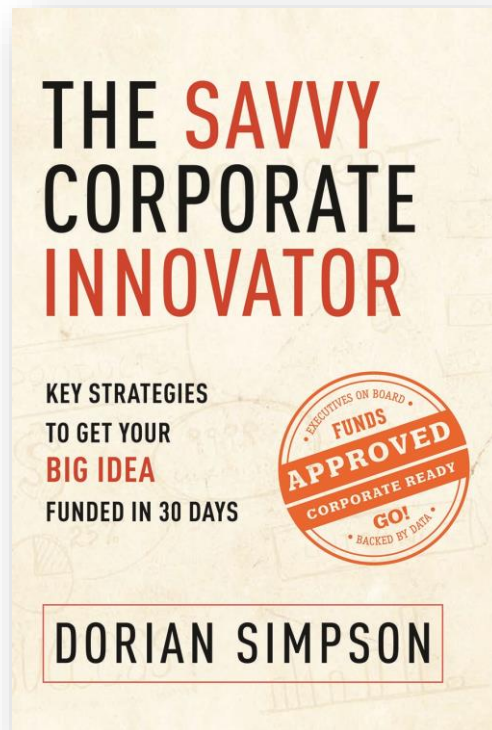


Chapter 1:

Every Kind of Innovator

Various Mindsets and Their Unique Challenges

An excerpt from:



Chapter 1

EVERY KIND OF INNOVATOR

Various Mindsets And Their Unique Challenges

*Your reputation as an innovator will always
talk louder than your ideas.*

Rate Your Current Skills

- What are you doing to build a reputation as a respected innovator?
- What is your innovation style and how does it impact your success?
- What range of skills are necessary to innovate and what are your own strengths and weaknesses?
- How do you motivate allies to help you develop your ideas?
- How objectively do you view your ideas?

Introduction

Innovators are willing to put ideas out there to be judged by their corporation and even the world with intense and not always positive scrutiny. Savvy innovators use tactical skills to turn ideas into valuable products, technology, and market opportunities. They have mental resilience and strong interpersonal skills to sell ideas to the corporate decision-makers who control the resources. Being savvy means understanding your situation, learning the skills to inspire others, and convincing executives to support funding. A savvy innovator ultimately builds a positive reputation as a respected innovation professional.

As An Innovator—Who Are You?

You're someone who wants to take a BIG idea for a new opportunity and move it forward in your company. You understand the steps and methods to systematically shape, investigate, prototype, challenge, build, and sell an idea until it grows into a real business opportunity. You may be an engineer or research professional tasked to devise product and technology ideas. You might be a product manager who must come up with new directions for current product lines. You may already be assigned to an innovation team, or you may even be leading a team that is investigating a new opportunity. You might also be a customer service agent, sales manager, or finance person who's not responsible for new ideas, but you have them and want to be heard! Innovators come from different fields, but have something in common: you have BIG ideas and need the skills to evaluate, develop, and sell them to corporate decision-makers.

INNOVATORS ARE EVERYWHERE

Steve was a regional sales rep for Sealed Air. The company made Bubble Wrap, polyethylene-foam mailers, and 100% recycled content paper. But customers were always looking for something cheaper and easier. One day, a customer threw

a box at Steve. It was loaded with latex balloons used to protect the items inside. The customer said, “If you want my business, come up with something like this where the air won’t leak out.” On his way home, Steve pulled over and sketched the concept for inflatable airbags for packaging.

Steve’s idea started low on the priority list. He was quickly frustrated that his idea wasn’t being executed. He thought, “This has huge potential and it feels like we’re just sitting on it.” To keep it going, Steve had lots of informal conversations where he continued to sell executives on how the idea could change the company. Finally, after 15 months building relationships and persevering, Sealed Air rolled out the product, and Steve became the inventor of VoidPak™ the inflatable airbag for packaging.

Corporate Innovators Are Not Entrepreneurs

True startups, the realm of entrepreneurs, have few constraints in how they navigate markets, build brands, hire people, develop products, and grow the business. In contrast, corporations have these constraints and more. Ideas must match the overall strategy of the company, reflect corporate brands, conform to financial metrics, meet revenue goals, and satisfy the personal and professional needs of executives and shareholders who have their own ideas for the company. A savvy innovator must first and always consider the goals of the company when presenting ideas.

One possible outcome of corporate innovation is taking an idea and incubating it as if it were a startup company within the corporation. This model is often called *intrapreneurism*. The innovator that leads the effort is an intrapreneur. While this is certainly one possible outcome of corporate innovation, and one we’ll address later, it’s not the only or even the most likely outcome.

Is Corporate Innovation A Full-Time Job?

Developing ideas is rewarding, exhilarating, challenging, and yes, time consuming. Chances are you have a full-time job in one department and must find time to develop new ideas on the side or with an innovation team. Google, for instance, has a 20-percent rule, which gives innovators one day a week to work on pet projects. 3M is famous for its 15-percent rule. These are nice programs, but most companies don't have the luxury of giving spare time for innovation. Usually innovators get no relief during an initial idea-evaluation period. That's life! If you're in a busy role and you really care about the idea, you'll need to find the time to devote to the effort.

From my experience, it takes about 80–100 hours to develop a concise, compelling opportunity proposal. How you fit this time into your job is up to your situation, and in Part III you'll learn how to use your valuable time in the most focused way possible.

Building A Reputation As A Savvy Innovator

While it's nice to think every idea is judged by its own merits, it's almost impossible to separate an idea from its innovator. Your reputation as a savvy innovator will often determine an idea's fate even before you share it. I've seen reputations work both negatively and positively. Often innovators tell me new ideas, and even though I try not to be biased, I find myself judging what they say based on past experiences with them. If they have pitched confusing or inane ideas before, I automatically assume this one will be the same. But, if the person has built a professional reputation, I'm more pre-disposed to like the idea and trust she has done her homework and will fulfill her promises.

Four Types Of Corporate Innovators

Innovators come in all ages, genders, functions, and levels of experience. But long-term success as a savvy innovator is based on two main factors: 1) innovation execution skills, and 2) innovation political skills. Execution skills are the tactical methods that drive

projects and execute necessary actions. Political skills help you understand and negotiate the inevitable office politics you’ll encounter along the way. These two dimensions create four types of innovators. Figure 1.1 shows how.

Being aware of your own style and the style of others will help you leverage your strengths and mitigate your weaknesses.

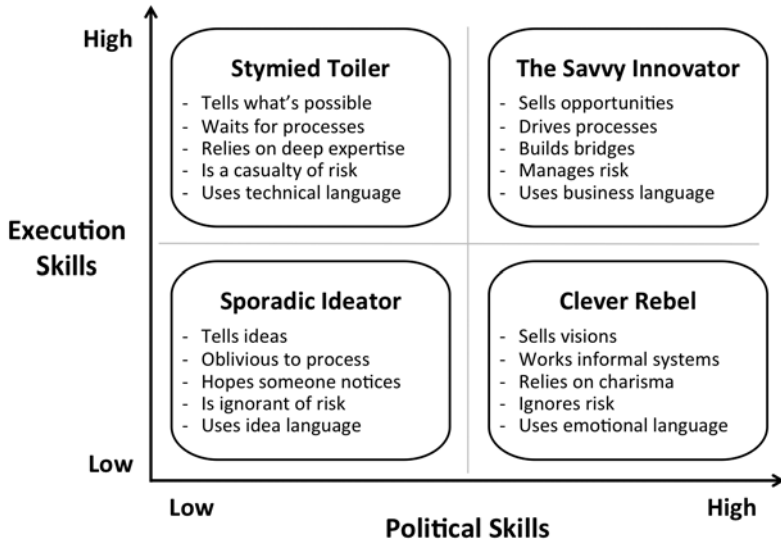


Figure 1.1: Four types of innovators

The Sporadic Ideator

This type of innovator always has new ideas. Unfortunately, they rank low on both execution skills and political skills. They may be engineers, marketers, customer service agents, or sales people who are natural idea generators and see ideas from many sources. They throw out random “idea darts” from all directions with enthusiastic comments like: “We should do this!” Or, “Why aren’t we building one of these?” The problem is, they don’t know what to do with their abundant ideas. Without a clear path to share and execute their idea darts, these innovators are easily frustrated by the lack of action in

the corporation. Sporadic Ideators share ideas with passion, usually with peers, but quickly give up when the going gets tough. When they do get the opportunity to voice their ideas, they usually lack the political savviness to effectively sell them up the chain. This can lead to defensiveness. Sporadic Ideators often believe they have better ideas than most, but no one really listens.

The Stymied Toiler

This type of innovator is high on execution skills, but low on political skills. They focus on project details and their subject-matter expertise rather than selling ideas to the people who matter. By not clearly understanding the dynamics of corporate decision-making, they keep their heads down and hope the company's formal processes will bring success. Stymied Toilers are often engineers or technology or research leaders who are, indeed, experts in a field. They're usually frustrated when executives question the value of their work or when they're not recognized for their expertise. Stymied Toilers often watch their ideas languish while other, inferior ideas, from more politically savvy innovators move forward.

The Clever Rebel

This type of innovator ranks high on political skills, but has low execution skills. They rely on gut feel and interpersonal skills to move ideas forward. Clever Rebels are savvy enough to inspire peers and enlist their help to relentlessly pursue ideas. They don't get discouraged easily and may even risk personal or corporate success to move their ideas forward. Clever Rebels don't like processes because they just slow them down. If they have any formal power or resources at their disposal, their ideas often become pet projects that operate "under the radar" unless killed by a more powerful adversary. Clever Rebels also usually lack self-awareness about their innovation skills and are prone to ignore warning signs in the market or technology. They often get frustrated by unsuccessful progress, which can cause them to leave the company for more hospitable pastures.

The Savvy Innovator

These innovators have a balanced blend of execution skills and political savviness. They are self-aware, appreciate their strengths, and know when to ask for help. They deeply understand the stages of innovation and the importance of mitigating both technical and commercial risk. Savvy Innovators know that ideas are merely starting points that can turn into a variety of opportunities. When selling their ideas, they build bridges between themselves, other innovators, and senior executives. They're always developing as they continuously learn both the execution and political sides of innovation. Savvy Innovators also understand and use existing processes and address executives on a personal level when asking for resources. Most importantly, Savvy Innovators are not overly attached to their ideas. They know when an idea is not right for their company.

I've worked with all these types and watched with fascination how each one sells their ideas. Take Keri—a Clever Rebel who was a manager at a test equipment company and a master of gaining support for her ideas. Keri could weave a great story that inspired peers and executives alike. You couldn't help but leave her office excited to help her see her idea come to life. She could get projects started, but they often fizzled out unless managers who could execute better took them over. Sometimes her ideas were successful. Other times they just lead to frustration.

Then there was John. He was a product manager at a media technology company—a classic Stymied Toiler. He had complex ideas that always came with detailed presentations, technical diagrams, and pages of “great data.” Clearly a deep thinker, John couldn't sell an idea if his life depended on it. Time and again his audience's eyes would glaze over after 15 minutes of mind-numbing details. He rarely received the go-ahead for an idea unless a more politically savvy person helped him.

To become a Savvy Innovator you can certainly start as one type and improve your skills in weak areas. Depending on the opportunities, different innovator types can thrive in different environments. First recognize yourself. Then think about how you operate and how you can learn from other styles.

Six Essential Innovation Skills

Developing an idea even to the point of asking for first-stage funding requires a wide range of skills from technical abilities to critical market analysis. To become a savvy innovator you need execution skills in the following areas of expertise:

Data Gathering: finding and interpreting relevant data.

Market Analysis: defining a market and estimating customer demand.

Customer Insight: understanding and validating customer needs.

Technology Exploration: applying technology to solve customer problems.

Go-to-Market Tactics: developing preliminary tactics for sales, marketing, manufacturing, and other execution challenges.

Financial Scrutiny: estimating revenue, costs, and expenses to the satisfaction of decision-makers.

This doesn't mean you must have all of these skills yourself. We'll address many of these skills in this book, but few innovators inherently have a complete skill set. Technologists are often weak in marketing while marketers may be weak in technology. People spend years learning the skills needed in a specific field, but innovation requires that you broaden your skills to the point you can at least understand the basics with enough awareness to evaluate your current strengths. It's important to know your weaknesses and look for help in the areas where you need more expertise.

Leveraging Team Members

Developing ideas at the early stage can be a lone innovator's task. But because an innovator needs help with a wide range of skills, there's a big advantage to working in teams building a well-rounded opportunity proposal. Figure 1.2 shows how a marketing expert brings knowledge about markets and what's important to customers.

The technical person brings expertise on what is possible based on internal company technology, technical trends, and access to external technology. It's extremely rare to find those skills in the same person.

Great success often just requires two people—a market expert and a technical expert. That's pretty good for a minimum team. Just look at Steve Jobs/Steve Wozniak or David Packard/William Hewlett. I once worked with a Seattle company that had a proposal contest where they formed teams to identify new opportunities and present their ideas to the executive team. Out of eight teams that pitched their idea, the team that won had just two members—a technical expert and a savvy business-development leader.

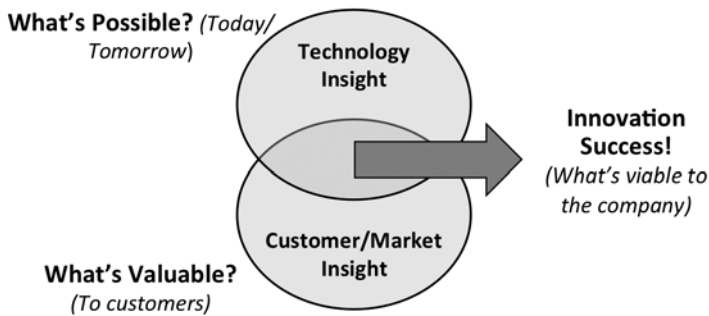


Figure 1.2: Teams can aid success

SAVVY IDEA: AVOID IDEA BLINDNESS

We love our ideas, but we can easily run the risk of idea blindness. This happens when we're so close to an idea that we ignore contrary information. We may even feel offended when asked reasonable questions as we start the funding process. I fell into this trap many times early in my career. I once created a company called Hobby Starters. It was at

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the beginning of the e-commerce era, and I was sure that an online portal for hobby-minded people would be the next big thing. I conducted a range of interviews but fell into the trap of idea blindness. When people told me that price was very important, I heard, "Price could be higher if I offered something truly unique." When someone asked, "Can't I get all of these products at craft stores?" I told myself I could overcome this with a better customer experience.

I proceeded to build the business, complete with distribution agreements and a full website, only to find out I hadn't sufficiently addressed the customers' concerns. I shut the site down after six months and had to rethink everything. I learned from this experience. It's crucial to be as objective as possible and avoid idea blindness even if you are sure your idea will be a huge success.

In the next chapter, we'll explore the range of ideas that corporations generate and how to determine which ones are worthy of pursuing further.

CHAPTER 1 REVIEW—EVERY KIND OF INNOVATOR

Innovators come in all types and can be found in every function. A savvy innovator knows his strengths and weaknesses, has the ability to execute the tactics of innovation, and knows how to navigate tough political environments to sell ideas. Building innovation skills takes time, but becomes more natural as you train yourself to recognize and react appropriately in all situations.

Five Savvy Success Strategies

As you hone your skills, practice these five strategies to start on your path towards becoming a savvy innovator.

1. **Never assume your ideas will sell themselves.** It's rare the others will see the same potential that you do. Ideas must be marketed and sold as much as any other product or service out there. The "market" for your idea is your company and the customers are corporate executives.
2. **Ensure you've embraced a corporate mentality.** Corporate innovation is not about the best ideas; it's about the best ideas for the company. Corporations must manage risk. Not only do you need to understand corporate risk, but you must understand what's at risk for the peers and executives you need to support your idea. This includes taking an honest assessment of your own skills. You must be truthful about your strengths and weaknesses when attempting to evaluate and sell your ideas.
3. **Learn to love data as much as your ideas.** While most executives love a new idea, it will never be sold on anecdotal information. Quantifiable data is the realm of decision-makers. The more relevant data you have to support why people should risk their job for your idea, the easier it will be to get support.

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- 4. Take an honest assessment of your own skills.** No one person will likely have all of the innovation skills necessary to develop an idea. Take an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses when attempting to evaluate and sell your ideas.
- 5. Acknowledge you can't innovate alone.** Even if you have all of the skills necessary to be a savvy innovator, you still need allies. These allies might be functional experts, peers, or executives. To execute any idea worth pursuing, you'll need help along your innovation journey from the moment you start sharing your ideas.

BOB AND NANCY (CONTINUED)**Bob, a classic innovator:**

Bob had started sharing his idea for a new wireless heart monitor. Nancy, his CEO, had just asked, “What is the market for this?”

Bob: *Great question. This is perfect for people having their heart monitored. At home, in hospitals, nursing homes and even just walking around! Here is the app a doctor would use to access the equipment. I didn't have time to do a full working app, but here is what I have so far.* (He pulls up a crude screen on his tablet and starts to login.)

Nancy: *That's OK, Bob. I don't need to see the app yet. Who will actually buy this? What do you think the market is for this?*

Bob: (Isn't she listening to me? I just told her! Can't she see how great this is for the company?) *If I were a doctor, I'd demand this product. Along with the heart monitoring, we can also add other functions for monitoring glucose and just add sensors as it expands.*

Nancy: (He's ignoring my questions. I don't have time for this.) *OK. I think I get it.*

Bob: (Yes! She's approving the project.) *Great. I'd like to start writing the product requirements so I can get this into our development process. I'm actually almost done and have started scoping out the resources we would need.*

Nancy: *Hold on Bob. That's great you've put a lot of thought into this, but let's talk through this some more. I still have a lot of questions.*

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Bob is a typical Stymied Toiler, but he has the aspiration and ability to become a Savvy Innovator. He spent a lot of time thinking about his idea and assumed he could get a quick approval from Nancy. However, Nancy wasn't close to committing funds. She saw a lot of potential in the idea, but wondered why Bob came to her so unprepared to answer her questions.

Can Bob get on track and get the guidance he needs to move his idea forward?

(To be continued...)

What Do YOU Think?

We'd love to hear your thoughts.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Learn more about the concepts discussed in this paper and many more related to an innovator's success in corporate environments in, *The Savvy Corporate Innovator - Key Strategies to Get Big Ideas Funded in 30 Days*. Available in ebook and paperback on Amazon.com:

Click here: [The Savvy Corporate Innovator](#)

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