

# The key to competitiveness? It's all in our imagination

Creativity is not just for artists and nerds, it is vital to Australia's success in a global economy, write **Tania de Jong** and **Terry Barnes**.

**D**onald Horne famously called Australia the Lucky Country. But today, being lucky isn't enough in a highly competitive world where emerging economies such as China and India are rapidly climbing the ladder of prosperity.

Staying in the race is more than mining or making and exporting top-quality goods and services: we have to set free the innate creative qualities of all working Australians.

Internal creativity and innovation are crucial factors in Australian companies establishing and maintaining a competitive advantage.

Logic and linear (managerialist, if you like) thinking will remain important but alone are no longer enough to succeed in a global economy.

Many experts and futurists believe that organisations need to place more emphasis on right-brain functions such as artistic, big-picture thinking and the ability to conceptualise.

Australian business overrates its innovativeness compared with other countries, research by McKinsey & Company has found. Arguably, the nation's commercial culture tends to link creativity and innovation more to profit-making and cost management — doing what you know better — rather than to adventures in imagination that might break open opportunities and new markets.

Would continuous innovators such as Steve Jobs and Apple thrive in Australia? Maybe not.

Australians too often think of creativity as the province of "creative types" such as start-up entrepreneurs, artists, advertising executives and scientists.

But why can't an Apple or a Google culture, in which employees are urged to let loose their creative

juices, become normal in our top 200 companies, not just a curiosity?

Fortunately, things are changing, as more and more chief executives and boards recognise that a culture of innovation and imagination is not just a luxury but a prerequisite for success and even survival.

It's no coincidence that major companies such as Australia and New Zealand Banking Group, Telstra and IT company CSC have recently appointed heads of innovation with strong briefs to think beyond the conventional and comfortable, and to encourage employees to do the same.

Creativity must be a crucial part of leadership and management equations.

This means helping individual employees and workplace teams to perceive the world in fresh ways, find hidden patterns, make

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connections between seemingly unrelated things, ask important questions and generate solutions.

Generating fresh solutions to problems and the ability to create new products, processes or services for a changing market are part of the intellectual capital that gives a company its competitive edge.

Here is a simple five-point creativity plan to stimulate cultural change, solve problems and compete globally:

- Boards, chief executives and organisational leaders need to be rewarded for recognising that everyone in their workforce is innately creative and able to create. Corporate growth and profitability are compatible with a culture where thinking differently is accepted and encouraged, and failure and "out-of-the box" behaviour aren't criticised.

- Recognise, reward and prize individuals and groups within organisations who think and act innovatively and, in so doing,

benefit their whole organisation.

- Teach creativity and design thinking as core skills at all levels of education, and especially in MBA and post-secondary business courses. There's no reason the new national school curriculum cannot also carry a strand that nurtures creative thinking, innovation and artistic imagination.

- Offer incentives to organisations that develop and encourage innovation capability in all fields, not just research and development in the technology or manufacturing sectors.

- Reward corporate investment in lifting wellbeing at workplace and organisational levels. Each happy and satisfied worker is a one-person innovation centre who could reward the creative investment a millionfold.

Beyond this, we need to ensure there is a thread of creativity running through federal and state economic and education policy making, and is not pigeon-holed in the conventional research and development corners of the industry, higher education and medical research portfolios.

Channelling some of the creative energy politicians use for petty point-scoring against each other might also help to build a creative nation.

Creativity is not just the preserve of luvvies, artists and boffins. It belongs to and is part of all of us. Setting it free is not simply a matter of good business: it's essential to tackling apparently intractable problems of our world, including poverty, water and non-renewable resources shortages, social dysfunction and mental illness, family breakdowns, environmental sustainability and even avoiding conflicts and wars between nations.

In short, it's something worth investing in.

■ *Tania de Jong is a consultant, social entrepreneur and executive producer of the Creative Innovation 2010 conference in Melbourne, September 8-10. Terry Barnes is a Creativity Australia thought leader.*