In the ‘Information Age’ technological innovations are moving faster than ever and have the potential, if applied successfully, to solve some of the world’s toughest global challenges. For policymakers to make the right decisions regarding research, development and investment though they need expert advice, and this is exactly what Robert Atkinson’s US-based think tank, the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, aims to do.

My goal was to establish a non-ideological think tank to help policymakers avoid policies that would deter innovation and embrace policies that would advance innovation, including by conducting analysis of a variety of technology policies and developing and promoting innovative tech policy ideas. At the time there was relatively little interest in innovation policy; certainly there was a focus on science policy, but that involves a narrower subset of issues than innovation policy. I believed then and still do that advancing technological innovation was the most important thing for our nation and our world. ITIF’s goal remains the same, but perhaps modified in two ways. First, our audience is much more global than I initially envisioned, in part because most nations are now grappling with the same kinds of tech and innovation policy challenges and can look to an organisation like ITIF for insights and suggestions. As such, we have done more work specifically looking at innovation policy issues in other nations and regions, including Canada, China, the European Union, India, Latin America and South Korea, to name a few. Secondly, the ratio of our work has probably shifted a bit more to telling policymakers what not to do, in a large part because there are so many voices and interests now opposed to technological innovation, and trying to get policymakers to ‘throw sand in the gears’ (all of course under the guise of protecting the public interest).

How do you work with policymakers?

We work with policymakers in a number of different ways. Many policymakers and staff around the world subscribe to our free weekly newsletter that includes all our new work (reports, op-eds, testimony, events, etc.) and pre-COVID...
Thought Leader tech and innovation policy has become a fear of job loss, the environment for Protection Regulation or opposing the in areas like privacy and General Data recognition, heavily regulate technologies groups. Whether it’s wanting to ban by nation and region. Certainly, in Europe, do they differ in Europe and the US? What obstacles do you observe at innovation and public policy – and how What do you observe at the intersection of technological innovation and public policy – and how do they differ in Europe and the US? There are many obstacles and they differ by nation and region. Certainly, in Europe, the Commonwealth nations and the United States have been a distilling rise in neo-Luddism (the opposition to new tech) and a growing “tech-lash”, at least amongst active civil society groups. Whether it’s wanting to ban certain emerging technologies like facial recognition, heavily regulate technologies in areas like privacy and General Data Protection Regulation or opposing the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ because of a fear of job loss, the environment for tech and innovation policy has become much more challenging in the last few years. Add to this the growing disdain of ‘big tech’ and the overall dislike of big business generally, at least among the left in the United States and Europe, and this makes it harder to advocate for policies like the free flow of data across borders, the research and development tax credit, and others.

A growing issue will be having the fiscal headroom to be able to continue to invest in innovation, including in scientific and engineering research. Unfortunately, the United States has been on a long negative slide when it comes to federal investments in research as a share of gross domestic profit. With the unprecedented COVID-19 stimulus and recovery packages that many governments have put in place, coupled with the expectation of slower growth, at least until we get a vaccine, many governments will have tough decisions to make. Hopefully, they will choose to expand funding for research.

How can public policy accommodate and encourage innovation? In some ways this is a very simple question. Governments face three fundamental choices regarding innovation policy: they can abdicate and assume that business and markets will do most of the work; they can regulate and assume that technological development and adoption will take care of itself and that the role of government is to make sure no one is negatively impacted; or they can facilitate and assume that there are many ‘market failures’ when it comes to national innovation systems and only by developing a national innovation policy, including with light-touch regulation, will a nation maximize innovation. If a government decides its main role is facilitation it’s not hard to figure out what to do. ITIF: https://itif.org/tech-policy-to-do-list and other tech policy think tanks have written extensively on specific components of what a good functional innovation policy should be.

One way to think about innovation policy is through the concept of the innovation policy success triangle, where nations need the right business environment, regulatory environment and technology policy environment. As much as it wish it were not the case, no nation gets an ‘A’ on all three factors. As we detailed in a recent report (https://bit.ly/2ppH9I) and solar panels (https://bit.ly/3zGf9b) has found significant negative impacts. We also continue our Program, and most recently bipartisan, bicameral legislation to help foster more innovation hubs in the US heartland.

You’re affiliated with the Center for Data Innovation, a think tank on artificial intelligence (AI) policy. With the advancement of AI technology, have the legal frameworks been able to keep up? I think so. In our view people overstate the power and velocity of change in AI (e.g. “artificial general intelligence is just around the corner”) and so there is a constant call for regulating AI and coming up with new legal regimes (such as allowing AI to own patents). We see this in Europe in particular. But there is still so much we don’t know about AI, like how organisations will develop and adopt AI without government regulation. In our view, it’s better to take a watchful ‘wait and see’ attitude to AI. Besides, we don’t normally regulate technologies we regulate the use of technologies. AI will be no different; AI in healthcare will be subject to health regulations; AI in securities trading will be subject to securities regulations etc.

What are some of ITIF’s achievements in recent years? How have you helped shape policy outcomes? John Kennedy said that ‘victory has no thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan’. So many of the policy changes we have successful advocated for have many ‘fathers’. Having said that, ITIF has played instrumental roles in a number of policy areas, including the passage of the national Open Data Act, the establishment of the Manufacturing USA Centers.