How to Build Your Business Mosaic:
Managing Diversity in the Workplace and Fostering Innovation Through Collaboration

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These days, it seems like everyone wants to be innovative. But what does that actually entail? What role does diversity play in innovation? Is innovation just for tech giants or can it be applied at the small business level? And how do businesses — of any size — spur the creative process without incurring bottom line losses? To start tackling some of these questions, let’s get the experts to weigh in.

The Myth of Solo Genius

Harvard professor and author Linda Hill recently gave a TED Talk (1) on her research into creativity in the workplace. According to Hill, solo genius is a myth. Innovation is about collective genius, or collaborative problem solving, and usually involves people with a range of skill sets and viewpoints.

Hill’s research into innovative organizations found that these workplace communities have three essential capabilities:

- Creative abrasion
- Creative agility
- Creative resolution

We’ll use Hill’s findings as a framework, running side-by-side this central premise: An organization’s investment in building a diverse workforce is key to yielding an innovative return. Here’s why.
The Role of Diversity in the Workplace

No matter the challenges involved, the fact remains: Innovation rarely occurs without conflict through diversity. Dr. Nicola Millard (2), head of customer insights and futurology at BT Global Services, regularly advises firms to increase workplace diversity — as its absence often signals a lack of innovation.

In 2015, Intel undertook a $300 million initiative to increase diversity — that’s the biggest investment yet by a technology company. According to Danielle Brown, Intel’s chief diversity & inclusion officer (3), “If we don’t have a diverse range of perspectives and views, we limit our availability to actually understand and design for our customers. And all of that will undermine the growth that we see ahead of us, and it will undermine our continued relevance in the industry...more inclusion leads to more growth, more innovation, and in turn better business results.”

Intel aside, Silicon Valley companies notoriously struggle with diversity initiatives (4). The New Yorker reporter Anna Weiner wrote, “Black and Latino workers fill only about five per cent of technical roles...in the tech industry, though they make up about eighteen per cent of computer-science graduates each year.” And succeeding in Silicon Valley tech as a woman means navigating treacherous waters: According to the Elephant in the Valley (5), nearly all of the 200-plus senior women in tech could report sexist interactions.
Outside of the Valley, fewer than 20 percent of U.S. companies (6) invest time and resources in building diverse and inclusive workplaces. Yet it’s those very same companies that outperform their peers (7) across the board on business, financial and talent metrics. In short, companies that invest in diversity are setting the pace. Now that should raise some eyebrows.

What’s the likelihood that companies in the top quartile for diversity financially outperform those in the bottom quartile?

Source: McKinsey Analysis

So, we’ve learned that solo genius is an artifact of our business past and diversity is critical to ushering in a new future — in fact, diverse companies set the pace.
Making Inclusion Matter

What steps should your company take to promote an inclusive environment?
1. Spotlight on policy

Adopt inclusive policies that value and support diversity, guided by federal laws addressing discrimination:

- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII)
- Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA)
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA)
- Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA)
- Equal Pay Act (EPA)
- Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA)

State and local governments have additionally enacted equal employment measures, including those forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation.
2. Accessibility

A critical (and often overlooked) building block to inclusion is evaluating workplace accessibility — from external landing pages to internal collaboration tools. Head over to Partnership on Employment and Accessibility (PEAT) for free employer tools (8), including the TechCheck.

Another route is to enlist the guidance of disability rights-based or advocacy organizations. Many welcome the opportunity to engage directly with companies, whether to offer feedback on policy, products or websites.

3. Employee training

Institute employee awareness trainings and be sure to include those responsible for hiring. “We hold implicit notions about the kind of person who would make an ideal candidate and/or leader, and we hire and promote accordingly,” states Anka Wittenberg (9), senior vice president and chief diversity and inclusion officer at SAP. That’s exactly why confronting bias — which can impact everything from the phrasing of job descriptions to interactions in the everyday workplace — has to start with you. To learn more, check out Grovo’s free curriculum on unconscious bias in the workplace (10).
4. Support team-building

Your workplace should be a mosaic, not a melting pot. Mosaics shine when individual pieces are appreciated and work together to form a cohesive whole. So take the time to get to know individuals. Build respect by building real relationships. If teams are remote, set aside time on regular conferences for virtual team building (11).

Remember, it takes effort to make a diverse group of people come together — but it’s far from impossible. So when it’s time to hash out solutions, as Daum advises, “Start every debate thinking of the other person as your best friend. Seek to help them understand and feel good about the engagement at the beginning, middle and end. Remember, you don’t know yet how important this person is to your future.” Or how important they are to the future of your company.

Prioritizing inclusion is the cornerstone for creating a diverse workplace. The next section will explore how to facilitate creative abrasion.
The Idea Maker: Creative Abrasion

We all want a workplace where the figurative light bulbs are always going off. But how do we get it?
First coined by Jerry Hirshberg, founder and president of Nissan Design International, creative abrasion describes a workplace culture in which ideas are productively challenged. According to Hill, it’s about creating an “idea marketplace” through a process of debate and discourse. Sure, that sounds amazing. But all that debate and discourse also sounds like a recipe for confrontation. And that’s bad, right? Well, it depends on the type of confrontation in question.

Rethinking Confrontation: Innovative HR Practices

Pause for a moment and think about the way you currently approach challenges. Does your company strive to create judgment-free zones, where confrontation is sidelined? That’s definitely a complicated personal communication strategy — and it’s just as problematic in the professional sphere. As Hill asserts, this workplace communication style is not going to produce creative abrasion.

What’s the alternative? Amplify differences. Facilitate heated — yet constructive — arguments that produce, as Hill describes, “a portfolio of alternatives”. In other words, mix up the pot. Keep stirring until all the issues bubble up to the surface. And issues will definitely bubble. As every human resource person knows, prioritizing workplace diversity is one thing. It’s another to actually get it. Professional educator Steve Lowisz clarifies, “HR professionals need to
embrace the uncomfortable conversations that might result from learning to ‘deal with differences’. People shouldn’t be ‘tolerating’ each other; you need to start accepting people. Don’t be afraid to talk about what may or may not be offensive. You need to start learning about each other and start communicating.”

What else can HR professionals do? Train managers to facilitate healthy conflict, ensuring everyone approaches discussions with what Inc. contributor Kevin Daum refers to as a “spirit of inquiry”. Managers should use a combination of debate settings to counter workplace power differentials, create spaces that welcome participation, and appeal to diverse communication styles — i.e. chat, email, video conferencing and in-person small and large group discussions. Managers should be prepared to argue from every side equally, providing counterpoints to challenge preconceptions and encourage balanced discussions.

Diversity can’t be boiled down to simply gender and color. Each of us bring a unique identity to the workplace, with multiple subject positions such as age, sex, sexual orientation, race, disability, religion, socioeconomic status. It’s a multidimensional world and we are multifaceted individuals. We don’t define ourselves as any one aspect of our identity. We don’t want to be pigeonholed by any single aspect, either.

Start communicating. Start constructive arguments. Embrace debate. It’s healthy. The next section will examine creative agility — and developing a workplace-cum-laboratory.
Innovation is often the result of trial and error, false starts, missteps and mistakes.
That’s where creative agility enters the picture. Hill explains that this concept refers to the ability to test and refine that portfolio of alternatives through “quick pursuit, reflection and adjustment”. For David Erickson, founder and CEO of FreeConferenceCall.com, creative agility can be undermined by our best business intentions — the practice of developing extensive strategic plans. “I’m a big believer in not creating a plan that becomes the focus,” says Erickson. “The problem with plans is that you have to follow them.” Creative agility is about learning from discoveries and acting (not planning) a way forward.

Think about it as a series of experiments rather than a series of pilots. Nick Telford-Reed, director of technology innovation at WorldPay, states that organizations should create an environment where people feel free to take risks. In other words, one in which people are allowed to fail in a rational, scientific manner that promotes learning from mistakes.

In a similar vein, Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Animation Studios President, Ed Catmull, argues that allowing employees to fail means protecting new, fragile ideas and the employees behind them.
“Protection means...allowing [employees] to make mistakes and not judging them in the process, as they’re trying to work things out”

Ed Catmull — President of Pixar Animation Studio & Walt Disney Animation Studios

Doesn’t all that protection get a little pricey? Well, as IDEO’s Tom Kelley once stated, “In the long run, innovation is cheap. Mediocrity is expensive.” Point taken.

And remember that Kelley’s comments aren’t just for the Intels of the world or technology companies launching applications into a saturated market. Innovation happens anytime a company develops new ways of doing business — whether that means redefining business models, networks, processes or service offerings.

Fostering Innovation Through Digital Capability

With that, let’s explore some easy wins on how those models, networks, processes and service offerings could be refreshed. These days, creativity and responsiveness are inextricably linked to digital capability — how we communicate and collaborate regardless of physical distance, both internally and externally.
By 2020, five different generations will comprise an increasingly global, mobile workforce (12). Technology is critical to increasing productivity whether employees are remote or all sharing a single roof. And nothing says quick pursuit, reflection and adjustment like real-time communication (RTC) (13).

Tech lets your organization get nimble. And with teams acting (not planning!) a way forward, collaborative tools keep the conversation flowing and momentum trending upwards. Particularly when teams are remote, RTC is what allows employees to be creative with and responsive to each other — and by extension to the unmet needs of customers.

Hold on a second. What if you or your employees aren’t sure what those unmet needs actually are? Bump up your understanding with some strong qualitative research. Focus groups aren’t dead, after all — they’ve just moved online. Quickly build up a pool of user data by conducting video conferencing (14) interviews. Consider sourcing a focus group through a clever digital campaign or at an upcoming event.

To sum up, digital capability can support creative agility by facilitating real-time communication that supports both internal collaboration and customer outreach. The upcoming section will look at the final piece to this mosaic — creative resolution.
Counterintuitive Innovation: Creative Resolution

Creative resolution, simply, is decision-making through combining ideas — even those that seem diametrically opposed.
The aim, according to Hill, is “to reconfigure [ideas] in new combinations to produce a solution that is new and useful.” And the end result? It goes beyond either/or solutions to allow for “both/and solutions”.

So, how do you reach these new combinations — these both/and solutions?

1. Listen. Really listen.

Made peace with the notion that this whole thing is counterintuitive? Great. Now start listening to all the options on the table. Quit trying to identify the best idea or the strongest argument. No more senior management tiebreakers. Instead, look for opportunities to move both options forward. Then, according to the Center for Simplified Strategic Planning, this is about taking “the best and most passionately held parts of each party’s position” and combining them “to produce a new and better alternative.”

2. Develop an intrapreneurial mindset

Another strategy is to change your business mindset. Intrapreneurship is all about disrupting internal processes or cultural norms. According to Wittenberg, this is the heart of innovation. Typically, however, it’s the big companies that actively promote intrapreneurship within their organizations.
As Forbes contributor George Deeb (15) explains, companies like Google, 3M and Intel allow employees to spend 10 to 20 percent of their time on innovative ideas of their own, outside of their normal day-to-day responsibilities.

But intrapreneurship isn’t for big companies alone. Small businesses and startups are ideal to encourage an intrapreneurial environment, as their founders understand both the risks and rewards of instituting new initiatives.

Understand that your company, whatever its size, is an ecosystem. Then, Wittenberg asserts, “Pick a diverse team with a range of experiences and perspectives; make your mistakes early and be open about them. When faced with a difficult task or situation, seek out advice from new and diverse sources, most likely you will find an improved approach.”

To keep costs down, draw on experts from other fields using a conferencing solution. Also consider inviting user feedback by running a beta test. Just like the focus groups discussed earlier, keep it easy and convenient with a weekly check-in on a free audio,
screen sharing and video conference platform. Make sure to select a service that can be accessed from any device (16) — a mobile, a laptop, even a landline.

3. Draw on design thinking as a strategy

As Linda Naiman, founder of Creativity at Work (17), describes, “Design thinking is a methodology used by designers to solve complex problems and find desirable solutions for clients. A design mindset is not problem-focused, it’s solution-focused and action-oriented towards creating a preferred future.” If that still sounds a little vague, and you’re wishing someone would just go ahead and offer a 90-minute virtual crash course in design thinking, there’s good news. Someone did — Stanford University’s d.school (18).

Remember — any of these strategies, in any combination, can fit your business regardless of size. Just embrace creative resolution with this understanding: Innovative organizations don’t allow any group or individual to live in the spotlight. They opt instead for patient, inclusive decision-making.
Conclusion:
Supporting Innovation from the Top Down

In this discussion of building workplace creativity, we’ve explored some practical steps to putting Hill’s findings into practice.
We have demonstrated the critical role that diversity plays in innovation, and come to understand the importance of building inclusive environments where healthy, constructive debate can take place.

We’ve learned that innovation involves a willingness to experiment, and that digital capability is key to maintaining momentum. We’ve addressed how innovative thinking can be applied to any size of business, and how real-time communication can spur the creative process.

Now it’s time for leaders to, as Catmull has said, “create a fertile environment, keep it healthy, and watch for the things that undermine it.”

Managing a workplace, then, implies an approach that has more to do with the ability to curate than the assertion of control. As Hill extolled, “Leading innovation is about creating the space where people are willing and able to do the hard work of innovative problem solving...where people are willing and able to share and combine their talents and passions.”

And when creating such a space, let the tech do the talking — choose products and services that employees are already familiar with or that are known for usability. Then roll them out and watch collaboration work for you. Innovation is right around the corner.
Appendix

(1) TED Talk: Linda Hill
(2) Computer Weekly: Diversity, digital and the impact on the working world
(3) Harvard Business Review: Making Intel More Diverse
(4) The New Yorker: Why Can’t Silicon Valley Solve Its Diversity Problem?
(5) Elephant in the Valley
(6) LinkedIn: Why Diversity and Inclusion Will Be A Top Priority for 2016
(7) Mckinsey & Company: Why Diversity Matters
(8) Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT): Employer Tools
(9) Entrepreneur: Why It’s Still So Difficult to Hire a Diverse Team
(10) Grovo: Unconscious Bias Training
(11) FreeConferenceCall.com: The Tao of Virtual Meetings
(13) FreeConferenceCall.com offers free real-time communication
(14) FreeConferenceCall.com offers free video conferencing
(15) Forbes: Big Companies Must Embrace Intrapreneurship To Survive
(16) FreeConferenceCall.com has free apps for every device
(17) Creativity at Work
(18) Stanford d.school: A Virtual Crash Course in Design Thinking