



Top 5 Factors for Successful Innovation at Architecture Firms

Chinese word for *innovation*

革

Changing
the Old

新

Inventing
the New

“We are an innovative office that...”

“As a firm we strive to develop innovative solutions...”

Innovation has become quite a buzzword across all industries. From startup companies to traditional corporate giants, it has become a very popular word on websites, market materials, shareholder reports, as well as job interviews. In fact, it was declared the “Most Important and Overused Word in America” by WIRED magazine [i].

At Avant Leap we believe that innovation is not a marketing gimmick, but rather an essential element that contributes heavily to the resiliency, longevity and the success of a company. It is also an increasingly important criteria talents look for when searching for their next job [ii]. Innovation is vital for creating new opportunities, increasing efficiency, and increasing profits for companies.

Being an innovative company is a lot harder than it sounds – in fact, 95 % of all product innovations fail [iii], and 54% of organizations struggle to align innovative strategy with business strategy [iv]. There are risks involved when investing in innovation, but often the reward more than justifies the risks. A study by MIT has shown that the number of accepted innovative ideas within a company has direct correlation to its profitability and growth [v]. In this article, we will look at the top 5 factors that can increase success of innovation at architecture firms.

1

Innovation as a Culture

Many companies have mistaken innovation as developing new technologies or adopting new tools. In our experience, these isolated efforts, however, usually became unsustainable and ultimately lost traction. For instance, the adoption of virtual reality in the architecture industry generated a lot of attention and many firms purchased VR headsets as a way to be more “innovative”, but without careful consideration of firm cultures and workflows, many headsets eventually became underutilized and ended up collecting dust most of the time.

What we have seen is that a truly innovative company is one where innovation permeates the company as a culture on every level, meaning everyone from top to bottom continuously asking themselves if there is a better way to accomplish a goal. According the same study by MIT, the best ideas often come from people who are in non-managerial roles rather than people on the top of an organization [v].

A culture like this does not happen overnight but in fact takes months and years to cultivate. Here are a few tips that we think will help create innovative culture:



Create a “speak-up” culture

Create a culture that encourages people to speak up if they think they have a good idea to make things better. Great ideas often come from unexpected places, and it takes a safe environment to make that happen.



Create supportive infrastructure

Create an infrastructure that supports individuals taking initiative to innovate. This includes providing resources, feedback, access to leadership / management, etc. The key here is to turn an idea into actionable steps that ultimately result in company-wide impact.



Create incentives for innovation

Have company policies and incentives that encourage, reinforce and reward innovation. Acknowledge individuals and teams that are taking initiative to be innovative and financially reward “wins”.

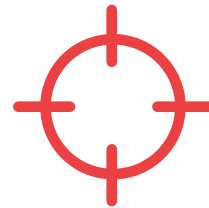
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Innovation as a User-focused Process

Innovation that is divorced from user needs often results in cynicism. Users might see it as gimmicky rather than something that actually helps with their day-to-day operations. An example would be the digital practice group of a mid-size firm rolling out their newly developed, feature-rich automation tools without first asking whether those features are actually helpful to the users, who then became frustrated because many of those features actually do not benefit their daily workflow.

Being user-focused allow companies to avoid wasting precious resources and time (which is one of the top obstacles for innovation performance [vi]), as the innovative process itself is directly related to solving a real issue that the targeted users are facing.

Here are a few tips that we think will help creating a user-focused innovation process:



Involve target user groups early

Involve representatives from target user groups early-on. Do brainstorming sessions with them, hear what they have to say about the idea and whether that aligns with what they want. The earlier the team can do that, the less time and effort will be wasted.



Identify KPIs and track them

Identify KPIs (Key Performance Indicator) early so that data can be collected, tracked and measured. You can't improve what you can't measure. KPIs are important indicators of the performance of individuals, a group or an organization that can be measured. Examples include: ROI (return on investment), profit margin, operation expense ratio, etc.



Keep your ears open

Consistently keep tabs on feedback from target user groups – periodically leverage interviews, surveys and observations. When developing a technology, platform or product, it is often a good practice to have built-in metric-reporting mechanisms so that the team receives both active and passive feedback.

3

Innovation as a Candid Process

The innovation process needs to be brutally candid. A common pitfall is allowing innovation to become an excuse to silence or dismiss feedback, in that anyone resistive towards the innovation effort are considered a “nay-sayer.”

But in reality, there is often valid reasoning behind the negative comments. Feedback like this is usually a symptom that points towards larger issues that might otherwise be ignored. Opportunities to solve these issues might be lost if negative comments are dismissed. In a boutique design firm, the design staff pushed back against the adoption of parametric design tools and expressed that these tools are clunky and gimmicky. But after investigating their feedback, the digital practice group realized that most of the design staff have had bad experiences with parametric tools at previous firms due to a lack of training and support. As a result, the digital practice group made sure that continuous training is included in their time and resource budget.

Here are a few tips to create an innovative process that is candid:



Encourage brutal candidness

Create a safe culture that empowers people to give feedback, especially disagreeing ones. If something is not working, the team should know as soon as possible so that adjustments can be made. Candidness is actually a healthy sign of trust since it shows people are comfortable enough to give negative feedback.



Document feedback

Carefully document and store feedback somewhere easily accessible by the team. Having a template when collecting feedback will allow the team to compare apples-to-apples across feedback from different people or groups.



Investigate & analyze feedback

Treat feedback as symptoms rather than root causes. Investigate to see what are the real contributing factors behind the feedback. Summarize these findings into a document so that the team can periodically check whether these causes have been addressed. If possible, share the findings with the rest of the organization, especially the decision makers within the organization.

4

Innovation requires Discipline

Innovation and discipline initially seem to be polarizing words, since innovation is about challenging the status quo and being creative, while discipline is about having a structure and enforcing it.

In reality, however, innovation and discipline can be symbiotic. Because many different visions, passions and interests can be at play, structuring the innovation process prevents chaos and points the collective effort towards the same general direction. Without discipline, companies risk wasting precious time and resources pursuing efforts that are ineffective and will have very little to no impact on the organization. There was once a grass-root effort at a design firm to develop new scripts for automation and parametric design. But without clear leadership, the effort lacked focus and consistency. A few months later the effort fizzled out and no real impact was made.

Here are a few tips to approach innovation with discipline:



Expose flaws ruthlessly

Design and set up processes that will expose the flaws of what is being worked on, be it a new technology, tool or workflow. Take the time to brainstorm as many situations as possible where the idea will not work. Think of strategies and solutions for these situations regardless of their likelihood to happen.



Collect data religiously

Collect data religiously and analyze it impartially. Leverage KPIs to measure and confirm whether the innovative process is working. Visualize data in a way that is intuitive as visual representation is the common language in architecture.



Revisit visions and goals

Revisit the visions and goals of the effort periodically to make sure it still aligns with the values and needs of the company. It is common for the excitement and curiosity of the team to rail the overall effort from its visions and goals.

5

Innovation requires Teamwork

In order for the innovation process to truly make a thorough and lasting impact on the organization, the process itself needs to be exposed to many different angles from within the organization, from design process and production to business development and firm operation.

This principle became clear when the digital practice group at an architecture firm started to include representatives from various studios (from residential, commercial to higher education) and different stakeholders within the company. Initiatives and efforts championed by this group were well received within the firm because every studio felt like they had a voice in the process. At the same time, the group also benefited from the representatives being advocates within their own studios, resulting in greater trust between the digital practice group and the company as a whole.

Here are a few tips to encourage teamwork in innovation:



Personal expectation matters

Provide periodic opportunities for those who are involved to share their personal expectations of the effort. Most teamwork issues and dissatisfaction is due to unmet expectations.



Flat hierarchy, strong leadership

Innovation requires an organization to have both a flat hierarchy and strong leadership [vii]. Having a flat hierarchy allows a company to respond to changing circumstances quickly as decision-making is decentralized. On the other hand, strong leadership is required so that the collective effort aligns with the visions, goals and resources of the organization.



Collaboration and accountability

While it is important to work collaboratively as a team, personal accountability is equally critical. Every team member should be empowered to make decisions, but at the same time, they should also be given the expectation that they are responsible for the decisions they make.

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Avant Leap is a global technology consulting organization providing world-class services and innovative solutions to the AECO industry from design through operations.

Conclusion

Innovation within an organization does not happen by accident but it requires intentional involvement from all levels. It needs to become a culture and be user-focused, candid, disciplined and based on teamwork.

We believe a firm that is innovative is an organization that is resilient and has a much higher chance of weathering uncertain times such as the one we are facing currently. We hope that the analysis and the tips above, which are based on real-life experiences, would be helpful to you and your firm. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions on how your firm can become more innovative.

Source:

[i] <https://www.wired.com/insights/2013/11/innovation-the-most-important-and-overused-word-in-america/>

[ii] <https://insights.dice.com/employer-resource-center/dices-ideal-employer-report-what-tech-pros-value/>

[iii] <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/clay-christensens-milkshake-marketing>

[iv] <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/services/consulting/innovation-benchmark-findings.html>

[v] <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/are-innovative-companies-more-profitable/>

[vi] <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2015/growth-lean-manufacturing-rising-need-for-innovation-speed.aspx>

[vii] <https://hbr.org/2019/01/the-hard-truth-about-innovative-cultures>

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