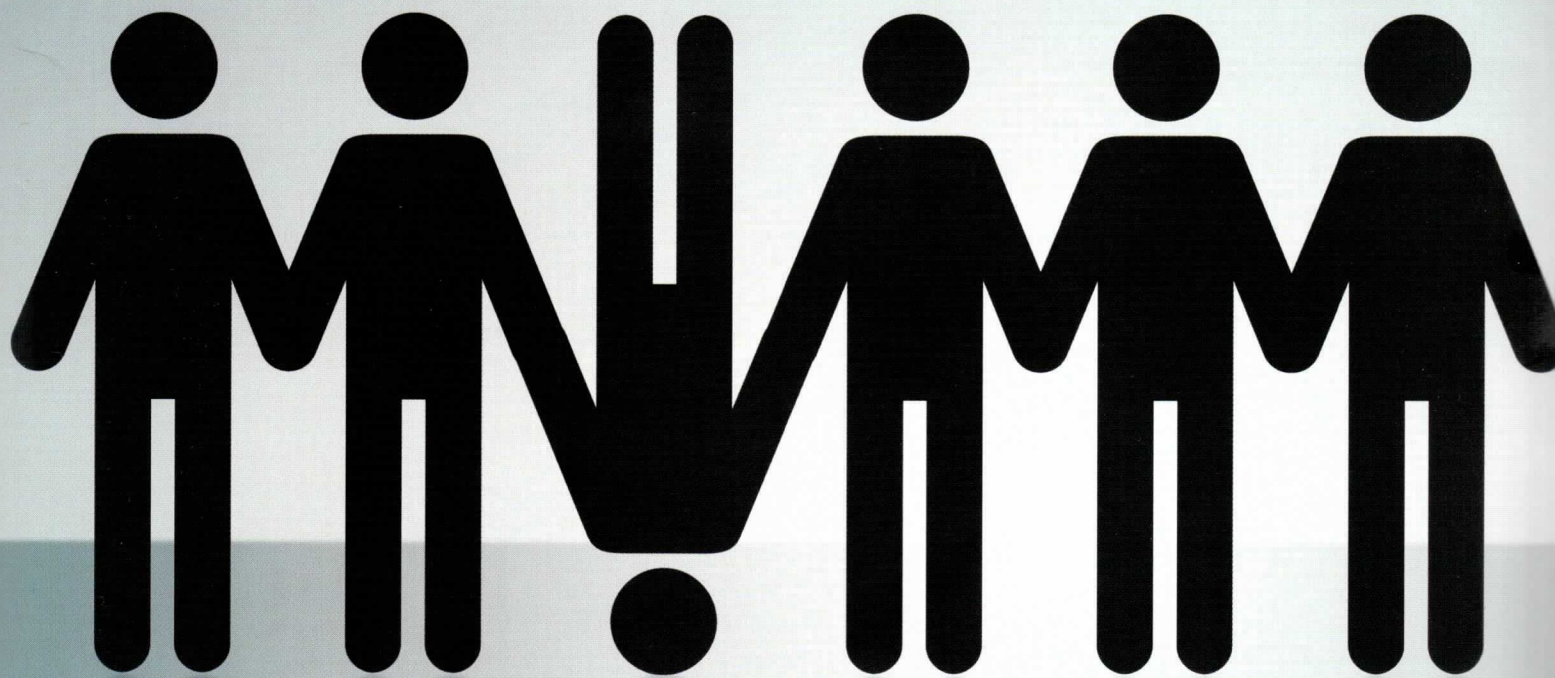


Who drives innovation? **Amantha Imber** suggests that, sometimes, it's not who you think who does the thinking.



# THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

**W**HEN YOU'RE TRYING TO FIND AN innovative solution to a problem, how often do you find yourself talking about it with the same old group of people? Perhaps it's your immediate team, or the people you regularly deal with at your client or partner organisations. If you're like most people, the answer is probably a lot of the time.

I regularly ask this question to groups that I address in speaking engagements and typically, about two-thirds of the room indicate that this sums up their typical approach to problem-solving. And I too have been guilty of this cardinal sin of creativity.

I used to work in advertising as a consumer psychologist for several years and as a result, found myself participating in one hell of a lot of brainstorming and problem-solving workshops. The typical scenario was thus: we would receive a brief from a client, one of the account managers would book a meeting for an hour, invite the usual suspects (that is, the team of people who were responsible for servicing that client) and we would sit around and throw ideas at each other. Because most problems we received were variations of problems we had received in the past, such as "grow awareness for X", "drive loyalty for Y", the group would typically rehash or re-spin solutions that were similar to how we had solved the problem in the past. And not surprisingly, it was rare that any strokes of genius came out of such meetings.

Likewise, in these situations, it was fairly typical for ideas to get shot down before they even had the chance to breathe. "But we've already tried that in the past and it didn't work" or "We don't have the resources" were phrases that I heard *ad nauseam*.

However, in other situations, we would invite some 'unusual' suspects to these meetings – a strategist who had never worked on

the client or category before, someone from the finance department (because let's face it, it's not often that they get asked to show their mug in an idea generation session) or someone equally unexpected. And creativity and great ideas would flourish. Suddenly, with the new perspective, ideas that the group would never have usually thought of were being suggested and being given serious consideration.

The energy in the group was different too. With new faces came new attitudes and renewed vigour for the problem. It was a much more enjoyable experience to be a part of.

My case study of one is all well and good, but being a geeky scientist type, whenever I get a hunch about something, I trawl through the research journals and see if there is some evidence to actually back it up. And in this case, there certainly was.

In one such study, Leigh Thompson from Kellogg School of Management and some other colleagues set out to explore the impact of group membership on creativity. They suspected that 'open groups', in which new members were regularly asked to contribute to the group, would be significantly more innovative than 'closed groups', in which membership remained the same.

To test their hypothesis, they divided participants into several three-person groups. Half of these groups were assigned as 'closed groups', and throughout the brainstorming tasks, group membership remained the same. The other groups were assigned as 'open groups'. Halfway through the brainstorming task, the open groups were given a new group member who would help contribute to the idea generation task.

Thompson and his colleagues found that the open groups performed significantly better on the task. They produced more unique ideas and a greater variety of ideas than did the closed groups. And it wasn't just the newcomer that was responsible for generating the ideas. Instead, they found that the newcomer actually triggered different thoughts and beliefs and ideas in the existing group members.

Not surprisingly, the researchers concluded that a change is indeed as good as a holiday when it comes to groups producing better ideas.

In another study that looked at groups and creativity, some researchers from Northwestern University were interested in exploring some relatively high profile teams that already existed and had been working together for some time. They looked at the Boston Red Sox, successful Broadway musical teams, and scientific collaborators, among other teams. And then they examined how effective their collaboration was.

Not surprisingly, they found that each team had a diverse bunch of people in it, but it wasn't diversity in gender or age that was related to breakthrough performance. Instead, the key predictor was whether the group contained a mix of experienced people who had been with the team for a while and a bunch of newbies who had less experience. They discovered that experienced teams who didn't introduce new

members were less likely to perform as effectively in their creative pursuits.

So, much like Thompson and co, they concluded that having diverse and changing group members is a key way to drive creativity and breakthrough innovations.

I believe that these findings (not to mention my case study of one) have important implications for the type of work I now do with organisations. A

typical project for us at Inventium (an innovation consultancy I founded a couple of years ago) involves an organisation approaching us with a problem or opportunity they want to think more creatively about, such as how they can drive growth among a particular target group, how they can grow revenue in category X, and so on. They then ask us to facilitate idea generation or innovation sessions to produce breakthrough thinking.

We have a range of tools and techniques that we've developed at Inventium, all of which are underpinned by what has been proven to work according to scientific studies. One of the most effective techniques that consistently produces quite amazing results is one that we call 'externals'. The concept springs from the number of studies that have been conducted, such as the aforementioned ones, that have time and time again shown that having people who are external or new to the team is a great way of driving creative solutions.

As such, we always recommend to our clients that we should invite people who are either external to the team in the organisation we are working with (eg bringing a finance person into a marketing team session), or external to the organisation.

We have used this technique with companies such as BP, Vodafone, Fonterra and Australia Post to deliver breakthrough thinking to problems that had consumed the team of people tasked with working on it. The impact of having externals in the room leads thinking in very left of centre directions which inevitably leads to better solutions.

The other thing about externals that is important to mention is that we are incredibly fussy about who we bring into the room. We don't simply let in any Tom, Dick or Harry (although the Toms, Dicks and Harrys certainly would have some effect, according to science).

Instead, we deliberately recruit externals who see the world in a very unique way, are generally working in a creative profession, such as photography, filmmaking or design, but have had experience in the corporate world. This means that our externals produce left-of-centre thinking that is underpinned with a business reality.

Due to the popularity of the externals concept with Inventium's clients, I recently co-founded a group called The Curiosity Hive that takes the externals concept to the extreme.

The idea for the Curiosity Hive came from the popularity of externals that we were inviting into workshops and the huge value they added. Mid last year, I was having a chat to some colleagues about this and we thought "what if we ran idea generation sessions in which the externals outnumbered the client?" What if we could assemble a diverse group of people who were essentially brains for hire? Kind of like live, real life crowdsourcing.

So we set about recruiting a group of brains with the following criteria in mind. First, we wanted a diverse mix of backgrounds. We didn't want 'two' of anything. So we searched for curious and creative folk from a number of different professions, such as medicine, architecture, publishing, production, IT, engineering, research and so on. Second, they had to be curious. Curious about the world, curious about finding out new things that had no seeming direct relation to them, and curious about finding better ways of solving problems. Finally, they needed to have had experience with the corporate world. We didn't want sculptors who had no idea what a profit and loss was, for example.

So what we ended up with is a group of diverse, creative and curious types who have an appreciation for the corporate reality that underpins many problems clients come to us with. And this became the foundation of the Curiosity Hive – a bunch of brains for hire.

To date, the Curiosity Hive has been overwhelmingly popular due to the novel proposition the group represents and due to many organisations' desires to look outside their normal world for innovative thinking. In a recent session with the publishers of *The Big Issue*, a street magazine written by professional journalists and sold by largely homeless people, the organisation tasked the group with finding solutions to how they could change perceptions of their organisation. It wanted to get across that it is not a traditional welfare charity (as many people believe) but rather a social enterprise that provides sustainable mechanisms that help people help themselves.

With ten curious minds and with two hours of idea generation time, we had around 20 ideas fleshed out (and about 100 ideas in their infancy). Natalie Susman, marketing and communications manager at *The Big Issue*, commented: "We found the workshop invaluable, walking away with a number of different approaches and new, creative and entrepreneurial ways to differentiate ourselves for other not-for-profits, some of which we have started to implement."

So the next time you identify a problem you need to solve or an opportunity that you might want to capitalise on, give some serious thought to the combination of brains you gather in the room. Sure, pick some of the usual suspects who have the depth of knowledge around the issue, but try to include a few unusual suspects and watch creativity blossom. ★

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*Dr Amantha Imber is author of The Creativity Formula (www.thecreativityformula.com) and a co-founder of The Curiosity Hive. She can be reached at: amantha@inventium.com.au*

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