

Thinking Differently...

Innovation is as vital to a business as a desk and telephone, but many only realise it when they lose touch with customers, spiral into decline or lose position to a competitor. Only then do they appreciate the importance of using design and creative thinking to generate fresh ideas, manage them and re-connect them to their customer.

Innovation should be a never-ending process, a part of company culture, embraced by all and not seen as a magic wand wielded only by the creative team. It should be a cornerstone of strategy and have a place in ongoing business development with its own budget. According to Design Council research in 2003, 47% of rapidly growing businesses had introduced new products or services in the last three years, compared to 26% of companies overall.

This kind of evidence suggests that innovation isn't something you'll get round to when you can afford to take on more staff or when you have time - it's an essential, without which a company can only maintain the status quo. But how does it work in practice? How do you increase the odds in favour of good ideas emerging in the first place, let alone turn them into commercial winners? A recent study by the Design Council and the DTI showed that innovative businesses have remarkably similar attitudes, be they blue chip manufacturers or creative industry start-ups.

For these companies, innovation is part of the culture. Instead of shutting people away in a room marked 'ideas' or 'brainstorming' while the rest of the operation trundles on as before, they ensure innovation permeates every aspect of a business. People working for innovative businesses are inspired to pursue innovation with genuine passion that goes beyond simply doing a job.

As a class leading example, Google's employee job description states that each person must spend 20% of their time on something creative and innovative that they believe will benefit the company and its customers and they even have someone who heads that initiative up on a global scale. He has the title of... Director of Other.

The truth is that people generally think of creativity and especially innovation as an 'aha' moment. A tiny spark of light that hits you out of the blue without warning; Eureka is the common phrase. In fact creativity and innovation are about habit, repetitive thought processes and a culture created by a team that promotes constant questioning and incremental development of everything they are doing. This is what the Japanese call kaizen, 'Continuous Improvement' or literally 'Transforming Value'.



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It's the 'aha' moment that people search for and think that they can turn on as and when they want to be creative or innovative. It's this conventional idea that many people define what creativity is. The reality is, you can't 'manufacture' ideas as they come from constant thought about problems and they come from habits. Creative people generally have different habits for how they use ideas, how they play with ideas and how much time they spend seeking alternatives (experimenting). It's also about how low their inhibitions are about filtering things out we would filter straight away and how much longer they will entertain those ideas to see what value they have. That's why they're creative.

So in essence, the 'aha' moment isn't as important as the habits that lead to the moment. Unfortunately this means there is no creativity pill but a realisation that creativity and innovation will take time effort and resources and will be achieved by incremental changes that will create sustainable and commercially viable points of difference.

I help facilitate all of the above by mentoring in a hands on, sleeves rolled up way within a company or team. I like to get my hands dirty and create relationships with the people I work with by helping solve real problems or briefs, using them to illustrate alternative viewpoints and ways of approach. I don't believe you can expect a step change from a two day workshop or creative thinking course as that's not enough time to change a culture within an organisation to embrace innovation and creative thinking. My approach is Kaizen based, incremental, sustainable and commercially viable.

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