

## Are You Ready For The Age of Intrapreneurs?

By Tim Knox



I've noticed an interesting trend lately. Usually the emails I receive in response to this column come from rookie entrepreneurs or established business owners seeking my input on startup matters, financing, employee relations, general management and leadership issues, policy matters, etc.

Lately, however, many of the emails are coming from employees of medium and large size companies who are growing frustrated at working in an environment that they deem (to quote one email) "Intellectually stifling and offers few challenges of one's creativity and innovation."

These folks are asking how best to move from being someone else's bored employee to coming into their own as an excited entrepreneur.

These people are called "Intrapreneurs" and their ranks are growing, which should be of great concern to the employers who have either been unaware that they existed or chose to ignore them in the past.

By definition, Intrapreneurs are employees who think with an entrepreneurial slant: instead of just doing their jobs by the numbers, intrapreneurs approach every task with an entrepreneurial mindset. They are always thinking of ways to improve products or processes. They are innovators, creative thinkers, and are quite often viewed by management as squeaky wheels. Unfortunately, Intrapreneurs are also often seen as trouble makers and hard to manage because they push the envelope of what's expected from a traditional employee.

Most big companies don't want employees who think independently. They don't want employees who think outside of their job description, as Intrapreneurs are prone to do. I know this from personal experience, but that's a whole 'nother column.

The primary difference between entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs is that the intrapreneur would be just as happy to spend his life as someone else's employee if the working environment nurtured and supported his efforts. Intrapreneurs do not want to become entrepreneurs. They are perfectly happy working for someone else if the environment offers opportunities for advancement and growth based on initiative and creativity, not just on years punched in.

Sadly, most big companies do not know how to nurture their intrapreneurs. Just the opposite is more the norm: they give employees a policies manual and tell them to tow the line. They hand you a written job description and expect you to operate within its parameters. When I quit my last real job some 10 years ago my reason for doing so was the corporate environment was just sucking the genius and the life right out of me. It's something I hear every week now from intrapreneurs.

Intrapreneuring is nothing new. As long as there have been employers and employees, there have been intrapreneurs. But the Internet boom spawned a new

generation of free agent minded employees who want the mental rewards and freedom of working for an entrepreneurial venture, and the financial stability of working for an established company.

Just because the Internet boom went bust does not mean the mentality of this generation of entrepreneurially-minded employees has changed.

To the contrary, Intrapreneurs are now part of practically every mid to large organization and they are biding their time and watching for opportunity while on the company payroll. This new generation of employees brings a change in the workplace mindset; from one of "serial employment" to one of "entrepreneurial advancement."

The only way to convert the focus of these employees, who are usually the most talented people within the organization, is to give them what they want: the opportunity to excel and grow within an environment that appreciates entrepreneurial thought. When intrapreneurs are allowed to flourish, the entire company will follow.

We are in the age of ownership, where everyone from the CEO to the janitor has more opportunities and options than ever before. We demand ownership in our lives and in our careers. The gold watch has been replaced by the brass ring.

Instead of stock options, Intrapreneurs want mental equity. It is important to them that the company succeed and excel to not only give them monetary satisfaction, but pride of ownership, as well.

If Corporate America can't provide that pride of ownership, then the intrapreneurs will seek satisfaction elsewhere: most likely in their own ventures that will be in direct competition to their old employers.

And as usual, my money is on the little guy.

Here's to your success!

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