

A Life Linking Science and Practice: Remembering Andy Van de Ven

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Photo taken by Kai Dragland at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in 2012

Since our founding in 2014, a central part of our mission at EIX has been supporting knowledge-sharing between people who study entrepreneurship and those who put entrepreneurial ideas into practice. This mission has engaged people around the world for many decades. In this article, I'd like to pay tribute to someone who advanced that mission throughout his career: Professor Andrew (Andy) Van de Ven, who passed away on April 30, 2022.

Andy was born in the Netherlands in 1945, a time when his home country was reeling from the devastation of the Second World War. His family immigrated to Canada, and then to the United States. He earned a PhD at the University of Wisconsin in 1972 and went on to teach at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania as well as at Kent State University in Ohio. In 1981 he joined the University of Minnesota, where he would spend the rest of his career, most recently as the [Vernon Heath Professor of Organizational Innovation and Change](https://carlsonschool.umn.edu/faculty/andrew-van-de-ven) (<https://carlsonschool.umn.edu/faculty/andrew-van-de-ven>).

Over the course of his career, Andy wrote or edited 14 books and hundreds of articles in which he developed and shared new knowledge about innovation and entrepreneurship as well as other topics such as organizational change, organization design, and inter-organizational trust. Andy was also an active member of many communities, spanning from his local community – where he helped repair and distribute bicycles to children in need – to worldwide communities of learning and practice, where he was beloved by many colleagues, partners, and students. Although Andy was not directly involved in EIX, he encouraged our efforts and had served as a mentor to a number of our editors and authors.

Here are a few of Andy's contributions that may be of most interest to readers of EIX:

- 1. Engaged Scholarship.** In the last major contribution of his career, Andy encouraged researchers and practitioners to work together to solve problems of common concern. His book, [Engaged Scholarship](https://www.amazon.com/Engaged-Scholarship-Organizational-Social-Research/dp/019922630X) (<https://www.amazon.com/Engaged-Scholarship-Organizational-Social-Research/dp/019922630X>), offers a detailed guide meant to help scholars, managers, and organizational stakeholders design and execute research projects. Andy understood this was a hard task that required addressing divergent interests. For example, he noted that researchers and managers tend to value different *kinds* of knowledge – “knowledge for science” and “knowledge for practice” as he put it. These forms of knowledge fulfill different purposes, he explained, but they are both essential to advancing human well-being.
- 2. Mapping innovation processes.** One way Andy lived out his approach to engaged scholarship was through the Minnesota Innovation Research Program, a decade-long research program that he and others undertook in cooperation with the 3M Corporation. In this program, teams of researchers carefully followed the development of 14 different innovations as they unfolded in real time. These studies found that, contrary to common perceptions at the time, innovation did not follow a staged, trial-and-error process. Rather, the innovations followed a wide variety of paths that unfolded at the levels of teams, firms, and industries. Nevertheless, they involved common patterns of “divergent” and “convergent” behavior. Andy's teams found that managers could not predict these patterns, but they could learn to “maneuver” them more effectively.



Findings from this program are summarized in [this ungated article](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310603380_The_innovation_journey_you_can%27t_control_it_but_you_can_learn_to_manuever_it) (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310603380_The_innovation_journey_you_can%27t_control_it_but_you_can_learn_to_manuever_it) and in the book, [The Innovation Journey](https://www.amazon.com/Innovation-Journey-Andrew-Van-Ven/dp/0195341007) (https://www.amazon.com/Innovation-Journey-Andrew-Van-Ven/dp/0195341007) .

3. **New ventures depend on their environments.** Although Andy understood and respected the skills of individual innovators, he was critical of the common tendency towards “hero-worship” in entrepreneurship. Instead, he encouraged us to pay more attention to the “infrastructures” in which individual entrepreneurs act. These infrastructures include a range of societal factors that both enable and constrain entrepreneurial activity, including market conditions, the availability of key resources such as talent and financing, the rules and standards that shape market exchanges, as well as the structures and behaviors of business firms. Andy’s contributions on this front helped advance our understanding of what we often call “[entrepreneurial ecosystems](https://eiexchange.com/issues/51)” (https://eiexchange.com/issues/51) ” nowadays. [In this article](https://eiexchange.com/content/71-the-changing-world-of-entrepreneurial-learning-r) (https://eiexchange.com/content/71-the-changing-world-of-entrepreneurial-learning-r) I built on his ideas to account for how recent forms of digital knowledge-sharing play a role in entrepreneurial infrastructures.

4. **The nominal group technique.** In addition to his research, Andy developed a practical tool that went on to be used for decades in organizations around the world. The “[nominal group technique](https://asq.org/quality-resources/nominal-group-technique)” (NGT)(https://asq.org/quality-resources/nominal-group-technique) is a framework that helps groups make decisions in ways that leverage the inputs of all their members. Research shows that many groups fail to do this on their own. For example, groups tend to talk most about things their members already know in common, and they often fail to surface the distinctive knowledge individual members hold. Groups are also affected by power differences such that some members hold back from sharing information or views that contradict those of more powerful members. The NGT helps groups avoid these “process losses” and get the most out of what each member has

to offer. New ventures that are trying to make decisions amid uncertain conditions may find the NGT a useful way to draw on the front-line knowledge of their team members and employees.

Through these contributions and others, Andy gave a big push forward to a vision that is shared by editors, authors and readers of EIX: that of a worldwide “learning community” producing and sharing knowledge that advances both the science and practice of entrepreneurship.

A fuller profile of Andy’s work is [available in this article](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/sej.1235) (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/sej.1235) published in Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal, which includes selections from his conversation with Shaker Zahra, another distinguished innovation scholar. And more on Andy’s life can be found [in his obituary](https://www.startribune.com/obituaries/detail/0000424557/). (https://www.startribune.com/obituaries/detail/0000424557/)