

Work Space

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Calling all bright sparks

Want more creativity from your staff? Brainstorming is old hat in the brave new world of role playing, bulletin boards and flash cards, reports **Brad Hatch**.

At Lion Nathan headquarters in Sydney, the marketing director for development and communication often pulls out his deck of 150 glossy flash cards. But it's serious business for Brett Grebert. He uses a pack of cards named *Ask Einstein* to help him come up with new ideas.

He's not the only one at the brewing company to turn to the cards when it's time for some lateral thinking. In fact, the cards — which ask questions like "imagine if it had sound", "imagine if it was more expensive", "imagine if it was French" and "imagine if it was on the moon" — have often been used in Lion Nathan's brand planning, marketing and innovation sessions. "Many of my colleagues live and breathe the beer industry and Lion Nathan's brands," says Grebert.

"So any application that helps us escape the confines of our collective understanding of the industry is a great help."

Devised by Gary Bertwistle of consultancy firm Blue Moon Creative, *Ask Einstein* is evidence of a growing trend towards a range of techniques that encourage innovation among employees.

Whether it's flash cards, global web discussions or a cognitive technique called "virtual brain calming", companies are looking for new ways to squeeze creative ideas out of their workforce. The programs are a world away from the brainstorming sessions or suggestion boxes traditionally used to spark creativity. Lion Nathan's corporate affairs spokesman, James Tait, says the flash cards have helped staff come up with new ways to bring products to market, such as matching beer and food.

"The cards help steer ideas away from the obvious," he says.

Brisbane-based banking and insurance firm Suncorp also wants to shift its focus.

About 100 Suncorp staff have been through a program using cognitive techniques in an effort to cut costs out of their insurance claims process without compromising service to customers.

The program, which involves groups of about 15 staff learning new ways of thinking, was developed by Chris Thomason of the creative consultancy IdeaGen. Thomason says that coming up with new ideas is about making new mental connections. He runs a program called Delicious Pain, which uses techniques such as virtual brain calming, metaphorizing and avatars (fictitious personas or characters) to push participants out of their routines.

Virtual brain calming is the antithesis of brainstorming, he says. Instead of shouting out new ideas, participants are encouraged to make new connections in a low-stress environment. The idea is to take pressure off staff rather than put them on the spot to come up with new ideas.

Metaphorizing is based on the idea that we often use metaphors to



Gary Bertwistle's *Ask Einstein* cards get workers thinking outside the square.

Photo: JAMES DAVIES

Handy ideas for fertile imagination

- Feed your imagination: galleries and museums are a good place to start.
- Exercise your mind: crosswords, jigsaw puzzles, and Trivial Pursuit.
- Read: everything from books and magazines to cereal packets.
- Use metaphors in the office to prompt new ideas.
- Ask other creatives what they do. Write to your hero, asking for advice.
- Break old habits: go to work a different way, incorporate spontaneity.
- Listen to Mozart.
- Start writing things down — anything at all — it's the writing that counts.
- Some colours work better than others. Yellow can boost creativity according to some consultants.

describe attitudes or approaches in the workplace. The technique, used at Suncorp, involved participants drawing pictures or symbols and telling stories in an effort to understand issues.

"A picture of a door could be about going through the door, a barrier that stands in the way," says Thomason. "Using metaphors can help people talk about otherwise undiscussable topics." Avatars are also used in the workshops to get a new take on a situation. Participants are encouraged to assume different personas, including "Mahatma" (in touch with humanity), "Carlos the terrorist" (looking for a dramatic impact) and "Fingers the thief" (always thinking of himself). Thomason says this allows people to

sitting across from each other, they'll shoot each other's ideas down in order to come out on top. Idea generation is an intensely political process."

Katz says that because we can't separate the idea from the person who generated it, our reaction to the idea really depends on who came up with it in the first place.

Speaking to *The Australian Financial Review* from his base in Boston, Massachusetts, Katz says everyone wants to come up with the "big breakthrough".

But the true light-bulb moment is a rare event, because good ideas evolve and are built upon by others. It's a process that requires a healthy amount of criticism, often better done anonymously, rather than in a

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Look at things in ways they normally wouldn't.

The general manager of Suncorp's property claims division, Peter Teen, says the Delicious Pain program was used to help workers focus on the design of new, more innovative systems and processes. Workers were asked to rework and abandon broken processes instead of applying temporary fixes. Such programs embody the belief that workers must come up with good ideas to get ahead in the knowledge economy. But some commentators say office politics can often bring the programs unstuck.

"Workers fear they will say the wrong thing, look stupid, have to do extra tasks or chase the idea up — or perhaps even upstage the boss," says executive vice-president of research consultancy Applied Marketing Science, Gerry Katz. "If you have two vice-presidents

formal meeting environment.

The consultants who pitch these sorts of programs say the best ideas come from "ground-floor thinkers": secretaries, administrative aides, mailroom clerks, customer service representatives and technical support people.

So how do you spark new ideas? Assistant professor of marketing at Columbia University's School of Business, Olivier Toubia, says it's now passé to add rushed brainstorming sessions to the end of meetings, or put a suggestion box in the corner of the office.

He says that while video games, greater worker autonomy and the occasional motivational seminar may strengthen workplace culture, this won't add up to much creative output if workers are uninspired or fear they will look stupid in front of their colleagues.

Toubia recently helped develop the theory behind a web-based game called Idealyst, a tool marketed by Katz's company Applied Marketing Science in conjunction with MIT's Sloan School of Management.

Idealyst encourages workers to anonymously participate in the idea generation process. Users log on from anywhere in the world and post ideas and feedback to bulletin boards, receiving reward points for doing so. Points are usually translated into cash or prizes. If another user builds on an existing idea the original author is rewarded for being the "spark". Columbia's Toubia says that the game eliminates traditional problems like "free riding" where people unfairly take credit for another's ideas.

It brings an air of anonymity to idea generation, helping those who are afraid to contribute new ideas to the mix, he says.

Consumer products group Colgate-Palmolive recently used this idea generation software in the United States to come up with product ideas for an ageing population.

Katz says the web is probably more convenient and productive than traditional brainstorming, because it allows workers, customers and suppliers to view, share and build on a specific question or problem without having to debate it face-to-face across a "high conflict" meeting-room table. But should employees be paid extra for new ideas?

Toubia says tailored incentives can improve creative output. "Getting the consultants in or a moderator can be very costly," he says. "Rewarding staff with cash or gift cards is a small price to pay for new ideas from the people who know the problems best — your staff."

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