OVERCOMING HURDLES TO INNOVATION

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PERSONAL INNOVATION

SIMPLE STEPS TO PUT YOURSELF IN A POSITION TO INNOVATE.

At this point, it's safe to say that *Innovation* has gone from buzzword to obsession in our industry. With everyone from the *Wall Street Journal* to *Fast Company* churning out articles on nimble new companies and their techniques, it may be hard to get a grip on how individuals like us – working in an agency structure – can start trying to innovate in the work we do every day. We'll cover off on steps that can lead to innovation from both a personal and organizational standpoint.
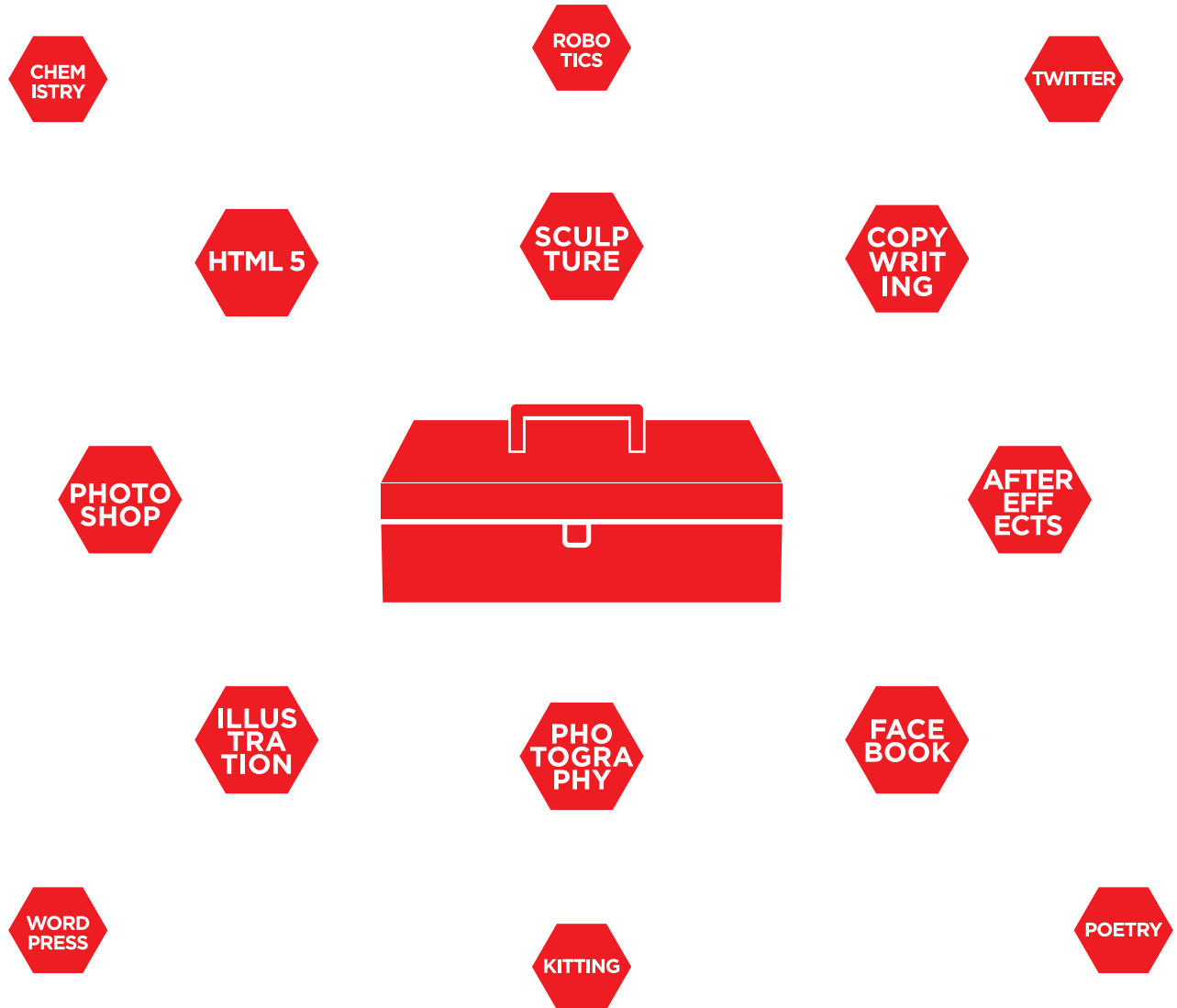
Innovation means something different to everyone

Your specific role and company culture can have a great deal to do with how you approach innovation, but most people can agree on the desired goal: to create something new. It may be a product, process, or idea, but whatever shape it takes, a true innovation advances thinking and (hopefully) achieves results that outperform its predecessors. Given this, it's no surprise that emerging technology is at the core of many of today's conversations around innovation and creative ideation. Nine of out ten of the companies listed on the 2012 "Most Innovative" list in *Fast Company* were centered around tech, with the Occupy Movement as the lone exception.

Here at Proximity, there's always been an understanding that great technological innovations should be born of great insights and ideas. Problem is, getting from one to the other can often include hurdles of various (and often unexpected) shapes and sizes. At a busy agency, time-sucking albatrosses abound. Setting aside moments to innovate may seem like a luxury you can't possibly afford. But not to worry, there are ways you can create an environment and mindset to put yourself and your team in a better position – one that's more receptive and open to innovative ideation. So let's start at the source. You.

Innovation is a byproduct of your personal know-how

New ideas aren't born of repetition, they're created by approaching problems from new angles. Individuals who continually push themselves to evolve and learn the latest processes or technologies put themselves in a better position to see unexpected solutions. If creativity is the ability to generate unorthodox solutions by making connections where there were none, then understanding the breadth and depth of the landscape in which those connections live becomes incredibly important. In other words, if you know what technologies exist, you can find interesting ways to use them to solve creative problems. Your knowledge of the nuts and bolts gives you the power to bend those technologies to create something fresh.

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KITTING

The One Time It's Ok To Be A Toolbox

Taking the responsibility to continually add to your toolbox of knowledge and skills is the single best way to position yourself for innovative thought. You're only handcuffing yourself and limiting your connective possibility if you only know a few ways of doing things. Not to say that innovation can't appear in a vacuum, but having a grasp of existing technologies and processes can lead to combinations and solutions that can be exploited for actual (see: working) innovation. Being a thinker and a maker are two different things. And in our industry, it's the maker of the fully functioning product that gets the spoils.
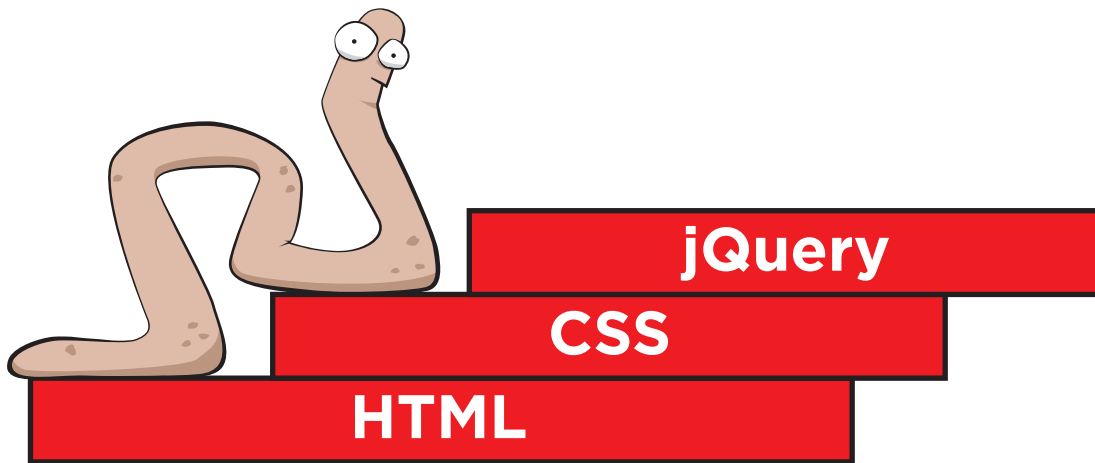
Learning From The Inchworm

There's a reason that personal innovation so daunting to some. The answer, quite simply, is fear. Many hesitate to travel too far outside of their comfort zone and venture off into the unknown (eg, learning new technologies). They're nervous to take innovative risks because they simply don't have a grasp of the underlying systems in which modern tech tools take root. But not to fear, there's a way to get over the impasse – and we'll call it "inching". Here's a simple example of inching, from the perspective of a digital creative.

Say you understand that HTML is the building block of the Internet. And that learning even basic HTML and CSS provides a certain level of understanding of how sites and applications are built. Grasping this, you get curious about building interactions and start looking at javascript such as jQuery. Then, when you're tasked with solving a user interaction

issue, you make a connection with a jQuery technique that you were previously unaware of. While jumping straight into javascript would have been like going to country that speaks a language you don't understand, inching your way to the solution makes for a much less trying experience. This process can apply to just about anything. Being curious and learning a little about one thing at a time will increase your comfort level and lower the hurdle to the next thing.

If you are consistently mindful of this process, you'll be surprised at how quickly your toolbox can grow. And as you continue to evolve, your skill set can become exponentially more powerful as part of a team of equally equipped partners. What you've learned in your area of expertise will create interesting connections with the skills of your group. A smarter, more innovative culture is born out of this – one where everyone is continually evolving and grow a collective toolbox.

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BEHAVIORS OF INNOVATIVE THINKERS

1 RESEARCHING
A hungry appetite for cutting-edge executions, research, and articles keeps innovative thinkers ahead of the curve. By seeing what others are doing, it's easier to combine new techniques into innovative or never before seen solutions.

2 PLAYING
Innovators are curious and comfortable playing with technologies and processes to uncover and test limitations. They don't fear breaking things and like sharing or learning from others that are playing with the same types of processes and technologies.

3 TINKERING
An extension of their fearless curiosity, innovators enjoy making things. While it's one thing to simply learn about new technologies, it's another to tinker and build something with it. This allows innovative thinkers to understand how they can push a medium or technology.

4 GOAL SETTING...OR NOT
Having a direction can be a good guide for the types of technologies or processes that will be most beneficial to your clients. But innovative thinkers also enjoy creating outside the confines of specific goals, boundaries, or clients. And that's not a bad thing. When they're tasked with a creative problem, they can make interesting connections to their previous discoveries.

5 UNDERSTANDING YOUR PASSIONS
Innovation can often require intense focus. When you love what you do, the hours fly by. When you hate it, you're almost always doomed to give up or lose focus. Innovative thinkers understand where their passions lie and make those passions their areas of expertise.

Hurdles to Innovation: Personal Innovation

TEAM & PROJECT INNOVATION

PUTTING THE RIGHT PEOPLE AND PROCESSES IN PLACE TO BRING IDEAS FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY.

Building Your Team

At an agency, creativity can come to feel like second nature. There's often no shortage of creative ideas, but generating true, actionable solutions can take a team effort. And creative solutions tend to happen when teams are formed with diverse backgrounds that bring unique perspectives to the assignment. One way to facilitate this is to look outside of your client's immediate industry and bring in perspectives from other disciplines. If your office has teams dedicated by client, mix things up and throw a high-fashion team on a pharma client. You might be surprised at what a fresh mind and a lack of understanding about client sensitivities can bring to the table.
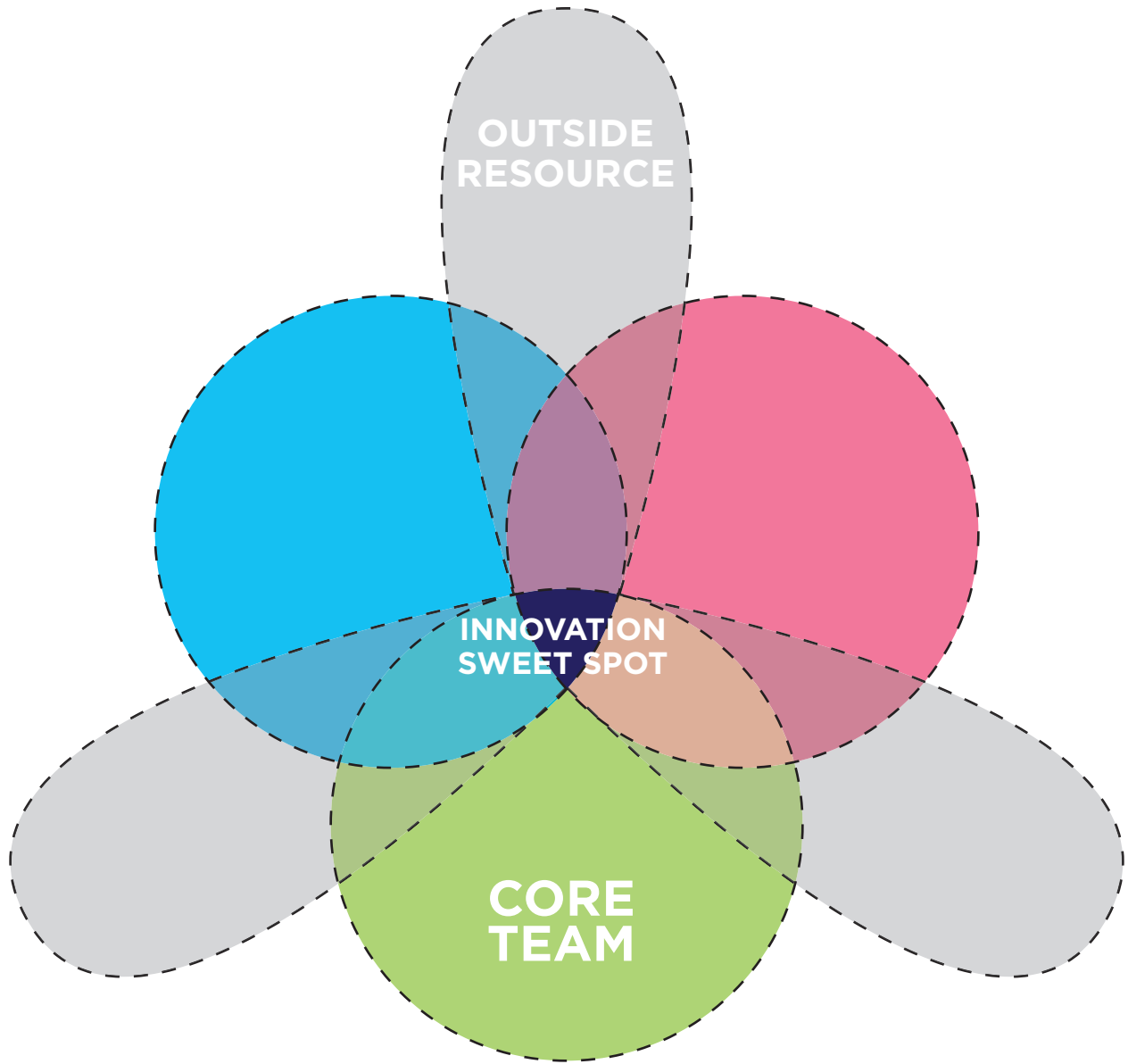
Expanding Your Internal Group

Bringing a technologist into the fold early can be critical to creating an actionable solution. While they might not be billed as "creative", they spend their days finding creative solutions to tech problems. This makes them a powerful asset during the ideation phase. It's also the job of the technologist to assess feasibility. When innovating, you're often doing something that has never been attempted or are bringing a new twist to a product or process. And something you bring to the table leaves your technologist stumped, you shouldn't take "no" for an answer. We should strive to push beyond and exhaust all avenues of feasibility. If no one on your team knows how to make an idea a reality, reach out to other offices or partners that are recognized for their particular expertise.

Looking Outside Your Walls

If you have access to vendors such as Facebook or Google, invite them in early on in the briefing process – you might learn about a soon-to-be-released technology that's perfect for the assignment. Going a step further, if you have connections in what seem to be radically different fields (product development or event planning, for example), bounce ideas off of them or invite them to a brainstorm. You might make some surprising connections that expand your team's thinking.

Hurdles to Innovation: Team & Project Innovation

OUTSIDE
RESOURCE

INNOVATION
SWEET SPOT

CORE
TEAM

Testing Ideas

The easiest way to see if a new bucket works it to pour water into it. When pushing for innovation, a series of checkpoints or proofs of concept is a necessity to keep ideas moving forward and properly shape them along the way. When individuals are living in beta and pushing their personal skillsets, you can build teams of makers or tinkerers who can individually recognize if an idea has any legs or build a simple prototype to test it.

Prototyping is a critical step when pushing for innovation. If your team is attempting something larger in scale, this can take a bit of time. With smaller projects, a prototype can be cranked out in a few hours. Having a rough working example will help solve lots of the problems or questions you may have. While many ideas sound great in theory, until you can click, tap, or play with it, it's hard to know if it's a truly workable solution.

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PROTOTYPING PLATFORMS

1 TWITTER BOOTSTRAP

A responsive HTML 5 framework for building websites, Bootstrap lets you easily mock up designs and interactions to throw in front of coworkers or consumers to validate hierarchy, flow, or usability.
http://twitter.github.com/bootstrap/

2 JQUERY MOBILE

This mobile application framework built in HTML lets you easily build applications that are similar to a native smartphone app. With many built-in styles for buttons, lists, and navigation elements, your apps can utilize common smartphone touch events and transitions.
http://jquerymobile.com/

3 PROCESSING

A java-based application environment, Processing allows those with basic development knowledge to quickly create computer applications. With a large user community and library network, it's easy to create applications that do everything from tap into twitter to native android apps that can access GPS and accelerometer data.
http://processing.org/

4 ARDUINO

Arduino is the cousin to Processing and is used to create physical prototypes. Users can easily connect sensors such as motion, distance or temperature to trigger events within your computer application.
http://www.arduino.cc/

5 RASPBERRY PI

Literally a computer the size of a credit card, Raspberry Pi is useful for physical prototypes that require more mobility. It can also connect with external sensors to build various products or interactive product displays.
http://www.raspberrypi.org/

Selling Innovation To Clients

As we push our clients forward, we're often faced with the challenge of bringing innovation to a particular product or product category. Sometimes, this means offering a creative solution to their brief. Other times, it means bringing them an unsolicited idea that you feel will help move their business forward. In either case, it's common to hit a hurdle when trying to convince a client to put dollars behind something they feel is unproven or hard to understand. Part of earning their trust (and getting the green light for your project) will come from the comfort level they have with your group as a direct result of the way you manage their day-to-day business. But there are things you can do to create a fertile sell-in environment with your client.

Arming Them With Info

Continuing education by the agency should be table stakes in any client-agency relationship. This helps to lessen the gap between ideas they're familiar with and the possible innovation your team is pushing. One benefit that can't be underscored enough is the effect this can have on your client presentations. Rather than spending precious time getting them up to speed on how an idea might function or be implemented, you'll be spending more and more time doing exactly what you should be doing...selling the big idea.

Finding Allies

Identifying forward-thinking individuals on the client brand team can be key, so bring these individuals in on the process early. These "Cowboy" types are pretty easy to spot. So once you sniff one out, make it your mission to befriend them. You're going to need a

trailblazing freethinker on your side if you're in the business of pushing innovative (and sometimes uncomfortable) ideas. Allowing them to get their hands dirty early can lessen their apprehensions, create an added sense of ownership, and prepare them to to sell the idea internally.
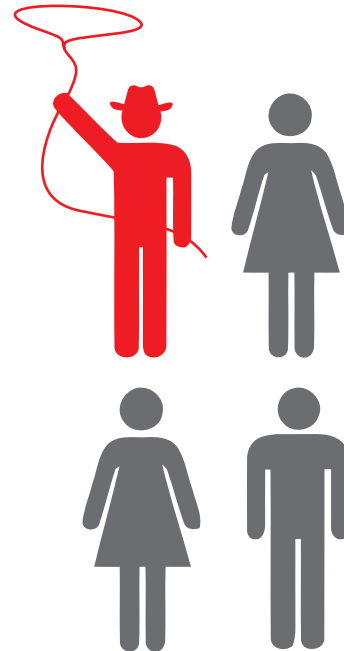
Connecting The Dots

Oftentimes, in the pursuit of innovation, it's easy to lose sight of the larger issue – the business goals and marketing objectives that your client is on the hook to meet. The more you can do to innovate with purpose and speak to how your idea meets their business needs in a strategically sound way, the better off you'll be. It'll keep you from appearing as if you're envelope pushing for envelope-pushing's sake, and will make it that much easier for your client to sell the idea across their organization. And if you've done your homework by educating and forming close bonds with your Cowboys, you'll find yourself with a client that's a champion of the idea – and one that's armed with the know-how they need to sell the idea from inside.

Hurdles to Innovation: Team & Project Innovation

ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION

BUILDING SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURE THAT CREATE AN INNOVATION-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT.

Environment & Attitude

While it might be tempting to simply issue a decree to your entire office demanding that everyone begin innovating immediately, the truth is that real innovation doesn't appear out of thin air. It's something that's nurtured, coddled, and shepherded. It's an organic outgrowth of environments and cultures that have been thoughtfully constructed. Offices that innovate are pieced together to function as a hyper-creative ecosystem, with all of the elements necessary to see that the seed of innovation not only appears but also takes root and flourishes.

Giving Them Enough Rope

Creating an environment that encourages innovation takes a little adjustment of the organizational mindset. At a typical agency (and most organizations for that matter), there's an accepted, deeply ingrained notion that success is something to be rewarded and failure is a thing to be frowned upon as a waste of time and resources. It's understandable. Most agencies need to have guardrails set in place to cut waste and boost profitability. But this kind of rigid model can have unintended and negative effects on innovation by stifling the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that innovative thinking requires. But if you can rebrand failure and soften its perceived impact across your group, you can create an environment where big risks are encouraged. One way to make this more palatable is to start considering failure a necessary part of the innovation process. How? Double-down on your attention to post-mortems – those moments of learning around the post-failure period. Breaking a failure down and quickly deriving next steps will help you move more rapidly to a more viable idea. So set some post-failure mandatories. Give people enough rope to hang themselves, but set the expectation that out of each failure must come a quick and actionable course correction.

Making Your Intentions Clear-ish

Sometimes a lack of innovative spirit is simply the product of a muddled message. As much as innovation is thrown around in agency halls, rarely is a direct call for innovation heard. So if it's something an office is expected to achieve, it should be made known. Without a clear directive, you run the risk of falling into the trap of bystander apathy, a well-known social phenomenon. People will assume that the task of innovating is being handled by someone else and is not expressly their responsibility. So be clear that it is an objective whose responsibility is shared across the entire office. But don't avoid one trap by falling into another. Being direct and dictating are two very different things, and pushing people to innovate is very different from telling them how to do it.

The goal is to create an environment where people feel comfortable to play. If they feel like they're delivering on direct orders or against an overly specific request, the results are likely to be more straightforward and far less breakthrough.

Organizational Structure

Beyond creating a nurturing environment, the nature of an office's structure can have significant effects on its innovative output. As organizations built to foster ideation, most agencies are already poised for innovative production. But the strength of that system is also its weakness. Employees are trained over time to maintain a certain creative status quo, to deliver on the agency's (and the clients') needs. Delivering again and again provides a certain amount of professional security. It's how juniors become seniors, seniors make their way to the c-suite, and clients stay clients. But there are times when bucking the system isn't just a harebrained scheme...it's a necessity.

Recently, the Energy/XI Chicago office took a significant risk by playing outside of the process sandbox during a sizeable pitch. To put it simply, they broke the rules and followed their creative instincts. In doing so, they ended up walking away with the prize. But if your group has the right constructs in place, risks like these can feel far less risky – they can feel like part of your routine. There are simple structural tweaks that can be made to maximize this potential and ensure that the necessary pieces are in place to safely carry an innovative idea from thought to reality.

Starting At The Top

As innovation bubbles up from the creative ranks, it's best to have somewhere for it to bubble up to. With day-to-day agency business and client concerns to field, finding upper management that can dedicate time to review, refine, and approve innovative ideas can be tough. Because of this, creating a management silo that's dedicated to these initiatives can go a long way. Choose one or a handful of progressive managers that can act as a sounding board and review panel, and give your innovators access to them at certain times or on specific days of the week. Make it part of their job description, a requirement even. The sooner it becomes part of their weekly calendar, the easier it will be to maintain working sessions and reviews.

Clanning Up

Getting the most innovative output takes the most innovative thinkers in the building. But don't mistake innovative thinking for well-roundedness or more traditional success metrics for performance. Oftentimes, people with incredible strengths in one area are lacking in others. The key is to determine those points of high-performance among the talent pool and clan them up with others with complementary high-performance areas. Rather than spending time fretting over and trying to bolster their weaknesses, the members of your creative clan can focus on what they're great at, knowing that the other members of the group have skill sets that cover their shortcomings. This kind of comparative advantage will keep the focus on the innovation at hand and create a cohesive, confident, and highly skilled unit.

Learning To Love The Random

Most agencies have some sort of continuous learning or in-house educational programs or courses that are available to employees at no charge, with classes and workshops that run the gamut from writing to strategy to tech and dev. As you might expect, classes focused on writing tend to draw writers. Dev classes, dev people. But these classes have the potential to do a bit more than hone already-used skills. By repositioning them as "open call courses," and inviting folks from across disciplines, you can introduce people to new ideas and help them flex creative muscles they may never have used before. By randomizing the learning opportunities, you'll be building a more diverse creative pool. The "outside" ideas that they learn in those classes can help them make creative connections that they might have been unaware of otherwise. You are, very simply, extending the possibility of innovation and laying the groundwork for breakthrough ideation.

The Issue Of Time

Most are familiar with Google's playful policy towards working hours. Their 20% approach has been covered at nauseum as proof of how liberating, organization-wide mandates can bear creative fruit. But the trouble with that model is the same trait that makes it so effective: its flexibility. When outlining a similar policy for an agency, it helps to be just as serious about the way employees implement the time as you are about allocating it.

As mentioned earlier, agencies are notoriously busy places. Distractions are a way of life. This kind of environment, however energetic, runs counter to the kind of attention and concentration required of truly innovative thought. One way to combat this is to limit the number of possible distractions your innovators can encounter. That means sequestering them

from the daily grind in terms of their workload. Their 20% (or whatever length of time you determine) should be used in unbroken stretches, as consecutively as humanly possible. In the same way that many European laws require workers to take two full weeks of uninterrupted vacation each calendar year, your innovators should have clean calendars and free minds during their periods of ideation. That doesn't mean you shouldn't check in on your escapists. Just make sure that any meetings they're scheduled to attend are explicitly tied to the project at hand. This can be taken even further if need be – a creative sabbatical can be used to make sure that the daily grind has absolutely no interference with the process. It won't just be an attractive proposition to your in-house creatives. It'll also be a nice carrot to dangle when recruiting new talent.

Innovation doesn't come easy. But it also doesn't have to be burdensome. Once your structure's in place and your environment's been optimized, the process itself will start to feel much more organic than you might think. They key is to remember that you're creating an ecosystem – a dynamic, new, and integrated whole made up of familiar parts. And you'll need help. So get heads nodding before you dive in. Down the road, those same heads will be bringing you the kinds of ideas that will put your agency on the creative map.