

How Does IDEO Recruit and Manage Creative Talents?

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Social technology is pushing us into a world of increasing transparency and accessibility. Gone are the days where a graduate's employment options are limited to the pool of companies who have enough money and time to afford on-campus recruiting – there are so many more choices now, small companies, organizations who are doing really interesting things that people can reach out directly not just to the hiring team, but to the CEO and executive team as well. “This flattens the decision making process – great news for the employees,” said Eugene Lin, Co-Managing Director of IDEO China, “all else being equal, leading to a more multifaceted and meaningful career.”

As the world's most renowned innovation consulting firm, IDEO has designed many famous products and business models for a wide range of top high-tech companies including Apple and Google. Because of IDEO's unique innovation model, the Obama Administration even sent officials to visit and learn from IDEO right after it came to power. Nevertheless, IDEO's true core competency lies in the way it embraces talents.

The T-shaped People Philosophy at IDEO

Interestingly, the advancement of social technology initiated and sustained by startups is now allowing all of us to consider at any stage of our career a completely new and different career option – to work not for others but for oneself, and to find a more efficient way to build a good reputation and impact, which will in turn help build a great team.

It is critical to have talents who are both deep in their craft and broad in their disposition for collaboration when it comes to business innovation. The T-shaped people at IDEO are a good case in point. The vertical stroke of the “T” is a depth of skill, and the horizontal stroke of the “T” stands for the disposition for collaboration across disciplines. IDEO's designers come from any number of different fields – industrial designer, architect, social scientist, business specialist or mechanical engineer. They are all industry experts, but they are even better at learning from multi-disciplinary collaborators. IDEO tends to put people with different backgrounds on the same project, so that they can learn from each other through real project work.

In addition to T-shaped talents, IDEO is also looking for people with unique points of views and with unique ways of approaching problems, who are able to see angles we wouldn't normally see while at the same time being enthusiastic about collaborating with others to create something that breaks old boundaries.

This sort of view has an impact on its hiring strategy. “While our hiring process starts with a conversation about a specific role, it is just as much about finding people with interesting experiences and an aptitude for the horizontal stroke of the T – we never

know who might walk in the door and we want to open ourselves up to surprises.” Eugene said.

Nothing Compares To Values

In an organization where intelligent and creative talents are put at the core, personalities, mental needs and working styles are incomparable to values.

It is the corporate culture that connects employees together. Very often people tend to underestimate the importance of the soft impact. Valve Software, a video gaming company based in Seattle, Washington, is known not only for many big hits but also for its extreme organizational structure behind the publicly-available Valve Handbook which describes its company culture and what it values – for instance, they’ve been “boss-free since 1996”. This has helped them attract, not everyone, but people who matter to Valve. Values matter deeply to the success of any firm as organizations evolve and grow.

Given its values, the core assumption that IDEO makes is that its designers are all self-motivated, so the starting point of any evaluation should come from within, and not disproportionately top-down. This is how every career development conversation begins. And IDEO can afford to do this because its talents are all self-motivated. “We know who we are and we are obsessive about making sure we hire people like us.” Eugene said. They have a formal career navigation process called IDEO Journeys, which starts by asking its designers to create their own goals. Their ‘business leads’ guide them to ensure they’re setting objectives that will enable them and others to help them achieve their career visions.

This forms such a kind of mentality at IDEO – being a good project coach is less about telling and more about enabling. A creative leader’s job is to set the stage properly – asking the right questions, creating the right team dynamics – and see what the group comes up with, and “when you approach problems with an inherent trust, the team almost always comes up with something much better than you could’ve imagined.” Eugene said.

In an atmosphere like this, the young creative leaders are wired to care about something bigger than themselves, and it’s something that’s increasingly reflected in the work that some emerging brands in China take on. For example, the Mobike startup aims to reduce traffic and carbon emission in cities. IDEO is creating a positive relationship between people and economy by addressing similar problems, giving designers a sense of mission and meaning to their work. For example, in China, IDEO helped create a new restaurant and retail venture that connects food from seed to table with the purpose of increasing mass access to good and safe food. They helped empower rural communities in China and also helped consumers manage their personal finance more effectively.

IDEO provides a flexible environment and various opportunities for designers to learn and exchange ideas. But in Eugene’s view, it’s not about building a “happy company”. In

the long run, it has to be more about self-fulfillment and a collective fulfillment around a purpose, “which is different from happiness. It’s a journey likely full of hard work, lots of failures, but one that brings ample meaning.” Eugene said. If you’re finding your own value – as your starting point – having to ask your employees about what they’d want to be happier. “Any resultant happiness is likely not going to last for very long. Therefore we should constantly do something different from the past.” And that is what values are about.

IDEO Values

1. Be Optimistic
2. Collaborate
3. Embrace Ambiguity
4. Learn From Failure
5. Make Others Successful
6. Take Ownership
7. Talk Less, Do More