

Can an Innovation lab fit into the classic Corporate model?

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At a recent company event one of the leaders in my division presented his thoughts on designing and implementing an Innovation lab. The presenter, Daryl Wilkinson, Head of Group Innovation at Nationwide (Link: [@DarylAndHobbes](#)) put forward the idea of creating a digital Agency style innovation lab. This would allow a select group of Thinkers, Strategist and Developers to rapidly wireframe up services and applications/widgets and quickly prototype them into working, running applications.

I think this is a very interesting opportunity, but I think the radically different approaches between operating an Innovation Lab and a large-scale UK Corporate company may pose some interesting issues.

Having worked in a few smaller companies, particularly digital and marketing agencies I can see the value in this. The benefits of this sort of approach are many, including increased flexibility, ability to change direction quickly and a more open way of communicating and moving ideas around. A key principle that allows this way of working to be productive for smaller companies is the removal of barriers. These barriers might be Company rigidity, Governance rules, formulaic team structures and employee ego. By removing all of these things, you can take away, or minimise their impact on the way people think about opportunities and problems. By removing traditional working barriers, you encourage people to open up to new ways of thinking that is not constrained by traditional learnt behaviour. (This is often referred to as disruptive thinking). The two fold acts of giving them literal authority to become unconstrained in approach, and the removal of these business rules allows for a different, more agile operational model.

This also results in the blurring of responsibilities and roles within the team. Team members are far more inclined to own their own space, and stretch out into other member's spaces, as the boundaries between them are blurred, in a far more collaborative working approach.

Let us contrast that with the traditional UK corporate model. Typically, they have a far more rigid structure, with defined lines between departments and responsibilities. Employees have a role to play and generally, because of the luxury of scale, people are kept in that role, and find it difficult to venture too far into other roles without encountering resistance.

Add into the corporate mix a defined, constrictive Governance model, security policies, hard-wired policies and processes and a corporate operating model, and the attitudes that brings with it. These elements are in direct conflict with the outline described above, that not only enables but also drives an Innovation lab. How this newfound Innovation lab will integrate into a corporate environment, working its way through the barriers described here, will either enable or contain its success. It will be a tricky journey implementing, then maturing a lab like this into a working state. It could become an interesting bubble of productivity, living inside the corporate structure, creating ripples that disrupt the usual state of thinking within traditional departments. What better way to introduce change into your organisation than by having a department like this forge new ways of thinking and approaches to solutions.

I'll certainly keep an eye on how it develops, and see if any of these conflicts arise.