

Beyond tech and elusive geniuses

The everyday innovation heroes

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Apple, Google and General Electric success stories centre on groundbreaking characters and geniuses. But 99% of companies worldwide are unlike any of these. Most organisations are made up of people like you and me: reasonably proficient in innovation management but surrounded by innovation agnostics. People who can share with us the tough, yet stirring mission of pushing boundaries to shape a bit of future.



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Steve Jobs, Larry Page, Sergey Brin and Thomas Edison - we can learn a lot from inspiring leaders. Many have sought to understand how these geniuses' brains work. Biographies and guides abound on how to be the next business star. Just scan through any physical or virtual bookshelf.

Now, put individual brilliance aside for one moment. Think about the expertise, knowledge, experience and different backgrounds of each and every one of your employees. Multiply that by a single, shared purpose you have identified as a top priority. The possibilities are endless.

Unsung heroes do play relevant roles. Still, we, as managers, too often overlook our company's most valuable asset: the collective intelligence of the people working with us. I always say that each company has the answers to many of its current challenges within itself (read ['Sitting on Untapped Potential - The Power of Your Organisation's Collective Intelligence'](#)).

Many of your employees and stakeholders have the potential to be real innovators. But they may lack the tools, methods and incentives to do it. Others may be equipped with management tools but fail to view their challenges as innovation opportunities - ones requiring differentiated approaches to reach a new set of answers.

Besides (as you know, if you've been walking the innovation road for some time), relying on an innovation team or department to do all the work no longer functions. You need to tap into the ideas and experience of everyone working with you.



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The foot soldiers

Idea management software - functioning as an 'idea market' - has proven to be highly effective at unleashing your people's hidden innovation potential. Geared to reaching goals, this gets each person to engage and participate more over time, whether you're seeking to improve performance, find new products and methods or develop a widespread, collaborative culture of innovation.

Technology may well serve its purpose, but it won't stand on its own. I won't lecture you on the importance of having the capital and people to effectively manage and run an innovation programme. A lack of human resources and funding is among the main causes for the demise of such initiatives. This is already clear, and I'm sure you're taking care of it.

What sometimes is less obvious is the need for a constituency inside your company to provide needed support throughout different phases of the innovation process. For instance, you'll need internal backing for communication: to reach out to stakeholders in far-flung parts of the organisation, to give a little boost when necessary to a particular idea or venture and so on.

Forget about employing a huge army of innovation musketeers. That's not going to happen. Since you've not been given an army of trained consultants to fight the innovation war, you need to find creative ways to build a constituency.

Ongoing training programmes that 'produce' innovation practitioners is one way to go. Over time, you'll build up a constituency ready to support you in your efforts, especially

if you have this contribution codified into each individual's performance evaluation targets. But how can you actually take your innovation programme to this next level of proficiency?

At Exago, we asked that question of ourselves when a client commissioned us to design a programme to build an internal army of innovation practitioners. The inspiration for our answer came from efficiency-focused Six Sigma type programmes.



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What colour is your belt?

Developed by Motorola in 1986, Six Sigma is a set of techniques and tools for improving processes. These programmes train and engage individuals at different levels of innovation to cut waste and improve efficiency, using a sequence of steps and quantified value targets.

By training people in these quality management methods, you get your own 'yellow belts', 'green belts', 'black belts' and 'champions' ([read more](#)). While engaging employees from very different positions, geographies and backgrounds in expertise, Six Sigma makes everyone - not just one person or department - responsible for specific skills within your company, from efficiency through to process improvement. This is the programmes' strongest benefit.

The results are noteworthy. In 2005, Motorola attributed over US\$17 billion in savings to Six Sigma. Consumer-driven Six Sigma programmes also reportedly saved Ford US\$300 million.

Among others, Black & Decker, General Electric and Bombardier fruitfully adopted this method. More recently,

innovation practitioners such as Xerox, Verizon and IBM have also combined Six Sigma ideas with lean manufacturing to focus transformation efforts on both growth and efficiency.

You need masters, as well as practitioners

Inspired by this model, we worked with our client to design and develop a specific set of outcomes. Together, we defined these outcomes to increase the success of initiatives by improving content quality, accelerating throughput and de-risking opportunities.

We named our programme ‘Innovation Sigma’, a solution that promotes a cadre of innovation pivots. It’s based on Six Sigma principles:

// Definition of four different levels of innovation proficiency

// Curricula (tools and courseware) that qualify participants at each proficiency level

// No full-time allocation (tapping into pivotal resources inside the organisation)

// Guidelines describing how individuals can progress from one proficiency level to the next

Innovation Sigma is thus a portfolio of offline tools, methods and processes that allow trained individuals to push innovation further. This mechanism describes when and how your company can embed these tools and methods throughout your organisation. To incorporate this into your company, you need to provide:

a) A **FRAMEWORK** to support the innovation process throughout the organisation

The framework consists of innovation tools and methods to generate and implement solutions addressing a given goal. It has five main phases, each one with the aim of generating specific content that develops a sequential flow in the process:



b) A complete innovation **TOOLKIT** that covers each of the framework’s phases

For each phase of the Innovation Sigma framework mentioned above, we designed a set of tools to generate specific content that strengthens the innovation process.

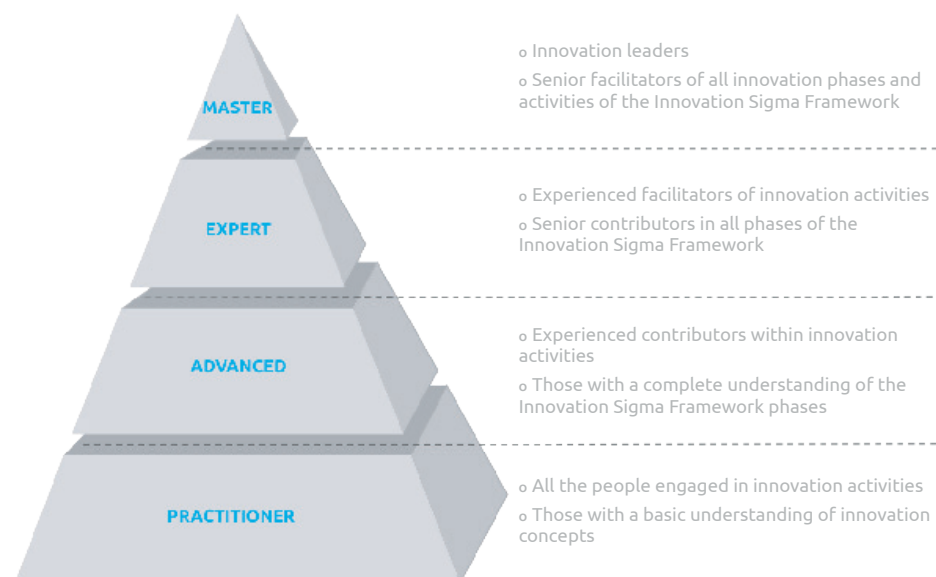
We perfected a total of 43 tools: from ‘External Obstacles and Opportunities’ through to ‘Inverting Paradigms’, including, among others, ‘Technology Empowerment’, ‘Insight-Based Idea Generation’, ‘Idea Refinement’, ‘Concept Elevator Pitch’, ‘Experimentation Plan’, ‘Decision Journey’, ‘Project Builder’ and ‘After Project Star’.

c) Different LEVELS of innovation proficiency to support the entire process

To ensure that the collaborators involved become proficient and use a common innovation language throughout the organisation, we developed a specific model of skill acquisition and performance. It differentiates collaborators on a four-level scale, specifically:

Practitioner | Advanced | Expert | Master

This model involves all organisation’s members in the process, allowing them to develop innovation skills progressively before advancing to the next level. Each level has a specific curriculum with a hands-on approach of ‘learn by doing’. Trainees can apply concepts and tools to resolve real business problems and challenges, according to their level, as this picture shows:



To complete the programme and support an innovation culture, you have to create a homogeneous process all over your company. You need to build an army of innovation practitioners to enhance innovation proficiency and deliver differentiation continuously.



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Transformation from within

Today, more than ever, cumulative, continuous differentiators allow businesses to increase performance, streamline processes and cost, surprise their customers with outstanding service and adjust their products and services to satisfy more demanding clients. This is not a onetime event. It's all about everyday improvements.

So, the biggest challenge companies face today is how to build an organisation where collaboration is sustainably enabled by technology, processes, capabilities and behaviours. Where collective intelligence becomes the 'muscle' behind innovation. And where people, individually and as teams, work beyond their job description, and everyone and anyone can make a difference.

This is where the logic of Innovation Sigma steps in - to better prepare your people to take on key roles as you develop your company's future together.

Innovation has to be a daily exercise, practiced by all. Deep down, we all are potential professional forerunners. Adequate training and endurance will create the upcoming heroes.