# How to Incubate Innovation

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Speaker 1: Tech Reimagined, redefining the relationship between people and technology. Brought to you by Endava, this is Tech Reimagined.

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Bradley Howard: Hello and welcome back. I'm Bradley Howard and you are listening to season three of Tech Reimagined, the podcast that explores how technology influences the fabric of our society, changing the ways that we work, we live and we do business. Every week I chat with the leading figures in technology and other relevant industries about the most important topics in the business. You can find us on every podcast platform that matters. Today I'm delighted to introduce our chief technology officer at Endava or CTO, Eoin Woods. Hello Eoin, how are you today?

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Eoin Woods: Hello Bradley. Thanks for the invitation. It's good to be here.

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Bradley Howard: Really lovely to have you on the show at last. So one key aspect of a CTO's role is to set the technology culture within the organization. Technology businesses live and die by their novelty of spirit and experimental outlook, authentic innovation, the type that results in products and services that really change the game is notoriously hard to come by. Eoin, today I really want to talk about how to incubate innovation. So what are the essential preconditions for novelty of cultures within organizations?

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Eoin Woods: Thanks Bradley. It's a complicated question, isn't it? Because so many people talk about innovation and so many people say they've delivered innovation and yet sometimes it's quite hard to know what they mean. For me, innovation is, I think what you said in the introduction is real impactful change to the way the organizations either work or deliver the services or the products that they create. I think the most essential precondition for innovation within an organization is an acceptance of failure. I hear quite a lot of, we sometimes even get this with our clients who are, hear quite a lot of organizations talking about the need for innovation and how they want to innovate and then when they start talking to people about let's start doing some innovation they say, " How long will it take? How much will it cost, and what will I get?" And I always look at them slightly confused.
 Well if it's innovation you won't know any of those things in the beginning. I'm afraid that's just development or business development or whatever it is. I think taking risks, I think being prepared to learn from failures and doing failures is a positive thing, which is much easier said than done especially when it's your money you're spending. I really do feel for senior managers who just feel that they're abandoning money to a black hole but they do have to let go and just see what happens. And I think the other precondition is the fact that innovation is actually done in the business.
 The biggest anti pattern I see in innovation is a separate innovation center. You can always tell innovation centers because the people dress differently and they have totally non- standard IT hardware. If the organization is a window center, they will inevitably have max. If the main organization is a max center, they will inevitably have Linux machines and they go off and innovate in a bubble and then when they try and come back and

apply that innovation, the organization kind of rejects the organism because it just doesn't fit with the way the organization works and its real needs.

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Bradley Howard: That is so true. We see this very regularly. So what's the best way for teams to cohere to maximize the chances of effective innovation?

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Eoin Woods: Yes, I think there's two things that spring to mind immediately. One is not to try and particularly early on, not to try and pick huge goals to innovate around, try and work out how your innovation process works by picking relatively small things that can be achieved relatively quickly. Same way we do, we would if we were developing a new say mobile application, we wouldn't try and develop all the features on day one. We'd try and deliver the simplest thing possible and then iterate on that. I think same with innovation. Find out if you can innovate and if not, why not by starting with relatively small things. The second thing though, which we just touched on is find something that matters to innovate around. There's very little point innovating around the expenses process if no one cares. If on the other hand it's a major pain point for all of the employees, it's going to make a big difference to the company and everyone will recognize the value of it. That might be exactly the thing to innovate around, although it's not, might not be thought of as a leading edge thing within the company. So find something that matters and start small. I think those are the two best bits of advice I can give.

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Bradley Howard: And stop firing people that are just trying to change things as well.

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Eoin Woods: That's certainly true as well. Yes.

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Bradley Howard: How can team leads or managers inspire their teams to maximize the chances of effective innovation? That's probably a loaded question for you.

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Eoin Woods: I certainly got some ideas and there are a few things that managers can do. The most obvious one sounds ridiculous but stay out of the way. By that I don't mean don't encourage it, I actually mean once it starts don't medal and don't try and sort of integrate yourself into it. People are quite enjoying innovating without you so just accept it and move on. But in terms of getting them started, I think one thing that you can continually do is ask people questions about could that be better? That doesn't seem to work as well as it could. Is that the best we could do or are there more things we could do? Is there anything you would've liked to do there, you didn't have time to do? Those kind of lead in questions. And the second thing is you have to find, and this is often the hardest thing is to find some way of giving people space for a bit of innovation in the normal business cycle rather than making it something that as we were saying goes off to some corporate innovation group for analysis.
The problem off course in many organizations today is partly is a side effect to deploying IT. They run pretty lean. There's not a lot of spare cycles in many accomplished and knowledgeable people's weeks. So you have to find some way of carving out some time, be it telling them that they shouldn't be in the office every Wednesday morning, they should be off somewhere sitting in the countryside thinking about innovation or whatever

makes sense in that particular situation or just now perhaps using another office or sitting somewhere outside the team.
But that's quite tough because it can confuse people as to what they meant to do at the time. I mean I've heard many stories about Google tried to do this that everyone got half a day a week to work on their own stuff and actually it was much harder to implement when they got to scale than anyone thought. It was really quite a complicated part of their corporate culture is to how to make that work. So yeah, ask a lot of questions but then work out having asked those questions, how would people ever get time to think about them and try and work on them?

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Bradley Howard: How do you try and encourage teams within Endava to do that then?

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Eoin Woods: We do a couple of things. So one is a very sort of event based thing. We run the Innovation Labs competition. Of course, which you are a very important part of. And we do that at location level and at region level and then we have grand final. So we are trying to get people at least once a year for a couple of months outside their day jobs thinking about what they can be doing in terms of innovative thinking. But that's a sort of point in time thing. The way we try and keep momentum right through the year on innovative thinking can also challenge people to think innovatively is through our innovation community.
That's a very federated thing. It's not a hierarchical controlled driven thing at all but it's a virtual organization across many of our delivery locations where people who are interested in innovation come together and we give them encouragement and funding and hopefully build enthusiasm along the way to organize their own events. And we also then organize some events at group level for everyone to take part in order to just try and keep us a little sort of innovation heartbeat going the whole time.

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Bradley Howard: You mentioned about Google struggling once they hit some scale and I'm not saying that in Endava is at Google scale yet, but how have you managed to keep Innovation Lab, the Global Hackathon event growing in step with the growth of the wider company?

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Eoin Woods: It's been quite tough and I have to here pay tribute to Simona Tanislav, who was our group innovation manager. She's done an awful lot of the hard work to do that. What we've done is that we've very much relied on in Endava's federated nature and we've tried to apply the same model in different places because Endava's federation, each bit of the federation is in roughly the same structure and we found that's worked quite well. So we try and work at delivery unit level in a particular region and then work at delivery unit in another region and do that around the world. And so we've broken the elephant up into enough pieces that each one is much more manageable and then try and find champions in that sub area of Endava who will drive it for us there.

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Bradley Howard: What's your aim for the future of the Innovation Lab event at Endava?

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Eoin Woods: Well we hope as Endava gets bigger and more geographically diverse we'll get to the point where we have quite big events in different regions. We would hope to

always still have a global event. I think what we're hoping to do over time is to link it more closely to the more business oriented side of Endava, the client oriented side. We call the (inaudible) groups who are always very enthusiastic and always great cheerleaders for the event and we often find that it's quite hard to integrate them with the event because different timelines and priorities and just sort of different timing. And I think we need to think a little bit about the format work at how we can get the account groups to be providing more input and also more expertise into the Innovation Labs. Particularly as an organization we evolve to being more oriented around industries as we are now.

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Bradley Howard: For anyone thinking about starting a hackathon tomorrow, well first of all I wouldn't recommend they do it the next day, but for someone who is looking at starting to organize it, how do you handle the competitive nature of teams competing? They work for the same company but they're competing. How do you handle that balance? You don't want to get too competitive for example.

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Eoin Woods: Yeah, this is one of the real balances, isn't it? Somebody made this comment to me recently and they're absolutely right. At Endava we're all about cooperation and collaboration and then in the Innovation Labs competition suddenly we turn around and say compete against each other. It's a slightly odd message, isn't it? And we have looked at removing the competitive aspect. The problem is as soon as you remove that it just becomes participation and it's very hard to have any kind of group level activity because we have to somehow weed out the entries because we can't take everyone into a single group final.
It would just be too unwieldy. I think what we try and do is to make sure that it's more about recognition than prizes and to make sure that at every level of the competition there is reward and recognition for people who take part and for people who do well and to make sure that we keep on reinforcing the fact that it's all about fun. If you're not having fun competing something's gone wrong so go and talk to your innovation mentor. And so we try and keep the emphasis on having fun in the spirit of friendly competition rather than some sort of brutal competition to win the final prize.

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Bradley Howard: I know that there's a hackathon going on today while we are recording this with a couple of clients that are bringing together their Endava teams and they're not going to make it competitive. Everyone's going to be awarded a certificate and a small prize for just taking part in the hackathon, which I thought was really nice. And then it becomes been more of a certificate of who comes up with some of the ideas.

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Eoin Woods: And if you can keep it a flat competition, if you can handle the scale of that, the other thing you can do is actually have teams co-operate. You can give people themes and ask them to co-operate and create different parts of a solution to a theme. But I'd ask about the scale of Endava is now, it's difficult to do that at group level. It is something we should probably think more about though at the regional implication stages.

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Bradley Howard: So finally, what do you think are some of the specific cultural activities that we do at Endava to support innovation that are best practices that other clients should probably think about as well?

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Eoin Woods: I think what we do is that we constantly challenge people to think about the way that they're doing their work. And one of the phrases I keep trying to use with people is that innovation is about doing the right thing in the current context or the best thing you can in the current context. So if you like, we have a relatively modest view of what innovation is. It's as simple as picking the right technique for the right job, but that also can be very innovative, exciting, that can be using something absolutely brand new or inventing something that's not been invented before. So I think because we make the idea of innovation quite inclusive, we make the ability to innovate relatively accessible to people.

 I think we get and we constantly encourage teams to be challenging their clients with a bit of ideas. I think we end up with innovation being seen as an everyday thing rather than something with a very high bar that's quite difficult to do and that only certain very, very clever, very qualified people can do often in innovation center, we've just challenged people to think of innovation as an everyday activity, about continually getting better and thinking about we don't just do the same thing we did last time, we do the right thing this time, even if it's a bit harder. I think that encourages people to think about innovation in their day to day jobs rather than thinking about it as a silent activity that's done just in a hackathon competition.

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Bradley Howard: That's such a great summary. It really is. Thank you so much Eoin, for talking to us today about incubating innovation. It's been so interesting. To all of our listeners, I hope you're enjoying season three of the Tech Reimagined podcast. You can find us on all the podcast platforms that matter. Please remember to hit those like and subscribe buttons and join us next week for another excursion into the frontiers of technology. Until next time.