

How to stimulate creativity in business

Pablo Cardona and Helen Wilkinson
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Yahoo has recently launched two new applications: *Mapmixer*, a tool that allows users to combine maps; and *Shop by color*, which lets Yahoo's shopping services customers filter their searches according to favorite color.

What is most interesting about these new services is that they stem from *hack days*, which are creativity contest organized by Yahoo to foment creativity within the company.

Yahoo implanted these *hack days* two years ago as a way to catalyze employee creativity. Initiatives that encourage innovation are increasingly popular in large companies. Microsoft, for example, has its own *hack day* and Google opts for "20 percent time", a formula that encourages employees to spend 20% of their work day on those company projects that are most interesting to them, regardless of the tasks that are assigned to them.

According to Google, the service Google News or the social network Orkut have emerged precisely from projects developed in that 20% of employee time.

This type of initiative boost creativity to the extent that it helps employees to feel less pressure and encourage them to take risks, thus giving rise to new ideas.

Favorable Environment

All employees have creative potential, but whether or not this gets tapped is largely up to the company. It is commonly thought that creativity depends on personality, intelligence, or even youth, but this is not always the case. Often, the best ideas come from people who might be considered conservative, and people with high intellectual capabilities are not necessarily the most creative. Having good ideas appears to depend on experience and knowledge, which can always be obtained. Thus being creative depends as much on attitude as on innate abilities. We can identify three basic characteristics that we consider the bases of a creative attitude: tenacity, confidence and enthusiasm.

Tenacity is necessary because ideas don't tend to just pop up. One usually has to do some searching. This is best done by using both sides of the brain: the right, which is the creative side, and the left which is responsible for making decisions based on analysis.

Secondly, confidence is needed to keep employees from blocking their creativity for fear of risks or possible failure.

Highlights

1 The first groups of hackers, as they called themselves, came out of MIT in the 1960s. Although the term is normally used to refer to computer-related crimes, the hackers themselves explain that, "hacking means having fun with ingenuity, using intelligence to do something really difficult. It does not differentiate between individual or team work, and it is possible in any type of project." That is how the Yahoo! innovation program came to be called Hack Day.

2 Yahoo! celebrated its first Hack Day on December 9, 2005, at the company's headquarters in Sunnyvale, California. The only rules for the event were that contestants had just one day to build their idea into a prototype, and that by the end of the day each team had to prepare a demo and then present it to their colleagues in two minutes or less.

3 Due to the success of the first Hack Day, the program was continued. In April 2006, the first Hack Day was held outside the United States, in Bangalore, India. In December of the same year came the first Hack Day open to developers from outside the company. The latest Open Hack Day, attended by more than 400 software developers and engineers from around Europe, took place in London in June 2007 and was co-sponsored by the BBC.

Finally, people will rarely be creative if they do not feel a certain enthusiasm or intrinsic motivation for the task at hand. Although one cannot always assign fascinating projects to employees, one can motivate them by making them feel that their work is important and appreciated.

In reality, creativity in the workplace is closely related to the company's to crop up, it is essential that companies create an environment of freedom in which initiative is valued. *Hack days* achieve this by breaking traditional barriers between the various constituencies within the company. Participants only have to ensure that a demo of the Project is available at the end of the day. In those 24 hours, bureaucracy and hierarchy give way to creativity so that people can get out of their "glass box" and see beyond all the processes that inhibit creativity.

Nimit Maru, the creator of Mapmixer, explains that this idea came to him in the shower. This is not unusual, since the brain tends to come up with its best ideas once all the information has been assimilated and associations made and it has the chance to relax.

Thus hack days are characteristically more relaxed, allowing employees to use the office in whatever way is most comfortable for them. In fact, Chad Dickerson, director of the Yahoo Developer Network and one of the main proponents of the system, claimed that he was as pleasantly surprised by the projects generated as by the ideas to improve the organization of the company.

Yahoo's hack days, like similar initiatives by Google and Microsoft, are only a few examples of how companies can actively stimulate the creativity of their employees. Companies that are able to create an environment that promotes creativity have a better chance of being ahead in the race for innovation and therefore gain a competitive advantage.