



Fighting the machine?

The challenges, opportunities and approaches to driving open innovation within Corporates

Recognise, implement & maximise

The Whitespace Corporate Innovation Club is a community of over 40 international and global corporate brands with a shared passion and interest in using innovation to help create different and new experiences and revenue models. The senior representatives from the different corporates either have a direct remit around driving innovation on behalf of their company or are a key contributor to it. The purpose of the community is to learn from each other – both successes and failures – but also learn from invited subject matter experts around specific topics or themes.

The Club meets bi-monthly and is always hosted by a Club member and chaired by Whitespace. The topics to be discussed have been collectively agreed by the members to have relevance to them and ones where they can both share and learn from. Depending on the topic external experts are invited to present, engage and provoke an honest and open dialogue amongst all the members.

Meeting Theme

Almost a year after the first gathering of the Corporate Innovation Club, the May 2018 meeting was perhaps the busiest yet. Frank, open discourse flowed freely from the off, and myriad leftfield and unconventional ideas were shared unreservedly, and greeted without prejudice. The meeting was energetic and even playful at times, and perfectly captured the unique spirit of knowledge sharing, brainstorming and open-minded debate that has come to define the Club's collective effort.

Broadly, the meeting explored ideas around assuring that Corporate innovation initiatives are progressive, proactive and impactful. Equally, discussion focused on moving forward Corporate innovation as a discipline, through building community and establishing collaboration. Much of the debate and brainstorming on the day was motivated by the notion of avoiding 'the innovation graveyard': a hypothetical place where both good ideas and failed initiatives are abandoned. Numerous challenges - and the opportunities their solving presents - were also explored.

“

...avoiding 'the innovation graveyard'...

”

Key Takeaways

Is Corporate Innovation too internally-focused?

Several attendees offered thoughts on the notion that Corporate innovation can too often exist in isolation within a Corporation, while innovation staff and teams are not encouraged to have a presence in any wider 'Corporate innovation community', or are resistant to this. While the gathering at the Corporate Innovation Club itself proved there is a community - and willingness to be proactive within it - there was general consensus that much can be learned from the investor community.

There, it was posited, investors having their own 'skin in the game' by the way of funds invested means they are necessarily proactive as a community, and meet regularly at conferences, pitching events and private meet-ups. Several attendees at the Corporate Innovation Club pointed out that innovation is a relatively young discipline, meaning a community has only had a modest period of time to emerge. Members also put forward that they have seen improvements proactively within the Corporate innovation community year-on-year for several years.

Exploring the 'isolated mindset' of innovation

Some attendees suggested that individual innovation teams may not be collaboratively-minded or community-facing, simply because they exist by default as an isolated entity within their corporation. It was also proposed that the inherent and necessary competitive culture between corporations might mean that Corporate innovation has inherited a competitive mindset: one that could come at the expense of innovation initiatives outlasting their creation. Some innovation teams may also have that competitiveness (as opposed to 'collaborative-mindedness') 'forced' upon them by the culture of the wider company.



the process of trying to install meaningful, impactful Corporate innovation was framed as 'battling against the machine'.



The fear of losing ownership

Some meeting attendees stated that they sense some fear of losing ownership of the 'products' and projects established through innovation initiatives; particularly if those innovations are deemed successful and useful to the wider corporation.

As such, much was suggested around means through which to make C-suite teams and other Corporate senior leaders understand the value of innovation, and not just cherry pick successful results. Having C-suite engaged with the benefits and potential of Corporate innovation – rather than just believing it is something that should be done to 'keep up with the Joneses' – has been presented at many Corporate Innovation Club gatherings as a means to assure results have lasting, meaningful or practical impact.

Do short project cycles stifle the impact of innovation?

With many Corporate innovation initiatives, project cycles often run at quarter-yearly or half-yearly cycles. It was proposed that cycles of such a length can stifle an innovation initiative's potential to grow and have impact, cutting of momentum as it builds. Furthermore, the idea that limited cycles could foster a mindset of short-termism was proposed, albeit only as a potential shortcoming. The conventions of Enterprise – including the longer project cycles found there – were highlighted as a potential source of inspiration.

Too big to need help? Small, autonomous teams in large machines

In something of a theme for the day, the process of trying to install meaningful, impactful Corporate innovation was framed as 'battling against the machine'. There can be a striking contrast in the make-up of innovation teams within a corporation, and the corporations themselves. While innovation teams can be modest in head-count, fast to move, risk-positive, experimental and focused on abstract concepts and goals, corporations, by contrast, can be large, process-burdened and confident in proven routes to clearly-defined results. In combination with the aforementioned competitiveness, that may even lead to a trend where corporations feel too big to fail, meaning a lack of support for collaboration between innovation teams and efforts from different corporations.

Respecting failure

In another theme that has appeared in previous Corporate Innovation Club meetings addressing different topics, members discussed how understanding of and expectations around failure must be managed, potentially up to a C-suite level. While 'failure' in numerous Corporate disciplines and functions is typically avoided at all costs, with innovation in particular it can serve as a lesson, and even bring unexpected and advantageous outcomes. With the craft and aims of innovation being relatively abstract and hard to clearly define or explain, an effort must be made to clarify what 'results' and 'impact' can mean within the discipline.



...there is value in focusing in on the technology trends as a way to engage with senior leadership in a way that is specific and easily understood...



Target people; not trends

Many trends – credible or otherwise – can motivate or direct the evolution and implementation of Corporate innovation initiatives. Recent examples include AI, blockchain and VR, with the cloud, crowdfunding and others leading a long line before them.

Corporate innovators can be pushed or feel compelled to embrace such trends as a focus for their efforts. Pursuing trends, however, may not be the most valuable application for meaningful Corporate innovation, even if those trends have value themselves, and exist on a bleeding edge.

Some suggested it was better for Corporates in the innovation space to target individual people in corporations – over trends in the wider world – as a means to see innovation projects move to completion and beyond. In essence, finding a senior leader that is open-minded to innovation's abstract make-up and aims may found a more proactive and impactful process than simply identifying a trend that courts excitement with C-suite.

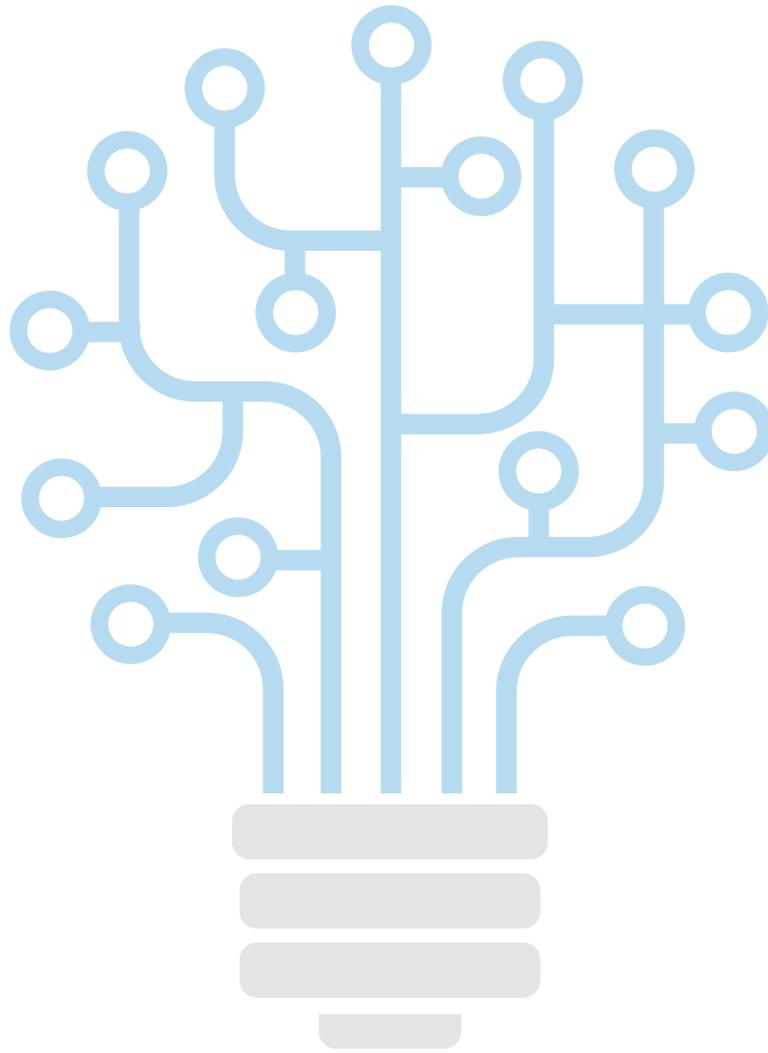
However, it was recognised that there is value in focusing in on the technology trends as a way to engage with senior leadership in a way that is specific and easily understood vs the more abstract discussion about creating an innovation environment with long lead times and a more speculative approach.

Lessons in 'starting a movement'

Inspired by the rather atypical medium of a YouTube video of a man dancing topless at a music festival – which provided a remarkably clear and detailed analogy – attendees discussed proactively building on existing momentum in innovations' community and credibility.

While it is beyond this report's capacity to detail the process of recognising how to start a "movement" around innovation within their organisations it was clear that many in the room felt that building on the year-on-year growth of the innovation community should be accelerated so as to push forward the status, presence and impact of innovation internally and within their ecosystems.

As the meeting wrapped there was a closing thought that leaders of movements are arguably trendsetters. As the movement grows, the status, presence and value of the individual that started it falls to various degrees. That decline can be seen as liberating the growth of a movement, rather than a failure of leadership. Movements are arguably about mass over leadership. A big topic and one that really needs a much longer and specific workshop to discuss properly.



WHITE SPACE

Whitespace is focused on helping high growth technology startups build a strong and repeatable business as quickly as possible. We do this by learning from startups and Corporates that we closely partner with and the combined experience of our founders. We identify the common areas where startups struggle or make mistakes and we build Intelligent Cloud technology solutions to break down barriers to entry for the Founders around business planning, investment raises and professional services that are needed to help mature and scale their businesses.

✉ cic@white.space

🌐 www.white.space

📍 Whitespace, 3rd Floor, 58 City Road, London, EC1Y 2AL