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Topic 1
Identify opportunities to do things better

Great organisations need people who seek ways to improve what is being done and who enjoy contributing to the innovation effort. In any role, you can help your workplace to become more effective and produce the best results possible. Be curious about work practices that are not as productive as they could be, rather than just accepting things because 'that's the way they are'.

You can identify opportunities to do things better. Be aware of your role and those of others around you. You need to be able to identify what exactly needs changing and obtain the right kind of information to help you put forward a case for change.

In this topic you will learn how to:

1A   Be aware of your role in workplace innovation

1B   Proactively identify opportunities for improvement in your area of work

1C   Gather and review information

Examples of innovation

Here are some examples of innovation in the workplace.

Receptionist

Susan is a receptionist for a local council. Her job is to attend to customers at the counter and assist with incoming phone calls. She regularly has long queues of customers at the counter; some have quick inquiries, while others require more time. She and the switchboard staff discuss ways to create at least two queues at the counter, how customers can choose which queue suits their needs and how the staff can better share counter duties while still managing the phone calls. They present their ideas to their manager and include a way to pilot this innovation.

Paper factory

Spencer works in a paper factory and develops an adhesive. It is not strong enough for his purpose as it keeps papers together but is easily pulled apart. Colleagues use the adhesive to attach notes in work files as it does not damage anything. A few years later the company realises the value of this innovation and renames it the 'Post-it note'.

Why is innovation important?

Innovation is good for business. It helps organisations achieve commercial success by providing new and better products and services. These are often delivered at lower costs. Doing things differently can also help to create better, more productive workplaces and make staff feel more involved and happier at work. Clients also benefit from improved products and efficiencies and better prices.

Innovative organisations outperform others. They can respond faster and better to changing environments, grasp opportunities and develop necessary partnerships to generate and act on ideas. Innovations can benefit organisations in a number of ways, as shown on the following page.

Example: two organisations encourage innovation

Small business

A small publishing firm with 15 staff creates newsletters for associations. They have had the same clients for a long time. Most of the staff know each other quite well, but do their own work without the need for much interaction with others. The two owners are worried that the energy seems to have gone out of the organisation. None of the staff have had new duties, training or development for some time. The owners decide to treat their staff to a Thank you dinner as a way of acknowledging their hard work and loyalty, and to use this time to offer prizes for innovative ideas for improvements. The owners ask two supervisors to hold weekly meetings at which members of their teams can brainstorm ideas.

Lev, the sales representative, wins an award for his suggestion that each month two staff members could research, produce and circulate a short brief with information about an association that may benefit from having a newsletter or other publication. Kassia, a data-entry clerk, receives an award for suggesting that staff subscribe to different newsletters to get new ideas and share them with the others in a monthly meeting.

Large organisation

ACB Importers is a large company with 1700 staff working in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. The senior managers want to improve the way they do things and decide to ask staff to submit ideas using a staff suggestion box in each location. The boxes are opened each month at the monthly management meetings. Suggestions are investigated and the best ones are presented at a senior management meeting each quarter. The senior managers decide which ideas should be implemented. This month, Ben Hassan, the receptionist in Perth, is commended for his suggestion about ways to cut down the amount of paper that the company uses.

1B Proactively identify opportunities for improvement in your area of work

There are always opportunities for improvements. A person with good ideas could spend all day being innovative. But we still need to get our work done. It's about having a balance.

If there is no innovation, our jobs and our organisations become stale and boring. But too much time spent thinking about how to do things differently means that nothing will be achieved on a daily basis.

It's a good idea to see your role as having two parts: one where you focus on innovation, one where you get the job done. Have your working hat on when there's a deadline to meet; have your thinking hat on during quieter times.

Some people make notes about ideas. Others spend a few minutes each day thinking how they could do their job better.
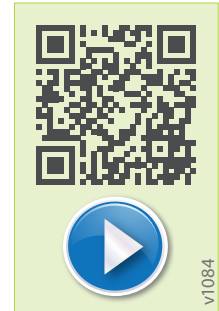
How opportunities are identified

Always be attentive to problem areas as well as to ways to improve your role and workplace. There may be a need to do things more quickly, to make fewer mistakes or to make the work environment healthier and safer.

The process of larger changes can take some time. As we have already seen, some organisations actively encourage people to be innovative and provide ways for this to happen. Sometimes, though, while you are working you will come up with your own good ideas, and it is important to devote a part of your day or week to developing these. Below are a number of ways you can take note of potential opportunities in your workplace.

Be observant

Notice how you can improve the way you do things.

Be curious

Ask questions of colleagues and read procedure manuals and frequently asked questions documents (FAQs).

Be a creative thinker

Come up with a number of possible ways of making changes.

Areas where improvements can take place

In the business world, innovative ideas generally come under one of nine categories, each of which are described below.

Processes and procedures

Improving processes and procedures involves developing more efficient and beneficial ways to carry out tasks and duties. It may involve changing the order you do things in, or reducing the number of steps it takes to achieve a particular result – anything that helps you make the best use of your time at work and ease workload pressure.

For example, you may have been instructed to process email requests for information about a service or product in the order you received them. You find that some requests are handled quickly and easily, while others take a long time and require a great deal of research. You come up with an idea to handle the easy ones straight away and leave the more difficult ones until later on in the day. This way you can respond to most inquiries quickly and efficiently, and in the afternoon you can deal with the others in a more leisurely manner.

Work practices

Work practices are the way your organisation does its business; that is, its policies and general methods of operation. This can include the way teams are made up and change over time. Sometimes teams need to change because they are not working as effectively as they could.

An example is a bank deciding that it wants to attract more customers. There are two other banks in the same suburb. At a staff meeting, a worker suggests changing the opening hours so that customers can access their bank earlier than the other banks.

Changes in the physical environment

The physical environment may need to be changed if people are not able to work to their best ability; for example, if the layout is inappropriate, something is unhealthy or unsafe, or something is not pleasant for staff or clients.

For example, an increase in staff in an office means that some workers are placed in an area not previously used by people; this area is not well ventilated and becomes very hot in the afternoons. New air-conditioning and vents could be installed and blinds placed in front of the windows to make this area safer and more comfortable for staff.

Storage or maintenance procedures

Organisations need to review and update their storage and maintenance procedures regularly and build in ways to deal with future growth. Staff need to know what needs to be stored and where, and how to dispose of anything not required. Maintenance schedules for a wide range of equipment need to be developed, costed and adhered to.

An example involves a spa and pool company with several large outlets. Each outlet has the current range of stock and some also have old stock at discounted prices. At a planning day, staff agree to move several of the outlets to smaller sites, have less stock on site and set up an online shop to sell old stock and where customers can select and design spas and pools based on their bathroom or garden measurements.

Generate new ideas

There are many ways to get creativity flowing. Sometimes new ideas come quickly and easily; at other times you need to put in some effort. The following methods can help you to produce ideas about any issue, including ideas for improving things at work.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming means coming up with a range of ideas in a short time. You can brainstorm by yourself, but it is usually better to get together with at least one other person, or your whole team. You may suggest that your team has regular brainstorming sessions to discuss a particular area of work.

For example, if you are having trouble keeping up with your emails and getting your work done, it can be a good use of time to brainstorm ideas and a range of possible solutions to better manage tasks and time. It is important that during the brainstorming process you do not make any decisions about what is a 'good' or 'bad' idea. Write everything down, no matter how silly it may sound.

Mind mapping

Mind mapping was invented and patented by an American, Tony Buzan, who discovered that we can tap into more areas of our brain and come up with more ideas if we 'map' our thoughts on a page.

To draw a mind map, write a core word or phrase (such as a problem you are having) in a box in the centre of a page. Then draw a number of paths coming out of the centre box, and on each path write down different aspects of the problem. Create paths leading from each aspect suggesting ideas for solutions. You can then look at your mind map and decide which ideas would be good to follow up.

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Which category, from those listed below, does each of Chen's ideas fit into?

- Processes and procedures
- Storage or maintenance procedures
- New customer base
- Work practices or services
- Team communication
- Staff changes
- Changes in the physical environment
- New technology
- Job role changes

Fill in this table.

Chen's ideas for improvement	Type of improvement
Contact the clients via email rather than phone	
Set some time aside early in the morning to make phone calls, before everyone's day gets busy	
Investigate whether someone else in her team who is not so busy can make the calls, or share the calls among team members	
Ask clients to pay up-front so there is no need to follow up late payments	
Organise a call schedule that is created each week in advance so she can better structure this task	
Purchase a new system that will automatically send reminders to clients, eliminating the need to make calls, which will free her up for other more important duties	
Move to a quieter place to make the calls	

Understand the situation

Understanding your own work role, those of others in your team and the organisation's priorities are all important things to consider as you gather information relevant to your ideas for change. The main reason why you are employed is to help your organisation achieve its goals and expected outcomes. Each staff member contributes to these goals in a particular way. There is no point changing the way you do something if it stops you achieving these goals.

Whenever you do something, it will have some kind of effect on the way others work. For example, moving your in-tray under your desk might make it easier for you to access, but it will make it more difficult for others to use.

You need to make sure you understand:

- the organisation's expected outcomes and how well you can achieve these outcomes under current conditions
- whether the current processes and situations are adequate for needs in the foreseeable future
- the resources required for your ideas and whether these can be supplied
- any barriers that may hinder your idea being taken up
- what impact your ideas might have on others: clients, staff or the general public.

How practical innovative ideas are

Try to imagine the needs of your role in the future – there may be no point implementing change that is only going to be useful for a short time.

Think about how your ideas will be resourced if they are adopted by the organisation. Resources can be things you can see or touch, such as computers, phones, telephone directories or software packages. They may also be less obvious, but equally important, things like time and your skills and knowledge.

It is important to ensure your idea is realistic before suggesting it to others. You need to consider things that might stop you from progressing, such as limits to finances, time or resources or the organisation's current policies or priorities.

Time-saving considerations

In some instances, you may be able to take some preliminary actions that could save time and money before any attempt is made to explore your innovative idea. These include getting some feedback from others and/or exploring the potential cost of your proposal.

Getting further feedback from others can help you decide whether your idea would be useful and therefore likely to be accepted. You could do this by asking selected staff members to respond via email as to whether they think your idea might improve current practices. This way you also have a useful written record.

Obtaining brochures and quotes for services, new equipment and software can save a lot of time, especially if you are aware of any budgetary limitations. Getting a few quotes can help you compare and contrast these, or if there is a preferred supplier you can ask for the special customer rate.

Review information

After you have collected information about your idea, you need to review it for:

- currency – whether it is up to date
- relevance to the idea – whether the information directly supports the idea
- suitability in your situation – whether the information is likely to be viewed as useful and practical
- likelihood of fixing the problem or achieving positive change – whether it will be seen as worthwhile to invest time, money and/or other resources to make use of this information.

After the review

After you have reviewed your information, you need to prepare it for presentation in a useable format. One way to do this is to create a document that outlines the stages you have worked through in a logical manner. Carefully summarise what you have found out to help readers to be able to quickly understand the information, its source and its value. Use headings to help you set out your proposal, such as those below.

Suggested headings for a proposal document
• Reason/s for change – the problems or the improvements you want to make
• Possible solutions – the ideas you came up with
• Supporting information – the results of your fact-finding exercises
• Recommendations – the idea or ideas that have the best chance of success

2A | Identify people who may provide input into ideas for improvements

You will not be practising innovation all on your own. Sharing your ideas with others and getting their input is essential if you are going to be an effective innovator. It is important to include all viewpoints right from the start.

If you work in a team, another team member may have already thought of an idea and be trying it out. Someone who has been in the organisation for a long time may know why a particular process has been in operation and can help you understand the situation better. Perhaps someone who has moved to a different area, or someone whose work is dependent on yours, can also provide input.

Other people can be of great assistance to you as allies, supporters, information suppliers and promoters. They can help you think more creatively, challenge your beliefs, provide valuable input and detail budgetary or resource constraints.

Help to develop your ideas

Here are some types of people who can help you develop your ideas. You may identify people who will take on two or more of these roles.

Colleague	Colleagues who work in the same area will have a direct interest in your idea, so it is wise to include them. They may be aware of the same issues and have other good ideas about how to fix them. They may also come up with other problems and issues that you have not thought of.
Supervisor	Your immediate supervisor or manager can provide an organisational perspective and can offer advice on the ease and likelihood of ideas being implemented.
Technician	People who have technical knowledge may know how a particular system or piece of machinery works, or they may have specialised knowledge in some other area. There may be technical experts in your team or outside your organisation. Take care if these people are not in your immediate work group or organisation, particularly that you do not disclose confidential information.

Processes and protocols

Organisational protocols are the standard or accepted ways of carrying out tasks, making decisions and implementing changes in a particular organisation or team. Sometimes these are formal processes. At other times they are simply part of the 'culture' of the organisation that people know about and understand, just by being there.

If people who work in different locations or at different times need to be involved in meetings, ensure you choose appropriate communication methods so everyone is able to contribute equally. If a number of changes are needed that affect several sections or groups within an organisation, follow a formal process to ensure that everyone is kept up to date so problems can be minimised.

Some organisations only investigate and approve ideas that are presented with appropriate supporting documentation. Some people also have a preference for detailed analysis to be presented with ideas and proposed solutions.

Communicate effectively with people at different levels

You need to consider the degree of formality required when communicating. This is related to the organisation's culture, the seriousness of the problem and the level at which a decision can be made.

Sometimes there are specially designed forms and processes that staff members use to suggest ideas. These are often available in organisations such as government departments, councils, hospitals or schools.

Many organisations are not very formal. People at all levels tend to call each other by their first names, make their own coffee and undertake basic tasks.

However, you need to adjust your level of formality according to the level of the person you are speaking to; for example, you would be more formal when presenting to the managing director as opposed to a colleague.

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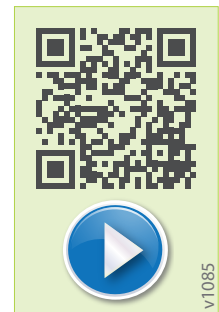
Medium level

Position level and job titles – Specialist roles:

- Bookkeeper
- Finance officer
- Personal assistant
- Librarian
- Supply officer
- Human resources officer
- IT support specialist

Responsibilities and decision-making power:

- Supporting the main activities of the organisation; these people have the power to make decisions that relate to their area of work

Suggested methods of communication:

- Email with brief message and letter or report attached
- Special report or request form if available
- Interdepartmental memo

Medium–low level

Position level and job titles – Division/business unit level:

- Manager
- Supervisor
- Team leader

Responsibilities and decision-making power:

- Frontline managers who make decisions about how to achieve performance measures and targets

Suggested methods of communication:

- Email
- Telephone
- Face-to-face (informal or arranged)
- Team meeting
- Performance appraisal

'What ifs'

'What ifs' allow you to gain other people's perspectives on your ideas and proposed solutions. You start off with your idea, putting 'what if' in front of it. When many people answer 'what if', you are able to clarify many potential consequences and repercussions of your idea. You could run a 'what if' session or seek individual feedback to your 'what if' question from a range of key people.

Develop options and possible variations

During and after feedback, you will have the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the situation and possible variations to the original idea. Perhaps you will come up with a new idea, or several new ideas. New possibilities can be added to your concept using the suggestions below.

Rethink the idea
Think through the idea again by revisiting the original problem or situation that led to the need for change.

Incorporate all information
Incorporate all information obtained about the resources that would be required for the change – include such things as budget or time limits, competing priorities, other changes that are taking place and any costs involved.

Incorporate other ideas
Incorporate other people's ideas and feedback to decide whether you have the best solution or if something else is needed.

Test and modify ideas
Test any modified or new ideas by presenting them to others (preferably people who have already been involved in the process).

2D Review and select ideas for follow-up

You have been following a systematic process for developing ideas. First, you obtained supporting information for an original idea of yours about something that needed to change. Then, you explored the usefulness of finding people who can and should provide extra input, how to share your ideas and also how to receive feedback from them. Now, you need to review the feedback you have received and make any necessary changes.

Document feedback

Feedback usually needs to be documented in some way before it can be used. There are many ways you might document your feedback; however, three common methods to use are a key points summary, a SWOT analysis and a pros and cons table.

When producing a key points summary, you may like to add the name of the person who raised each point. When using a SWOT analysis table, you will describe your idea's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Finally, when using a pros and cons table, you create two columns listing arguments in favour of the idea in one, and those against in the other.

Reasons for documenting feedback may include:

- keeping track of the historical development of an idea
- acknowledging and valuing others' time and effort
- saving time by not going back over steps or having people re-raise issues that have already been dealt with
- ensuring that you get the best possible outcome
- providing evidence that you have followed all necessary steps, in case problems arise later.

3A Take action to implement routine changes

How does an innovative idea become a new work practice? Innovation in the workplace is not about taking things into your own hands and making decisions without communicating with others. Unless you are an owner or manager, the final decision will usually be up to others to make. However, if you can show how your idea will benefit the organisation, your ideas are more likely to be accepted and lead to greater satisfaction for yourself, your work colleagues and the organisation's clients.

Whether the change is small or large scale, innovation generally follows a process that goes through several stages.

Stages of innovation

Ideas do not always lead to change straight away. Your organisation may decide not to implement any changes at that time. This does not mean the idea should not have been raised. Someone may still thank you for your foresight at a later date.

Below is a summary of each of the stages of innovation and some further information about each. Note that stages 4–6 all involve obtaining approval to implement change.

Example: routine changes that may not require approval

Routine changes that may not require approval include:

- collecting the office supplies at the same time as you collect the mail, so you save a trip
- transferring data from a Word document to an Excel spreadsheet so you can prepare reports more efficiently
- giving your supervisor all the work that needs signing twice a day instead of interrupting him or her five or six times a day
- changing your lunch break to a more suitable time to cope better with client needs.

Implement the changes

When you do implement routine changes, you need to make sure everything is planned appropriately and all tasks are completed.

Think carefully about setting a date or time for change. Sometimes changes can be implemented immediately, but at other times it may be best to wait. You are best to avoid peak work periods such as while the monthly report is being finalised. You may set your time for change to fit around business cycles such as the end of the financial year, or introduce it after a major project is completed.

Advising others about your change is courteous and helps you to make a smooth change. You may advise people via an email or in a staff meeting, giving them ample notice and a reminder just before the change is to occur. You will not want to be answering a lot of questions during the implementation or while you are getting used to a new way of doing things.

3B Identify and articulate issues and practical processes

When the change you want to make will affect others, or is likely to take some time or be costly, it is very important to make sure you have thought about the issues and problems that may arise. Making big changes also means you need to do more planning. The major issues that affect change are described below.

Approvals are required

You need to ensure that you have the appropriate authority to proceed. While your idea may have been supported in a meeting, or your boss gave verbal agreement when you made your presentation, this does not necessarily indicate that you have the authority to proceed.

It is always best to get approval in writing: an email, signed form or initials and a date on your letter may suffice.

Relationship of the idea to organisational priorities

You need to ensure you have taken into account other things that may be going on in the organisation generally, as well as in your immediate work area. Consideration to deadlines and peak periods also need to be taken into account.

For example, moving furniture may need to be done at the end of a work day or after work so as not to disrupt workflow.

Cost of implementation and logistics

Costs need to be considered carefully before implementing change.

For example, it may be much cheaper to hire a truck on certain days of the week; people who install machines may be able to work more quickly on days or times when there are fewer workers in the office. You also need to take into account any down time while the change is happening.

If a number of things need to happen, it is important that these are done in the most efficient way.

For example, a new software package can't be installed until a computer system is upgraded; new desks and equipment must be provided before new staff members can start working. A flow chart or run sheet can help eliminate these problems.

3C Present ideas and practical suggestions about improvements

It is important to choose the right method of communicating your idea or suggestion. Your communication methods will vary depending on who your audience is, how many different people or audiences you need to communicate with, the level of formality that is required and the amount of time you have to prepare and present. Sometimes more than one method of presentation is appropriate. The three main categories of presentation are described below.

Verbal presentation

Verbal presentations include one-on-one meetings with your manager or supervisor, or group meetings such as with your team or a focus group. You may communicate face-to-face or via the telephone. Verbal presentations may be done in a structured or ad hoc way; your choice will largely depend on the time you need to take, and how things are done in your organisation.

Verbal presentations are generally used when the people who need to know are located in the same office or there are regular team meetings. This is not a good method to use when the information is complex or would take a long time to describe, as people will not retain all the information. The downside of a verbal presentation is no paper or electronic record, so your presentation may be forgotten.

Written presentation

If you want to provide supporting information or the process needs an in-depth description, you may want to produce your presentation in writing. This also works where you need to present it to people you do not usually see. This has the added bonus of allowing the reader the chance to select when they will read it. The downside is that it may get filed away somewhere for later and be forgotten.

Written presentations include reports, memos and emails (with or without attachments). Some organisations have special forms that are used to present ideas or information.

Key presentation points

1 **Problem and reason for change**

This is the 'setting the stage' part of the presentation in which you provide the background material and outline the exact nature of the original problem or issue.

2 **Issues**

This is where you outline all the reasons why it is a problem for you, others in your team and/or the organisation as a whole.

3 **Solution**

This is the best option as determined after careful deliberation, research and getting feedback from others. Show how it will fix the problem or lead to improvements

4 **Discarded solutions**

These are other things that could be done to overcome the problem but were not as good as the solution chosen.

5 **Problems that may occur**

This is where you outline disruptions that are likely to occur while the changes are taking place. Reassure people that these will be minimal and not long-lasting.

6 **Effects**

Show how your change will benefit the organisation. You want to maximise people's comfort about the change and minimise any likelihood of the change being unsupported because it will have a negative impact on another aspect of the organisation's work.

7 **Costs**

Costs may be in terms of financial expenses, resources, time or effort. Reassure people the impending change is a cost-effective solution.