

Julia Austin: Is your company *really* set up to innovate?

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Animation by [CollectiveNext](#)

Innovation is really another word for creativity. So when a company launches an innovation program, or even goes so far as to appoint or hire someone to lead their innovation efforts, what they're attempting to say is, "We are a creative organization that wants to foster and support creative stuff." But the big question is, are they set up to succeed in making that statement a reality?

If you know a person with a track record for coming up with new and valuable things — or perhaps you are one of those people — you know that being creative is not a scientific process. It's often open-minded, off-topic, crazy thinking that can lead to the most market-changing, high-impact ideas. So when a company takes on innovation as an explicit mission, one sure-fire way to kill it before it has even started is to stifle the creative process.



For the past two years, I served as VP of Innovation at [VMware](#), one of the pioneers of the virtualization and cloud infrastructure industry. When I joined VMware, the company had less than 1000 employees (its now up to almost 15,000), and innovation was a very fluid and very present part of the company's culture. But as the company grew and became more distributed across the world, it was clear that we needed to scale our ability to innovate and maintain our culture of innovation. So in 2011, I stepped up to be the company's first VP of Innovation, within the Office of the Chief Technology Officer. In that role, I ran a number of programs that fostered the creative process and ensured great ideas got exposure and consideration. Before my tenure at VMware, I was part the early leadership team at [Akamai Technologies](#),

which speeds the delivery of content on the Internet, as its vice president of engineering. And earlier, I worked in the healthcare industry.

Below are my six best suggestions for how to ensure your innovation program supports, rather than smothers, the creative spark. In the video above, you'll see an animated take on these ideas from the talented team at [CollectiveNext](#).

- 1. Hire creative people who are willing to take risks**, and aren't thwarted by opposition. There is a fine line between stubborn and thick-skinned, but the best innovators are those who listen to feedback and know how to filter out the stuff that's not constructive, so they can stay focused on what they're doing. They also should have the sense of when enough is enough, and be willing to take a new route or kill their own project when it's clear they're on the wrong path. Sometimes it's not personal - it's about the next great thing!

2. The **innovation program leaders have to be good salespeople**. They need to be able to sell fragile ideas to those who will fund them, and be excellent at communicating the status of such ideas – knowing how much and how little information needs to be shared to instill confidence about what’s being created, and deflect noise or doubts so the innovators can stay focused. These leaders need to trust their innovators, but know when to intervene when help is needed or projects are getting off track.

3. It may seem obvious, but I can’t tell you how many companies I know who have innovation programs but no **space to foster creativity**. I’m not talking about Nerf guns and ping-pong tables in the office. I’m talking about actual spaces where creativity can flow: large spaces with walls of whiteboards and comfy places to lounge, so people can brainstorm ideas. (Depending on what you’re trying to create, room to build mock-ups or prototypes can be just as critical.) Often, the innovation teams are looking for temporary space or someone’s hand-me-down equipment so they can run their experiments. While you can argue that scavenging for resources is in itself is creative, it’s an added burden and distraction that can keep teams from focusing on what they’re trying to build (and then they’re questioned why it took too long or cost too much money!)

4. Speaking of money....**innovation should be budgeted for** as part of the core set of things a company is doing. It’s not an afterthought, or something you do with “extra” budget. A percentage of revenue, or of cost of R&D, are two possible metrics. The worst thing to do is cut your innovation budget when times are lean. Where is the new stuff going to come from if you’re only spending money to maintain what already exists?

5. Part B of the money story is **what that money is for**. It’s not just the space, equipment, and people, but also for things like conferences where they can get exposed to new ideas or get feedback on the ideas they present. It’s for hiring interns to help with experiments, or for research grants so you can collaborate with academics. Think about the broad spectrum of what’s being invested in. Consider project/program managers, and how they might play a role in managing timelines and the reporting process so your investment in innovation is properly supervised.

6. Finally, a company that adopts formal programs needs to have a culture of innovation where respecting the artistic nature of the work and being patient with the creative process is part of what they do. This is about **sharing stories of innovation wins and losses**, and the learnings that came from both. It’s about celebrating both, too, because learning what not to create is just as important as what you did create that made the company its next \$100 million. Consider the time and money you saved because an experiment was done, and reward those who tried for taking on the challenge and accepting the loss as a “meta win” for the company.

Whether you’re building software or a new type of car, the creative process may take all sorts of twists and turns (and a lot of time!) before you wind up at the best solution. But in my experience, what gets you there every time is investing in the right people and programs, and always keeping the culture of innovation in the foreground.

I’d love to hear your take on how organizations can best set themselves up to support innovation and creativity... and what they sometimes do to get in their way. Post a comment if you have thoughts....