Unusual Suspects

Identifying High Capacity Innovators in your organization

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Introduction

We are captivated by people who create interesting new products and services. Innovators spark our imagination. What personality traits or characteristics drive successful innovators? What makes people like Steve Jobs, Thomas Edison and Richard Branson such good innovators? Are the skills and traits unique to just a few people, or do these innovators simply exercise their insights and traits more consistently and effectively than others? As sustained innovation becomes more important, understanding the behaviors, skills and characteristics that form a good innovator becomes vital for individual, team and corporate success.

Can we identify traits or characteristics that make an individual a capable innovator? Can we identify thinking patterns, characteristics, behaviors and perspectives that signal innovation capability or competence? These questions are of great importance in every company, across the globe, as sustained, successful innovation becomes ever more vital for growth and differentiation. Executives increasingly ask: who are our best innovators? How can we find and recruit prospective employees who will become our best innovators? Can we teach existing employees how to become more innovative? Identifying and developing the skills that sustain innovation is a critical task.

What is driving the demand for more innovation? As competition increases, customer demands shift and product life cycles shrink, only innovation can create organic growth and improve competitive differentiation through the creation of new products and services. Occasional innovation is helpful, but market conditions and consumer demands are calling for more innovation, more of the time. These demands mean that your innovation success rate must increase, and to do that you need the best innovation processes and tools, and more importantly, the best innovators fully engaged on your new product and service developments. But there’s one problem. While the demand for innovation has increased, many companies have invested far more on innovation tools and techniques than on the people who make innovation successful. Beyond developing specific innovation skills, few companies have attempted to discover the traits or characteristics that differentiate successful, motivated innovators from others who are more comfortable with the status quo.

As innovation transforms markets and industries, corporate executives must transform their organizations to ensure the best innovators are focused on innovation. How companies staff innovation activities must change, because current emphasis and investment are out of whack. People are the critical input for innovation success, not techniques, tools or processes, and deploying the right people is paramount for sustained innovation success. What many corporations (and consultants) often get wrong is that the “who” of innovation is far more important than the “how”.

The “who” of innovation

Over the last decade, hundreds of books have been written about innovation. Most of them focus on innovation methodologies, tools and processes. Another category of books highlight the experiences of successful companies or visionary individuals. These books speak mostly to the “how” of innovation: how each author believes innovation can be successfully implemented in a business. These books often fail to recognize the vital role that people play for innovation success. Few books speak to what we believe is the most important ingredient: the “who” of innovation. The people who support and sustain innovation. The focus on tools rather than people isn’t accidental. Over the last 30 years management thinking has been captivated with efficiency and effectiveness. Successive waves of management thought and tools reinforced this approach. First it was a focus on quality, followed by a focus on reducing variability (Six Sigma) and then on eliminating waste and inefficiency (Lean). In conjunction with these techniques, many organizations implemented enterprise-wide computer systems that calcified existing processes. These tools and systems dramatically improved efficiency, cut costs and sustained profitability, automating processes and eliminating people. Today, in these automated processes, people manage the exceptions while standard operations proceed in the background. But innovation isn’t like the well-defined and automated business processes. Innovation isn’t systematized and can’t be automated. **Innovation is, and will remain, a capability that is centered on excellent people who possess a range of insights, skills and traits that accelerate innovation. Innovation depends on the right people with the right motivations more than any other capability or process in a business setting.**

While corporate investments in automation and process efficiency have cut costs, they don’t improve innovation capability. You need good, engaged people to spot opportunities, gather and assess research. You need people to generate and evaluate ideas. You need people to shape ideas, validate the solutions with customers and build the business case that supports a new product or service. Once you realize that people are more important than tools and processes, identifying the best innovators in your company should be the first order of business. But while many companies can identify key contributors in important functions like accounting, sales, or project management, they struggle to identify their best innovators.

**Spotting innovators in your midst**

Identifying key contributors isn’t difficult in many business settings. For example, you know who your best sales people are. They demonstrate their expertise by constantly meeting or exceeding their sales quotas. You know who your best managers are. They complete projects on time, under budget and produce the new products and services necessary for your organization to succeed. Your company has evidence about its top performers in almost every function and position, but I’m certain you can’t identify the best innovators in your company. Past performance helps identify your best salespeople and managers. Education, training and expertise also play a significant role in identifying top performers. But where innovation is concerned, there’s often no track record, few historical precedents and little training or expertise to guide your selection. In many cases there are no quantitative measures and few qualitative measures to indicate who your best innovators are.

While organizations have implemented a host of assessments to identify individual strengths, these assessments won’t identify capable innovators. In fact your existing evaluations may lead you astray. People who
successfully manage existing processes and products aren’t necessarily good innovators, because they are often wedded to existing methods and definitions. In some cases these successful managers and executives are the worst innovators because their past success has been tied to existing capabilities and processes. To a great extent they are tied to the status quo. Your best innovators may be people who are less visible, less aligned to existing methods and models.

You may actually find many of your best innovators in unusual roles or positions. Some of your best innovators are to be found on the edges of your business. In some cases they are highly regarded employees, and in other cases they are marginalized irritants who are always suggesting changes or improvements. They can be a bit unconventional, occasionally bucking the existing systems. It’s very likely you have little insight as to who the best innovators are in your business. It’s not a set of skills or traits that you’ve identified or assessed previously.

If you accept the premise that innovation is important, and growing more important every day, and that people are the driving force behind innovation, identifying the best innovators in your business is vital to your success. While “business as usual” has sustained regular operations and reasonable returns to date, the need for innovation has increased as markets change, consumers demand more and better products, global competition increases and demands for growth and new revenues increase. Your company must identify the best innovators currently on the payroll and give them more skills, processes and infrastructure to help them succeed to increase the quantity and quality of innovation underway. Further, you must recruit new personnel who demonstrate these same innovation skills and traits. Innovation requirements should influence how you hire individuals directly from college and how you hire experienced personnel. But first you’ll need to know how to identify the most likely innovators based on limited information. To see why this matters, let’s examine how innovation projects and teams are formed today.

The Usual Suspects

In our experience, the selection and staffing of an innovation team is rarely given enough consideration. The teams are often built by identifying individuals from three employee “pools”. The first pool is composed of successful mid to senior level managers who have demonstrated great expertise in managing existing products or projects. These individuals are considered “high potential” managers who have flourished operating under business as usual rules. They understand how to achieve success under normal operating principles, but much of their success is tied to the existing processes, hierarchies and frameworks. Their success and expertise may become barriers to innovation when new insights require working against or outside conventional norms. The second pool is represented by what I’ll call high capacity staff and middle managers. These are people who get a lot of work done – the “work horses” of a corporation. While these individuals seem valuable for an innovation activity because of their ability to “get things done”, they are often the worst people to assign to an innovation activity, because they are already overworked and attempting to balance many simultaneous projects. They prefer to spend their time on projects where the potential for success is very high, so they often falter on innovation projects which seem risky or ambiguous. When demands arise on competing projects they tend to abandon risky innovation efforts in favor of tried and true projects. The third pool is composed of people who are not fully engaged in other activities. They have time available or can easily reverse existing priorities. In the modern business environment, few people have available time or can easily trade off existing activities for new
A person with available time is often a low performer who is placed on an innovation project simply because they have time available to commit.

Note that none of these selections does much to ensure the success of an innovation project. The successful manager or executive may be too tightly wedded to existing processes or products, and unwilling to introduce divergent thinking or create products or services that reduce the need for existing products. The overtaxed manager will constantly weigh the value of innovation work against the success and progress of other projects. His or her attention is constantly divided, and their loyalties lie where the opportunity for success is the highest. Weaker or uncommitted staffers may not provide a lot of intellectual heft to an innovation activity.

We’ve stipulated that people are the most important ingredient for innovation success, yet we’ve demonstrated that many organizations don’t spend the time and effort to identify teams most likely to achieve success. Rather than build a team that is destined to create incremental ideas, why not identify the best possible people and place them on innovation activities from the beginning? The most common reason for incorrect staffing is that many corporations have no idea who their best or most capable innovators are. Strange to think that in an era of constant assessment, 360 degree feedback and ongoing skill development, many firms have no idea how to identify or measure their employees’ innovation capacity.

Assessments

It’s not as though we lack the ability to assess capabilities: a variety of capability and personality assessments already exist. Many firms have used assessments like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator™, DISC® and Strengths Finder® to identify preferred working styles to improve teamwork, collaboration and communication. These assessment tools are widely accepted and frequently implemented in many corporations, especially in the ranks of senior executives and managers. From these assessments and other frameworks, some initial indications about innovation skill and preference can be discovered.

From Myers-Briggs research psychologists created the Kirton Adaption Innovation Index (KAI). KAI uses Myers-Briggs research to assess an individual’s willingness to adapt to existing conditions or their proclivity to innovate. At one end of the spectrum are people who are more innovative – who are willing to rethink and challenge the status quo. On the other end of the spectrum are people who are more likely to adapt their thinking to existing conditions. Using Myers-Briggs results or completing a KAI assessment, individuals and teams can discover their propensity to adapt to existing conditions and expectations, or their propensity to reject the status quo and create new solutions.

Other assessments test creativity capabilities. Perhaps the oldest and most well-known is the Torrance® Test of Creative Thinking, which ranks people based on their presumed creativity. This assessment indicates how “creative” an individual is in regards to the population, but creativity alone does not equal innovation. Finally, there are other assessments that identify the specific role or roles that an individual should fill when placed on an innovation team. Two such assessments, Foursight: Your Thinking Profile® and Creatrix®, help individuals and teams identify where and when an innovation team member may add the greatest value.

While all of these assessments offer vital insights for corporations about their employees, we believe they don’t indicate who the best innovators are in an organization and what skills or traits they possess that make them
good innovators. In this paper we’ll propose a new assessment model, identifying traits that we know are exhibited in good innovators, and helping you use those traits to identify people who have high innovation capacity.

Finding your best innovators

Our assessment and the purpose of this book is to help corporations identify the individuals, regardless of their education, role, function or level in the corporate hierarchy who have the critical mass of skills and traits which makes them the best possible innovators. The assessment differs from those listed above in several important ways:

- Our assessment examines twenty four traits that have been demonstrated to accelerate and improve innovation capability. Through the assessment we can identify people who possess a significant number of these traits. Further, we explain why these traits contribute to the work of innovation.
- Through the assessment we can also identify people who possess the traits we identify in great depth. People who are more creative, more curious, more empathetic than their co-workers.
- Using the assessment we can ensure teams are composed of people with mutually reinforcing skills and traits, and that many if not all of the critical skills are represented on an innovation team.
- As teams with these traits demonstrate their effectiveness, your company can use these insights to improve recruiting, hiring, staffing and training decisions to improve innovation, and focus on leadership and skill development for your managers and executives who are called on to lead innovation programs.

We believe that no other assessment will help you quickly identify the individuals who are the most capable in an innovation setting, who have the most passion and engagement, and bring the right attitudes and competencies to bear to make innovation successful.

How we developed our assessment and identified specific traits

For over a year we’ve surveyed people we call Relentless Innovators. We call these people Relentless Innovators because I discovered some of them when I wrote Relentless Innovation. That book examined companies that are constantly innovating and contrasted them with peer firms in the same industries that don’t innovate as consistently or as regularly. From the research we found that companies that consistently innovate have incorporated innovation into their “business as usual” climate, and have people who exhibit a number of specific traits. Relentless Innovators are constantly innovating, regardless of circumstances, business function or corporate climate. Through our interactions with Relentless Innovators we’ve identified the traits that set them apart from their peers. Using these traits and an accompanying assessment, we can help you find the people in your organization who are most likely to be your best innovators. Further, by identifying these traits we can help you identify and hire new employees who have these traits, and encourage the existing staff already on your payroll to improve their skills and adopt new traits to help them become more innovative.
Insights and Sources

The traits we’ve identified and will describe below are based on years of experience leading innovation projects, observing the individuals who thrive in innovation roles. The traits are also based on research conducted by OVO as well as published research conducted by a number of academics and other innovation consultants. A short list of sources includes:

- The Innovator’s DNA, written by Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen
- The Opposable Mind, written by Roger Martin
- Blue Ocean Strategy, written by Kim and Mauborgne
- Midnight Lunch, written by Sarah Caldicott
- Drive, written by Daniel Pink
- The Ten Faces of Innovation, written by Tom Kelley
- How Serial Innovators Navigate the Fuzzy Front End of New Product Development, a white paper written by Griffin, Hoffman, Price, Vojak
- Characteristics and Behaviors of Innovative People in Organizations, a white paper written by Professor Fiona Patterson, Dr. Maire Kerrin and Geraldine Gatto-Roissard for NESTA
- Evil Genius: How dishonesty can lead to greater creativity, a research paper by Dr. Francesca Gino and Dr. Scott Wiltermuth.

Further, recent research commissioned by IRI entitled Institutionalizing Innovation Competency provided added reinforcement for several of the traits we identified.

From Adjacency to Unconventional

From these and other sources we’ve identified 24 traits that are important for innovation success. In this book we’ll dedicate one short chapter to each of the traits. We’ll describe the trait, link the trait to innovation and describe how that trait supports innovation. Further, we’ll consider how to encourage or improve those traits in your teams.

Rather than “rank” the traits according to their value or importance, we’ve listed them alphabetically. After the initial review of the traits we’ll present rankings of these traits based on our research and experience. This is a long list, and it’s unlikely that you’ll find many people who demonstrate all of these traits. What you should look for in your employees and prospective recruits is evidence that an individual possesses many of these traits, or that these traits and skills can be developed, if you hope to find people who are more comfortable and more capable leading and contributing to innovation activities.
Other important signals

Beyond these traits we’ve also identified a number of demographic characteristics and experiences that signal a person is more likely to be innovative than their counterparts. From our research we found that Relentless Innovators are much more likely to have advanced degrees or continue to pursue education and learning throughout their life (reinforcing the Life Long Learner attribute). Further, we’ve found that Relentless Innovators are much more likely to have had multiple employers or even careers, as opposed to remaining in one career or with one employer for a long period of time. These demographic and experience characteristics are examined in more detail after the review of the traits.

We identified a number of other interesting signals as well, including the fact that many Relentless Innovators have very vibrant lives outside of their work environments. We’ve found that consistent innovators are very likely to engage in a range of hobbies which we believe increases creativity and accelerates idea generation. We’ve also found that good innovators enjoy travel, which we believe introduces the innovator to new ideas, perspectives and experiences.

These demographic and experiential factors in combination with the more innate traits described in detail below will help identify the individuals with the most capacity and capability for innovation.
Transforming your business: How to use this insight

We’ve identified a number of traits, characteristics and demographic experiences that good innovators possess. Once you understand these criteria and use them to assess your employees, you can then decide how to improve your innovation capacity and capability. Through this insight you can transform your organization into an innovation powerhouse, placing the best people on innovation activities and constantly developing your employees into capable innovators. As innovation transforms your markets, your competitors and your customer demands, you can simultaneously transform your internal innovation capability.

Let’s turn our attention to how you can use this insight to your advantage. There are five opportunities that emerge once you understand these traits and characteristics:

1. **Accelerating innovation.** Transform the way you build innovation teams by identifying the individuals with the most capability and capacity for innovation on the most critical activities. Since people are so vital to innovation success, placing the most capable people on innovation activities will accelerate the efforts and improve the quality and value of the outcomes. Identify the people best suited to specific innovation roles. For example, engage people with high empathy scores on the tasks of discovering customer needs, and people with strong future orientation on trend spotting.

2. **Recruiting.** Demand that your recruiting managers seek out people who demonstrate traits that contribute to innovation success to add more innovators to your ranks. This applies both to new hires straight out of college as well as experienced hires. Understanding the characteristics and traits that good innovators possess, your hiring teams can identify more people with innate innovation capability.

3. **Transform leadership development.** Corporations have done a poor job developing leaders who can manage innovators and innovation projects. With these insights you can build leadership development programs to teach your executives how to develop people who have these traits and how to manage innovation projects more successfully.

4. **Rethink corporate culture, rewards and recognition.** Once you understand the critical innovation traits, and the people that possess those traits, you’ll need to review how your corporate culture and reward structures encourage or inhibit these attributes and traits. Does your culture encourage innovative people and identify people with traits that improve innovation outcomes? What do your evaluation and compensation structures reward? Do they encourage innovation and innovative people or encourage efficiency?

5. **Individual development goals.** The assessment provides feedback on the strengths of each individual who responds, and reports their scores for each trait compared to the team or organization as a whole. This report can identify areas for development and improvement for everyone who completes the assessment, to help them improve their innovation capabilities.
As innovation increases in importance and urgency, the companies and organizations that excel at developing and commercializing new products and services most effectively will be the most successful. Given the risks and uncertainties of innovation and existing corporate and cultural barriers, you want to staff innovation projects with the people who have the greatest innovation capability, the best understanding of customer needs and the highest chance of success. Understanding the traits that sustain innovation and acting to encourage and develop those traits in your organization will accelerate innovation and result in more organic growth, increased product and service differentiation and higher profits.
Innovation Traits

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<th>Adjacent Thinking</th>
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Attribute Icons
**Adjacency**

From our research, we’ve found that many Relentless Innovators identify “adjacency” or adjacent thinking as a critical capability. For our purposes, we’ll define adjacency as the ability to identify opportunities, needs, or markets that are “adjacent” to existing opportunities, needs or markets that your firm currently serves.

The dictionary defines adjacent as “lying near, close or contiguous”. When innovators talk about adjacency they mean the ability to think in ever-increasing scope, starting with the existing definition of a market, a need, a technology or a capability. Then, innovators have the capability and capacity to think about what’s immediately close or contiguous with those defined markets or needs. This “adjacent” thinking distinguishes innovators from their more conventional peers. Conventional thinking defines a specific market, opportunity or technology and seeks to maximize market penetration in the target space, accepting existing constraints and optimizing within the constraints. Adjacent thinkers often identify opportunities outside of the existing scope, pursuing adjacent markets, segments, needs or opportunities. Adjacent markets frequently offer several key benefits over existing markets, including lower competition, more opportunity for differentiation and an equivalent or lower investment for success. *Blue Ocean Strategy*, written by Kim and Mauborgne, describes introduces the concept of adjacency when they describe the typical bloody competition in “red oceans” full of competitors, and the possibility of “blue oceans”, adjacent markets where no competition exists or with far lower competition.

Adjacent thinkers are rarely limited by pre-conceived market definitions, whether those markets are formally or informally defined. Instead their thinking makes connections to similar needs, customers or opportunities immediately adjacent to the existing market definitions where opportunities exist that are equal if not better than those within the existing definitions. Note as well that adjacent thinking is focused on growth over efficiency, while thinking inside market definitions is focused on efficiency and maximizing existing opportunities. Adjacent thinking introduces three vital perspectives for innovation: 1) growth over efficiency, 2) enlarging or redefining a market rather than accepting existing constraints, and 3) a door to new opportunities that may have similar needs or demands.

Adjacent thinking can be difficult since it is a divergent activity. That is, adjacent thinking expands the scope and set of potential solutions rather than accepting the existing market or constraints. Corporate culture pressures teams to accept existing constraints and to ignore potential adjacent opportunities. People who exhibit adjacent thinking are frequently considered disruptive because their exploration of adjacent opportunities often distracts others from the core challenge. While many innovation teams pay lip service to the idea of divergent-convergent thinking, adjacent thinking is just the beginning of real divergent thinking.
Most Relentless Innovators are “associative” thinkers – that is, they are able to hold two or more apparently mutually exclusive ideas and discover solutions that address both concepts simultaneously.

Roger Martin described the concept of associative thinking in his book entitled The Opposable Mind. In his book he called this approach integrative thinking, which he defined as the ability to hold two opposing ideas, eventually reaching a synthesis that contains elements of both ideas that simultaneously improves both. As Martin points out, this associative thinking often leads to the rejection of existing models and the search for broader, more encompassing solutions rather than suboptimal tradeoffs in more conventional thinking.

The authors of the Innovator’s DNA also identified associative thinking as a key trait of successful innovators. In their book, associating is defined as “the ability to make surprising connections across areas of knowledge, industries and even geographies...”. For Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen, associating is about cross-pollination and synthesizing a range of insights to create a new idea or solution.

Regardless of your definition, the ability to associate disparate data, ideas or insights is a very valuable trait. Associative thinking creates value on innovation projects through activities such as forced connections, finding the valuable intersections when two opposing ideas collide, or by “reframing” a challenge or problem to create an entirely new model of the problem or solution. Much like adjacent thinking, associative thinking breaks down “either/or” tradeoffs to introduce new perspectives. Associative thinkers are also adept at solving apparently insolvable contradictions, because in the solution of those contradictions lie valuable innovation. Genrich Altshuller recognized the value of solving apparent contradictions when he designed the rules for what we now call TRIZ.

Associative thinking faces even more resistance than adjacent thinking, because of the simplicity of mutual exclusivity. If we accept that the two concepts or ideas can’t exist simultaneously, innovators will divide the activity into two discrete and simpler projects. The potential to combine them and create a higher order solution will be missed. Associative thinking introduces a completely new perspective, expands the problem and potential solution set and forces a very different way of thinking.

Associative thinking is fairly difficult in a modern business environment, where we are taught to simplify complex problems into simpler challenges that can be solved more easily. This “divide and conquer” mentality means that in some cases we chose a sub-optimal solution rather than seeking out and overcoming apparent contradictions. Further, and as we discussed in the section on adjacency, associative thinking is divergent thinking, tending to expand the scope of inquiry. While associative thinking is vital for innovation, it is often discouraged in corporate environments.
Good innovators rely on past experience and their formal knowledge, but are always willing to look at a problem or opportunity with fresh eyes. Sometimes ignoring conventional, accepted wisdom about a challenge or problem and taking a completely fresh approach can suggest entirely new solutions. Relentless Innovators often approach interesting challenges by attempting to ignore what they already “know” about a problem in order to approach it from a completely fresh perspective. For the purposes of this paper we’ll call this the “Beginner’s Mind” approach. This approach helps open up entirely new ways of thinking about a challenge and often results in completely new solutions.

The beginner’s mind is a concept originating from Zen Buddhism that describes a condition where an individual has an attitude of openness and a lack of preconceived conditions. Using a beginner’s mind approach, an innovator examines a problem or opportunity with a fresh, even naïve perspective, using as little of the existing knowledge as possible. A beginner’s mind approach is difficult for many people for several reasons:

- The “curse of knowledge”
- Personal credibility

Many of us, when confronted with a challenge or problem, call on everything that we “know” to solve the problem. We turn to history, accepted solutions, documented examples and our own experience, to build on previous success. But what we fail to recognize is that what we “know” may not always be true, and calling on what we know reinforces the information we already have, and excludes other information or perspectives. Further, it’s rare that we seek out new insights or knowledge, or look for information from new or unusual sources. The “curse of knowledge” conundrum presents itself when we are blinded by what we think is true and fail to seek alternatives or when we actively reject other options. In fact the greater the expertise or knowledge about a particular topic, the more the curse of knowledge applies. For example, Bill Gates couldn’t imagine a computer that would require more than 640K of memory, and said so on many occasions, although consumer demands proved him wrong. It’s often true that experts struggle to imagine a situation or condition that is different from what their knowledge can accept. Expertise can be a great accelerator for innovation, but it can also become a significant barrier as well.

Personal credibility is another limiting factor when considering the beginner’s mind approach. Knowledge and expertise often signal status and importance. We respect people who can quickly deliver answers and information about challenges rather than people who ask questions to learn more about the problem. Actively demonstrating a lack of knowledge or rejecting existing knowledge can reduce a person’s status or introduce the risk that others refuse to take the individual and his or her ideas seriously.
It should come as no surprise to discover that Steve Jobs attributed a good deal of his innovation success to the concepts behind a beginner’s mind. Jobs was a Buddhist and well-schooled on the concept of a beginner’s mind. Jobs used the beginner’s mind approach to radically rethink the ideas of portable music and cellular phones.

Innovators can use the “beginner’s mind” approach to rethink existing parameters and models. By rejecting what they know, and approaching a need or market with a simple, even naïve perspective, they can discover new needs, unmet needs and instances where existing products don’t provide value. Within the beginner’s mind viewpoint, innovators can discover entirely new opportunities for growth. For many innovation teams, however, using this approach feels artificial and redundant. Spending time re-imagining the problem or approaching the problem from a naïve perspective doesn’t appear to add value and certainly takes up valuable time. Yet many innovations result from the mind of innovators who chose to reimagine the problem with a beginner’s mindset.
Everyone recognizes Edison as a prolific innovator. His success made his life a case study for innovators to follow. However, some of the history about Edison has gotten the story wrong. Edison is often pictured working alone, a solitary genius in the lab. Many people believe that innovators should be isolated in quiet laboratories where great revelations will strike. Edison’s examples and the feedback from our Relentless Innovators should quickly reverse that notion. Good innovators actively and consistently collaborate with other innovators, their potential customers and their markets and channels.

While the notion of Edison as a solitary inventor has been built up in the popular press, the reality is far different. As Sarah Caldicott (Edison’s great-grandniece) has demonstrated in several books (especially Midnight Lunch), Edison worked as the hub of a great number of scientists and technicians who conducted simultaneous experiments in his Menlo Park lab. He intentionally built a web of scientists and technologists who were actively exploring and experimenting with the leading technologies of the day, including electricity, the telegraph, railroads and other technologies. Edison met regularly with his co-workers, his financial backers and his potential customers. He collaborated consistently and actively, using feedback and combining the ideas from others to improve his insights and ideas.

In the corporate world innovation is often regulated to the R&D lab, or small “skunkworks” projects isolated from the rest of the business. Innovation is often hidden from customers and business partners as well. Good innovators, however, thrive on collaboration, on the ability to quickly and constantly share insights, ideas and results. Good innovators are assimilators, combining ideas and constantly reworking concepts. Few ideas originate as a complete concept from one individual. Rather it’s more often the case that ideas are improved and perfected through interaction and exchange with others. When innovators are isolated or not allowed to collaborate, innovation is cramped and incremental at best. It’s rare to find good innovators who don’t enjoy discussing ideas and who aren’t actively sharing insights or comments with others. Innovation is accelerated when innovators talk to each other, to customers, to channel partners and to experts in other industries or fields.

As a general rule good innovators, and people who have greater innovation capability, find value in collaboration, in exchanging and discussing needs, perspectives, models, ideas and solutions. There’s been some discussion, based on Myers-Briggs research, which seeks to understand whether innovators are extroverts or introverts. This is a misreading of both Myers-Briggs and innovation. Myers-Briggs doesn’t suggest that introverts dislike interaction. Introverts in the Myers-Briggs categorization are simply people who receive more energy from ideas than from interaction with people. But that doesn’t mean they don’t value collaboration. Most innovators recognize their ideas will be improved because of collaboration with others. However, collaboration isn’t just important in the definition and refinement of an idea, but also in the development and
justification of the concept, as well as obtaining “buy-in” for new product or service development. In most organizations it takes a range of skills, teams and functions to bring a new idea from initial concept to successful commercial launch. Good collaboration paves the way for innovation success, from early definition all the way through to product launch.
Comfort with ambiguity

Innovation is often an act of discovery, where neither the process nor the outcomes can be clearly defined in advance. In many settings, innovation tools are new and unfamiliar, people lack innovation training or defined workflow, and there’s little definition of the innovation activity or outcome. In most cases everything about an innovation activity is ambiguous – the inputs, the processes and the outputs. For many people, ambiguity presents great difficulty, because it places individuals in situations where their expertise is not valuable and there are few definitive answers or directions. Ambiguity at work can be difficult and distracting. For Relentless Innovators, ambiguity is expected, and even embraced.

The dictionary defines ambiguity as vagueness or uncertainty. Many innovation projects and programs are rife with uncertainty. Executives know they want more “innovation”, by which they mean organic growth and differentiation, but they aren’t sure how to define innovation nor do they want to limit themselves in to a specific solution or risk “leading” their teams to specific outcomes. In organizations where innovation is a relatively new undertaking, the scope of innovation activity, the requisite tools and processes, even the outcomes are undefined or poorly defined at best.

For many people, working in a constant state of ambiguity is unusual and uncomfortable. After years of process engineering, focus on efficiency and eliminating variance, most businesses operate based on highly defined processes that constantly repeat the same well-defined activities. There is little uncertainty, little ambiguity and great efficiency in most business processes, so activities become second nature. When tradeoffs or alternative decisions are encountered the risks and rewards are understood. Decisions and tradeoffs are definitive and clearly understood.

Innovation completely inverts that comfortable scenario. Innovation is ambiguous, uncertain and often highly inefficient because there are few defined processes and little prior experience. Innovation teams often have little training and few trusted tools. Innovation requires the team to discover customer needs that weren’t understood and to propose ideas that may be subject to failure. These challenges introduce ambiguity, which introduces uncertainty and doubt, which introduces confusion and to some degree helplessness. People and teams who have become familiar and dependent on “black or white” deeply understood processes and decision making are unprepared to make decisions based on limited information. When they encounter ambiguous issues, they spend more time focusing on eliminating or reduce ambiguity rather than on generating ideas. Too much energy is spent focusing on creating clarity, rather than generating new solutions. As Griffin and her co-authors suggest, a “tolerance for ambiguity and willingness to rely on intuition...allow them to see things that others cannot”.
Good innovators understand the balance between process definition and ambiguity. They focus less on defining the process and scoping the specific outcomes, and more on the innovation activities that lead to valuable new ideas. Ambiguity is recognized component of the innovation process, but doesn’t become a major distraction to the success of the team. Good innovation teams must be composed of people who can work comfortably and effectively when all the answers aren’t either black or white.
It should come as no surprise that our Relentless Innovators report that creativity is a trait that many share. Creativity is the starting point for good innovation. Many of the tools and methods innovators use to spark new ideas originate from creative thinking, much of it first documented by the Creative Problem Solving Institute.

When we talk about creativity, we are using the word holistically. The dictionary defines creative as possessing originality or expressiveness or imagination. A couple of words are critical in that definition: original and imagination. Creative people have original ideas, not derivative ideas based on existing products. They create those ideas from their imagination, not limited to facts or past experience. Creative in this context can mean that the individual is very inventive, an expansive thinker, a person who is imaginative. It doesn’t necessarily mean artistic. These factors help create more and better innovation, because they are the fuel for better ideas and insights.

The problem that many individuals face is that while we give lip service to concepts like creativity, most businesses don’t recruit highly creative people and don’t emphasize creativity in regular, day to day operations. Most corporations treat creativity as a skill they can hire temporarily, from agencies or consultancies, rather than an important internal skill to develop. Firms hire creative skills from outsiders, and then use internal, highly developed execution skills to realize the creative inputs. Since creativity is hard to define, hard to manage and can be acquired temporarily, most organizations don’t bother to develop internal creative skills or to hire creative people. What these organizations fail to realize is how critical creativity is to innovation and how quickly creativity dies when not in use.

Creativity and innovation are tightly linked. Without creativity, there is little “divergence” in innovation activities and too much convergence, leading to many incremental products or services that fail to satisfy. Without creativity, few new, original or disruptive concepts are created. Creativity opens new perspectives, provides enthusiasm and energy and sparks new innovative ideas and solutions. The absence of creativity in your organization will limit both the depth and breadth of innovation you can complete.

I’ve noted above that creativity is the fuel for innovation. Creativity is vital at the initial stages of innovation, to help introduce new and different concepts, stretch the thinking of the innovation team, introduce new perspectives, bring new concepts to light or create new connections. Innovation should always be a divergent/convergent process, and creativity is vital, especially at the beginning of an innovation activity, to ensure that divergence is part of the process. Without creativity, many ideas will simply repeat existing patterns or focus on what the culture and risk tolerances will accept. Even though creativity is critical, many firms don’t emphasize creativity internally. They struggle to understand why their internal teams can’t create imaginative, compelling new products. Good innovators know that creativity is an important first step to successful innovation.
Curiosity

In our interaction with Relentless Innovators, curiosity was identified as an important trait more frequently than any other trait. The dictionary defines curiosity as “an interest leading to inquiry”. That definition is important, because it contains two relevant aspects: interest and inquiry. People who are curious have an interest in a topic which compels them to inquire and learn more. Relentless Innovators are relentlessly curious about customer needs, why things work the way they do, why certain processes or programs exist.

Curiosity creates energy for an innovation activity. The curiosity which compels innovators to inquire helps overcome corporate inertia that stymies discovery and change. Good innovators are so driven by their curiosity that they can’t help but go discover why things exist and what they can do to change the status quo. Through their nature, curious innovators upset or disrupt their co-workers by questioning existing and settled processes or frameworks. Naturally curious people question why things exist and see the questions as opportunities to improve or to learn, while incurious people view the questions as needlessly disrupting established practices.

Curiosity is vital for innovation because it helps overcome some of the hurdles associated with the status quo. Curiosity drives innovators to understand existing conditions, and to understand customer needs, wants, and expectations at a much deeper level. Curiosity pushes innovators to want to learn and understand, to discover and to explore. Without curiosity, innovation teams often assume they “know” what customers need after a cursory investigation. Unfortunately, naturally curious people can irritate their fellow workers by constantly asking questions about existing processes or new insights. Correctly harnessed in an innovation activity, curiosity provides the energy to overcome inertia, and leads to more and better questions about customer needs and product or process gaps.

Like creativity, curiosity has tenuous status in a stable environment. Many corporations discourage curiosity, favoring focus and discipline over investigation and learning. Too much curiosity may distract existing processes and systems that while not perfect, are working efficiently. Curiosity may lead innovators to explore unmet needs or adjacent markets without the capability to deliver results. Where highly efficient processes are paramount, creativity is not valued, in fact it is disruptive. But when disruptive innovation is required, curiosity and curious people provide the energy, the enthusiasm and the insights to create valuable solutions to seemingly intractable challenges.
Many executives understand the need to identify customer expectations and unmet needs, and frequently sponsor research to investigate those needs. While these activities are important, they frequently lack a critical ingredient: empathy. Empathy is vital to understanding customer needs, but it’s not a trait frequently exhibited in the business world. The dictionary defines empathy as “identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another”. In simpler terms, empathy means the capacity to understand another person’s needs, experiences or emotions at the same level and to the same degree as that person does. Empathy is usually associated with roles in caring professions—medical professions or the clergy—moreso than in the business environment.

Yet empathy is vital for good innovation. Empathy helps innovators understand customer needs and expectations and the depth and breadth of those feelings. In many “innovation” projects, team members assert their understanding of customer needs, based on market research or their familiarity with existing products. Attempting to understand customer needs at a deeper level requires more interest, engagement, vulnerability and time than many innovators are willing to commit. Without empathy, innovation teams understand the needs and wants of customers at a surface level, and fail to understand deeper unmet needs. This failure leads to incremental, “me too” products.

Empathetic people understand unmet needs, the underlying drivers, and how important and relevant those needs are. These individuals understand customer needs more deeply—they “feel their pain” as a former President has said. Further, because of their empathy, they can articulate needs and expectations more effectively than less engaged peers. True empathy helps you understand the customers’ needs from their perspective, which leads to better insights. Better insights can produce products and services that are more important and more relevant to customers and consumers.

While empathy is valuable to uncovering unmet needs or understanding the depth and breadth of a need, empathy is not a trait that is emphasized in the business world. Many innovation teams are so focused on defining requirements, solving problems and moving quickly into new product development that they fail to take the time to engage customers and understand their needs. Even when customer research and insight becomes an important component of innovation work, many innovators simply don’t have the depth of empathy necessary to engage with the customer at their point of need or expectation. Instead of deep engagement, many innovators go through the motions of customer research, checking a box that allows them to move on to idea generation and product development. It’s only with deep engagement and empathy that you’ll discover the most vital needs and create truly innovative and valuable solutions.

Innovation teams need people with high levels of empathy to improve customer interaction and research. Empathetic people are better listeners, able to hear what is not being said. Empathetic people can understand customer needs at a much deeper level than their peers, and can translate those needs into features and
requirements in a way that their peers can understand. Like some of the other traits we’ve identified, empathy is not a skill or trait that is encouraged or actively reinforced in most business settings. In most organizations, efficiency and profits matter more than deep engagement with customers. Empathy is a critical trait for innovation success, yet is also a trait that is often unappreciated and frequently stymied or criticized. Empathy is one of the most important traits for innovation success, and one that is probably the least represented in your organization.
Exploring/Experimenting

Good innovation almost always begins with a period of divergent discovery. That discovery is predicated on the innovation team’s ability to explore a range of diverse options to address specific needs, and then later fulfilled by the team’s ability to experiment and test new ideas in order to discover and learn. Exploring possible alternatives and experimenting to learn what works are two critical factors for innovation success. People who are capable and successful innovators constantly seek to explore the scope, depth and breadth of challenges and needs, and consistently experiment with potential solutions to learn what works to address the need. Exploring is active discovery, uncovering new needs and new segments. Exploration is tightly linked to the idea of divergence, which is vital in the early phases of an innovation activity. Experimenting is the act of testing different ideas or alternatives to discover which may offer a valid solution, and what can be learned from both a successful outcome and a “failure”. Consider Edison’s work to perfect the light bulb. Edison experimented with hundreds of different filaments, and is often quoted as saying he knew one thousand ways not to make a light bulb. But all of his experimenting and failure led to insight and success.

The importance of experimenting is highlighted at length in The Innovator’s DNA. In that book and in other works about innovation, a key point is made about our perception of experimenting. Historically, experimenting was about validating a hypothesis. Any outcome that led to an increase in understanding and knowledge was valuable. Today, many experiments are considered valuable only if they validate prior expectations. We often don’t understand or even attempt to evaluate experiments that don’t produce expected results. We simply label these experiments as failures, actions to avoid or quickly sweep them under the rug.

Good innovators share many similarities with early explorers like Magellan and Columbus. They both explored dangerous, unchartered regions of the globe. They went where others dared not go. They embraced a high probability of failure with a corresponding reward if they succeeded. The act of innovation requires discovery. Certainly we can’t innovate effectively without the preceding act of discovering needs, opportunities and potential future scenarios. Once a new discovery is made, the only way to validate that discovery is through experimentation. Exploration and experimentation are both vital for innovation, and they are tightly linked. Yet experimentation is often considered an activity for research scientists in a lab. Innovators must bring experimentation out of the lab and experiment with all kinds of ideas in many settings, especially with customers and channels involved. Testing theories, making prototypes or mockups and experimenting with intangible ideas are all part of the innovation process.
Interesting new research from Dr. Gina Francesca and Dr. Scott Wiltermuth asserts that dishonesty – ignoring or breaking rules, or even cheating, often leads to greater creativity. For innovators, ignoring or breaking rules is often the first step toward seeing a challenge or problem in a new way. I’ve decided to call this trait “flexibility” rather than dishonesty or rule-breaking.

As the old saying goes, rules were made to be broken, and the best innovators are those individuals who aren’t constrained or confined by existing cultural constraints, regulations or social mores. While acknowledging that these “rules” exist, the best innovators can imagine a setting in which those rules are changed or altered. Once the rules or structures no longer constrain thinking, innovators create more interesting, more novel and often more valuable ideas. We’ve noticed this phenomenon when working on innovation projects in a number of highly regulated industries. Once, when working with a health insurer, our innovation team generated a number of new and valuable ideas. When the ideas were reviewed with the client, they were immediately rejected because they violated industry rules or regulations. Our client was completely boxed in by the regulations, and refused to consider ideas that might violate any standing regulation. Yet regulations are just laws or the interpretation of laws, which can be changed. Otherwise, what are lobbyists for?

When innovating within the “rules”, limited by constraints and context, there’s little room for new ideas. The range of new thinking is severely limited. Innovation teams are guaranteed to struggle, because limiting themselves to what the “rules” or regulations or culture will allow condemns them to fight for the same customers, needs and markets as their competitors, what Kim and Mauborgne called the “red oceans”. There’s little wonder that most disruption is introduced by firms from outside an industry, because outsiders have less stake and less reverence for the rules. In any industry there exist “rule takers” and “rule breakers”. Most innovation is created by the people who ask: what if we relaxed or ignored the rules, just for a little while, so we can understand what might be possible if the rules didn’t exist.

Far too many potential innovators, and innovation teams, never assume they can break the social, political or regulatory requirements in their industry. They start, instead, from the assumption that they must work within the rules, and struggle to find interesting new ideas or products. Rather that start from a “what could be” perspective, most start from a “what is allowed” perspective. People who are comfortable “flexing” the rules and regulations see far more opportunity, generate far more ideas and create significantly more novel and disruptive ideas.

Who are the “rule breakers” in your organization? The people whose mantra is “ask forgiveness not permission”. While these individuals are not always considered team players and good corporate citizens, they may demonstrate capabilities and traits that allow them to imagine better and more valuable ideas.
Future Orientation

It’s almost impossible to create new ideas, to anticipate emerging needs and to identify potential new markets while constantly absorbed with the past. Innovation is about improving products and services that already exist or creating completely new products and services. Its outcomes are always produced in the future. Thinking about the future and the emerging factors that will influence the future are key considerations for any innovation activity. Good innovators are far more focused on the future than on the present or the past. Beyond the annual planning process, very few firms spend time thinking about the future because they are so focused on short term, quarterly financial results. Thus, the timeframes and thinking patterns of innovators often conflict with the expectations of their corporate cultures.

Why is the future so important for innovation? No matter how valuable and relevant an idea is today, its promise lies in the future. The average product development cycle in most firms runs from several months to several years. No matter how relevant your idea is today, it won’t be launched as a new product creating new revenue for months or years. During that time, market conditions may change, competitors may introduce new products and services and consumers’ attitudes and needs may change. Many innovators fail to understand how much can change between the time they create an idea and the time a new product is actually launched. Understanding the potential future market conditions is vital for the success of a new product or service.

Likewise, while corporate culture is a present and powerful force, innovators can’t afford to allow historical preferences or stories about past success to direct investigation and research. Take for example the lazy rejection that an idea has been attempted previously and failed. This argument is only valid if the ideas, people and conditions are exactly the same as they were previously. No good innovator is bound solely by the experience and history of a company, but they are informed by that history. Good innovators understand that the opportunities and barriers for an idea lie mostly in the future and how it unfolds, rather than in the past.

The final reason that good innovators are future-oriented is linked to another attribute we’ll investigate later in this document. We label that trait “proactive”. Good innovators create new ideas before customers recognize needs or competitors launch competing products. Instead of reacting to competitive threats and market conditions, innovators are anticipating and predicting needs and circumstances. This means their focus is constantly on the future, not the past. As a tool, innovation is much more proficient in a proactive mode than when used to react to market conditions or to respond to a competitive offering. Good innovators understand the best use of innovation, and constantly focus their attention on future products, services and business models.

This consistent focus on the future may seem contradictory or frivolous to an innovator’s counterparts, who are often very focused on near term activities and events. Reward systems focus attention on short term activities rather than longer term strategies and objectives, and those that do seem to be distracted dreamers rather than people who add value to a current conversation.
Holistic

Innovation can take many forms, from small changes that create basic improvements to existing products to disruptive innovation that introduces a completely new product or service. A recurring trait of strong innovators is that they view innovation “holistically” – seeing the activity from end-to-end, and thinking about any innovation in a systemic way. Good innovators are able to see the “big picture” – all the interconnecting issues and opportunities a new product or service creates.

There are three concepts entwined in our definition of holistic. The first is the ability to understand the “end to end” process of innovation. Good innovators understand the commitment and investment necessary to identify a need, gather insights, generate ideas, evaluate the ideas and make recommendations for new product or service development. They understand that innovation is more than brainstorming or other discrete activities. They value the “holistic” effort involved in bringing a new idea to market. In this regard they view innovation as a journey, not a discrete action or step.

The second concept within the “holistic” trait is the ability to think about innovation in a systemic way. By this I mean that any innovation is a system of connected components. Changing an existing product, or creating a new product, has knock-on effects and may require changes to existing ancillary products, channels, marketing and other solutions. You can’t make a new product in isolation. New products often require new channels, new marketing, new support options and many other infrastructure changes. Understanding the need and how the solution fits into a larger systemic framework matters, otherwise the innovation job is only partially and incompletely accomplished. Good innovators innately understand what Geoffrey Moore called the “whole product” in Crossing the Chasm. A “whole product” is a “generic product augmented by everything that is needed for the customer to have a compelling reason to buy”. In general practice this means that people don’t buy technologies or capabilities, they buy complete solutions that solve relevant needs. While some “early adopters” may purchase new technologies that aren’t yet final or don’t have all the necessary infrastructure, support, applications and so forth, the preponderance of the market won’t purchase until the solution is complete.

Finally, as Griffin, Hoffman and their co-authors point out in their white paper on serial innovators, good innovators are people who “connect the dots”, but in order to connect the dots they first have to be able to “find the dots”. This means examining the problem or opportunity from the broadest perspective and deeply understanding the challenge, but also having the aptitude to “pull back” and look at the bigger picture.

The holistic trait and its incumbent perspectives and attitudes can create difficulties for innovators when they work with less holistic peers. Many people are satisfied to conduct rapid, discrete innovation activities focused on narrowly defined requirements to deliver a new product quickly. Good innovators will identify two challenges with this approach. First, the approach will appear unstructured or untethered, without consideration for an “end to end” process. Second, innovators will want to understand the potential markets
and customer needs, and impacts of new products to channels, other products, competitors’ offerings and other knock on effects. The holistic approach may take more time and expand the scope of the effort, but it results in better, more relevant and useful solutions.
Humility / Low Ego

Humility, like empathy, has an unfortunate and somewhat negative connotation in the business world. In a highly competitive environment people who have low egos or who exhibit humility about their ideas can be easily ignored. To advance in the modern corporation it’s important to have a healthy ego and champion one’s capabilities and ideas, as well as a record of success. While success and advancement may lead to confidence or even arrogance, most innovators can attest to the importance of humility and low ego for innovation success.

Before we examine the concept of humility, I’d like to distinguish humility from an earlier attribute I called beginner’s mind. I considered combining the two concepts, but ultimately decided to keep them separated. They deserve to be separated because confident, perhaps even arrogant people (think Steve Jobs) can manage to look at a problem through a beginner’s eyes. A beginner’s mind introduces new perspectives and new pathways to a solution by taking a completely fresh approach. Humility and low ego speak more to how innovators learn, identify needs, collaborate with others, and how they attract and work with ideas from other people. Innovators with low ego are less likely to reject feedback or criticism of ideas, and are more willing to accept ideas or input from others.

The best innovators are synthesizers, taking bits and pieces of insights and ideas from multiple sources and combining them to create something even more valuable. It’s difficult to accept ideas from other people if your ego or position is threatened by acknowledging that some portion, or even the entire idea you are working on originated with someone else. Humility allows an innovator to involve everyone and every perspective in the innovation process. Humility helps an innovator become agnostic to the eventual source of the idea. Further, it’s important that innovators not become defensive or overly protective about their ideas. To some innovators with uncertain egos it may appear that suggestions to improve an idea are subtle attacks on the individual who submitted the idea, rather an attempt to improve the idea. People who can subjugate their ego in the innovation process and seek feedback or insights from others will be more prolific and create better ideas. They can only do this by being willing to listen and incorporate the insights and ideas of others, and by not becoming defensive about their own submissions. As Griffin and her co-authors wrote, serial innovators “solicit feedback from a variety of sources to help them evaluate its true worth”.

Humility is also important when identifying customer needs or product gaps. Product managers or executives often have great pride in their offerings, and may not have the humility necessary to understand the unmet needs that still exist or that consumers still encounter. Humility can lead to more insight and discovery about unmet needs, but only if innovators lower their egos and are willing to listen to consumer input.

It’s quite possible that individuals who have low egos may not volunteer for these kinds of projects, and may be overlooked when executives identify team members. These individuals may not have high profiles within the organization. However, being humble or possessing a low ego doesn’t equate to incremental ideas or an inability to share or exchange ideas. In fact those with low egos improve collaboration and share ideas more
effectively. Humility may lead to new insights or new discovery of unmet needs, which is vital for innovation success.

Humility, like empathy and beginner’s mind, isn’t a highly valued quality in most corporations, but it is vital for innovation success.
Previously, in the trait entitled Collaborative, I argued that innovators must be collaborative, able and willing to share ideas and insights with anyone who can help. However collaboration doesn’t mean that innovators aren’t passionate about their ideas, or that they can’t or shouldn’t defend their ideas. Innovators need to demonstrate “independence” from existing culture and thought, especially when their ideas are disruptive or fall outside of the mainstream of corporate thinking. Innovation requires a careful balance between collaboration and working effectively with a team, and standing up for their ideas, or apart from the status quo to defend ideas.

Innovators need healthy independence from the “business as usual” mindsets that prevail in every corporation. They must be able, when necessary, to reject existing structures and thinking and create new ideas that will add value to the organization. This independence doesn’t suggest collaboration is useless. Collaboration and exchange of ideas and insights is vital. Independence means that the successful innovator is willing and capable of holding different ideas and opinions than others in the firm or even the firm’s culture or operating practices. Innovators in many cases must have strong opinions and have enough independence to explain the value proposition their idea creates. Innovators who acquiesce to corporate culture or who follow corporate thinking blindly are more likely to create incremental solutions. While independence may sometimes seem unreasonable, it is often through independent thought that new innovations arise. As George Bernard Shaw said, “the reasonable man adapts himself to the conditions that surround him; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man”. Likewise, innovation depends on people who reject the accepted, conventional thinking and create new solutions.

For this reason, good innovators may sometimes seem at odds with their co-workers or with the corporate culture. They frequently hold strong opinions about their ideas and are able to defend their ideas with supporting evidence. When considering the staffing options for an innovation activity, it’s important to identify people who have enough strength of character, enough independence to question the existing conventions. If everyone on the innovation team engages in corporate think, ideas will be limited to what the culture and existing conditions will allow. Independent thinkers are vital to the success of innovation projects.
Intrinsic Motivation

Daniel Pink, in a recent book entitled *Drive*, examines research about factors that motivate people. The subtitle of his book (The Surprising Truth about what Motivates Us) gives clues about his findings. His conclusions suggest that far too often executives don’t understand the factors that motivate their employees. Executives assume that the majority of their employees are “extrinsically” motivated. Extrinsic motivation is defined as external motivating factors – cash, monetary incentives, recognition and other factors external to the individual. While extrinsic motivation is common among many employees, Pink and others have found that innovators are more often motivated by intrinsic factors rather than, or in addition to, extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivation is defined as motivation that comes from inside an individual rather than from any external or outside rewards. Further, the definition often includes the fact that people engage in an activity for its own sake, rather than for the rewards. In simple terms this means that good innovators find it more rewarding and satisfying to work on their ideas and see them through to commercialization, rather than win cash or prizes for merely submitting ideas. This finding suggests that many reward and recognition systems are not encouraging the people who are the best innovators, and some programs meant to incentivize people to submit ideas are encouraging and rewarding the wrong behavior.

If we think carefully about the definition of intrinsic motivation, it’s clear that some innovation rewards and recognition programs have it backwards. Good innovators will innovate because they enjoy the activity. They don’t need cash or recognition in order to innovate. They innovate because they are challenged by a problem or need, and they find great intrinsic value in solving the challenge. Poorly designed reward systems create two significant problems. First, they attract people who are more interested in the incentive than in solving the challenge. These individuals are rent-seekers, not necessarily innovators. Second, the more the rewards are based on cash or extrinsic outcomes, the less involved people who are intrinsically motivated become. Extrinsic rewards can create a perverse incentive where people submit ideas with the sole purpose of earning more money, rather than actually trying to solve a problem.

Good innovators are motivated by interesting problems, and the opportunity to pursue the solutions and implement their ideas. They are motivated by the challenge, and have deep passion for creating and implementing solutions. They are often “crowded out” of innovation activities where tangible rewards are set too high by people who seek the incentives. It’s important for your innovation efforts to identify people who are intrinsically motivated, and to structure your innovation activities to allow these innovators to remain involved with their ideas as long as possible. Further, you should carefully consider the reward structures that support or encourage your innovation activities to ensure they motivate the right behaviors in your organization.
Our interactions with Relentless Innovators indicated that most innovators consider themselves “lifelong learners”. Anyone actively involved with innovation recognizes that many of the early activities in an innovation project (trend spotting, needs discovery, customer research and problem identification) lead to learning about potential future conditions, emerging markets and unmet customer needs. Synthesizing this information and using it to create products and services that solve customer needs demonstrates a learning process. The innovator is confronted with new information, analyzes or processes the information to understand how to make it relevant, uses the knowledge to imagine and design new products or services, and finally witnesses those new products in use. Another type of learning may be required as well. Innovators often use new tools, new methods and new processes to identify needs and generate ideas. Learning and eventually mastering these tools requires a desire to learn. Whether learning about customer needs and market trends, or learning new innovation tools and methods, innovators are required to be capable learners.

Innovators by their very nature are constantly learning. They explore the formal and informal constraints of their organization. They investigate trends and create scenarios that further knowledge and understanding. They meet with customers to understand and learn about unmet needs. They investigate ideas and experiment to identify the best ideas to convert into new products and services. They interact with partners and channels to understand how to incorporate external capabilities and technologies to provide new products and services. As we’ve noted previously in this list of traits, innovators are very curious about the world around them. Innovators must both be open to new learning and enjoy learning in order to innovate successfully. In fact, the more disruptive the anticipated product or solution, the more the innovator must learn in order to design and develop the best ideas.

Since learning is such a vital component for good innovation, it wasn’t surprising to find that innovators ranked it as an important trait. What was surprising was the range of forms the learning takes. Some innovators continued to pursue additional education in their specific field of study. Many people who identified themselves as innovators held master’s degrees or even PhDs. Some innovators pursued a significant amount of training in their industry or area of specialty. Others focused on learning completely new subjects or learning new tools or methods. Still others focused on learning to play a musical instruments or learning the skills for a new hobby. It doesn’t seem to matter quite so much what the learning entails as long as the individual is involved in new learning.

People who are naturally curious, who are constantly engaged in learning and who enjoy learning are far more proficient as innovators than their peers who aren’t open to learning new methods, tools or information. People who resist learning new methods or who pay lip service to new learning aren’t likely to create interesting new ideas. They are often “anchored” in proven products and solutions, trusting in past experiences and skeptical of new thinking and tools. Good innovators understand that they must be constantly learning about
their markets and customers, and gaining new skills as new methods and new tools emerge. Identifying the people in your organization who enjoy learning will accelerate innovation and improve outcomes.
As companies have invested in defining processes, perfecting decision making, reducing uncertainty and variability, increasingly success in any activity is taken as a given. Failure to achieve anticipated goals is not just troubling, but in some cases a career ending outcome. There’s less experience with failure and less tolerance of it than ever before. Narrowly defined projects and corporate reward systems have built a resistance to failure. This resistance to failure is rapidly increasing at the same time innovation requirements are growing. As these two expectations move in opposite directions, the divergence will create interesting tensions. Almost by definition, many innovation activities end in “failure”. Since corporate culture and reward systems reinforce success and punish failure, people have been taught to avoid failure. These conflicts are resolved when teams define innovation so narrowly with such a high probability of success that the end result isn’t really innovation but a simple update to an existing product.

The dictionary defines “failure” as the “condition or fact of not achieving the desired ends”. We clearly need to redefine failure in corporate settings to build more opportunity for innovation to flourish. The “front end” of innovation is often represented as a funnel, with the expectation that many ideas will be generated, but only a few implemented. This winnowing process means many ideas will fail, as we discover that they don’t meet customer needs, have hidden issues or constraints, or can’t achieve some minimum financial qualifications. In an organization that is intolerant of failure, introducing a process that by its very nature includes “failure” is difficult. Innovators must first redefine failure as a process of discovery and experimentation, and then prove that even failure has key benefits if we harvest learning from all activities to improve future products and services.

Corporate innovators are rationale actors and they live within the evaluation programs, compensation schemes and cultural definitions that the organization imposes. As long as experimentation, rapid winnowing of ideas or even the termination of a project based on new learning is considered “failure” it will be exceptionally difficult to innovate successfully. Good innovators understand the role experimentation and failure play in creating new products and services. Due to their natural curiosity and willingness to experiment they are more familiar with failure and less likely to be deterred by failure. They are more likely than their co-workers to learn from experimentation and project failure and to incorporate what they’ve learned from their experiments into new, more viable ideas. They recognize, as Churchill said that they must “move from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm” to gain success.

Existing cultures encourage employees to resist activities that lead to new learning or potential failures. Your innovation success depends on your ability to identify people who have a much greater tolerance for failure, and recognize how to use what failure teaches them to improve subsequent ideas and products if you hope to innovate successfully. Your success also depends on redefining “failure” as experiments meant to lead to new learning or insight.
That innovators should be optimists seems so obvious that it should go without saying. However, many innovation projects are staffed by individuals who were available when the project began, not by the best innovators, or even the most optimistic employees. It’s safe to assume that most innovation teams include some “doubting Thomases”—probably the last place many of them should be. In fact this is one of the reasons we prefer people to volunteer for innovation projects. Random assignment of available staff ensures that at least one of the individuals will have strong reservations or doubts about the process, the innovation tools, the scope of the project or the ability of the innovation team to achieve anticipated outcomes. The optimists on the team have to work overtime to overcome the pessimists in their midst, never mind corporate and cultural resistance.

The dictionary defines optimism as “the tendency to expect the best possible outcome or dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation”. Both definitions are important for innovation. In any innovation project, innovators will encounter conflicting management direction, competing strategies, new tools and methods, unusual constraints and unexpected barriers. Any of these obstacles can cause a person to doubt the efficacy of innovation, to question the innovation tools or processes. Several seemingly insurmountable obstacles or barriers may lead individuals to consider quitting the project or ending the innovation activity. Only the “tendency to expect the best possible outcome” will keep people focused when barriers are encountered. People with a more pessimistic outlook will encounter these barriers and seek to find a simpler solution with less risk and resistance. Optimistic innovators will identify possible alternatives to overcome a barrier or reframe the problem to encompass the barrier. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to conduct good innovation work with a pessimistic point of view. Further, pessimists on an innovation project tend to “anchor” the entire team to a more constrained viewpoint.

If overcoming the pessimists on the innovation team isn’t difficult enough, innovators must also face the power of existing cultural thinking, the fear of failure and the risks associated with uncertainty associated with innovation that exist outside the team. Only optimistic people can encounter these barriers and continue to pursue innovation goals. Optimists are capable of sustaining a larger scope of inquiry, anticipating positive outcomes and influencing those around them to believe in a positive outcome. Given the barriers and resistance they are likely to encounter, innovation teams need to be staffed with optimists who believe in the possibility of innovation and yet are grounded in the requirements of the business.
Here's a trait that you may not have expected in a list of innovation attributes. Many of the Relentless Innovators we surveyed told us that understanding the amount of work to accomplish and leaving enough time for work and reflection was critical to their success. Perhaps patience isn’t the right word, but it is probably closest to what the innovators suggested was important.

Patience is important because many innovation projects start life as a rushed, last minute affair, initiated after a competitive threat or sudden market shift. Any new team needs time to form and organize, especially when the activities and tools are new and unusual. Additionally, since innovation is risky and uncertain and often high profile, executives and managers try to rush the activity along, rather than taking the time necessary to do the work well. Further, the more interesting or disruptive the intended innovation outcomes are, the more time is necessary for innovation to produce valuable results.

In the Mythical Man-Month, Fred Brooks wrote about the amount of time and resource commitment necessary to complete a project effectively. One saying attributed to Brooks is that nine women can’t make a baby in one month. Some activities require time, incubation, discovery and reflection and can’t be rushed. It is possible to hurry innovation, to skip steps and to accelerate through the phases, but in the end most teams are left with inadequate ideas that don’t reflect customer needs, which are bound for failure. Good innovators understand that the work takes time to accomplish, and are patient enough to balance the time they need to succeed with the pressures to complete the activity as quickly as possible.

Good innovation happens when well-prepared teams are allowed to investigate and discover customer needs and to generate ideas within that context. Patience is needed to adequately define opportunities, investigate customer needs, understand and assess alternatives and develop new solutions. Good innovation can be accelerated, but it can’t be rushed. Innovators also need great patience when interacting with peers and managers who don’t understand the innovation methods or timeframes. Innovation often requires educating the people on the periphery of the project on the activities, perspectives and insights. This education and the introduction of new perspectives and ideas takes time and requires great patience as well.

Identifying people who allow ideas to unfold, who have the patience to dig deeply into customer needs and who exhibit the ability to interact with time sensitive managers and peers who don’t grasp the importance of new perspectives or tools will dramatically increase innovation capabilities. In some instances these individuals may appear to be too methodical, too slow or perhaps even stubborn in their need to gather and assess information. But as Covey reminds us in his Seven Habits, it’s better to sharpen the saw before using it.
**Proactive**

In many companies, the ability to react quickly to impending calamity has become the way to gain acclaim and advancement. No cost is spared to address the most immediate and difficult customer complaint or product failure. Short term problem solution has become a virtual competency for many managers, introducing the concept of “fire fighting” into corporate culture. Unfortunately, that “fire fighting” mentality is gradually spilling over into every corporate decision and activity. Increasingly, many companies are attempting to use the impetus of a competitive threat to begin rapid innovation projects which seek to “catch up” to a competitive offering. Many innovation projects are kicked off in response to a competitive offering, market shift or customer demand. This rapid response, which works well in familiar settings with well-defined processes, stumbles when applied to innovation. Fire fighting works because the managers are well versed in the existing processes and products. They can quickly assess needs and bring the right solutions to bear. Innovation, on the other hand, relies on unusual tools and new processes which are unfamiliar to many managers. Further, innovation capabilities aren’t designed to be rapid reaction tools. Rather, good innovation is a journey of discovery and insight. The best innovators will tell you that they, and the tools associated with innovation, are best when they are used proactively, rather than reactively.

Good innovators are proactive because they are constantly engaged in spotting trends, building scenarios and understanding customer needs. These activities identify emerging needs and opportunities that can be addressed before competitors recognize the opportunity and in some instances before customers become aware of the need. As noted above, many of the tools associated with innovation assist with discovery and customer needs identification, which take time and are forward looking. That’s why innovation is so valuable in a proactive setting, developing solutions and products before competitors and customers become aware.

Innovators too are much more attuned to thinking and working proactively. Planning, investigating and exploring gives them the time to create interesting and relevant new products and services that provide value to customers.

When innovation is used proactively, to identify emerging needs and markets, innovators have the time to conduct investigations and explore customer needs effectively. Based on these insights, they create better and more valuable products and services that address unmet needs. Conversely, when innovators are called on as a rapid response force, they sacrifice much of the discovery work and are forced to copy existing products rather than understand market or customer needs. There’s little argument that some innovation tools can be used in either scenario, but true innovation is always proactive. Consistent innovators can be found constantly thinking about the next product, the next market need, understanding, discovering and interpreting needs and fashioning solutions before the demand is created.
When you examine the common business activities you’ll accept that there are few that introduce more risk than innovation. Innovation uses uncertain tools and methods, seeks to create products that don’t yet exist to satisfy unmet or even unarticulated customer needs, introduces ambiguity into a well-defined and regulated process and, to top it all off, is a huge distraction for the “business as usual” operations providing the funds to sustain near term cash flow. Anyone who commits to work on an innovation project is either crazy, or has a very high tolerance for risk. Distinguishing between the two is important.

While few business risks are life threatening, many can be career threatening. Just one or two “failures” leaves a big black mark on anyone’s hope of advancement. In innovation, there are many risks and uncertainties. For many people, the risks and uncertainties are simply too numerous to be embraced. Individuals with a low risk tolerance will avoid innovation activities, and if assigned to an innovation project will focus more time and effort on reducing the risk than on generating ideas. True innovators aren’t blind to risk, they simply seek to understand the risks, mitigate the ones that they can and carefully monitor the others. True Relentless Innovators are more tolerant of risk, and more capable of balancing risks and rewards than their peers.

An innovator’s ability to tolerate risk doesn’t mean they are unable to recognize risks, or that they are simply immune from risk. Innovators understand the risks associated with developing new products and services and know which ones are important and how to mitigate them through training, skill development, experience and process. They can distinguish between real, imminent risks and those that are present but not potentially harmful. Further, innovators understand the balance between current risk and potential reward. It’s not that they are immune to risk, simply that they understand the risks involved with innovation and can place those risks in the proper context.

Many innovators have different expectations for rewards as well as different risk tolerances. As we’ve noted previously, many innovators are intrinsically motivated, so their risk profiles are much different than their peers. Good innovators are internally motivated and enjoy working on innovation activities. Innovators aren’t necessarily seeking the rewards and returns that their compatriots need in order to embrace the risk of innovation. For this reason, the amount of risk associated with an innovation effort may seem lower to an innovator than it would to a less innovative peer. Further, since many good innovators are motivated by learning and new experiences, the innovation attempt has almost as much reward as the outcome.

It’s vital for innovation success to identify people in your company who are more comfortable and more tolerant of risk. People with low risk tolerance will constrain innovation projects, seeking the most “successful” outcome rather than the solution customers need. People with low risk tolerances will invest more time and energy focused on mitigating or eliminating risks rather than creating new insights or exploring new opportunities.
For at least a decade, IDEO and others have described innovators as “T” shaped. By this they mean that innovators are broadly competent across a range of disciplines (the cross bar) and have deep expertise in one discipline (the vertical line of the T). This construct has been attributed to Bill Moggeridge, a leading design thinker who spent many years at IDEO, although others have expanded on the idea. Brian Shackel, an expert on human-centered design, noted that the best innovators had “...an outstanding capacity for abstract thinking, yet they also had a really strong grounding in physical materials and tools”. Shackel was reinforcing the notion that the vertical bar of the “T” represents a deep competency, but also the ability to understand both abstract concepts and the tools that help deliver those ideas into the physical world.

In this definition, good innovators are both generalists AND specialists. As generalists, they have a broad understanding of the different disciplines, functions and teams that must work together to develop a new idea. As we’ve noted previously, good innovators have a “holistic” view of the needs, capabilities and solutions. They are systems thinkers, and the cross-bar of the “T” represents the cross-functional and interdependent nature of innovation. As specialists, most innovators have a deep expertise in a discipline that allows them to contribute something of value to the genesis and development of the idea. That deep skillset could represent a wide range of capabilities and competencies. Good innovators can be found in R&D, but also in marketing, finance, product management and development, project management and other groups and disciplines.

In the corporate environment today many individuals are increasingly “I” shaped. A focus on efficiency and speed has meant that more people must become deep experts in narrow competencies. The cross-functional or cross-disciplinary issues are addressed in temporary teams and through highly developed processes. Generalists are less favored than specialists due to notions of cost, efficiency and product or process knowledge. However, the best innovators are those with broad understanding of the entirety of the innovation need and the organizational capability, who can also deliver a specific competence.
Tenacious

When developing this list of traits, two traits that seemed synonymous were frequently volunteered. One was persistent, and the other was tenacious. Given the relative overlap of the two concepts, we decided to combine them and focus on the more “robust” attribute of the two: tenacity.

Persistent is defined as “continuing firmly or obstinately in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition”. Few phrases can sum up the life or existence of an innovator more succinctly. Innovators need to be persistent – they need to be firm and obstinate in their work despite almost inevitable resistance. That resistance will spring from corporate culture, colleagues with products or turf to protect, existing funding and portfolio needs, and a fear of risk and uncertainty. Innovators have to be persistent to overcome these barriers. But this concept of persistence wasn’t edgy enough. Instead we were interested in taking the concept a bit further, into the definition of tenacity: holding firmly to something. The reason we favored tenacity over persistence is that tenacity has an almost aggressive flavor to it. The notion that someone would stand up for their ideas, or fight for their ideas, versus persistence, which seems more time based.

In either case, whichever word you prefer, innovators demonstrate tenacity and persistence in their work and with their ideas. Part of their tenacity comes from their passion. Innovation is work they enjoy doing. Part of their tenacity comes from their empathy. They believe that their ideas can solve customer needs. Sometimes their persistence and tenacity isolates them from the team. They aren’t considered “team players” because of their independence and their commitment to their ideas. Good innovators aren’t simply stubborn or locked into a specific solution in general, but can become that way because of their passions and empathy for the customer. Stubborn people aren’t necessarily innovators, but many innovators can become quite stubborn or passionate about their ideas.

Tenacity and persistence is especially valuable in an innovation activity, because there are so many challenges and barriers. Innovation typically introduces new risks, which will cause decision makers to reduce scope or limit resources. Innovation introduces new tools and methods, which can lead to questions about approach or investment. New ideas may conflict with existing culture or cannibalize existing products. Every roadblock or barrier can become an insurmountable hurdle and slows innovation progress. Only truly persistent or tenacious innovators can overcome these hurdles.
You may be familiar with the phrase “culture eats strategy for breakfast”. This saying acknowledges the overwhelming power of corporate culture. A strong corporate culture has many benefits. Culture creates a common language or mythos for an organization. Corporate cultures quickly “on board” new employees, establishing expectations and introducing informal power structures and highlighting the attitudes and perspectives of an organization. Culture, while informal, is very powerful and constantly corrects the organization to keep it effective. There are, however, several negative aspects of a strong corporate culture. Corporate cultures can block new ideas and perspectives and reinforce old habits. A strong culture can create “groupthink” and resist change. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of a powerful culture is how culture seeks to isolate or eliminate unconventional thinking.

There is an old Japanese proverb that states that the “nail that sticks up will be hammered down”. In other words, conform, or expect criticism and potential isolation. Consider for a moment how powerful culture can be, and potentially how dangerous an unchecked culture can be. If everyone is of the same opinion and mindset, it is simple to achieve a high degree of teamwork and efficiency. Yet in a highly aligned culture, who introduces the new idea that disrupts or changes how things are done? Who introduces a new perspective? The stronger the culture, the less inquisitive and the more defensive the company becomes. A homogeneous culture needs, although rarely welcomes, unconventional thinkers.

Given the investment in existing processes, efficiency and reward systems in most companies, the prevailing attitude is to sustain and defend status quo operations. Even when executives demand innovation, the first attempts will always be made within the confines of existing processes, expectations and personnel. True innovation will only occur when unconventional ideas and new processes or tools are introduced. These ideas may break internal conventions on product definition, profitability or customer need, or external conventions like accepted industry practice. Good innovators are vital because they are willing to consider potential processes, practices, products and business models that are unconventional, and unappealing to the rest of the organization. Yet because of the focus on efficiency and low variability, these ideas are rarely sought out, and unconventional thinkers are viewed with skepticism or even ridicule. Good innovators may have low egos, but have high confidence in their abilities and in their unconventional methods of thinking.

Innovators may suffer from some isolation because of their unconventional thinking. Companies that have high investments in efficiency and process definition don’t welcome questions about their conventions. Innovators are often tolerated because their value is recognized, but may be considered complainers or disrupters because they want to challenge traditional methods and assumptions that others willingly accept.
Insights from our research and assessments

Now that we’ve reviewed the psychographic traits we identified in our research, we can turn to what we’ve found through our assessments. In general, most organizations that have completed our assessment possess an “average” range of these traits, with a few exceptions I’ll describe later. We’ve found that most organizations demonstrate a “bell shaped” distribution, in that a handful of individuals possess many of these traits deeply, while an opposing handful claim not to possess many of these traits. The majority of the organization fall in the middle. Identifying the “outliers” who possess more of these traits in more depth is crucial to innovation success.

Traits

Not surprisingly, the companies we’ve researched and those that participated in early assessments possess all of the traits we’ve identified, in varying depths and distributions. Several of the traits, however, aren’t as conspicuous or as deeply entrenched, which may cause some difficulties when innovating. Based on our research and the assessments we’ve completed so far, the following traits are present in far fewer people and in far less depth than the other traits:

- Beginner’s Mind
- Comfort with ambiguity
- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Exploring/Experimenting
- Future Orientation
- Humility/Low Ego
- Proactive

These are important factors, both for imagining new ideas (Beginner’s Mind, Creativity), gathering insights (Empathy) and the way in which people work on innovation (Exploring, Proactive, Comfort with Ambiguity). In our research and in trial assessments across a number of firms in different industries, we found that these factors were the most likely to be the ones least represented.
Other signals an individual may be an innovator

Beyond the characteristics listed above, our research indicated that there are demographic and psychographic traits and personal experiences that can indicate individuals who are more capable and more likely to be a successful innovator. We found that successful innovators shared these common traits and/or experiences:

- **Education.** Good innovators tend to have more education than their peers. This fact confirms the “life long learner” attribute we’ve described above. In our surveys and in our client interactions, the people who excel at innovation tend to have more formal education than those that struggle with innovation tools and methods. Over 60% of the people we surveyed had advanced degrees, either master’s degrees or PhDs. As we noted above, the concept of “education” isn’t simply limited to academic fields. Good innovators are constantly learning, in their own area of expertise or in new fields of study. Openness to new information, knowledge and experiences indicates an individual who is more open to new thinking and new ideas.

  However, education by itself isn’t necessarily a good signal of innovation capability. It is the actions and perspectives of the individual that matter, not academic achievement. Deep education in a particular field may build resistance to new ideas or concepts in that field of study or cause an individual to ignore potential technologies or threats.

- **Length of work experience.** Our research found that the best innovators tend to have between 10 and 20 years of work experience. We stipulate that this amount of work experience provides them with more models and more examples of successful work, and more experience understanding how to develop and implement ideas in a corporate environment than less experienced peers. This finding seems to conflict with the concept that new employees often have more or better ideas, but when you consider that innovation isn’t just about generating ideas it begins to make sense. Good innovators combine both the ability to generate ideas with the knowledge of how to develop ideas into new products and services and get the concepts launched. While people with more than 20 years of experience are also capable innovators, they may lack the enthusiasm or energy to attempt innovation if innovation has “failed” in their organization in the past. Good innovators combine good insights and perspectives with the knowledge of how to successfully implement those ideas in their organizations, without becoming disillusioned or overwhelmed by previous experiences.

- **Breadth of work experience.** Our research suggested that the best innovators had diverse work histories, allowing them to draw on experiences from different positions, functions, companies or even industries. This breadth of experiences allows an innovator to import ideas or solutions from one industry to another and to recognize similarities or patterns from previous experiences. Many innovations in one industry are simply “borrowed” or imported ideas from another industry or geography. There is a benefit to a heterogeneous workforce, with special focus on employees from competitors and adjacent markets or industries. When staff and employees are too similar, too homogeneous, the potential for groupthink sets in, rejecting new ideas or perspectives.
This concept doesn’t require an individual work in multiple industries or geographies. Someone who has held significantly different roles or worked in different business functions within one company can provide interesting perspectives over a person who has worked their entire career in one role or business function.

- **Breadth of personal network and sources.** Good innovators have broad, diverse networks of friends and colleagues inside their teams and companies, but additionally have strong networks outside their industry or function. Larger and more diverse networks mean that the innovator is constantly exposed to more ideas and perspectives. Narrow or “closed” networks tend to reinforce limited information, while broader networks constantly introduce new thinking. This concept of “breadth and depth” holds true as well for the chosen “sources” of information. People who consume information from a wide array of topics and sources are typically better innovators than people who don’t enjoy reading or have a narrow selection of sources. A broad source of information or ideas ensures that new thinking or new ideas are constantly introduced.

- **Travel.** People who enjoy travel and travel frequently are often better innovators because they are exposed to different conditions, experiences and solutions than more sedentary counterparts. Travel places innovators in situations where they can understand customer and consumer needs, where they can witness unmet needs and encounter new and unusual circumstances and experiences. Through travel good innovators encounter people who have different lifestyles, experiences and expectations, and can more readily adopt those personas when identifying needs or creating new ideas.

- **Hobbies.** It’s clear from our research that innovative people are also relatively creative people. They spend their free time in creative hobbies, especially focused on arts (sketching, painting, drawing, photography), tinkering (woodworking as an example), travel and other hobbies. Creative, active hobbies stimulate problem solving and creative thinking, building and reinforcing skills that are vital for innovation. Further, good innovation includes creating images, representations, prototypes or simulations of ideas. These requirements call on the ability to draw, illustrate, diagram, model or create three dimensional images of ideas.
Assessing your organization

For innovation to be successful, two equally important but radically different phases of work must be completed successfully. We refer to these phases as the “front end” of innovation and “execution” or the conversion of selected ideas into new products or services. Both phases are important and yet share little in common in terms of the skills and traits that make them work effectively. Front end activities require discovery, exploration, openness to new perspectives and new thinking, while execution tasks require adherence to methods and formulas, speed, predictability and efficiency. As we’ve noted before, over the last 30 years the dominant focus in corporate strategy and management thought has been on improving execution – cutting costs and waste, increasing efficiency and improving organizational effectiveness. The skills and traits that are emphasized within the execution phase include:

- Efficiency
- Speed
- Focus on known processes and methods
- Repeatability
- Predictability

These skills, traits and capabilities ensure that the execution phase of product development runs smoothly, effortlessly and with as little cost or risk as possible. Over the last 30 years, however, many companies have neglected to reinforce attitudes, behaviors and skills that support and sustain innovation. The emphasis on efficiency and short term thinking has swamped most efforts to improve innovation capabilities. The skills and traits that front end activities depend on haven’t been encouraged or developed, and it’s easy to see that many of the traits conflict with best practices for the execution phase.

While traits like exploration, empathy, creativity, beginner’s mind and others are vital for innovation success, those traits could distract or even disrupt a highly efficient execution process. Comparing the traits that animate the two phases highlights a key reason many innovation activities struggle to create interesting, valuable ideas. Many corporations staff innovation activities with people who have implemented programs focused on efficiency, speed, predictability and low risk. When these individuals are confronted with an innovation opportunity, they rely on their existing skills and traits, rather than embrace the important skills and traits that support innovation. Skills and traits like empathy, future orientation, beginner’s mind and others seem unusual and uncomfortable. These team members are far more likely to rely on tried and true skills and perspectives, which leads to incremental ideas at best.

The table on the next page provides a quick compare and contrast opportunity to examine traits and skills that accelerate or improve the front end activities in comparison to those that improve execution.
### Phase | Front End | Execution
--- | --- | ---
Traits/Skills | Beginner’s Mind | Expertise
| Comfort with ambiguity | Structure |
| Creativity | Efficiency |
| Empathy | Speed |
| Intrinsic Motivation | Limited variation or exploration |
| Explore/Experiment | Repeatability |
| Future Oriented | Short term focus |
| Little Fear of Failure | Predictability |
| Adjacency | Limited scope |
| In Common: Optimism, tenacity, passion, collaboration, nimbleness, proactive, curious | | |
Most important traits | Secondary Traits | Tertiary Traits
--- | --- | ---
Innovation | Knowledge Economy | Table Stakes
Beginner’s mind | Associative | Adjacency
Comfort with risk and ambiguity | Explore/Experiment | Collaborative
Creativity | Flexible | Independent
Curiosity | Future Oriented | Patient
Empathy | Holistic | Proactive
Humility / low ego | Lifelong learner | Risk Taking
Intrinsically motivated | Little Fear of failure | T-Shaped
Optimistic | Unconventional | |
Tenacity | | |

Of course categorizing these attributes as more important or less important is dangerous. We ranked some of these traits, for example Beginner’s Mind and Empathy, as most important, because we believe that 1) they are vital to good innovation and 2) they are rarely found in many organizations. Other traits that we identified as most important include concepts like intrinsic motivation and comfort with risk and ambiguity. These two attributes demonstrate that an individual is likely to be a “self starter” and not rely on external rewards in order to innovate.

These ranking should also consider the existing corporate culture, the market conditions and other factors. For example, some organizations may need to identify people who are capable experimenters with little fear of failure and who are passionate about innovation, rather than focus on people who demonstrate a “beginner’s mind” or other attributes in the first column.
OVO Innovation Assessment

Using the traits we’ve identified above, OVO has worked with a leading research organization to develop an online survey that will allow you to assess your organization. Individual employees can complete the assessment in approximately 20 minutes, and you can identify individuals who have strengths in key innovation traits, identify capable innovators and build teams that reflect many of these innovation traits.

Beyond the individual assessments, you can identify corporate strengths and gaps across these vital traits. With this understanding, your executive team can do a better job:

- Staffing innovation projects – assigning the most capable people to the projects
- Building individual and team skills and capabilities
- Hiring new people who possess greater innovation capacity
- Developing leaders and improving leadership development.

Reporting

The assessment provides two types of reports, a report for each individual, which reports the score for each trait for the individual and compares to the corporate average, and a corporate reporting and analysis tool, which allows executives to build innovation teams by identifying the individuals who possess the deepest skills and traits. Examples of the two reports are included below.

Individual Report
You can find the assessment on our website: [www.ovoinnovation.com](http://www.ovoinnovation.com) under Services and Assessments. Contact OVO if you’d like to learn more about the online assessment.
How to use these traits to your advantage

From our research it’s clear that strong innovators possess traits that lead to a greater probability of innovation success. We began this research after working with many client innovation teams that were randomly assigned. These teams included people with great interest and proclivity for innovation, and people who were simply assigned and somewhat skeptical of innovation. Frequently we found that some of the “best” employees based on traditional evaluation frameworks were resistant to innovation, while others a bit outside of the corporate mainstream were much more open minded and effective at innovation. Working with our clients and through interaction with innovators around the globe, we’ve defined the traits above as most important to innovation success. We believe that finding the individuals in your organization who demonstrate these traits is vital, because they can become the basis for an innovation competency. Identifying, developing and training these individuals, and staffing them on important innovation projects will lead to a much higher success rate in innovation projects and drive new growth, differentiation and disruption.

This is not to say that any random assignment of people within your organization can’t be successful at innovation. We’ve had experience with a broad array of people and teams, and good success with many different team formulations. However, we can state based on our experience that people who demonstrate the traits identified above are more engaged, more committed and more capable innovators than those who don’t demonstrate these traits. What this means in practice is:

- faster “ramp up” for the innovation team,
- more excitement and engagement from the innovation team members,
- less confusion and resistance to new tools and methods,
- much more productive idea generation,
- better and more valuable ideas,
- less need for education and review of innovation methods, and
- innovation projects with better returns in less time.

Your organization can overcome a lack of internal innovators by defining a highly visible, well-defined and repeatable innovation process, and constantly reinforcing the process. However, a company that can identify and recruit good innovators and provide them with a defined innovation process and supportive culture can accelerate innovation activities and outcomes.

A couple of notes

Very few innovators will reflect all of these traits. In the aggregate, innovation teams must be populated with people who possess many of these attributes, and all attributes should be accounted for across the team. Some traits or characteristics may be easy to recruit, while others may be more difficult to find or require inviting people who aren’t typically involved in innovation or new product development to the innovation team. While
finding the right people may be difficult, it’s far better to broaden the search than to assign an individual to “play” a specific role or to assert a trait they don’t possess in great depth.

When teams are recruited blindly or when people are assigned to an innovation team, it’s likely that many of these traits will be absent. These innovation teams inadvertently “double down” on some traits while other traits are completely absent, meaning those teams are reinforcing some traits or attributes to a dangerous degree, inviting groupthink, while completely overlooking or ignoring other traits, introducing blindspots into the process. What you need to seek is a balance of these traits in the team, especially when the corporate culture tends to favor specific traits, perspectives or viewpoints.

This focus on the breadth of capability of the innovation team becomes more important as the expected impact of the idea increases or as the type of outcome changes. Any team can create incremental ideas, but only diverse teams with a broad representation of these traits can consistently create radical or disruptive ideas that are relevant and valuable to customers. Further, as the incidence, breadth and frequency of innovation activity increases, understanding how to build and populate effective and capable innovation teams becomes ever more important.

No executive worth their salary staffs important projects by randomly selecting available staff members. Instead they carefully weigh each individual’s experience, capabilities and competencies to ensure a higher chance of success. As innovation becomes more vital to growth and differentiation, building the best innovation teams becomes critical. Understanding the traits that signal a greater capability and confidence in the innovation process will lead to better innovation team staffing and to better innovation results.
What to do now

If your company needs more organic growth, differentiation and profits, it’s likely you’ll contemplate innovation as a possible solution. I hope we’ve convinced you that 1) innovation is vital for ongoing growth, differentiation and profitability and 2) to sustain innovation you need good tools and process, but most importantly the right people. How can you determine which managers and employees have the greatest propensity for innovation success? You can discover that, to a great extent, by understanding how they rank against the traits we’ve identified.

We offer an online assessment based on the traits that have been documented and discussed in this paper. Our recommendation is to assess a wide swath of your staff and managers, so you can establish a “baseline” and identify the individuals who are most likely to be successful now. The baseline will identify “outliers” in many of these traits, and can indicate traits that your team lacks or where there is consistent weakness. Once the baseline is established and you can identify individuals with great strength in a number of these traits, consider how to staff them on innovation activities. Further, think about how to increase the skills and capabilities of managers and staff who don’t rank quite so highly.

As I noted in the introduction, there are five significant actions you can take once you understand the important innovation traits listed above, and have identified people who possess these traits:

1. **Accelerating innovation.** Transform the way you build innovation teams by identifying the individuals with the most capability and capacity for innovation on the most critical activities. Since people are so vital to innovation success, placing the most capable people on innovation activities will accelerate the efforts and improve the quality and value of the outcomes.

2. **Recruiting.** Demand that your recruiting managers seek out people who demonstrate these traits, to add more innovators to your ranks. This applies both to new hires straight out of college as well as experienced hires. Understanding the characteristics and traits that good innovators possess, your hiring teams can identify more people with innate innovation capability.

3. **Transform leadership development.** Corporations have done a poor job developing leaders who can manage innovators and innovation projects. With these insights you can build leadership development programs to teach your executives how to develop people who have these traits and how to manage innovation projects more successfully.

4. **Rethink corporate culture, rewards and recognition.** Once you understand the critical innovation traits, and the people that possess those traits, you’ll need to review how your corporate culture and reward structures encourage or inhibit these attributes and traits. Does your culture encourage innovative people and identify people with traits that improve innovation outcomes? What do your evaluation and compensation structures reward? Do they encourage innovation and innovative people or encourage efficiency?
5. **Skills development.** As your company understands the critical skills and traits necessary to sustain innovation, you can assess your workforce to identify the best innovators, and build plans to provide skills development and capability for all employees, to improve innovation capabilities broadly.
Conclusion

As jobs and knowledge becomes more specialized, companies have increasingly turned to assessments to help understand communication, working styles, competencies and other factors to improve job efficiency, collaboration and a host of other factors. Yet to date little has been done to help managers and executives identify the critical perspectives and attributes of people who excel at innovation, at a time when innovation is growing in importance.

Through this research and the companion assessment, managers and executives can identify people within their organizations who have the best capacity and propensity for innovation success, and by placing these individuals on key innovation projects can obtain a much higher percentage of innovation success which results in more interesting, more relevant and more profitable products.