

How our understanding of employee innovation is outdated

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Do you feel that you are not good at innovating in the workplace?
According to Maria Pajuoja's doctoral dissertation at the University of Vaasa, Finland, the reason for the feeling might be that the prevailing

perception of what individuals do when they innovate is too one-sided.

"It's common to talk about innovation as synonymous with developing a good solution to a problem at work. But individual innovation is more than coming up with a good idea. According to my research, there are several stages in the innovation process, all of which are important for innovation to occur," says Maria Pajuoja, who defended her dissertation on September 2.

Maria Pajuoja's research dusts off outdated notions about the role of the individual in the innovation process. In addition to ideators, organizations also need [employees](#) who notice what can and should be innovated, know how to negotiate enough space for a solution, and question familiar operating models.

Innovation starts with a problem

Innovation starts when an employee notices a problem that needs or is worth solving.

"It is not self-evident that this will happen. For example, suppose an employee does not care about the success of the organization or believes that pointing out problems gets you labeled as a problematic employee. In that case, it may seem wiser to stay silent. Organizations that want to innovate should ensure that employees feel welcome to bring up innovation opportunities," Pajuoja states.

Without obligations and together: coffee breaks conducive to innovation

According to Pajuoja's research, finding a solution is often a social process in which coffee breaks play a central role.

"It's quite funny how often the interviewees mentioned coffee breaks as innovative. However, it seems to be more about getting to bounce ideas around with like-minded people without obligations than that the act of drinking coffee would contribute to innovation," Pajuoja says.

There are often a lot of constraints to suitable solutions: how much the solution can cost, what size it can be, or even laws can dictate certain constraints. Managing these constraints is also an essential part of the innovation process.

"An employee who knows which constraints are flexible and how to negotiate more room can play a key role in finding the best solution. It would be good for organizations to be aware that this kind of role is also crucial in the innovation process and requires different capabilities than coming up with a good idea," Pajuoja points out.

Employees know how they innovate best

In her dissertation, Pajuoja also studied which factors influence whether and how often an individual innovates. Even though managerial coaching positively affects innovation, solely searching for external factors may not be the best approach.

"It was clear from the interviews that the individuals are very aware of how they can best maintain their innovation capability. When asked what influences it, only a few mentioned their managers or organizational practices; most talked about what they do themselves. Four of these ways emerged in my research: keeping up to date with the latest information in the field; creating and maintaining a social network; active observation of the environment; and believing in your ability to innovate," says Pajuoja.

According to Pajuoja, organizations should make sure that they support

the individuals' [innovation](#) capability, for example by giving opportunities to expand their networks and by making visible, and encouraging, all the steps necessary for innovations to occur.

In her [doctoral dissertation](#), "From mechanistic measuring to up-to-date understanding: Problematising the study of innovative work behavior," Pajuoja has used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The data collected for the dissertation consist of 4,418 responses from employees in the SME sector, 255 research articles on the topic, and 34 research interviews conducted in a multinational corporation.

More information: Dissertation:
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