

## Innovation/Global Risk

### Better mousetrap? Or Better Way?

By Shlomo Maital



Ever heard of an engineer named Keith W. Tantlinger? He worked at a truck-trailer manufacturer in Spokane, Washington. And he changed our world, through process innovation. He died last Aug. 27 at age 92. The title of this blog is also the title of an article about him by NYT columnist David Leonhardt.

What did Tantlinger invent that changed the world? Simply, “a lock that connected to the corners of containers and that crane operators could mechanically open and close from their seats.”

Uh...so what? Well, the lock caused a revolution in shipping. It led to the adoption of containers of uniform size. This enabled mechanization of loading and unloading ships, cut time and cost of transporting goods and contributed to the boom in global trade.

Leonhardt quotes expert Marc Levinson, whose book *The Box* chronicles the history of containers: “There was no breakthrough in terms of material...there was a breakthrough in thinking through the entire process and coming up with a neat economical solution.” Leonhardt cites the work of economist Paul Romer, who helped us recognize the importance of processes, rules and systems as technological breakthroughs, and not only ‘mousetraps’. You can make an argument, Leonhardt says, that “the greatest opportunities for progress today lie with better rules and systems. Improving schools is more about process than laptops. “ Reducing errors and expanding preventive medicine, Leonhardt cites, can arguably save more lives in the next decade than bench science, research on the genome, stem-cell therapy, cancer vaccines and all the other lab work we hear about...

Tantlinger held a patent, Leonhardt notes..but it is a patent for the less glamorous side of progress, the hard creative work that allows mundane objects to fill new needs.

**Innovator:** Don’t neglect processes, rules and systems. Can you figure out a system that keeps capitalists from taking on excess risk? That keeps European governments from overspending and overborrowing? That helps small businesses

**run their operations better? Process innovation, research shows, is the most profitable and rewarding of all types of innovation.**