

CREATE ... INNOVATE ... IMAGINE ...

THINKING CREATIVELY CAN HAVE SIGNIFICANT FINANCIAL BENEFITS FOR YOUR BUSINESS. HERE *PRIORITY* EXPLORES SOME STRATEGIES TO HELP BUSINESSES BOLSTER IMAGINATIVE THOUGHT, SOLVE PROBLEMS AND ENCOURAGE INNOVATION.

THE BUSINESS OF CREATIVITY

"Businesses wanting to change need to move away from logical and linear thinking," says Dr Amantha Imber, founder of Inventium, a Melbourne-based company that trains people to think more creatively.

Through Inventium, a company she founded in 2007, Amantha has worked with executives from around the world, consulting to companies such as LEGO, BP, Fosters, Vodafone, Australia Post, Clemenger BBDO, OMD and Oglivy. She is also the author of a forthcoming book on the subject, *The 52 Rules of Creativity*.

Amantha, who has a doctorate in organisational psychology, uses a scientific approach with a psychological base to help people think more creatively and innovatively.

"Workplaces are realising that they can come up with good ideas faster and find better solutions to existing problems by using a creative-thinking approach. A breakthrough product, process or customer experience is more likely to be created by moving away from the routine, the comfortable or the incremental," she says.

GETTING CREATIVE

Amantha believes that one of the biggest barriers to creative thinking at work is the tendency for people to get stuck in their day-to-day routines.

"Many businesses have lodged themselves in a routine and they do things the same way every day, which is not the best environment for stimulating creative thinking," she says. "And staff often feel that they are too busy or too stressed to offer creative solutions."

Amantha suggests that there are a number of simple strategies that businesses can use to encourage creative thought, such as creating breathing space from work pressures, developing problem-solving techniques and recognising good ideas from staff members.

"If your staff are thinking outside the square then it's a huge competitive advantage for your business." >



Amantha Imber,
founder of Inventium.

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PERMISSION TO FAIL

Allowing risk-taking and giving staff permission to fail are also critical to creativity but it can be difficult to cultivate these concepts in a risk-averse organisational environment.

"Innovation means creating and trying new things, whether it's a product, a process or a strategy," explains Amantha. "This can involve the possibility that things will not work. And if you're after a real breakthrough innovation, then the risks tend to be higher."

"We're not used to setting ourselves up to fail and, as a result, we start to take fewer risks. This inbuilt resistance to risk-taking often increases as the stakes get higher. When people get better jobs, or higher mortgages, or their kids are at school, it means they usually have more to lose and they can become more risk-averse."

Amantha believes you can't be creative and have a perfect score card at the same time. This is why a supportive workplace culture is crucial for employees to feel they are allowed to think about innovation. "When staff feel safe and supported and not worried about threats, they are more likely to take risks, which is what business needs for innovation."

A STIMULATING CHALLENGE

Managers can foster workplace creativity by giving their employees more interesting work and greater responsibility.

"The biggest predictor of creative thinking at work is having a challenging job," says Amantha. "When employees are allowed to work autonomously, as opposed to being given step-by-step, day-by-day instructions on how to reach certain goals, they will generally behave more creatively."

It's also beneficial to align tasks to an employee's area of interest and to ask them regularly if they feel challenged by their work.

While a challenging job can be stimulating, Amantha believes that stress is not conducive to creative thinking.

"According to research conducted by the Harvard Business School, creative thinking was found to be less likely on high pressure days," she says. "Creative thinking can still occur under pressure but only if workers have a strong sense of mission and they can immerse themselves in their work uninterrupted."

Being creative and original doesn't always have to be hard work. Rest, relaxation and regular breaks can provide the fresh perspective you've been searching for. Similarly, sleeping on a problem or challenge or taking a short walk outside when you feel blocked can be one of the smartest things to do.

"When you return, the chances are you'll have a fresh idea or approach," Amantha explains.

IT'S A TEAM THING

Businesses should also consider the size of their teams. When teams are being constructed and created, organisational creativity is generally the last thing on the manager's mind. However, recent research suggests that the size of the team is strongly linked to how innovatively an organisation will perform.

"A group of researchers at the University of Oklahoma examined the issue of what is the optimal size for teams that need to think creatively," says Amantha. "They found that organisations that were made up of very large teams (more than 15 members) were less creative than those consisting of medium-sized teams of six to 10 people – a size that is considered optimal for creativity."

Changing teams around or introducing new members can also help overcome a "group think" mentality, where individuals start automatically thinking the same way as their team.

"Research suggests that teams that have been together for a while develop a set of entrenched assumptions and ways of doing things and a set pattern of behaviour," says Amantha.

Studies show that when a new member joins a team, existing assumptions, attitudes and behaviours are far less likely to be activated and, instead, the new person triggers new thoughts and behaviours.

While it can be tempting to leave harmonious teams alone, Amantha suggests businesses try to rotate employees regularly through different teams to enhance creativity.

STIMULATING SURROUNDINGS

The environment in which people spend their working lives can also have a phenomenal impact on their creative behaviour.

One of the best ways to stimulate creativity, according to Amantha, is to regularly change the physical surrounds of an employee's working environment. This can be as simple as putting up new posters every fortnight or pinning interesting articles up in the tea room where people have time to be exposed to new stimuli.

Creativity also seems to be higher in offices where there is an element of nature present.

"Gazing out of the window to a view, or even bringing some greenery into your immediate surrounds, can have a significant impact on creativity," says Amantha.

"Even having furniture that is made from natural materials, as opposed to plastic and synthetic, can have a positive effect."

Warm colours such as red and orange are also believed to promote creative and lateral thinking.

"This occurs because warm colours tend to make us feel happier than cooler colours and when you're happy, a chemical called dopamine is released in the brain, making information flow more freely."

Minimalism isn't necessarily ideal for creativity; an environment that contains many objects and textures is much more conducive to creative thinking. "One of the keys to creative thinking is being exposed to a large amount of stimulus, which triggers more thoughts and improves creative-thinking ability."

It will probably come as no surprise that Amantha promotes the open plan office environment. "There is a lot of scientific evidence suggesting that office environments where employees can easily exchange ideas and be sociable leads to greater creativity and job satisfaction."

Office design that incorporates more casual social interaction spaces, such as groups of couches or "break-out" areas for the informal exchange of ideas, is one way organisations can promote both sociability and creativity. >



BEYOND THE BRAINSTORM

Brainstorming, a technique often used by companies to generate ideas, is not a forum favoured by Amantha for extracting creative ideas from a group.

"In my experience people working alone tend to produce better ideas than brainstorming groups. I know that I come up with my best ideas when I am having a shower or when I am bleary eyed at three in the morning," she says.

In general she believes that brainstorming is flawed because it tends to discourage introverted people and also because people often don't listen. "This results in many thoughts and ideas going unnoticed and, as a result, dying before they've ever had a chance."

Amantha suggests that an alternative strategy is to initially think about the challenge alone.

"Next time a major brief hits your desk, resist the impulse to have a chat with the person next to you. Instead, spend a bit of time thinking about it on your own. Once you have come up with a few good ideas – and possibly some not-so-good ones – then ask your co-workers for input."

She also suggests sending around an email that explains the problem or brief to the team a few days before the meeting. One technique Amantha uses to facilitate useful idea generation at meetings or workshops is called "shifting". It involves people generating ideas on their own, then joining with a group for five minutes to listen to and build on the ideas. The members of the group then go back to working individually for another five minutes before repeating the group process of building ideas.

WE'RE ALL BORN CREATIVE

Having worked with thousands of individuals across many different organisations, Amantha says that the main myth she has to debunk is that creativity is something you have to be born with.

"I have heard so many people claim that they don't have a creative bone in their body and they can't change that. This simply is not true," she insists. "Everyone has the ability to be creative – often it's just about being given the right tools or stimulus." ■

10 TIPS FOR IGNITING CREATIVITY IN YOUR WORKPLACE

Here are a few techniques you can employ to boost imaginative thought in the office.

- 1 Encourage staff to take regular breaks, and take them yourself.
- 2 Formally recognise staff who contribute and develop new ideas.
- 3 Introduce creative thinking time into business procedures, such as meetings and project planning.
- 4 Try to minimise extended periods of extreme pressure.
- 5 Allocate uninterrupted time for workers to generate creative solutions.
- 6 Train your staff in innovative thinking tools, skills and processes.
- 7 Put a plant or a red lamp on your desk.
- 8 Create a social, break-out area in your office.
- 9 Display interesting articles and posters on the walls of your office.
- 10 Change your screensaver to a picture of nature or, if you have a view, take time to gaze out the window once in a while.

Source: www.inventium.com.au

ADVICE FOR DIRECT MARKETERS ... CHALLENGE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

It is inevitable that we will all bring a number of assumptions to the tasks that we are asked to complete and problems we are asked to solve, says Amantha.

"Sometimes assumptions can be a good thing, because they help us complete tasks more efficiently," she says. "However, when it comes to thinking creatively, and designing breakthrough direct-mail pieces, our pre-determined assumptions can actually prevent us from doing great work."

To overcome this problem, Amantha suggests that the next time you want to solve a direct-marketing problem or design a DM piece, you should start the process by writing a list of all the assumptions you have about the challenge.

"For example, one assumption many marketers make about direct-mail pieces is that they have to be two dimensional. Another is that they only engage one of our senses: the visual sense."

Once these assumptions have been identified, you should try to reverse them. Amantha says that challenging your assumptions in this way can free you up to consider new DM formats and options.

It might lead you to consider how you can use the mail piece to engage the consumers' other senses. Or it could lead you to a completely new creative approach that is much more appealing to the recipient of the mail piece.

For more information on creative thinking visit www.inventium.com.au, www.thespeedthinkingzone.com.au or www.creative-portal.com.

DELOITTE FOCUSES ON INNOVATION

Back in 2004, financial services firm Deloitte Australia invested in a now highly successful innovation program known as Deloitte Innovation. The program encourages taking innovation from concept to reality and develops what it calls "commercial winners".

"We realised that creating and sustaining innovation was fundamental to achieving our ambitious growth plans. However, as a firm we faced some challenges in successfully harnessing innovation for growth," explains Matt McIntyre, Operations Director, Deloitte Digital and Deloitte Innovation Program Director.

According to Matt, the problem was that some people were good at identifying promising ideas, investing in them and commercialising them, while others were more comfortable doing things the way they always had. "In a dynamic market that demanded growth and change, we might have been on a losing streak if we had simply relied on luck to triumph over the challenges we faced."

Deloitte's innovation program is designed to encourage participation from all levels of the business. A total of 4,500 employees and partners contribute ideas to the "innovation zone" and as of July this year, 4,821 innovative ideas had been submitted, with 253 of these approved for testing and/or implementation. "Diversity is a breeding ground for good ideas and is the cornerstone of our innovation program," says Matt.

Through its innovation program, Deloitte has developed a number of new businesses and services that contribute almost eight per cent of the firm's current revenues. Employee engagement and loyalty have increased and 80 per cent of staff take part in the innovation program. "We have seen a return on investment in the innovation program of 350 per cent," says Matt.

Invention has been engaged on a number of occasions by Deloitte, with Amantha Imber facilitating workshops on creative thinking and one-on-one complex decision-making, also known as convergent thinking.

"We found that the techniques Amantha teaches really work. A number of our successful revenue generating ideas have evolved from these workshop sessions," says Matt. "She has taught us that everyone is creative but without the proper framework in place we wouldn't get people to express their creativity or extract value from their ideas."

According to Matt, empowering people to be creative in their "day jobs" is one of the aspects that has helped Deloitte's innovation program succeed. "Rather than take the 'innovation time-off' model, which is coming up with innovation out of work time and is used by the likes of Google, we adopted an 'innovation time-on' model," he says.

Deloitte uses a funding model, which enables staff to bill their innovation and thinking time to the firm's innovation program, giving them the time to work on their ideas. The funding for these new ideas comes from an innovation tax that Deloitte applies to its business units at the beginning of the financial year.

Recognition is also an important part of the innovation program. Deloitte issues its annual Innovator of the Year Reward to officially recognise those who are formally contributing outstanding ideas to its "innovation zone". ■

Here are four key steps that Deloitte took to develop a culture of innovation and creativity.

- 1 **Be strategic.** Align innovation goals with business strategy and ensure that innovative capability is embedded in the organisation.
- 2 **Educate staff and recognise innovation.** Make sure staff know the importance of innovation and the types of opportunities the business is looking for. Plan how you will reward and recognise innovators.
- 3 **Set an ideas implementation plan.** Make decisions about what criteria to use for progressing ideas to the next stage, including how to prioritise ideas and fund them.
- 4 **Incorporate practical tools to monitor and manage innovation.** Deloitte created an innovation tool that would allow staff to easily submit ideas, collaborate on those ideas, and track their progress in a transparent way.