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Collaboration is needed more than ever, but will it lead to your next company breakthrough?

MARTIN KOVACS / Tuesday, February 20, 2018



Source: City of Melbourne/ That Startup Show. Photographer: Wren Steiner.

The benefits of workplace collaboration are well established, however hitting the right collaborative mix is an ever-present challenge for companies seeking to drive progress and innovation.

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Now more than ever before, discovering the key to collaboration may be critical to companies seeking a competitive advantage.

Kellogg School of Management research, published last year, points to the increasing importance of collaboration as our individual knowledge bases become more and more specialised.

Skills specialisation in turn means that increasingly larger groups are needed to successfully complete projects.

"There's more and more to know in the world, and you can only have so much in your head," observed Benjamin Jones, Kellogg School strategy professor.

"So the share of stuff you know as an individual is declining in any field."

Jones noted that over time this leads to "an ongoing, never-ending phenomenon of increased specialisation, which is ever increasing the demand for collaboration".

Collaboration with something novel thrown in

Research conducted by Jones and Brian Uzzi, Kellogg School professor of management and organisation, shows that collaboration among scientists and across research institutions has grown steadily since the 1950s.

Not only was there an increase in collaboration, but it was also found that the most successful papers, measured by number of citations by fellow scientists, were the product of individuals teaming up.

"In everything, teams beat solo," Jones commented.

"In the 1950s and 60s, in lots of fields, solo beat teams. It's flipped. Now teams always have a higher home-run probability than solo."

Of course, finding the right balance is the challenge, with further research showing the most successful scientific papers were those that were mostly conventional, but contained a little bit of novelty.

"If the whole thing is spicy, it does badly," Jones stated.



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"If it's hyper-conventional with no spice, it does badly. So you've got to be really grounded, but then you've got to mix in something unexpected."

How to facilitate collaboration?

Companies seeking to facilitate collaboration will need to consider methods to bring employees regularly in touch with each other. The research points to the benefits of central spaces in which employees can mix, potentially linking up with other employees that they would not normally run into.

As Jones explained, Pixar is one company that has designed its office space with this aim in mind.

"Pixar designed its headquarters in California with all the bathrooms in the centre of the building, and all the food and coffee in the centre in an atrium," Jones commented.

"They were very intentional about wanting people who are artists and animators, and the coders, and the music people, and the screen writers to be constantly bumping into each other in random ways to spark ideas."

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Martin Kovacs is a journalist with experience covering the IT, consumer electronics, retail, finance and energy sectors.

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