

Spot the Innovator

Unearthing the special people in your organisation.

Transformers

One of the great aspirations we have as organisations, and some of us as individuals, is innovation.

Innovation is the most aspirational outcome we can ask for – way beyond an initiative, improvement, or something excellent or demonstrating best practice. The word implies something transformational.

Novelty

Students of innovation are unanimous on what it looks like – it looks new, novel and even original, compared to what came before.

Innovation is not a thing you can describe without a point of view either. An innovation in

one organisation may be usual business in another.

Delving deeper, three concepts seem make up the full molecule – adoption, adaption and assimilation.

For an innovation to gain a sustainable life, the organisation needs to adapt in order to adopt the innovation. Innovative ideas may well come about by chance and Eureka moments, but making it real, productive and sustainable is entirely dependent on the organisation's ability and willingness to change – to assimilate the innovation.

Degrees of newness

Innovation is not invention, though one may lead to the other. In fact, the kin of innovation is more like a benign plagiarism.

Scholars agree that much of innovation comes from borrowing ideas, approaches or products, and reinterpreting them to apply to a different set of needs. So the thing new about innovation is not the idea or product itself – it is the context in which it is introduced and reapplied.

Creative people

Workshops and suggestion boxes are not enough. The bottom line is to have innovative people in the organisation who, at times single-handedly and despite their colleagues and bosses, are able to envisage and introduce change.

Studies describe these types as creative, optimistic, expert in their fields, with broad experience and knowledge, motivated, avid networkers, inquisitive, experimenters, and people with great social and political nous.

Social people

The prospective innovator's ability to synergise with the immediate team or work group is also important – both in themselves, and in the group's ability to accommodate an innovative type person.

Being a good team player is also cited as an innovator quality, but I do think the quality of relationships between an individual and the rest of a team is much more significant. Team playership, by conventional definition, can cramp a person's style.

Connected people

The research seems clear - innovation arises from innovative people working across specialties and interests. Innovators have a drive to engage across multiple organisations, and across the formal structures within their organisations.

An interesting observation is that Councils that innovate best are much more focused on plucking ideas from other Councils than they are on formal benchmarking (a form of league table), or process review (a form of navel gazing).

In other words, they understand the notion of strategically borrowing other people's intellectual capital.



Special organisations

You may have one or a thousand innovator types in your midst, but they will simply resign one day if the organisation can't accommodate them.

By their very nature, innovators flourish or flounder depending on how others around them act. If the work group or organisation is not flexible, adaptive and risk friendly enough, innovations won't see the light of day – the poor sole's free spirit gets crushed under process, regulation, inflexibility, complacency, and in the worst of cases, fear and ridicule.

Special managers

So, when you find an innovator, make sure they are in the right work group and at the right nexus in the organisational chart. If necessary, pluck them from one team and put them in another.

Do this with their agreement of course, but better yet, just ask where they would like to go – they probably already know where that is.

A challenge is that the genesis of an innovation is often ambiguous or with uncertain outcomes. Here, senior executives must be willing to take the risk and wear the "down time" to allow innovators to learn, make apparently unrelated connections, experiment, and even fail but allow them to try again.

Redundancy is good

Department heads would also do well to program a certain amount of "redundancy" into work plans, so that team

members can explore, network, experiment and do things which are not usually measured as productive time.

Included in this is the time and freedom to take part in peer forums across the sector, from LGPro Special Interest Group meetings to other professional development opportunities with people outside the organisation, or even outside the Local Government sector.

Too often you hear the complaint that bosses don't support this enough. The reason may well be a valid resource issue, but such people need to also accept that innovation will never happen if their staff don't have a professional life outside the workplace.

In a similar vein, making time for staff to dabble in topics that (apparently) have little to do with core business should be seen as a good thing. It's about the creative process, which best happens when unrelated ideas connect and become new ideas in themselves.

The value

Having said that, committing to the innovative process is a choice, and only necessary when the community, a crisis, a financial shortfall or a higher government makes it so.

Innovation should be valued in its own right though, embraced as a key goal for all Councils and selected teams within their organisations, backed up with the mechanisms and culture that allow the emergence of innovative people and the adoption of the new ways of working they create.

Innovation Mentors

The notion of having people in an organisation specifically tasked with making innovation happen is not new. Nor has it been successfully applied I suspect. Anyone who has appointed such a person into a line management position will have missed the point.

In fact, one person with some minor resources, not a team, will do per organisation. I call this person the "innovation mentor".

All they need is administrative backup, a salary and budget for operational sundries. Anything more extensive will be use of existing budgets. Personal experience says that such a role is possible, but only within the right councillor and management culture supporting it.

The innovation mentor's PD would include clear performance measures and standards of course, but it would say a few other innovative things.

- The person is overseen by the CEO.
- They identify and mentor anyone deemed of innovator stuff, and willing to play the part. And they will have the full support of the HR department of course.
- Their business plan is fluid - everyone's business plan influences theirs, and vice versa. Indeed, they will play a key role in corporate planning.
- They are sanctioned to delve into other people's business - to unearth the connections that lead to innovation, and unblock the barriers to harnessing innovator talent.
- They can spend as much time visiting other organisations as needed, and within reason, take anyone they think is a prospective innovator with them.

To do so would say a lot – that the organisation is willing to be elastic, spongy, integrated and visionary enough to make sure innovators don't just spit the dummy and leave.

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get involved get connected

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