

Informal Innovation

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Innovation. These days, there's hardly a mission statement that doesn't include it, or a CEO who doesn't promote it. Yet in most organizations creativity isn't exactly flourishing.

Maybe that's because we're trying too hard to formalize it. A recent MIT study found that 80 percent of the breakthrough innovations in products and services did not occur in training sessions or formal meetings. Rather, dynamic innovation was almost always the result of informal (even chance) encounters.

I help organizations find innovative solutions to business challenges. I've consulted with clients in the public and private sectors to develop collaborative meetings utilizing creative techniques for idea generation - and the results have been impressive. So I know the power of well-structured interaction to revitalize a group's ability to think creatively.

But 80 percent! There's a statistic that's hard to ignore. And it isn't only MIT's finding. Steve Jobs put it this way: "At Apple, innovation comes from people meeting up in the hallways or calling each other at 10:30 at night with a new idea, or because they realized something that shoots holes in how we've been thinking about a problem." In other words, innovation is less a product of structured processes and more a result of informal conversations.

Here's an example of the results that can come from the cross-pollination of ideas: Two researchers at Hewlett-Packard were good friends. Sally worked in the life sciences area and Laurie was in the printing technology group. Both were part of the central research labs. At the time, H-P was looking at producing the print head nozzles for its inkjet printer through a process called laser ablation. This is a highly controlled process in which a high-energy laser vaporizes the plastic substrate to create a little hole.

Laurie told Sally about the project and she in turn mentioned it to Patrick, a colleague working in the R&D division for Hewlett-Packard in Germany. The three researchers started wondering if this same process could be used in life sciences to create microfluidic structures.

That was the beginning of over a decade's investment - first by Hewlett-Packard and currently by Agilent (following a 1999 spin-off from H-P). And now Agilent has the world's leading technology in ablation-based microfluidics for chemical and biochemical analysis.

How about your company - your agency - your association? Had any good conversations lately?

Obviously, it helps to have the right kind of culture in place for innovation to flourish - but creative conversations don't happen because of a CEO mandate or a task force charter. Instead, they emerge organically in organizations as a byproduct of routine interpersonal interaction.

Creative synergies are often facilitated by employees with multiple networks throughout the organization. Friendships bring trust, inviting an even deeper level of communication. Importantly in the H-P example, Sally was able to connect to both Patrick and Laurie (who didn't otherwise know one another) and all three people were essential to the project's early success.

Want to dramatically increase your organization's "creativity quotient?" It may be simpler than we thought. IBM's knowledge management guru, Larry Pruzak, says the key to knowledge sharing and innovation is to "hire great people and let them talk." Social networks, personal

relationships, people with connections across divisional boundaries - this is the real foundation for breakthrough innovation.

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