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Innovate small, think big

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Eleven years after it was founded, Tyro is still in start up mode according to founder and chief executive officer Jost Stollmann. Tyro competes with some of Australia's most well established companies by fostering and maintaining a deeply innovative culture.

"Innovation is a fashionable but fraught term," Stollmann says. "There's the innovation which comes from incremental changes to something which already exists, and then there's disruptive innovation which is something entirely new."

Innovation culture

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The challenge of creating and maintaining an innovative culture is something Stollmann understands deeply.

In 1996 he sold his first company CompuNet Computer AG to GE Capital, and then took on a role leading GE Capital IT Solutions as it expanded across Europe. By the time it was sold to GE CompuNet had more than 3800 staff, and Stollmann was tasked with finding a way to hold onto the innovative culture which existed while integrating his company into GE.

“The problem many large companies face when they try to buy a small innovative company is that it is like ‘tissue rejection’ in a transplant patient,” Stollmann says. “Large companies that aren’t set up to foster innovation will try to destroy that innovative culture, it’s only a question of time.”

Having worked in both very small and very large organisations he recognises that it is very difficult for large and well-established organisations to innovate in disruptive ways because they carry the weight of their past success, their existing way of thinking and their organisational complexities. They have cumbersome risk-mitigating decision processes to overcome before they can commit to an innovative approach and then huge difficulties to end the failing projects. They tend to be (too) late starting innovative projects and (too) late ending the invariably failing ones.

“That makes it very hard for large organisations to think outside the square, take risks, place bets and take them off the table.”

However, Stollmann has identified a number of approaches designed to ensure innovative culture is protected, not destroyed, through expansion.

How to foster an innovative culture

Innovation, according to Stollmann, is itself a discipline, which involves:

- 1) A specific commitment to a highly iterative production schedule.
- 2) A supportive workplace.
- 3) A strong commitment to invest in new technology and processes.
- 4) A culture where failure is accepted as a natural part of the creative process.

“The question is whether you have an appetite to aggressively protect your ability to create new stuff,” Stollmann says. “You will always have a thousand things you need to do, and the resources to do just ten. You need to strategically pick the ones on which you want to focus.

“It is also important to attract talented staff, and then to get out of their way and let them get on with their job, so that they are willing to take risks and make new discoveries.

“We advance in small steps and stories, we try something, if it works we move on, if it doesn’t we try something different,” Stollmann says. “Then we deliver changes in small increments every 14 days, our risks are smaller and we fail fast. We do not waste time and resources on the blind alleys.”

Openness, respect and transparency are also key to unlocking innovation, according to Stollmann.

“Being deeply innovative is above all about being culturally sophisticated, not only technologically,” Stollmann says. “It’s about making people feel respected as human beings and not feel like numbers.”

In summary

Innovation culture is:

- based on discipline, not luck.
- built on creative, talented staff who are empowered to take risks and make mistakes.
- fostered when the risk of trying something new is minimised.
- requires investment in creativity and new projects to be fiercely protected.
- requires a high level of openness, respect and transparency.

Speak to your Account Executive on how ICT can help you better collaborate to drive an innovative culture.

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