

Innovation — Art or Science?

If innovation in the workplace can be measured scientifically, ask Robert Bates and Anna Bruns of RSA, can it therefore be improved?

Innovation," says Apple Inc. co-founder Steve Jobs, "distinguishes between a leader and a follower." It's certainly been the cornerstone of his company's success, and is critical to any company's long-term prosperity.

Innovation is inherently human. It is people — on their own or in groups — who evolve and implement ideas and bring them to life. Companies who under-estimate, or even ignore, the human facet of innovation and invention do so at their own peril.

When it comes to people, there are two key innovation ingredients. People need to be able to create new ideas on the one hand, and willing to evolve and implement these new ideas on the other. This latter component can be referred to as 'Willingness to Innovate' (WTI). An interesting difference between these two ingredients is their stability over time. Ability — defined by personal

traits, like intelligence — is somewhat fixed, especially in adult populations. Willingness, however, can change significantly and rapidly, depending on the motivational aspects and facilitatory qualities of an employees working environment. Because willingness is both important for innovation and highly susceptible to influence, it is critical to identify those environmental factors that can speed up or facilitate innovation, or indeed slow it down. High WTI of employees therefore means high investment of energy in the innovation process.

Going the extra mile

The willingness of a company's employees to go that extra mile can make a real and tangible difference to its success. Employees' performance can be broken down into two distinct categories: Firstly, there is in-role performance, which

refers to those activities that are clearly defined in an employee's job description and which are directly related to that employee's individual, specific contribution to the company's overall output. Secondly, is the extra-role performance which is less well defined, referring to an employee's behaviour above and beyond their explicitly allocated duties — examples being excessive helpfulness to colleagues and clients, taking initiative and being a catalyst for change. Collective, positive in-role performance helps maintain a company's success. Extra-role performance, on the other hand builds on that success, significantly enhancing it. For most, innovation is an extra-role performance and probably the most powerfully differentiating one. Innovation varies massively, even in R&D teams whose primary role is generating and implementing new ideas.



Capturing innovation

Despite WTI being an extra role factor and not being written into job descriptions, most line managers do have an idea of their top performing innovators. However, the true differentiator that makes a team successful does not come from the 10% of highly motivated, innovative employees who have the greatest impact. Often it is the remaining 90%, only slightly more or less motivated and innovative than they should be, who make the biggest difference; either for better or worse — a slight deviation from the innovation 'norm' when uniformly present in the majority of employees can dramatically affect the ROI.

In order to minimize the risk of missed opportunities and lost revenue, it is necessary to audit the WTI of not only a few individuals, but of all employees. This is of utmost importance in the R&D department where commercially successful innovation is the number one priority; a collaborative process relying on the positive contribution of all employees. Continuously monitoring innovation can identify creative hot spots and weak spots, give insight into the presence of factors that either promote or hinder innovation,

and provide the foundation for carefully designed, carefully delivered interventions to maintain or enhance innovation.

Peaks and troughs... and peaks?

Monitoring WTI is especially important during times of change and on a regular basis thereafter. This is because a change to working conditions can have a dramatic impact on an employee's motivation and hence WTI, whether it's a move between companies, within one or restructuring. Our research data shows that typically, in a new unit or role, employees tend to be very innovative for up to one year, the degree of their motivation increasing with time. During their second year, WTI falls dramatically to its minimum of their complete time of employment. After that time, to reach the heady one-year height of WTI, it usually takes more than 20 years in a stable working environment and a systematic personnel development plan, based on a programme of careful, consistent monitoring and intervention. The good news is, that with the company showing a meaningful commitment to the development of their employees, both employee

retention and innovation can be greatly improved.

Similar results can be found for employees recently promoted to leadership positions, although here the effects are more marked. From an extremely high level WTI in their first six months within a leadership position, an employee's motivation falls off sharply to its minimum within the second half of their first year. After that, it takes more than 20 years of hard work, both from the employer and employee, for the innovation peak to be reclaimed.

Measuring innovation scientifically

Of course, this rise and fall in innovation is susceptible to influence and intervention. However, in a similar way to medicine, before treatment comes diagnosis. It is for this reason that the routine monitoring of WTI on a regular basis is so important. As discussed earlier, the majority of line managers have little idea of all their employees' innovation and if they do, it's generally anecdotal or lacking in substance. Also, each line manager is likely to use their own, unique scale to judge WTI, making cross-company generalisation impossible.

What is needed are tools that can provide validated, reliable, objective scales for measuring the requirements for innovation. Only these will allow companies to conduct truly time-effective, meaningful innovation audits, the results of which will allow comparison of WTI within different departments, detect changes in innovation over time, and help guide the design and delivery of interventions to help maintain or enhance innovation. These tools now exist and can help to ensure the long-term success of the company, contributing to an environment in which each and every employee can reach their full potential. In the world of diminishing pharma pipelines this is critical to ensure that valuable R&D employees are working together with maximum creativity and motivation.

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