

# Intrapreneurship: innovating from within the corporate cubicle

 By [Lyndi Lawson-Smith](#) 27 Jan 2015

In today's era of digital innovation, tech-savvy start-ups can launch new services and products lightning speed. Some examples of companies that have done just this include WhatsApp, the mobile messaging platform that Facebook acquired for \$19bn in 2014.

WhatsApp is giving South African mobile network operators a major headache by eating into their SMS and voice revenues with its free messaging service. Thanks to today's technologies and a global marketplace skills, competition for large companies can come from nearly anywhere and without warning.

That's why we can expect to see big South African businesses start to embrace the concept of intrapreneurship as a means of keeping pace with the speed of change and innovation in a globalised economy. Defined as entrepreneurial behaviour within a large organisation, intrapreneurship is a way for larger businesses to fast-track development of fresh ideas.

The concept of intrapreneurship has gained currency in the digital era because companies like Google and Facebook are well known for giving employees time, resources and space to work on their pet projects. Google's Gmail, created by employee Paul Buchheit, is an example of an intrapreneurial product hundreds of millions of people use every day.

But before that, an entrepreneurial group of employees at 3M created Post-It notes in the late 1970s. Even earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lockheed Martin's famous "Skunk Works" group worked on secret fighter plane projects during World War 2.

## Why intrapreneurship?

For South African companies, intrapreneurship is an opportunity to make themselves attractive as employers to bright, entrepreneurial thinkers who can create brave concepts and bring them to life at rapid speed. Many of today's most promising graduates and young professionals want to run their own businesses - intrapreneurship is a way to attract and retain these skills.



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It is also a means to do things that might be culturally foreign to the organisation - for example, workers in :

conservative organisation might resist a move to mobile technologies - or to experiment with products, business models and technologies that might be disruptive to the established business.

The company essentially provides the venture capital to seed the concept, and has the option of integrating it into the organisation or nurturing it into a new business if it works out. It's a low-risk way of testing tomorrow's ideas.

## **Are you "intrapreneur" material?**

In today's more progressive companies, managers are supporting employees who want to go beyond the job description. They are looking for people who can think beyond the obvious and they want to give them opportunities to make a difference.

For example, it's becoming common for companies to let workers spend 20% of their time working on projects that aren't strictly part of their jobs or for managers to allow employees to pitch projects they'd like the company to fund once a quarter.

If you are entrepreneurial by nature, then you might be a good fit with an intrapreneurial group in a company. Essentially, to be entrepreneurial within the confines of a big organisation, you need to be willing to take risks and sell your concepts and see opportunities where others cannot.

Like any entrepreneur, one working inside an established business may need to fight for his or her ideas. Gmail seems like an obvious idea to us now, it encountered major internal resistance even within a company as apparently open to disruptive ideas as Google.

So, to be an intrapreneur you will need to have unshakable self-belief, but combined with the tact and diplomacy to get support from people who feel that you're squandering company resources or may see you as a threat.

## **Why digital skills matter**

Digital skills are also essential for a would-be intrapreneur. It's thanks to technologies such as cloud-computing, e-learning, digital collaboration platforms and online marketing that you can be nimble in researching, testing, executing and marketing new ideas.

Digital media and marketing plugs naturally into an intrapreneur's (or entrepreneur's) thinking, so it's an area where it is well worth investing in as you develop your skills and expertise.

### **ABOUT LYNDI LAWSON-SMITH**

After completing both her BA in English Literature, Politics and Environmental Science Honours degree, Lyndi honed her writing skills and digital knowledge as a copywriter with Quirk, working on several high-profile brands and campaigns.  
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