AIA Best Practices:
Developing a Culture of Innovation: Ten Lessons Learned

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Summary

A successful innovation incubation program can help keep your firm on the forefront of the industry. Here's an step-by-step example of how one firm built their program—which has been running successfully—and the lessons learned as a result.

Introduction

Before reading any further, look around you. Assuming you're indoors (or even outdoors in an urban environment), nearly everything you see is the result of innovation—as defined by Merriam-Webster, "the act or process of introducing new ideas, devices, or methods." Also, not coincidentally, nearly everything you see is the result of human design and creativity. Design and creativity rely on innovation, for individuals as well as for design firms. So it's in a design firm's interest to encourage, foster, and democratize innovation by its staff. One way to do this—a proven, successful way—is through an innovation incubator program.

Being intentional about innovation

In 2010, the authors of this paper helped start such a program, focused on supporting innovators and minimizing program superstructure. As of 2022, the program is still thriving. Here's how it works:

Step 1: Twice each year, a firmwide call for innovation incubator proposals is distributed. All employees are eligible to submit, either as individuals or as small teams. Proposers have three weeks to craft and submit their proposals, which should describe tangible deliverables and explain the problems to be solved, the anticipated research procedures, and the expected outcomes of the proposed explorations. Proposed innovation projects can encompass pure or applied research, prototype space designs, or product development.

Step 2: All the proposals are posted for a week on an internal firmwide web page. All employees are encouraged to review each proposal and provide their comments and questions.

Step 3: A firmwide committee of six to eight people (including your two authors), representing the various disciplines within the firm, meets for several days to review the submissions. They use three criteria to evaluate proposals:

How innovative is the project? The committee looks for practical, problem-solving ideas that are new and different and address a problem worth solving. Proposals should state:

- How the idea is innovative. Is it completely new or an incremental refinement?
- Does it have the potential to position the firm as a thought leader?
- What knowledge related to the proposal already exists; and
- How it will confirm, refute, or extend previous knowledge or contribute new knowledge?

How relevant is it to our business? Proposals that will benefit the firm's current and future business will be given preference, so the committee wants to know

- If the proposed innovation will improve the environmental, experiential, and economic performance of projects;
- If it will intrigue clients, contribute to society's broader goals, or advance partnerships; and
- If it will build on other firmwide research efforts.

How feasible is the work plan? The program aims for tangible results, so the committee asks:

- If the proposer(s) have adequate collaborators and technical expertise;
- If the proposer(s) have a realistic budget of labor hours and expenses; and
- If the project is achievable within the time constraints.

Step 4: Using the above criteria and taking the firmwide employee feedback into consideration, the committee awards about a dozen "microgrants," consisting of 40 labor hours and $1,000 for expenses for individual innovators and 80 labor hours and $2,000 for expenses for teams. Grant winners are then announced to and celebrated by the firm.

Step 5: Successful individuals and teams proceed with their innovation projects. Following approximately four months of exploration, the resultant deliverables typically consist of a written summary supplemented with diagrams, graphics, software tools, physical models, or prototypes. Participants present their projects, first to the innovation incubator committee and then to the entire firm. Summaries of results are published on the firm's public website and in other appropriate outlets.

Step 6: After a round of completed projects, the committee tries to meaningfully connect incubator grantees with experts, practices, and project teams that might benefit from the research. The grantees are also encouraged to reach out and form connections themselves, by presenting at conferences or meeting with clients.

Step 7: The process starts again. The committee adjusts the program as needed. The application/grant-award cycle has run without interruption since 2010. For the program to be successful, it must be a consistent and reliable part of the firm's culture.

Ten Lessons Learned

So, after 11 years, 22 application cycles, 783 applications, and 281 awarded microgrants, what have we learned? Ten important lessons that will help you create an innovation incubator in your firm:

1. Innovation = Ideas + Implementation.

Ideas are cheap. They can happen anytime, anywhere: at our desks, while we're walking or driving, even (or maybe especially) in the shower. But to turn a cool-sounding idea into a true innovation takes sustained work. The allotted 40 labor hours are seen as "seed money" to support the innovators' efforts, but most innovation projects require considerably more time. Since these are nearly always passion projects, the innovators typically invest their own personal time, though we try to keep that to a minimum to maintain the program's appeal. The incubator's purpose is not necessarily to fully develop an idea, but to help innovators find a path to take their ideas to the next level.

2. Innovative ideas can lead anywhere—or nowhere (but that's okay).

No matter how the innovation projects turn out, each one has value. Even if the desired results aren't achieved, valuable knowledge is usually gained in the process, knowledge that future innovators might build on for their own innovation projects. The best innovation projects ask questions to which no one knows the answers—yet.

3. Innovation can cause discomfort, and that's okay, too.

Diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives, either within the innovation team or from outside resources, often lead to richer results. Similarly, a narrow-minded approach to projects can conceal important if unexpected results. It's best if the projects are not too focused or prescriptive. The program tries to reward proposed projects that are willing to take risks, and to support risk taking by creating safe spaces to explore. Taking a chance on seemingly crazy proposals can sometimes lead to worthwhile and unforeseen outcomes.

4. Innovation needs dedicated time to breathe and develop.

Everyone in the firm must recognize and embrace the fact that a culture of innovation requires time for individuals and teams to mentally explore ideas. Therefore, although the innovators do have deadlines to complete their projects, they are in control of how they spend their time and the outcome they deliver, and they coordinate with their "day-job" project teams to do so.

5. Innovation thrives when personal passion meets opportunity.

The innovation incubator is designed to encourage people to pursue their passions. It's the committee's job to decide which passions are likely to lead to usable results. Ideally, individual passions should align with firm goals, even if the alignment is tangential, leaving the door open for future thinking. The program empowers innovators to follow surprising but potentially valuable paths that might lead to . . . well, who knows?

6. Innovation within an organization needs simple, structured agility.

Keep the program's structure simple but aligned with the firm's strategic goals and established processes.

Make the timing of the application process regular and predictable. Be alert to external forces or existential changes (such as designing for a pandemic) that might prompt more urgent, immediate incubator results.

7. Innovation needs to be encouraged and celebrated.

To energize potential applicants, create buzz before, during, and after each application cycle. Celebrate the discoveries (and discoverers) and share the lessons. We post all incubator projects on the firm's internal website and schedule lunchtime firmwide presentations of all completed projects. We also post as many as possible on our external research website, acknowledging individual contributions.

8. Grant work needs to have dedicated on-the-clock time.

The critically important support and encouragement for grantees to develop their projects on company time needs to come from leadership—both firm and local leadership if you have multiple offices. After all, giving people a grant to do work on their personal time isn't really a grant.

9. Establish an intellectual property policy.

With the aid of your legal counsel, create a policy defining who owns the results of the innovation projects. In our case, we believe that most of the program's results should be provided for the public good. Therefore, any copyrightable material is distributed as described in https://creativecommons.org/. Software generated from this program is distributed through an open-source license, as described in https://opensource.org. Occasionally, innovators request the ability to patent their developments. When this occurs, a policy should establish who owns the patent and how that ownership might be split between the incubator and the firm.

10. And remember: Just because something is interesting or novel doesn't mean it's innovative.

The committee must be as clear as possible about what innovation means to the program and the firm. Every application must be evaluated, discussed, and debated by the committee. For each proposed project, the committee must ask, "What's really innovative about this?" and be able to have healthy, respectful debates as the needs and priorities evolve over the years.

Does it work?

Our innovation incubator program has been enthusiastically embraced by our employees, as reflected in the nearly 800 applications we've received in 22 application cycles. Some of our recently completed innovation incubator projects include

- "Can We Design the Ultimate Bus Map?"
- "Say No to Pandemic Loneliness"
- "CFD Analysis on Passive Design"
- "Efficiency in Construction Administration"

- “Pushing the Envelope: Analyzing Building Envelope’s Resiliency Using Future Climate Predictions and Rainfall Progressions”
- “COVID-19 Response: Adaptive Working Behavior and Its Impact on Energy and Carbon Patterns”
- “Social Equity Indicators”
- “Road Map for K-12 Education”

The range of topics from just this small sample of research/innovation projects shows how a program of this type can tap into the diverse passions and energy of a design firm’s creative staff, giving them an outlet for exploring intriguing topics that might be left unexplored without the firm’s support. At the same time, the firm’s mission is advanced, as all these topics relate to and strengthen the firm’s vision and practice. In our experience, the investment in microgrants is small, but the benefits gained by the firm and its employees can be enormous. A successful incubation program does more than produce innovative projects; it reinforces a way of thinking and a level of inquiry that ripple out into our project teams and promote an authentic culture of innovation.

About the contributor

Leigh Christy, FAIA, is a principal in the Los Angeles studio of Perkins&Will, where she leads projects focused on benefitting communities, ecosystems, and occupants by integrating research with practice. She sits on the international firm's Research Board and Technology Council. Leigh also co-created and leads the firm's Innovation Incubator program, which has supported more than 300 staff-generated research ideas through internal microgrants. She works at the interface of architecture and urban design, collaborating with clients and colleagues to reach beyond what seems achievable.

Leigh's curiosity and passion has led her to become a thought leader among her peers and a trusted partner in her local community. She was an adjunct faculty member of Woodbury University from 2008 - 2014, teaching design and theory, and continues to sit on design juries across the country. Leigh currently is a member of the AIA California's ArcCA Digest Editorial Board and Climate Action Committee, as well as leading the ULI Los Angeles Innovation Council.

Mark Walsh, AIA, has over 25 years of experience in design and construction coordination for all phases of project design and delivery, from programming and pre-design through construction contract administration. Mark's experience includes numerous project types, including higher education, K-12 education, corporate, commercial, civil, healthcare, science and technology, and sports and recreation. As Perkins&Will’s Global Director of Technical Design Mark focuses on developing a culture that delivers the highest quality of technical excellence while embracing innovative construction and delivery techniques and seeking to improve the firm’s efficiency. He also co-chairs the firmwide Technical Design Community and is a member of the firm’s Project Delivery Board. In his complementary role as Technical Director of Perkins&Will's Chicago studio, Mark oversees the technical design, quality assurance/quality control, and project delivery of all the studio’s architectural and interior design projects. Finally, Mark is a co-founder of the Perkins&Will Innovation Incubator and has been an active member of its selection and oversight committee since the program's inception in 2010.

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