Innovation: making ideas work

Tess Julian

Developing a culture of innovation need not be that difficult. Contrary to public debate, innovation is not just about cutting edge product development and expensive research. Neither is it about the solitary genius or boardroom brainstormer. It is a process that can be learned and used by everyone in the organisation to generate and develop ideas.

In fact in an increasingly competitive and change-driven economy, organisations also need to adopt innovation in a systematic way. Libraries are only too aware of the need to be innovative in response to external pressures, given ongoing changes to the availability of information. From defining the changing role of libraries, considering their social function or having input into the training of librarians, to managing tightening budgets, shaping the virtual library or anticipating client expectations, libraries need to lead not be led. Employees need the skills to think innovatively and managers need the skills to foster innovation throughout the organisation.

Education has a significant role to play in the development of the necessary skills and attitudes. The challenges vocational education and training faces in regards to innovation can be considered two-fold. First, it has the responsibility to provide a workforce with the skills needed to thrive in the workplace including skills for managers. Second, it increasingly needs to provide innovative services and innovative delivery styles of training to the workforce.

innovation @ work skills

innovation @ work skills are the starting point for individuals and workplaces to understand and embrace the innovation process. They are:

Interpretation: defining what is needed.

Generation: creatively generating new and exciting ideas, and selecting the best one, through a process of filtering.

Collaboration: working on the idea with others, peers, supervisors or networks.

Reflection: analysing the idea, thinking it over.

Representation: developing a presentation of the idea, either a proposal, a model, a plan, or a verbal explanation, usually to 'sell it' to a supervisor or a client.

Evaluation: reviewing the idea to ensure that its meets clients' requirements, is innovative and useable.

It's a simple process that can be used by everyone in a workplace, from entry-level workers to management.

Where do the *innovation @ work* skills come from?

Since 1997, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) has been funding research focusing on the process of design. ANTA was interested in identifying if there were common skills for the design function across different industries. Why design? Because design is about having new ideas and testing them to see whether they work.

The research went on further to examine whether individuals, who do not see themselves as designers, use the same design principles and skills in certain aspects of their jobs. This research determined that common skills were used so widely across the diverse range of industries that the term 'design' did not seem to define the true nature of the skills, and was replaced by the term 'innovation'. The definition of innovation became *a new idea or a new use for an old idea, that adds value*. Seven guideline competency standards were developed to describe the skills needed for innovation at all levels of work.

Twenty-two cross-industry case studies were initiated. Those selected were from across ITAB sectors and AQF levels and included organisations such as The Regent Hotel, ALIA, Museum of Sydney, Holden and South Sydney Council. Twelve trial learning programs were also conducted with organisations as diverse as OPSM, Alumac and Caltex.

Overwhelmingly the companies who participated in the trial learning programs agreed that the materials explained and presented innovation in an accessible way and encouraged creativity. Participants easily understood the skills and how they worked in conjunction with each other and how they could be applied at work.

However, it was also recognised that skills alone did not guarantee innovation. There was little point in developing these skills in individual workers unless complementary work was done to develop management cultures which actively support and foster innovation, ideas and knowledge sharing. Innovation will not happen consistently across the workforce unless the right culture exists.

Nurturing innovation in the workplace

According to the *Harvard Business Review*, innovation:

> ...has everything to do with organisation and attitude and very little to do with nurturing solitary genus... We found systematic innovators in all kinds of settings.

Their markets and settings were diverse, but their approaches were not.

Even workers in typically 'non-creative' industries were able to exercise and improve creativity and innovation if they were given the tools, skills and permission to exercise them.

To help create a workplace that fosters innovation, managers need the skills and competence to develop:

- work systems which support innovation;
- a work environment which fosters rather than inhibits innovation; and
- management skills to guide and encourage staff to work in an innovative way.

Training for innovation

Learning the *innovation @ work* skills is the starting point for businesses interested in developing a culture of innovation in their workplace. The skills may be used for designing a new product, system, tool or technique. If used together within an innovative work culture and supportive management, the likelihood of developing innovative ideas is increased.

Under ANTA's guidance, the seven competency standards have been supported by tools for educators, managers and learners to assist in developing work skills and workplace culture. The standards are also being added to training packages such as the Tourism, Hospitality and Caravan industry Training Package, the National Wholesale, Retail and Personal Services industry package, as well as the National Assessors and Workplace Trainers and the Business Services Training Package.

Tools have also been developed to support the standards and assist in developing work skills and workplace culture. These guides detail the skills and learning to assist all individuals and organisations with the challenge of innovation from entry-level positions through to management level.

So for those who are sceptical about the word innovation, and view it as just another phrase or cliché, you may want to stay tuned. As the *Australian Financial Review* reported recently, 'innovative and creative work cultures are built by leaders who take risk'. Those who don't step up to the challenge, may be left behind.

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