Implementing a culture of intrapreneurship

Innovation should become a permanent function of any organisation, in the same way you have accounting, operations, and finance. That’s according to Andrew Corbett, Paul T. Babson chair of entrepreneurial studies at Babson College, in a Harvard Business Review article about the myth of the intrapreneur. In it, he says that intrapreneurship must be a company-wide operation, and that no single lone champion can take a ‘game-changing’ innovation from idea to reality.

Implementing an organisation-wide move towards intrapreneurship requires embedding it fully into your HR practices, says Paul. That means job descriptions, person specifications, staff development, incentives, and rewards revolving around innovation and entrepreneurial spirit. “That’s when you’re going to attract the right people, and if you get the right people, then over time I think you will get the type of change that you want to happen.” Hiring isn’t always the solution either, Paul adds. Implying that some people have ‘intrapreneurial’ talent—ie by actively seeking to hire them—can be an inhibitor to current employees who are creatively skilled and innovative, but don’t have an outlet for their talent. “Ultimately, this is about moving people from feeling they’re not in control, and are unable to deal with complexity, to a position where they feel they have a role to play, can act and make things happen, have confidence, and are able to see ambiguity and complexity as part of the modern world.”

Paul Coyle, director of the Entrepreneurial Mindset Network, thinks that adopting intrapreneurship is crucial to the long-term financial sustainability of companies today. The Entrepreneurial Mindset Network works to promote the power of the entrepreneurial mindset in personal, organisation, and societal change. They have worked with professionals from, among others, the business sector, education, energy, financial services, healthcare, HR, IT, and journalism. “If we don’t learn to work in this way, like so many other businesses that we read about on a day to day basis, we will fail to meet our customers needs […] and we’ll go out of business.”

**What are the challenges facing executives today?**

Today, the biggest issue is that you need a different type of organisation, culture, and way of working to address the most current challenges facing business, thinks Paul (pictured right). Understanding how to transition from how you’re currently organised into a completely different way of working is vital. A lot of organisations can act in an intrapreneurial way, he explains, but that’s in relation to lone champions who stand out here and there in an organisation.

Real change happens when organisations roll out systemic intrapreneurial practices across the whole business. A challenge, Paul explains, is that people often know how to start the process but know less about how to scale it up. If you are a lone champion within an organisation, and are working intrapreneurally within your own business unit, then Paul thinks you can make a lot of progress—when that is then combined with the rest of the business, that’s when cracks start to appear. “The scaling up of that to the whole organisation is the really difficult bit, and the bit that collectively we all need to try and find out more about and understand better,” he says. “Risk taking is a dangerous thing to do in an organisation, so it’s an internal dilemma between, okay let’s all be more intrapreneurial, and what it’s actually like to get these missions off the ground.”

**Paving the way for intrapreneurship**

Guillermo Cisneros is the director of ESADE Business School's Executive Education program, Leading With Music Thinking—run in partnership with Berklee College of Music. He says that it’s important that organisations can identify entrepreneurs within their business and support them. That’s one side of intrapreneurship. The second is creating an entrepreneurial spirit within your organisation, making it more flexible and ready for change. To implement that culture, Guillermo says that you need to allow space for innovative employees to develop new ventures.

“Entrepreneurial opportunities are very important for leadership development,” he says. “A better way to help employees become leaders and develop the skills they need is to give them intrapreneurial opportunities, real challenges.” He cites the music industry as a key learning pillar for executives wanting to see an industry that has had to reinvent itself time and time again.

“The business models are changing, and there’s incredible disruption because of technology and innovation. To be a musician and work in the music industry you need to be an entrepreneur, and to learn the skillets from the very beginning.” That entails creating a unique artistic offering, recognising changes in the market, and knowing how to promote yourself. Resilience is also tantamount to success, as you’re going to inevitably encounter failure—how you deal with that will determine your longevity.

**The three stages of intrapreneurship**

Thinking of entrepreneurs solely in the mould of Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, or Adam Neumann, is selling yourself a falsehood. Paul says that most of what it written about entrepreneurial ways of working speaks to those who enter the startup world at the shake up phase. Before that, he explains, you have the startup/idea phase, and the scale up phase—going through all three stages is what intrapreneurs within companies should be aspiring to.

Adam Neumann—the former CEO of WeWork—is a prime example of what happens when you enter at the shake-up phase. After WeWork pulled its initial public offering (IPO) in September this year, Adam’s position at the company quickly unraveled. “Most of us can do really interesting and useful stuff at the startup and scale up phase, but it’s a journey and you don’t get there overnight,” says Paul. “You’re not born at the shake-up stage, and you don’t do that as an individual. The really important shake up stuff will be solved by working together, with organisations collaborating internationally with each other.”

Both Paul and Guillermo will be speaking at the upcoming MERIT Regional Summit on intrapreneurship in Manchester on 13/11/2019.

---

**Why Intrapreneurship Matters**

Implementing a culture of intrapreneurship is key for the longevity of large corporations in the digital age

by Thomas Nugent

originally published 07/11/2019


Intrapreneurship will be an unavoidable for large corporations as they adapt to the digital age, as tech behemoths like Google, Amazon, and Facebook have ushered in a new entrepreneurial era of shake up and disrupt at all costs. If move fast and break things became synonymous with the Mark Zuckerberg’s of the world, traditional, large corporations have historically been more move cautiously and try not to break anything. They need to become less risk averse, though, or risk failing. Intrapreneurship—a system where employees act like an entrepreneur within an existing company or established organisation—will be a key part of that.

Paul Coyle, director of the Entrepreneurial Mindset Network, thinks that adopting intrapreneurship is crucial to the long-term financial sustainability of companies today. The Entrepreneurial Mindset Network works to promote the power of the entrepreneurial mindset in personal, organisation, and societal change. They have worked with professionals from, among others, the business sector, education, energy, financial services, healthcare, HR, IT, and journalism. “If we don’t learn to work in this way, like so many other businesses that we read about on a day to day basis, we will fail to meet our customers needs […] and we’ll go out of business.”

**What are the challenges facing executives today?**

Today, the biggest issue is that you need a different type of organisation, culture, and way of working to address the most current challenges facing business, thinks Paul (pictured right). Understanding how to transition from how you’re currently organised into a completely different way of working is vital. A lot of organisations can act in an intrapreneurial way, he explains, but that’s in relation to lone champions who stand out here and there in an organisation.

Real change happens when organisations roll out systemic intrapreneurial practices across the whole business. A challenge, Paul explains, is that people often know how to start the process but know less about how to scale it up. If you are a lone champion within an organisation, and are working intrapreneurally within your own business unit, then Paul thinks you can make a lot of progress—when that is then combined with the rest of the business, that’s when cracks start to appear. “The scaling up of that to the whole organisation is the really difficult bit, and the bit that collectively we all need to try and find out more about and understand better,” he says. “Risk taking is a dangerous thing to do in an organisation, so it’s an internal dilemma between, okay let’s all be more intrapreneurial, and what it’s actually like to get these missions off the ground.”

**Paving the way for intrapreneurship**

Guillermo Cisneros is the director of ESADE Business School’s Executive Education program, Leading With Music Thinking—run in partnership with Berklee College of Music. He says that it’s important that organisations can identify entrepreneurs within their business and support them. That’s one side of intrapreneurship. The second is creating an entrepreneurial spirit within your organisation, making it more flexible and ready for change. To implement that culture, Guillermo says that you need to allow space for innovative employees to develop new ventures.

“Entrepreneurial opportunities are very important for leadership development,” he says. “A better way to help employees become leaders and develop the skills they need is to give them intrapreneurial opportunities, real challenges.” He cites the music industry as a key learning pillar for executives wanting to see an industry that has had to reinvent itself time and time again.

“The business models are changing, and there’s incredible disruption because of technology and innovation. To be a musician and work in the music industry you need to be an entrepreneur, and to learn the skillets from the very beginning.” That entails creating a unique artistic offering, recognising changes in the market, and knowing how to promote yourself. Resilience is also tantamount to success, as you’re going to inevitably encounter failure—how you deal with that will determine your longevity.

**The three stages of intrapreneurship**

Thinking of entrepreneurs solely in the mould of Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, or Adam Neumann, is selling yourself a falsehood. Paul says that most of what it written about entrepreneurial ways of working speaks to those who enter the startup world at the shake up phase. Before that, he explains, you have the startup/idea phase, and the scale up phase—going through all three stages is what intrapreneurs within companies should be aspiring to.

Adam Neumann—the former CEO of WeWork—is a prime example of what happens when you enter at the shake-up phase. After WeWork pulled its initial public offering (IPO) in September this year, Adam’s position at the company quickly unraveled. “Most of us can do really interesting and useful stuff at the startup and scale up phase, but it’s a journey and you don’t get there overnight,” says Paul. “You’re not born at the shake-up stage, and you don’t do that as an individual. The really important shake up stuff will be solved by working together, with organisations collaborating internationally with each other.”

Both Paul and Guillermo will be speaking at the upcoming MERIT Regional Summit on intrapreneurship in Manchester on 13/11/2019.