



Who “Owns” Innovation?

David Sneesby, Managing Partner

In this article

- 1 Why innovate?
- 2 Whose job is it anyway?
- 3 Innovation Directors – a new breed?
- 4 Isn't it a team effort?
- 5 What does the market think?
- 6 Where does this leave us?
- 7 A word from the Partners

Should someone “own” Innovation?

Why innovate?

According to Edward de Bono "There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns."

The late Charles Kettering, an inventor and head of research at General Motors, said "An inventor is simply a person who doesn't take his education too seriously. You see, from the time a person is six years old until he graduates from college he has to take three or four examinations a year. If he flunks once, he is out. But an inventor is almost always failing. He tries and fails maybe a thousand times. If he succeeds once then he's in. These two things are diametrically opposite. We often say that the biggest job we have is to teach a newly hired employee how to fail intelligently. We have to train him to experiment over and over and to keep on trying and failing until he learns what will work."

Whose job is it anyway?

So if innovation is so central to organisational progress that should be responsible for it? Should there be, for example, an Innovation Director whose remit it is to champion innovation across the organisation. Certainly, based on some of the most recent assignment briefs we have been working on, several of our clients seem to think so. And interestingly, in the current times of such economic uncertainty, could this creation of the new role of Innovation Director be seen as a proactive response to help kick-start the process of creative thinking following a period of battening down the hatches where the appetite for change has been dulled? It is clear that many organisations have been focussing on their “core activities” and have adopted a maintenance mode to ride out the recession.

But is this right? Should organisations be responding to innovation in this way? Innovation is risky but necessary. The UK is still operating as a risk averse environment. There is an underlying reticence to

*“you should
separate the risks
in your head from
the actual risk of
failure”*

change and take risk and fear has developed. Syl Saller, global innovation director at Diageo, commented recently at a conference targeted at marketers that “you should separate the risks in your head from the actual risk of failure”. She also added that “you should take responsibility for change that you want to see”. Finally she made the point that relationships in organisations can help to stimulate innovation and that by developing a framework that encourages

support and empathy among colleagues, marketers can feel confident that innovation will be backed by those they answer to.

Innovation Directors – a new breed?

So what is behind the thinking of creating a new role of Innovation Director? Is it that innovation has dried up and this is the catalyst, or innovation is back on the agenda again, or possibly that innovation is seen as so important it cannot be left to chance, or maybe it is an aggressive manoeuvre to wrong-foot

the competitors? Whichever, having an Innovation Department is placing responsibility and accountability for this activity in the hands of a few “experts” – much like the R&D department. Does this then mean others in the organisation can/should stop thinking of new ideas because the thinking is being taken care of in the Innovation Department?

*“a mandate –
permission to
innovate”*

Isn't it a team effort?

But shouldn't it be the responsibility of every single employee to come up with new ideas – after all it is them that have the most interaction with the customers, processes, services and products. And it motivates as well. Having a voice and a channel to express ideas must be good? Indeed, fundamental to the Kaizen method is placing the responsibility for idea generation on those closest to the process. A sustained kaizen idea suggestion system can be one of the most powerful ways to keep people engaged in continuous improvement.

But as Susan Heathfield expresses in Harness the Power of an Employee Suggestion Programme: Beyond the Suggestion Box, “The pitfalls of an ill-conceived employee suggestion program are multiple, legendary and most frequently - avoidable. A carefully constructed employee suggestion programme that is launched with organizational commitment, clarity and ongoing communication can positively impact your bottom line and your employee motivation and enthusiasm. An ill-conceived, hastily launched, undefined employee suggestion program can turn people off and generate ill will, cynicism and misunderstanding.” She ends by saying “People tend to start ill-defined, fuzzy programs that fail to define rewards, implementation strategies and communication systems. People, who fail to get timely feedback, stop submitting ideas. If every idea becomes a “why should we” rather than a “why should we not”, people get discouraged quickly. The process becomes a joke. Or simply ignored. How many empty suggestion boxes are sitting in companies?”

*“The pitfalls of an ill-
conceived employee
suggestion program
are multiple,
legendary and most
frequently –
avoidable”*

What does the market think?

So returning to the question of whether there should be a director responsible for innovation I read a tweet from [David Armano](#), the recently appointed EVP, Global Innovation & Integration at Edelman. He commented that someone called Zachary Paradis had congratulated him on his appointment but didn't know what the title meant! Armano responded by saying “innovation comes in waves of all sizes, but it's something that every business needs to focus on—because it can ultimately create new opportunities which are essential for growth.....Many organizations set up innovation incubators or labs and treat them as experiments. In my experience where I've seen this done, it leads to some interesting experiments—but a lack of adoption. This is where integration comes in. Innovations can often happen in nimble environments, but it doesn't and shouldn't be treated as a lab. Instead, innovations should occur in batches with the purpose of scaling and integrating more broadly. It's the second half of the equation and can be accomplished with multiple teams focused on pushing things through to fruition.” He views his appointment as “a mandate from Edelman's most senior leaders—permission to innovate.”

I recently came across a really interesting discussion on innovation which I'd like to share with you. Ben Malbon is the Director of Creative Strategy at Google Creative Lab in New York. Prior to this he was the Executive Director of Innovation at BBH (the creative agency). Like me he was intrigued by the idea as to whether such a role as Innovations Director should exist. He asked a number of people with title's similar to this what it meant and to try to capture their role in a tweet-length summary. They said this:

"Innovation doesn't happen with an individual, it has to be part of an organization's culture."

Edward Boches (Chief Innovation Officer, Mullen)

Opening minds. Inspiring change. Creating unexpected connections. Dissecting cool stuff + re-applying. Sharing. Experimenting.

Saneel Radia (Head of Innovation, BBH New York)

Help BBH NY do what we aren't currently doing but want to. Criteria: make clients & talent happy, be credible.

"the community might actually catch a few fish, while they are learning to fish"

Faris Yakob (Chief Innovation Officer, KBS&P)

Asking Why? And What If? Instead of How? + When? - Hopeful midwife to new *kinds* of ideas

Rishadt Tobbacowla (Chief Strategy & Innovation Officer)

Help drive future competitive advantage. Seek fresh insightful connections.

Some of the most pertinent of responses in the resulting blog stream was from a person who suggested that "In an odd way, the job of a Director of Innovation is to make their own role obsolete. To kick start a cultural change within the company/agency". Another went on "Great post. I'm in favour of the Chief Innovation Officer, as long as the goal of this position is to make itself obsolete. Years ago job titles had to have "digital" in them. It was someone's job to understand digital. Now it's everyone's job to understand digital, so you don't really need that prefix in a job title anymore. Same with innovation, it should be everyone's job." And finally a person who said "Strongly agree. Innovation doesn't happen with an individual, it has to be part of an organization's culture. A Chief Innovation Officer's value may not come from being a visionary seer, but from building a forward-thinking environment and identifying the people who thrive in it. It's someone who expands the organization's horizon, and guides it along the edges of what's next." If you'd like to read more comments – and there are many more tweets on this subject have a look at this.....

<http://malbonnington.com/tag/chiefinnovationofficer>

A study by James Watkinson found that "Unlike chemistry or accounting, Innovation is a discipline and the building blocks can be learned, built, practiced and managed. Through repeated practice the discipline is built and eventually the cultural DNA of the organization comes into alignment for successful innovation. The road to building the foundation for innovation is old and time-tested. And while there are many starting points, a firm can begin the journey by putting together a group whose role will be to serve as "innovation champions." They will help the firm shape its values and create the climate. As the

process continues and matures, this group can be grown into a community of champs, mentors and coaches. Along the way we must give this community a common vision and a common language of innovation; provide them concepts and tools to build the processes; coach their innovation behaviours; and help them practice continuous experimentation. Although this journey may take several years, the investment can yield real benefits before all disciplines are fully developed, as the community might actually catch a few fish, while they are learning to fish.”

Where does this leave us?

Where does this leave us? I guess like many thought pieces it's good to reflect. I have as I have been writing and researching this piece. Is there a consensus? I don't think so. But it raises the question for me as to whether the role of Innovation Director will be around 10 years from now. Maybe they will have completed their job by then, made themselves obsolete and equipped their organisations and people with a corporate culture or DNA that nurtures and harnesses creative and innovative thinking once again? I hope so.

A Word from the Partners

We hope you've found this piece interesting and useful, and we'd love to hear your thoughts on this subject. If you would like us to explore this subject in more detail, or if you would like to suggest other topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

We look forward to working with you.

Best wishes

The Partners

ingoodcompany@snowdontate.com