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Julie Evener

University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences, jevener@usa.edu

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Innovation in the Library: How to Encourage New Ideas, Create Buy-In, and Serve Our Patrons Better

By Julie Evener

Library Services, University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences, St. Augustine, Florida, USA

Innovation is a much touted concept in the business world. Libraries, too, have felt the need for continuous innovation as we serve ever-changing needs. Leaders can use principles practiced in business to transform academic libraries into cultures of innovation. In a culture of innovation, employees are engaged in their work and excited about the possibilities of it. Leaders help cultivate creativity by promoting growth mind-sets, rewarding experimentation, and practicing discovery skills. Importantly, library leaders in cultures of innovation hone persuasive abilities to create buy-in for implementing innovations in order to serve users more effectively with dynamic solutions to persistent problems.

Keywords: Creativity, engagement, innovation, implementation, leadership

Introduction

Innovation is a much touted concept in the business world. From Peter F. Drucker to Clayton L. Christensen, business scholars throughout the literature have focused on the importance of and catalysts for innovation. Companies like Google and Apple are well known for the effectiveness of their creative practices like Google Café, non-commissioned work time, and encouraging mistakes. The edict to “innovate or die” (Matson 1996) rings true for all

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industries as technology continues to advance at a rapid pace and the world “flattens” according to Friedman’s theory of globalization leveling the economic playing field (Friedman 2005).

Libraries, too, have felt the need for continuous innovation as we serve the ever-changing and broadening needs of our patrons. Academic library leaders can apply business principles of innovation, including flexible working policies, autonomy, flow, the growth mind-set, experimentation, solitude, discovery skills, issue selling, and implementation to their organizations to engage employees, cultivate creativity, create buy-in for new ideas, and ultimately serve patrons more effectively.

Engaging Employees

A culture of innovation is one in which employees are engaged in their work and excited about the possibilities of it. Rather than checking off a to-do list or complying with minimum requirements, engaged employees put their whole selves into their work and find meaning in what they do, more so than simply earning a paycheck (Kahn 1990). In academia, we often talk about the library’s role in increasing student engagement. We understand that a student who is engaged is less likely to drop out or transfer schools and more likely to be academically successful (Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006; Kuh et al. 2008). Similarly, employee engagement leads to less turnover, better customer service, and more innovation (Devi 2009; Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes 2002; Fleming, Coffman, and Harter 2005). Business leaders have encouraged employee engagement through flexible working policies and enabling environments where “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) is possible. Library leaders can adapt some of these same ideas to help librarians and other library employees feel more engaged at work.

Flexible Working Policies

Flexible working policies have become popular among the most cutting-edge and innovative companies. Netflix offers unlimited vacation time to its employees (Volastro 2014). 3M, Google, and Australian company Atlassian offer noncommissioned work time for employees to work on whatever projects inspire them, even if it is not a part of their typical duties (Pink 2009; Hayes 2008; Collins and Porras 2005). Leaders at Best Buy developed a results-only work environment (ROWE), allowing employees to work when and where they want as long as the work gets done (Pink 2009). The goal behind each of these practices is employee autonomy, which increases job satisfaction and engagement (Baard, Deci, and Ryan 2004; Meyer and Gagne 2008).

The traditional view of management in business assumes that employees need either a carrot (a reward) or a stick (a punishment) to motivate them to do their work properly (Taylor 1914). Newer research, however, suggests that employees—and people in general—are naturally self-directed and that rewards and punishments can actually decrease productivity when the work necessitates creative thinking and analysis rather than routine tasks (Amabile 1996; Deci 1972; Harlow, Harlow, and Meyer 1950).

Pink (2009) discusses these findings and their implications for modern managers in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*. He cites autonomy as one of the three elements contributing to engaged employees. Autonomy means “acting with choice” (88). In other words, employees have a say in their schedules, tasks, methods, work spaces, and even coworkers. The idea of autonomy in the workplace has several challenges, chief among them the adaptation of leadership styles to encourage autonomy over managerial control. As Pink relates, employee autonomy “requires resisting the temptation to control people – and instead doing

everything we can to reawaken their deep-seated sense of autonomy” (87). Further, autonomy requires leaders to trust their employees.

Autonomy of Time

Netflix’s unlimited vacation policy and Best Buy’s concept of ROWE are examples of companies entrusting their employees with autonomy over their own schedules. At Netflix, and about 3 percent of companies in the United States, employees are not limited in the number of paid days off they can take (Brooks 2013). Similarly, in 2005 Best Buy’s corporate offices shifted to a ROWE, the brainchild of Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson (Stevenson 2014).

ROWE means that employees are not accountable for the time they spend working—how much time, where, or when—but are expected to meet certain outcomes to which they and their supervisors agree. The most important factor is that “the work gets done” (Ressler and Thompson 2008), less important is when or where. The idea is not only to boost morale and improve work-life balance, but also eliminate the long-standing myth that time in seat equals productivity. As Thompson explains, “We were also shining a bright light on the people who’d previously been able to hide inside the system by showing up every day without actually accomplishing much” (Stevenson 2014). After all, even if an employee is playing solitaire, as long as she’s at her desk at the scheduled time, her colleagues and supervisors assume she’s working.

Autonomy of Task: Noncommissioned Work Time

Another flexible working policy that has been successful in the business world is noncommissioned work time. While this idea can take many forms, it essentially boils down to allowing employees occasional autonomy over what work they are doing—time to work on an idea or project that isn’t necessarily part of their job, but which may excite them.

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One of the earliest and most well-known examples of noncommissioned work time is the company 3M. From tattle tape to pens to stethoscopes to pet brushes, 3M seems to make anything and everything. The innovation they've created as a result of their noncommissioned work time may be a key reason why. William McKnight became general manager at 3M in 1914, and he "intuitively understood that encouraging individual initiative would produce the raw material of evolutionary progress—undirected variation" (Collins and Porras 2005). He instituted the "15 percent rule" (Collins and Porras 2005), which allowed technical employees to spend 15 percent of their working time on projects that they had initiated and chosen themselves. 3M employees invented the Post-it note during their 15 percent time. The flexible environment their company offered them made it possible.

Atlassian, an Australian software company, created its own version of 15 percent time when it instituted something that came to be known as FedEx Days. Essentially, supervisors encourage employees to choose an interesting problem and work on it for an entire day, even if it doesn't fit into their regular responsibilities. The catch is that the employees must showcase what they've come up with at a meeting the next day. Hence "FedEx Day" because employees must "deliver something overnight" (Pink 2009).

Google is another company that has adopted the idea of noncommissioned work time, which they call 20 percent time. Innovations like Google News, Gmail, and Google Translate came out of 20 percent time projects. The idea is to give creative employees, or potentially creative employees, autonomy over how they use their work time, free their minds from the usual concerns of their positions, and let their natural interests guide them.

Adapting Flexible Working Policies to the Library Setting

Adapting flexible work policies to an academic library setting poses unique challenges. After all, someone needs to open and close the library at a designated time and staff it during those hours, making it impossible to allow all employees to set their own schedules. However, library leaders can make some aspects of flexible policies like ROWE and noncommissioned work time a part of their workplaces.

For example, consider the shift in higher education toward more learning-centered practices, a change that encourages institutions of higher education to provide resources and services around the clock to meet the needs of students rather than the convenience of the institution (Tagg 2003). A librarian who prefers to work from home in the middle of the night could be an asset in this type of environment—answering emails and chat queries in real time as students are studying and writing. The point would not be to require librarians to work this shift, or any particular shift, but rather to be open to the possibilities inherent in catering to employee preferences. Encouraging employees to set their own schedules ahead of time could help reawaken their sense of autonomy.

Noncommissioned work time is more easily adaptable to the academic library environment. Allowing your librarians and other staff the freedom to work on whatever project they choose for a certain amount of time per week has huge potential. Think about it: if time and job responsibilities were not factors, what project would you like to work on at your library? A cataloger may choose to create a new display of resources about twentieth-century popular music. An instruction librarian may revolutionize the way librarians communicate with students online. A clerk with Web design knowledge may create a mockup of how the library website might be designed to make better sense to patrons who know nothing about libraries.

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Flow

Autonomy is one of the key elements of a state Csikszentmihalyi called “flow”—a “merging of action and awareness” in which a person becomes completely absorbed by what he is doing and is completely engaged in the task at hand (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). More contemporary references to this phenomenon in popular culture call it being “in the zone”. Flow leads to feelings of satisfaction, happiness, and engagement. Maybe a little surprisingly, studies on flow have found that people are more likely to be in a state of flow at work than during leisure time (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that the following conditions are necessary for flow:

- Clear goals,
- Immediate feedback,
- Balance between challenges and skills (i.e., the task is not too easy or too difficult),
- Focused concentration on the task at hand,
- Minimal distraction,
- No worry of failure,
- Lack of self-consciousness,
- Sense of time disappears.

One example of a flow task typical in an academic library setting is searching for the answer to a tough reference question. The goal is clear—find the information that the patron needs. The librarian gets immediate feedback in that each resource he checks either contains the information or a clue pointing toward the information, or it does not. The question is a challenge to the librarian’s skills, and it allows him to exercise and test those skills. As he searches, the librarian is focused—time, the surrounding environment, and any worry about the self or a negative

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outcome disappear. After the librarian finds the information, he feels satisfied and happy, not only for helping the patron, but because he succeeded in a challenging task. That's flow.

Although some people and tasks are better suited to flow, a person can create the necessary conditions in her own workplace and managers can help create flow conditions for their employees. One way is to ensure that employees have projects and responsibilities that challenge them but do not overwhelm them. The tasks should be achievable based on an employee's current skills and abilities, but they should also force the employee to further develop those skills and abilities. Managers can provide adequate and consistent feedback at each step of the project so that the employee knows she is on the right track. Managers can ensure that employees have at least some time to work during which they can focus on one task. Avoiding multitasking and distraction is difficult in an academic library setting where library staff complete many tasks while manning a reference or circulation desk. Balancing time spent with the patrons and time spent alone in an office or other private work space is crucial.

Cultivating Creativity

In addition to engaged employees, another key element of innovation is a library culture that cultivates creativity, encouraging employees to stretch their abilities, experiment with new ways of doing things, and accept and even celebrate mistakes. Allowing employees the solitude they need to be creative and helping them develop skills related to creativity are also important factors in cultivating creativity.

The Growth Mindset

A prevailing notion in the modern world is that intelligence, athletic ability, creativity, and other aptitudes are unchangeable, fixed through genetics. A person is either smart or dumb, capable or incapable. Dweck (2006) combatted this idea with her theory of growth versus fixed

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mind-sets. She allowed that “people may start with different temperaments and different aptitudes,” but “experience, training, and personal effort” can increase those natural tendencies (5). The bottom line is that a person who believes nothing she does will increase her creative capacity or intelligence will not even try to do so, while a person who believes the opposite puts herself in a position to grow and develop her skills.

Dweck’s (2006) “self-theories” or “mind-sets” are applicable in two ways to the goal of cultivating creativity in library employees. First, Dweck’s research shows that people with fixed mind-sets “reject opportunities to learn” and instead stay on the easy, safe paths in life and work. However, when they learn the basic science behind how the brain works and that increasing capabilities like intelligence and creativity is possible, they switch to the growth mind-set and are more likely to take on challenges. In other words, even library employees who believe they are not creative can become creative if they believe that they can do so and work toward it.

The difference is in how we perceive challenges. People with fixed mind-sets see a challenge as a test that will either confirm their capabilities if they are successful or prove to everyone that they are not good enough if they fail. In the growth mind-set, a challenge is an opportunity to increase one’s capabilities—to grow and stretch. Doing something as simple as teaching employees that any person’s capacity for creativity can change with practice can make employees more willing to try being creative instead of automatically assuming that they are not creative people.

Second, in her growth mind-set theory, Dweck interpreted “failure” not as an end-all, be-all judgment of a person’s inherent value but rather as a necessary condition for growth. People who never fail never challenge themselves and therefore never learn or improve. A work environment in which setbacks and imperfection are unacceptable is a work environment training

its employees to stick to doing what they already know how to do well. In such an environment, employees recognize more risk than reward in trying something new; complacency and stagnation will soon follow. If, instead, employees “get praise for taking initiative, for seeing a difficult task through, for struggling and learning something new, for being undaunted by a setback, or for being open to and acting on criticism” (Dweck 2006, 137), the work culture encourages the growth mind-set, cultivating creativity and experimentation.

Experimentation

Thomke (2001) outlines four essentials for what he calls “enlightened experimentation.” Enlightened experimentation is systematic experimentation, optimized to identify the best ideas. In the business world, “the systematic testing of ideas is what enables companies to create and refine their products” (Thomke 2001). The same edict can apply in academic libraries, where our “products” are the services and resources we offer our patrons.

The first essential element for enlightened experimentation is “organize for rapid experimentation” (Thomke 2001), which involves creating an environment in which experimentation is valued and rewarded. Applying the growth mind-set, and other ideas discussed in this article, can help library leaders create a library culture in which library staff feel comfortable trying new things and have the support they need to do so.

The second essential element of enlightened experimentation is “fail early and often, but avoid mistakes” (Thomke 2001), which means embracing the “positive failures” that lead to the refinement of good ideas but avoiding mistakes resulting from sloppy work and lack of communication. If we learn anything from Dweck’s (2006) theory of the growth versus fixed mind-sets, it is this: Failure is an option, and it is necessary for growth, learning, and progress.

Thomke's (2001) third essential element is "anticipate and exploit early information" (69), which translates into pilot testing and assessing, taking the assessment information into account on the next iteration. For example, a library service in constant need of reimagination and innovation is library instruction. An instruction librarian might learn about a new approach she'd like to try. Empowered and encouraged by her supervisor, the librarian creates a lesson plan that incorporates the new approach. Now the experimentation begins. The librarian may pilot her new lesson plan with one class and compare their learning with students in classes using the traditional method. If the new approach is not as effective, the librarian can make changes and try again. Eventually, the librarian may deem the new approach ready to roll out to all of her classes.

The assessment step is key. The idea behind experimentation is to learn from experiences, which means assessing to ascertain what was effective, what needs improvement, and what should be eliminated. Also important is closing the loop by making the necessary changes, implementing the new solution, and then assessing again to gauge whether the changes had the intended effects (Moreton and Conklin 2015).

Finally, Thomke (2001) advised "combining traditional and new technologies" so that new ideas can mature in practice without too much risk. Though failure is a risk inherent to experimentation, library leaders can take steps to ensure that most experimentation is low stakes. Integrating proven techniques and practices with new ideas minimizes the risk of complete disaster. For example, if the library is hosting a new event on campus, library staff can use the same proven and successful marketing tactics used for previous events to advertise the new one, eliminating one unknown from the equation.

Experimentation, whether or not it is enlightened and systematic, is the lifeblood of innovation. New ideas do not jump out of one's brain fully formed but instead require a supportive environment, occasional positive failures, iterative testing and assessment, and integration with existing practices in order to come to fruition.

Solitude

Cain's (2012) popular book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* focuses on an aspect of creativity that many may not consider: solitude. Cain's focus is, of course, introverts, but even if the two-decade-old estimation that 63% of library workers rate as introverted (Scherdin 1994) is no longer accurate, typical numbers estimate between 25 percent and 50 percent of the total population are introverted, which means at least some people who work in libraries are introverted.

Though committees and group work are currently the popular choice in academia and business, Cain argues that solitude may actually be more conducive to creativity. She bases her argument on profiles of well-known creative thinkers like Steve Wozniak and studies dating back to the 1950s that found that creative people tend to be introverts. Cain's conclusion is "introverts prefer to work independently, and solitude can be a catalyst to innovation" (Cain 2012, 74). This point, perhaps, is where Google and other cutting-edge companies may be getting it wrong as they tout their open office plans and highly collaborative environments as keystones for creativity. Instead, studies have shown that open office plans can cause stress, decreased motivation, contention, and even aggression (Cain 2012).

Solitude, often construed as a negative state, actually has more benefits than drawbacks, cultivating creativity among them (Long and Averill 2003). Specifically, solitude allows an individual to "loosen cognitive structures" in favor of breaking down and recreating reality

(Long and Averill 2003). In other words, solitude allows people to imagine different ways of doing things and new ways of being. Individuals who are never alone are also never alone with their thoughts, depriving them of an opportunity for the quiet reflection from which great ideas are born.

In an academic library, this means, once again, allowing employees time away from the desk where they can work alone with fewer distractions. The combination of noncommissioned work time and solitude can be a powerful tool for innovation in our libraries.

Discovery Skills

We have discussed how creativity is not a “genetic endowment” inherently gifted to a select few but lacking in the rest of us (Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen 2011). Through Dweck’s growth mind-set theory we explored the idea that with practice and experience, a person can increase their creative abilities. The question remains: What practices and experiences work best to cultivate creativity?

Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen (2011) addressed exactly this question, and, through their research, they established a list of five “discovery skills” proven to enhance a person’s capacity for innovation:

- Associating,
- Questioning,
- Observing,
- Networking,
- Experimenting.

Library leaders and their staffs can become more creative through processes and activities designed to facilitate these five skills. While we have already addressed experimenting in detail, the other four discovery skills merit exploration.

Associating means the ability to take two or more seemingly unrelated concepts and connect them together: for example, applying social networking characteristics to an online library catalog. To improve associating skills, Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen (2011) recommend branching out to learn about other jobs, how things work, and processes used in other disciplines and then think about how they might relate to the library world. Library leaders can help their employees think more associatively by building a “curiosity box” filled with random and interesting things. At meetings or employee development days, have employees each choose two items and relate them to each other. Even better, have them relate the items to something they do at work on a daily basis. Doing so can “force us out of our habitual thinking patterns” (Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen 2011) and open our minds to new possibilities.

Questioning means not only asking how to do things better but also asking questions about the fundamental ways we do things. For example: Why do we charge fines when students turn materials in late? What if we stopped charging fines? What would happen? Questioning even the “sacred cows” of our libraries (Reed, Blackburn, and Sifton 2014) can pave the way for better ideas and more effective methods. One idea for library leaders is to challenge employees to be aware of their “Q/A ratios” (Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen 2011). In a typical conversation, how many questions do you ask rather than answer? Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen (2011) found that innovative individuals ask far more questions than they answer.

Observing and *networking* are related in that both skills involve getting out of one’s comfort zone to experience new things and meet new people. One great tip for observing in

libraries is to watch patrons and notice how what they do differs from what you expect them to do. For example, students may be using what you intended to be independent, quiet study rooms as study rooms for small groups. Maybe they are tapping the screen at the print station instead of using the mouse, expecting the touchscreen they are accustomed to on their mobile devices. Among other things, library leaders can encourage their employees to develop networking skills by approving attendance at conferences that are not obviously related to libraries, giving library staff the opportunity to connect with people of different backgrounds (Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen 2011).

Practicing and mastering Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen's (2011) five discovery skills is an important step toward cultivating creativity for both library leaders and their teams. When employees feel engaged in their work and understand how creativity happens, innovative ideas are not far behind. The next step is successfully implementing those new ideas into workable solutions.

Creating Buy-In

Creating a culture of innovation and developing creative new ideas will not lead to serving patrons more effectively if the ideas are never implemented. Implementation typically involves pitching the idea to a committee, the administration, or other stakeholders, especially if the initiative requires budgetary support. It can be challenging to solicit the needed support to get a good idea off the ground.

Getting Support

The library team has come up with an innovative new idea that will benefit the library, the students, and the institution, but adopting the idea requires approval from a higher up due to cost, complexity, or other factors. Library leaders must sell their staff members' ideas to get

support for adopting and then implementing innovative ideas. Though every situation is different, general tactics and strategies can help make pitches more effective and quiet naysayers.

Research on “issue selling” has revealed seven tactics that work in a range of industries to help sell good ideas to the boss. According to Ashford and Detert (2015), they are:

- Tailor your pitch;
- Frame the issue;
- Manage emotions on both sides;
- Get the timing right;
- Involve others;
- Adhere to norms;
- Suggest solutions.

Consequently, the best way to propose an idea to decision makers is to know your audience, plan your presentation, and make it as easy as possible for stakeholders to say yes by demonstrating the idea’s importance to institutional goals and mission.

Often, naysayers use the same formulaic excuses to express why a new idea, even a great one, will not work (Kotter and Whitehead 2010). Leaders can prepare ahead of time to anticipate, answer, and deflect those concerns, increasing the idea’s chances of making it out of committee and on to implementation. Kotter and Whitehead (2010) identified twenty-four common attacks on new ideas and how to deflect each one.

Each of these attacks fits into one of four attack strategies. *Fear mongering* occurs when an opponent tries to raise fears that the proposed plan has many unforeseen and deadly risks, even when that is not the case. *Delay* seeks to put off the decision bit by bit and then indefinitely until the window of opportunity for the new idea closes. *Confusion* brings in “irrelevant facts,

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convoluted logic, or so many alternatives that it is impossible to have the clear and intelligent dialog that builds buy-in” (Kotter and Whitehead 2010, 79). Finally, *ridicule*, or character assassination, turns the discussion toward the person or group presenting the idea instead of focusing on the idea itself.

Learning to calmly and logically respond to each type of attack will help the discussion stay on track and convince the audience of the merits of the idea. Between planning the presentation of the innovative idea using Ashford and Detert’s (2015) recommendations and strategically responding to common criticisms, library leaders can clear the path for stakeholders to accept proposals for the good ideas that they are.

Implementation

Once library leaders have enough support to adopt an innovation, implementation is the next step. Innovation implementation is “the process of gaining targeted employees’ appropriate and committed use of an innovation” (Klein and Sorra 1996, 1055), or, in other words, reaching the point where the innovative idea is accepted and ingrained enough to be part of the library’s regular function. Even after getting the support needed to adopt the innovation, implementation can be difficult. Let’s explore the conditions behind implementation that are most likely to make it successful.

Klein and Sorra (1996) found that two conditions were most likely to predict successful innovation implementation. The first related to users feeling that their use of the innovation was encouraged and expected because of organizational support. Specifically, organizations should teach the skills necessary to use the innovation, provide incentives, and remove barriers to use (Klein and Sorra 1996). The second occurred when the innovation matched well with institutional values. Based on this, library leaders can ask two questions when implementing

innovative ideas. Are target users *able* to use the innovation? Do target users *want* to use the innovation?

Later research suggested additional factors affecting implementation: marketing, communication, manager support, budgetary resources, an organizational willingness to learn, patience, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and commitment (Frambach and Schillewaert 2002; Klein and Knight 2005; Ensminger and Surry 2008). Ensminger and Surry (2008) found that among higher education institutions, availability of budgetary support and other resources was the most crucial element of innovation implementation.

Because of the many factors to consider, innovation implementation is best approached strategically and in phases. Especially in a higher education environment, incremental change may be most effective (Kouzes and Posner 2003). Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman (2012) suggest four phases in their quality implementation framework (QIF). First, become better aware of the institution through a self-assessment process. Gauge the present conditions, attitudes, and values that may affect innovation implementation. Second, plan and set the stage by mapping out what the implementation will look like, who will do what work, and recognizing potential pitfalls. Third, once the implementation process begins, make sure to support those using the innovation with training, feedback, and a method of evaluating and reporting back. Finally, use feedback and experience to improve the innovative practice and prepare for implementation of future innovations.

Whether the innovation is large scale or otherwise, some planning and strategizing will be necessary to make sure that implementation is successful. Nurturing an innovation-friendly library environment makes it more likely that library staff will accept new innovations and that those innovations will flourish.

Conclusion

Admittedly, academia differs from the business world, but library leaders can apply many of the same principles that business scholars have proposed to increase innovation in their academic libraries. Because much of the research centers on people and how they work and interact with each other, the findings disseminate well to other workplaces. Ideas to engage employees, such as creating conditions for flow and more autonomy through flexible working policies, help workers in any environment become more satisfied and productive in their jobs. Ideas for cultivating creativity, including the promotion of the growth mind-set, rewarding experimentation, allowing opportunities for solitude, and practicing discovery skills, can unlock wells of imagination even in library employees who insist that they are “not very creative.”

Applying these strategies can transform an academic library from an ordinary workplace into an environment in which innovation flourishes. Academic library leaders can learn to incorporate business principles of buy-in into their professional tool boxes in order to convince stakeholders to support an innovative initiative. Well-implemented innovative ideas, in turn, can improve the library experience for the patrons we serve, making processes easier, services quicker, and interactions more dynamic.

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