

The Idea Factory: Bell Labs and the Great Age of American Innovation

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The definitive history of America's greatest incubator of innovation and the birthplace of some of the 20th century's most influential technologies

From its beginnings in the 1920s until its demise in the 1980s, Bell Labs—officially, the research and development wing of AT&T—was the biggest, and arguably the best, laboratory for new ideas in the world. From the transistor to the laser, from digital communications to cellular telephony, it's hard to find an aspect of modern life that hasn't been touched by Bell Labs. In *The Idea Factory*, Jon Gertner traces the origins of some of the twentieth century's most important inventions and delivers a riveting and heretofore untold chapter of American history. At its heart this is a story about the life and work of a small group of brilliant and eccentric men—Mervin Kelly, Bill Shockley, Claude Shannon, John Pierce, and Bill Baker—who spent their careers at Bell Labs. Today, when the drive to invent has become a mantra, Bell Labs offers us a way to enrich our understanding of the challenges and solutions to technological innovation. Here, after all, was where the foundational ideas on the management of innovation were born.

Jon Gertner grew up in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, just a few hundred yards away from Bell Labs. He has been a writer for the *New York Times Magazine* since 2004 and is an editor at *Fast Company* magazine. He lives in Maplewood, New Jersey, with his wife and two children. "Filled with colorful characters and inspiring lessons . . . *The Idea Factory* explores one of the most critical issues of our time: What causes innovation?" - Walter Isaacson, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Riveting . . . Mr. Gertner's portraits of Kelly and the cadre of talented scientists who worked at Bell Labs are animated by a journalistic ability to make their discoveries and inventions utterly comprehensible—indeed, thrilling—to the lay reader. And they showcase, too, his novelistic sense of character and intuitive understanding of the odd ways in which clashing or compatible personalities can combine to foster intensely creative collaborations."
- Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"One of the best innovation-focused books I've read: It's a wide-ranging, detailed, and deeply fascinating look at the New Jersey lab which has been churning out useful discoveries since the early 1900s." - *The Boston Globe*

"Fascinating history . . . the research behind *The Idea Factory* is astonishing." - *Slate Book Review*

"Compelling . . . Gertner's book offers fascinating evidence for those seeking to understand how a society should best invest its research resources." - *The Wall Street Journal*

"An expansive new history . . . does an impressive job of illuminating many of Bell Labs' key technological triumphs." - *Wired.com*

Other Books

The Shock of the Old. From the books of H.G. Wells to the press releases of NASA, we are awash in clichéd claims about high technology's ability to change the course of history. Now, in *The Shock of the Old*, David Edgerton offers a startling new and fresh way of

thinking about the history of technology, radically revising our ideas about the interaction of technology and society in the past and in the present. He challenges us to view the history of technology in terms of what everyday people have actually used-and continue to use-rather than just sophisticated inventions. Indeed, many highly touted technologies, from the V-2 rocket to the Concorde jet, have been costly failures, while many mundane discoveries, like corrugated iron, become hugely important around the world. Edgerton reassesses the significance of such acclaimed inventions as the Pill and information technology, and underscores the continued importance of unheralded technology, debunking many notions about the implications of the "information age." A provocative history, *The Shock of the Old* provides an entirely new way of looking historically at the relationship between invention and innovation.

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