

Why diversity matters: designing the right design team

Chloe Heath, co-founder of the design and innovation consultancy Modern Human, argues that diversity is not just a 'nice to have' – it's good for business too

As organisations try to create innovative new products and services to compete, they often rush into the process. They neglect to design perhaps the most important component of the design process: the team itself. They might try to ensure that different business units are represented in a multidisciplinary team, but a nod to organisational politics is as far as it goes. Yet, research proves consistently that teams are more successful if they are diverse. If innovation is so important, it also makes sense to spend a while considering the composition of the team.

One of the most important aspect of a team's composition is its diversity. There is strong evidence that diversity is good for business in general. For example, an American Sociological Association study found that for every one per cent rise in the rate of gender diversity and ethnic diversity in a workforce there is a three and nine per cent rise in sales revenue, respectively.

But what do we mean by diversity?

The basic definition, or 'inherent diversity', encompasses core attributes such as ethnicity, gender, age and sexual orientation. Most organisations have policies about this and it is likely to be monitored actively. This is vitally important but insufficient. Consideration of diversity must go wider to include the experiences, skills and attitudes acquired and evolved over each employee's lifetime – known as 'acquired diversity'.

In broad terms, acquired diversity is a person's experience of the world and the cultural quirks from exposure and awareness they've acquired. This form of diversity is often overlooked when putting together teams.

So how does an organisation seek out diversity

in its broadest sense and apply it to their greatest challenges?

During our work with companies designing products, services and experiences, we have identified four key elements to creating and focusing a diverse team to meet innovation challenges.

Design the right team

Pick people from a mixture of departments from around the business at different levels of seniority. Remember though that people are not only defined by their role at work. Consider the whole individual and select people who have different backgrounds, upbringings, approaches and pick a mixture of introverts and extroverts. Everyone should bring a different core skill and focus whilst also providing surprising additional skills that they may not use every day at work.

Design the right team culture

After building a diverse team, you need a process that enables everyone to contribute equally. It must: have a clearly stated vision: the vision needs to be big enough and compelling enough to encourage individuals and factions to overlook professional differences to achieve something significantly beyond their current reach; ensure participant safety: team members should feel comfortable voicing their views and making mistakes; exhibit a preference towards action; maintain frequent and meaningful interactions, inevitably this means that teams need to develop effective ways for giving feedback, resolving disagreements and making difficult decisions; be truly empowered, which means they can ask forgiveness rather than permission.

Design the right process

Any human-centred design process must start with a deep immersion into the problem space. Use observational research techniques like shadowing and diary studies to gain a deep understanding of peoples' goals, motivations and behaviours. These techniques immerse the project team into the context of their peoples' lives and create a shared experience and understanding of the problem. A diverse group of individuals will prioritise different observations and reach deeper insights naturally.

Generally, there is a lack of understanding of where ideas come from. The limitations of brainstorming are widely documented, yet in many workplaces brainstorming is still the go-to technique for generating ideas. One of the drawbacks is that brainstorming heavily favours extroverts.

That's why we recommend using a variety of ideation techniques. An out-loud technique, such as brainstorming, should be balanced with time for individual reflection and idea generation that call on the strengths of introverts too.

There also needs to be recognition that teams who generate wild, innovative ideas still tend to select safe ones for further development. Iterative prototyping and piloting helps build security and safety into the process. Use rapid prototyping to test how the proposed innovation will be used and its impact on all of the inter-related factors.

In summary, before embarking on innovation projects, leaders should take a moment to design the right team, establish the right team culture, craft the right brief and design the right process. Doing so maximises the chances of success. |

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