

Interview: Somchet Thinapong - Chairman, National Innovation Agency - Thailand



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The chairman for the National Innovation Agency (NIA), Mr. Somchet Thinapong, shares his personal ambitions to bring innovation to the forefront of Thailand's agenda, why innovation is vital to ensuring the success of the nation and where he hopes to see Thailand's innovation strategy in the coming years.

What experiences have led you to your current role as chairman?

As chairman of the organization, I can attribute my success to my extensive formal education and my professional experience where I worked in various sectors. My educational background is in engineering and professionally I have had various entrepreneurial stints where I helped start various companies, as well as several assignments in state companies, which have all contributed to my growth as an innovator and leader. Eventually, when I moved into innovation it felt like a natural step for me because innovation is something I am passionate about and I believe it something that will make up a large part of Thailand's future. Innovation means being able to compete regionally, as well as internationally to improve the lives of others and I believe that the National Innovation Agency (NIA) is playing a vital role in promoting innovation and value creation in Thailand!

What is the NIA's role in promoting innovation?

The pharmaceutical industry does a great deal of societal good for the Thai people and allows for creativity to eventually become a reality. Moreover, it is fundamental for discovery and value creation. In pharmaceuticals, creativity can come from observing, studying and profiling diseases and sicknesses. In order to come to a solution and create treatments and cures, there needs to be creativity, but you need a platform to do so, and the NIA is helping bring about real change in Thailand by focusing on three strategic areas for supporting the innovation development namely: bio-business, eco-industry and design & solutions. Such undertaking will integrate innovation into the strategic industry with a short-term goal to generate a change in the manufacturing structure that will affect the economy and society in a swift and efficient manner. The long-term goal is to bring Thailand to a knowledge-based economy and society. Moreover, the NIA creates a platform for inspiration where individuals can imagine, create and implement change. To achieve this vision, the NIA functions as a central unit in coordinating, networking and partnering different organizations from various fields such as education, technology, finance or investment but mainly focuses on utilizing knowledge management to achieve innovation, particularly to induce “innovation on cluster platform”, which uses innovation as the principal tool in improving the quality of life and as a driving tool for competitive economics.

How does the NIA measure success?

The NIA works through various channels and consequently is able to spot what Thailand needs to promote valuable innovation. In order for innovation to be valuable it must be quantified. Metrics equate to success and the NIA has successfully helped strategize with companies. Currently, I am assisting over 35 companies in their strategy to grow and develop into successful organizations in the life science sector, such as agriculture where the NIA is taking basic crops, such as rice, and turning it into other consumable food products and makeup. To compete successfully in today’s local and global market innovators need to be savvy and work with their existing natural resources. The NIA seeks to identify an issue and come up with a solution that is mutually beneficial for society and investors alike.

What local stakeholders does the NIA work with?

In order to remain efficient you must work with various agencies to ensure the nation’s full innovative potential is reached. The agency brings together various stakeholders to work together and identify which products are needed in the market. Currently, we are working with the National Research Council of Thailand and we recently signed a memorandum to ensure entrepreneurs have access to funds. We also partner with the Federation of Industry and the Federation of Trade because they have over ten thousand members, which also benefit from the NIA’s work.

Not many people know about innovation coming from Thailand, what changes need to be made in order to change this misperception?

Thailand is currently rebranding itself because we need to let people around the globe know that our products are just as valuable as many other nations. Promotion starts with people and once we get people's mindsets to change I believe people will start to view our innovative products as a commodity. Moreover, if we can demonstrate that Thailand is an innovative place I believe it can compete in the global market with its products.

What is the NIA doing to promote innovation?

We provide the tools necessary to jump-start your organization and have it become a reality. Innovation requires financing and the NIA recognizes that we need to provide aid to our fellow Thais who have valuable ideas, but need help to materialize their dreams. In December of last year, we kicked off a coupon system for innovators in need of financial aid, loans and help paying their interest, as well as provide research assistance from local universities.

What niche is the NIA currently focusing on?

Thailand needs more investment in bio-base systems because of the value added it offers to society in the long-term, such as energy sources in Thailand. We can also look to our regional neighbors for successful models of bio-base systems, such as Singapore's petrochemical industry, which has boomed as a result of biotechnology and value creation. I believe that if Thailand strategizes it can do the same and become a regional hub and example for our neighbors.

Where would you like to see the industry in five years time?

I have high hopes for Thailand and believe we need to narrow down and focus in several innovative segments that will give rise to economic growth and provide societal good for the people of Thailand. In my opinion, Thailand's main clusters of focus should be petrochemical and the service industry, which can lead to some innovative strategies for medical tourists, etc. Another area that has been explored recently is aerospace engineering, but in order to further expand in this sector we must remain focused on providing an innovative playing field for citizens to participate.

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