that's also where the power and the magic is.

[00:18:36] Kim Christiansen: I love that you brought up failure and it got me to thinking about failure tolerance. I almost think that's the reason why we do end up putting so much pressure on ourselves is because we're pushing against this risk of failure, which then causes us to be closed and rigid and et cetera, et cetera. I loved the attitude of your PhD professor who said, learn to fail quickly, because not only does that socialize us to accept failure as a learning opportunity.

[00:19:08] Rachel Backer: Mm-hmm.

[00:19:08] Kim Christiansen: But it also challenges us to collect failures because they are learning opportunities. What do you think about that?

[00:19:15] Rachel Backer: Exactly. If you have learned something, you've learned how not to do something, what happens when you do it a certain way? That is experience, and that's exactly what I'm talking about, that you will take with you as you try again and as you iterate.

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That's something that, like you were saying before, is so common to science and to business is it's all iterative. It's all okay. If I change this one thing, then what? Where, where does that leave me? And what are the next steps that I see in front of me now?

[00:19:47] Kim Christiansen: The most common belief system that I come across with my clients is that if I spend too much time experimenting, then I'm wasting time.

I'm wasting money, energy, resources. It's a waste. So what would you say to someone who is kind of stuck in that mindset? Like, I don't wanna waste a bunch of time with experimenting.

[00:20:11] Rachel Backer: I think that is such a difficult mindset to overcome. But you know what, I'm gonna throw this one back to my PhD supervisor because he had a lot of wisdom and I just feel like everybody should hear it.

He had an incredibly successful research program. He's well known across the country. He has done wonderful things for crop production. I have a lot of respect for him. So his name is Dr. Donald Smith at McGill University. So he would always say, He would let his grad students stay a little bit longer because no matter what, at the start of the degree, whether you're a master's student or a PhD student, you're gonna have a ramp up phase where you need to figure out what it is that you're doing.

You need to get oriented in the lab. You need to learn techniques. You need to figure out who to ask your questions to and make those mistakes. But once you've had the time to establish yourself, that's when you're gonna make these big leaps in terms of knowledge and really pushing the boundaries of things.

You have to know the system that you're working in to be able to build upon it. I think that's something in the business environment that I think sometimes that's underestimated of. You need to take that time to look around to the surroundings and understand where it is that you are. Before you can make that leap to the next level.

And research and innovation aren't linear. It's that hockey stick shaped graph where it's gonna be slow at the start, but then it goes way up. And so yeah, you may not see return on investment in the first year or two years. That's scary. That is. A difficult reality to accept, but years 3, 4, 5, you might really exceed what it is that you had anticipated.

It is a bit of walking off a cliff. There isn't a guarantee, but I think try taking those smaller risks and build up that risk tolerance because I think that's the only way to get comfortable doing it.

[00:22:15] Kim Christiansen: Agreed. So much so good. I love the way you illustrated the hockey stick graph cause immediately I was like, yes.

Exactly. It's not linear, it's not a straight line. As much as we humans like certainty and guarantees and to know what A plus B equals C, that is never the case. So, I think what I, I really resonated with, with what you were saying was when we're talking to people and myself included, who have this fear of wasting time or wasting energy or money, that over the long term you actually can realize more success, more savings if you invested it up front.

And then reap the rewards downstream then if you just locked yourself into this straight line right at the beginning and try to catch up later on.

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[00:23:11] Rachel Backer: Exactly. My tech has some good statistics about it that businesses that are innovative do better in the long run. And so this is about playing the long game.

It's not about next quarter. It's not even maybe about the next fiscal year. It's about five years from now, 10 years from now. And I think. It's hard when you gotta make payroll, you know, like there are these immediate things, but I think if there are ways that you can incorporate even a little bit of innovation that can pay off in the long run.

[00:23:42] Kim Christiansen: So it's more about a willingness right from the beginning to take calculated risks and to be wrong. That's what it sounds like innovation really is about, is like this willingness. Is that fair?

[00:23:58] Rachel Backer: Yes, yes, I think so. I think it's keeping an open mind and allowing yourself to be pleasantly surprised. You know, that's a delightful thing, but if you expect the worst outcome and you don't try as a result, then nothing ventured, nothing gained kind of thing.

Obviously. I think starting innovation right at the start is fantastic. Even if you're in the middle, it's not too late to start. You can come to that at any point. We're here to meet you where you're at instead of push you in a direction that you're not wanting to go in. It's never too late to shift the mindset.

[00:24:38] Kim Christiansen: Hmm. It comes back to mindset. Yeah. Always. Yeah. I love the way you said it was. A willingness to risk failure, however you define that for yourself. Take calculated risks, and also a willingness to be pleasantly surprised as well. What that made me think about is I see this quite a bit where we don't necessarily recognize our successes because we're heads down, we're focused on the future.

We're like, okay, I just gotta get onto the next thing. So it's not just about. Being willing to move forward in uncertainty, but it's also a willingness to look backwards, see what didn't work. We're very good at that as humans, but also seeing what did work so that we can take that and apply it to the next situation.

That's where the learning happens, is we're actually taking what we've gathered and applying it to the future.

[00:25:36] Rachel Backer: Yes.

[00:25:37] Kim Christiansen: Anything else you wanna say about that?

[00:25:39] Rachel Backer: Yeah, I think the biggest thing is, I agree completely and I think, yeah, don't underestimate the, the successes that you have had or the knowledge that you've gained along that path, and how that can lead you to further discoveries down the road.

[00:25:56] Kim Christiansen: Yes. I always say this, so the podcast is titled Peaceful Productivity. It's about making the most of your time and enjoying the process. That's really what we're talking about here, is it's not so much about getting to the destination. It's about making the most of it in the process, which is everything that we talked about, the willingness to experiment and to look back, celebrate the successes, all of that contributes to the mindset and the enjoyment of the process. Because if you're not having fun, then why bother?

Really.

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[00:26:34] Rachel Backer: Exactly. Exactly. One of my mentors once told me, Yeah, if the job's not fun, you should look for a different job, and I think creativity makes things fun.

Innovation makes things fun and new. Our brains are wired for that. As much as they're wired to be scared of new things, it's also very rewarding.

[00:26:57] Kim Christiansen: Yeah

[00:26:57] Rachel Backer: It gets me up in the morning, that's for sure.

[00:27:00] Kim Christiansen: Yeah, it's that balance between risk and reward that makes it fun. It reminds me of that saying challenges are what make life interesting.

[00:27:10] Rachel Backer: Yes, exactly ,exactly.

[00:27:13] Kim Christiansen: Solving problems. Well, it's been such a joy to have you on the podcast today. You're so fun to talk to, and I'm curious if people wanted to find out more about Mitacs and how to access their services, how would they go about doing that?

[00:27:28] Rachel Backer: Yeah, you can reach out to me, I'll share my contact information, or we have a list of advisors across Canada

[00:27:36] Kim Christiansen: And what's the website?

[00:27:38] Rachel Backer: It's Mitacs, mitacs.ca.

[00:27:44] Kim Christiansen: Yeah, I'll put your contact information into the podcast description and welcome back anytime.

Thanks for coming.

[00:27:52] Rachel Backer: Oh, thanks. It's been a pleasure.

[00:27:54] Kim Christiansen: Are you looking for a coach who will help you increase your business profit while protecting your time and your wellbeing? If so, I'll invite you to check out my website, financialwellnesscoach.ca.