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## Making 'Eureka!' happen

**Companies working to nurture creativity in employees, using movies, toys and other methods**

**DAVID RANII, Staff Writer**

When mobile-phone maker Sony Ericsson wanted to brainstorm ideas to promote a camera phone, it hired a creativity consultant to draw out its staffers' best ideas.

The result: "Image America."

Sony Ericsson gave Robert Clark, a photographer whose work has appeared in National Geographic and Vanity Fair, a S710a camera phone and dispatched him across the country to take photos. They were featured in a Web site co-hosted by American Photo Magazine.

"It's a great way to show ... this is quality imaging," said Nicky Csellak-Claeys, Sony Ericsson's head of brand management for North America. The Research Triangle Park executive said Sony Ericsson was so happy with the promotion that it recently hired the same consultant for another "ideation" session -- an elevated form of brainstorming.

Businesses of many types are looking to unlock employees' imaginations, to nurture a creative culture.

"It appears to be getting crazy with the two words -- creativity and innovation," said David Magellan Horth, senior program associate at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro. "There is a fair amount of 'flavor of the month' about it."

During the 2001 recession and its aftermath, many companies focused on slashing costs to boost profits. Now that those cost-cutting efforts have hit their limits, they're turning their attention to boosting revenue, said Richard Blackburn, associate professor at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at UNC-Chapel Hill.

That's made "new" and "different" hot commodities in the corporate world. "Innovation is a way towards growth," Blackburn said.

Cases in point: The growth trajectory of break-the-mold companies such as Apple Computer and Netflix.

And since many companies are trying to do more with less, maximizing workers' contributions can be essential. But companies can't just flip a switch to get the creative juices flowing.



Elizabeth Hipps, left, Charles Mangin, center, and Ben Laws of public relations firm Capstrat make a mosaic of Albert Einstein out of Post-its (top).

**Staff Photo by Juli Leonard**

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### FOSTERING CREATIVITY AT WORK

Looking to nurture a creative culture in your organization? Here are some tips:

- \* Get out of your boring office. Sharing ideas with co-workers can lead to better ideas.
- \* Diversity is key. People who work in the same department have similar perspectives. So seek input from other departments. But don't stop there. You need input from people of different ages, genders, races and socioeconomic backgrounds, too.
- \* Make sure senior executives are on board. The people in charge set the tone.
- \* Consider hiring a creativity consultant. They aren't cheap, but a good one can be a smart investment.
- \* Let employees know that failure is an option. That doesn't mean tolerating sloppiness and negligence. It does mean recognizing that trying something new is risky business.
- \* Listen to your customers. They understand what they want better than you ever can. They'll reinvent the wheel for you.

### BOOKS

Get ready. Get set. Get creative! It just doesn't work.

Here are some examples of how local companies are working to make it happen:

\* Epic Games, a Raleigh video-game company, sponsors film nights when local theaters play movies that were inspired by games or have edgy effects.

\* The generous employee perks of Cary software giant SAS -- such as on-site medical facilities -- are seen as having a creative benefit. "We believe that trying to relieve stress on employees is one method of making their time at work more productive, and more creative," CEO Jim Goodnight said.

To keep its employees fresh and engaged, SAS encourages them to seek out new jobs elsewhere in the company. Software developers, in particular, can get burned out if they work for years on the same product, Goodnight said.

\* Companies such as Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, the state's largest health insurer, have processes in place to harness the creativity of their customers. Blue Cross, which is based in Chapel Hill, requires its top 50 executives, starting with CEO Bob Greczyn, to talk with five customers each month.

\* Last summer, Capstrat, a Raleigh public relations and marketing firm, created an Elvis Presley mosaic comprised of 2,646 Post-it notes. It was stuck on a 14-by-9-foot wall in a conference room used for brainstorming, to demonstrate to staffers that they don't need a giant budget to make a big impact. It was such a hit that last weekend a group of employees replaced the King with another icon made of sticky notes: Albert Einstein.

\* When Jeff Dahlberg was named creative director of Durham advertising agency OgilvyOne recently, he bought \$300 worth of toys -- from dart guns to Nerf footballs. He calls it "fidget material" that makes the environment less stuffy and "more conducive to creative thinking."

He also gave the go-ahead to staffers who want to wear roller skates in the office. "They didn't really tell me why. I didn't ask," Dahlberg said. "I just said, 'Don't run anybody over.' "

### More interaction

A big push is reinventing workspaces to spark more creative thinking. The theory is that the traditional, sterile office stifles new ideas.

The offices of ad agency McKinney in downtown Durham's American Tobacco complex were designed by Durham architect John Warasila of Alliance Architecture to be an aesthetically pleasing, inspiring environment -- and to promote employee interaction, especially among employees from different departments. Spots where people can gather informally are scattered throughout. Offices are intentionally small to encourage staffers to work in common areas.

When the Triangle's largest ad agency moved into its new space in 2004, it even switched from delivering mail to employees' desks to having them pick it up themselves -- next to a spot where they can also fuel up on caffeine, so they're more likely to linger. On Monday mornings the firm puts out bagels, too.

"It's about having conversations, rather than meetings," said David Baldwin, executive creative

Some books on creativity recommended by experts:

\* "A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative," by Roger von Oech (\$15.99, Warner Business)

\*"The Art of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity from Ideo, America's Leading Design Firm," Tom Kelley (\$29.95, Currency)

\*"Creativity in Business," Michael Ray and Rochelle Myers (\$14.95, Main Street Books)

\*"The Creative Priority: Putting Innovation To Work In Your Business," by Jerry Hirshberg (\$16, Collins)

\*"Open Innovation: The New Imperative for Creating and Profiting from Technology," by Henry William Chesbrough (\$35, Harvard Business School Press)

\* "Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas," by Edward DeBono (\$17.85, HarperBusiness)

\* "Weird Ideas That Work: 11 1/2 Practices for Promoting, Managing and Sustaining Innovation," by Robert I. Sutton (\$26, Free Press)

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director.

Wade Lewis, who manages the agency's print studio, said he never realized how isolated he was when McKinney was based in more conventional offices in downtown Raleigh. But collaboration is easier in the new environment. Conferences with colleagues tend to be less formal, more frequent -- and shorter.

"I appreciate they had the vision to create this space," said Grace Cantor, a 24-year-old strategy planner who joined McKinney right out of college. "I feel McKinney cares for me as an employee. They want to take care of us, and I want to do my best."

The guiding principle behind the creativity initiatives at many firms, including McKinney, is that two heads are better than one. And a dozen heads are better than two.

"Rarely do major breakthroughs occur by individuals working alone," UNC's Blackburn said. "Even the greatest scientific accomplishments are the work of a community of scientists."

Creating a culture where creativity can flourish is just the opposite of the don't-color-outside-the-lines approach at many companies.

"If you're forced to conform, your creativity will be drained out of you," said Jon Fjeld, executive director of the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

### **Change of scenery**

Sony Ericsson wanted fresh thinking in late 2004 when it hired Lisa Parker of Massachusetts-based Stratovation Consulting to conduct the two-day ideation session that led to the "Image America" promotion.

Rather than conduct the session at Sony Ericsson's RTP offices, it was held in a loft in Greenwich Village. A change of venue is a great catalyst, Parker said. "A lot of people say, 'Let's be as creative as possible in this boardroom, which has a big table, rigid chairs, no windows, stale air and bad coffee,' " she said. About half the 15 people who participated were Sony Ericsson employees based in RTP, while the other half were from the company's New York advertising and public relations agencies.

Parker also loaded up on stimuli, including toys, photos and descriptions of different demographic groups and a list of the all-time greatest movies. They were the starting point for exercises ranging from imagining the lives of different demographic groups -- and, ultimately, how they might use a mobile phone -- to free-associating from the movie list.

"You get people thinking of other things. That leads to new ideas," said Csellak-Claeys.

It can all seem a bit silly at times.

"If there isn't an element of absurdity in a session, you haven't stretched your client enough," Parker said. She charges anywhere from \$7,500 to \$35,000 for a two-day ideation session, depending on the location and whether outside speakers are hired.

"It's not cheap," Csellak-Claeys said. "You do it when you want to come up with a meaningful program."

But being truly creative requires more than having a consultant parachute in every so often. The entire organization, starting at the very top, should be committed to the concept.

Jimmy Goodmon Jr., vice president and general manager of Capitol Broadcasting's New Media Group, said his company has managed a string of technology firsts without any formal process in place for scoping out what's new. Capitol's WRAL-TV was the first commercial station to broadcast high-definition programs in 1996. Capitol's radio station, Mix 101.5, was among the first to broadcast high-definition radio signals.

The key, he said, is that everyone knows that his father, CEO Jim Goodmon, is willing to take risks and "really pushes the envelope in being first and trying new things."

In order to be creative, employees also need to know that trying something new that doesn't work won't end their careers.

Being "free to fail" has become a corporate mantra of sorts, but many companies only give the concept lip service.

Companies need to take an extra step to demonstrate that they really, really mean it.

Juanita Weaver, a creativity consultant in Washington, D.C., has one client who light-heartedly names a "mistake of the month." Another calls on people whose experiments have failed, to deliver a post-mortem -- not as a punishment, but as a learning experience for everybody.

The proper attitude, said the Center for Creative Leadership's Horth, is summed up by the story of an employee who submitted his resignation after he made a mistake that cost his company \$1 million.

"I just paid a million dollars for your education," the boss objected. "You think I'm letting you go?"

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