

Mastering the Front End: Seven Steps to a More Creative Organization

by Lucio Pieroni

Neuroscience has scientifically proven that unusual neural connections help creative people connect insights that others find unrelated. This tends to back up the common notion that ideas are all about that light bulb moment, which reinforces the role of the elected, creative few. But for leaders of innovation, it raises broader questions and implications. First, how do you bring diverse knowledge and insights into the organization to create these unexpected connections? Second, how do you ensure that the creative ideas generated are relevant to your business? Third, how do you support a business process that seems fuzzy and turn it into reproducible steps that invite broad contribution?

Here are seven steps to develop a creative organization that is more than the sum of its collective individuals.

1. Enable real-time, dynamic collaboration to integrate knowledge.

Innovation is about combining different bodies of knowledge. When knowledge is integrated, it creates the conditions that stimulate creative people to make the unusual connections that lead to breakthrough ideas. That's why you need cross-functional teams: to collaborate on a daily basis and ensure that their knowledge is integrated. If you have a dispersed team, then you need to ensure that your social networks are enabled by technology.

2. Broaden your range of inspiration.

The best business ideas often occur at the intersection of market, customer and technology intelligence. Teams that create the best ideas take the conscious step of carefully selecting the sources of inspiration before they go digging for information. For example, food companies source inspiration from culinary trends, consumer good companies immerse themselves in the consumer experience, and B2B companies spend days in technology scenario planning. Open innovation extends this network of knowledge to the outside world, quickly multiplying the sources of inspiration.

3. Remove the fuzziness from the process.

To ensure that everyone can contribute, establish a clear process and clarify how the front end of innovation (FEI) process fits with the broader end-to-end innovation cycle. A strong FEI process should include the following steps: clarify the brief, dig for inspiration, create ideas, develop the ideas and, finally, make a decision. The secret to success is to require that the process is followed, but to avoid creating hurdles, gates and governance in the earlier stages.

4. Link ideation to corporate strategy.

Creativity can produce a lot of ideas, but business value increases when creativity is channeled to priority areas. A lot of patents are traded or sold every year because they represent relevant customer solutions that could not be supported by the company's business model. Establish your strategic arenas and innovation requirements early.

5. Transform business requirements into innovation requirements.

After clarifying the strategic arenas, translate them into requirements specific to innovation. This leads to innovation domains, which reside at the intersection between mega-trends and unmet consumer needs relevant to the strategic arena. Adding your technical competencies and complementary assets leads to the development of innovation platforms, as illustrated in Figure 1.

A good example of an innovation domain is music portability. As shown in Figure 2, the underlying mega trend and the unmet consumer needs have existed for many years.

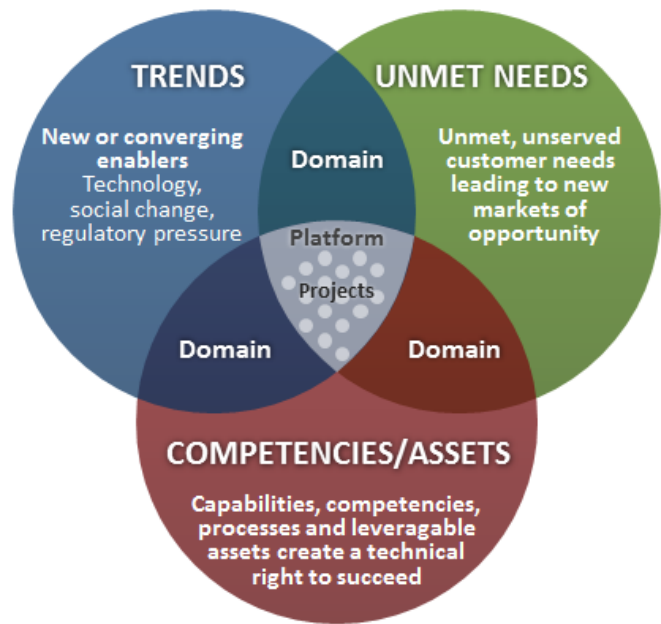


Figure 1



Figure 2

As shown in Figure 3, technological advancements in music portability actually enabled different platforms, with different product features and functionalities.



Figure 3

Best-in-class innovators use innovation domains to focus the ideation process. Innovation domains are also frequently used to provide a visual synthesis of knowledge, and platform teams that visually display the platform — similar to figures 2 and 3 — create the best conditions for unexpected connections to happen.

6. Fully develop ideas.

The best product launches are the ones that deliver against several of the domain benefits and across all of the touch-points of the customer experience. Conversely, rapidly scaled, "half cooked" ideas generally fail, no matter how brilliant they are. Make sure your organization takes the time to develop and combine complementary ideas.

7. Support the process with great leadership.

The innovation leader's role is pivotal. Generate enthusiasm and creative people will feel respected and valued. Rewarding desired behaviors, like collaboration, teamwork and building on other's ideas, ensures that change is sustainable. At the same time, your words alone are not enough. To support a successful FEI process, companies must create a leadership team that monitors progress and removes organizational barriers and independent teams responsible for breakthrough innovation.

Companies with a strong number of creative people and the ability to connect them via open innovation are certainly off to a strong start. But good ideas are not created in a vacuum, and mastering the front end of innovation requires more than just creativity. As the philosopher Norman Podhoretz wrote: "Innovation represents a miraculous coming together of the uninhibited energy of the child with its apparent opposite, the sense of order imposed on the disciplined adult intelligence." Mastering the front end of innovation requires a combination of creativity and discipline.

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