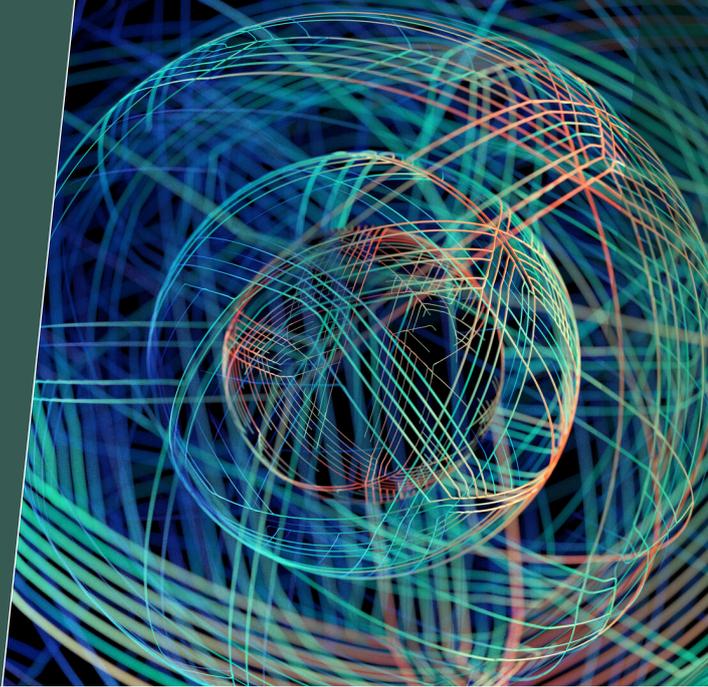


THE INNOVATION MATRIX

The must-have ingredients for successful innovation in organizations

Thought Leadership



Introduction

From the wheel to generative AI, innovation has always been the cornerstone of progress. Innovation propels societies forward—into new territories and new dimensions. To organizations, innovation means having an edge over the competition and increasing revenue while adapting quickly to a changing market.

While many leaders know that innovation matters for their company's near-term performance and long-term success, many [struggle to realize their innovation goals](#). Without a solid grasp of innovation—or how to build a company ready to innovate—turning strategy into action becomes a guessing game.

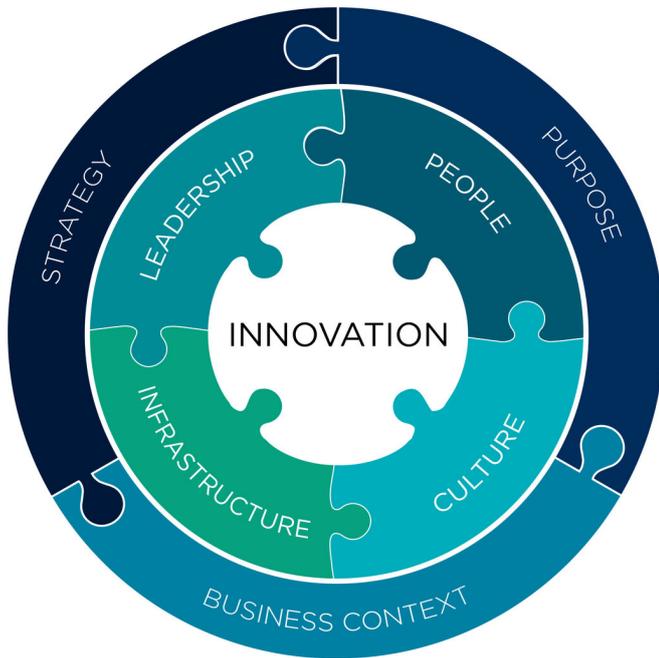
Korn Ferry embarked on a mission to define innovation, identify the pillars for success, and provide the tools organizations need to activate their innovation goals. Through surveys, academic research, and historical data, the Korn Ferry Institute has identified the key ingredients that organizations must have in place to bring their innovation initiatives to life.

Based on our research, we developed Korn Ferry's Innovation Matrix: a set of interconnected levers that scaffold successful innovation. For this success to stick, these four inner levers—leadership, people, infrastructure, and culture—must be combined and optimized within the framework of an organization's strategy, purpose, and business context (the outer ring).

Innovation, at its core, is about creating value through generating, developing, and implementing new ideas, processes, and products, realized through leadership, people, infrastructure, and culture. **Leaders** play a pivotal role in nurturing innovation throughout the company. They inspire teams, encourage creativity, drive performance, and champion transformative ideas. An organization's **infrastructure** supports the balance between diffused responsibility for innovation and centralized innovation functions by creating strong communication networks that enable collaboration on novel solutions. It also supports an organization's ability to effectively leverage data for decision making and creativity, which can be a serious competitive advantage that underpins decision-making and creativity. A psychologically safe **culture** encourages risk-taking, collaboration, and diversity. When employees feel supported and valued, they're more likely to contribute innovative ideas. And finally, empowering diverse **talent** and leveraging external partnerships creates a powerful mix of behavioral competencies.

But knowing what innovation requires is not enough to bring an organization from idea to impact. Korn Ferry's Enterprise Health Scan helps companies identify which levers of the Innovation Matrix to pull to unlock innovation success, as well as shows how they compare on innovation benchmarks. The Korn Ferry Enterprise Success Framework, in turn, makes the matrix actionable by pointing organizations toward the solutions that support their innovation goals.

Figure 1. *The Innovation Matrix*



Understanding the Innovation Matrix

The Outer Ring

Innovation does not happen in a vacuum—it exists to create value in the world. Innovation is a way to achieve business objectives and should therefore be aligned with the purpose and identity of the organization and considerate of the business context. Before starting an innovation journey, organizations should consider these three factors:

- Strategy
- Purpose
- Business Context

Strategy

For innovation to be effective, organizations need to achieve strategic alignment by linking their innovation efforts to their growth objectives. In their book, *Breaking Away: How Great Leaders Create Innovation That Drives Sustainable Growth—and Why Others Fail*, Korn Ferry’s Jane Stevenson and co-author Bilal Kaafarani outline how four distinct types of innovation support different growth strategies and their impact on talent management. By exploring these types, companies can leverage different innovation approaches to execute their strategy, address challenges, and drive financial performance.

Transformational innovation creates groundbreaking change through curiosity and a desire to reshape the world as we know it. It revolutionizes entire industries and societies, with ripple effects beyond its initial impact. Yet, it comes with immense risks and challenges, including cultural resistance, risk of failure, and resource allocation. Nurturing transformational innovation means creating safe spaces for visionary thinkers to explore bold ideas without the constant pressure of immediate results or metrics.

Category innovation builds on transformational innovation and anticipates customer needs. It turns ideas into practical and tangible offerings that allow for follow-on innovation. It thrives by blending marketing insights with technological capabilities, breaking down silos, and encouraging collaboration between departments.

Marketplace innovation, in contrast, is driven by competitive pressures; it keeps category innovation relevant to its customer base. It focuses on creating new features or benefits that captivate customers and keep products or services relevant—and profitable. Effective talent strategies should promote cross-functional collaboration, striking a balance between creative thinking and practical implementation to bring innovative ideas quickly to market.

Operational innovation is the unsung hero of sustainable business success. It focuses on improving internal processes for efficiency and profitability from within. To drive operational innovation, companies need to prioritize analytical thinking, attention to detail, and a deep understanding of processes. Developing these skills creates a culture of continuous improvement that achieves operational excellence and long-term success.

Purpose

Innovation should reflect the organization’s purpose, connecting its core identity with its place in the market. And activating a sense of purpose can be a powerful catalyst for innovation. Analyzing the Global Innovation Index and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), which measures how employees view the impact of their jobs, a clear trend has emerged: regions where people feel a strong alignment with their personal purpose **consistently score higher on innovation**. When employees find meaning in their work, they drive **greater innovation in their respective countries**.

What's more, aligning personal purpose with organizational goals not only boosts innovation but also builds trust, empowerment, and autonomy—essential ingredients for success in modern, distributed workplaces. According to their book *Senior Leadership Teams: What it Takes to Make Them Great*, Korn Ferry's Deb Nunes and her coauthors show that by embedding a strong sense of purpose within the organization, leaders can create an environment that not only supports but also accelerates innovation. Organizational purpose creates clarity and alignment for teams to ensure that they are working toward the same goals, boosting motivation and commitment, and guiding decision making.

Companies that focus solely on profits can suppress creativity, while those that help employees connect with a deeper purpose inspire positive emotional experiences and expansive thinking. A strong organizational purpose can also create a sense of shared identity and collaboration among teams, encouraging the exchange of ideas and collaborative problem solving. As a result, organizations that integrate purpose into their innovation strategies tend to be more successful.

Business Context

Companies often [cling to the status quo](#) because they believe the risks of innovation outweigh the potential rewards. But this can stifle new ideas and create a reactive culture. On the other hand, the most innovative organizations monitor external disruptors like new technologies and shifting consumer needs, and they adjust their strategies to stay ahead in the market.

Indeed, the late economist Clayton M. Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation underscores the importance of businesses being vigilant about emerging technologies that initially cater to niche markets. Disruption is a gradual process, not a flash in the pan, and companies that pay attention to their business context can better understand industry dynamics, market conditions, and competitive pressures. By considering their environment, businesses can identify growth strategies and uncover opportunities for both incremental and transformative value.

The Inner Ring

Innovation requires a holistic approach. Even if one part of an organization is ready to support an innovation initiative, it cannot succeed on its own. The Innovation Matrix's inner ring identifies the components of the organizational ecosystem that must be optimized for innovation to succeed:

- Leadership
- People
- Infrastructure
- Culture

Leadership

For an innovation strategy to succeed, an organization needs the right leaders at the helm of its efforts. These leaders need [essential skills](#) to communicate the vision for innovation, align it with the organization's core purpose, and make it actionable for teams across the business. Korn Ferry's research shows that successful innovation is [closely linked to leaders who communicate effectively and promote teamwork](#) through empathy, affiliation, and humility. These strengths help leaders operationalize innovation through strategy, infrastructure, people, and culture.

Leadership qualities and motivators need to adapt to different types of innovation and business contexts. Aligning leadership styles with the four types of innovation helps organizations create the right environment for each innovation to flourish. As Stevenson and Kaafarani explain:

- **Transformational innovation** needs leaders to be visionary game-changers. They are driven by curiosity and the desire to create groundbreaking possibilities. They thrive in empowering environments that allow for exploration and failure.
- **Category innovation** requires business-savvy leaders with strong influencing skills and a focus on market-driven growth. They are motivated by achieving business success and developing people, flourishing in collaborative cultures that emphasize market insights.
- **Marketplace innovation** calls for leaders with strong project management skills and a process-oriented mindset. They are motivated by healthy competition and superior endorsement, excelling in structured environments with clear execution plans.

- **Operational innovation** demands detail-oriented leaders focused on cost and productivity. They are motivated by creating order and achieving measurable goals, succeeding in cultures prioritizing efficiency and continuous improvement.

Leaders need to align their approach with their innovation context to drive performance now and position their innovation vision for long-term success. Their role in an innovation initiative is more than just symbolic. Leading an innovative organization requires both vision and fact-based management—it requires building a culture where innovation thrives while supporting business growth through continuous improvement. Leaders, in other words, need to simultaneously leverage metrics, champion data-driven decisions, manage change, and eliminate obstacles to innovation. Altogether, research suggests that a leader's actions can have an **even greater impact** on innovation than technological advancements.

Critically, those at the helm of innovative organizations connect the dots between the different functions vital to innovation. In a recent Korn Ferry survey on innovation in organizations, 52% of respondents said they believe the CEO is responsible for driving innovation, while roughly 30% also attributed this responsibility to marketing, research and development (R&D), middle management, and individual contributors. And indeed, leaders are critical drivers of strategy. Innovation requires constant decision making—integrating information on what is technically feasible, business viable, consumer informed, and strategically aligned.

But beyond making those decisions, leaders must also activate the strategy through the functions and roles vital to innovation, as research shows that innovation thrives when both leaders and teams share responsibility for creativity. In fact, according to Korn Ferry's research, highly innovative companies have **a larger proportion of creative employees spread across functions and levels** than their less innovative counterparts.

Leadership needs to be creative and communicate the innovation strategy, encourage a culture that supports innovation, and promote shared responsibility for creativity across the organization. A study by the Korn Ferry Institute, in collaboration with École des Hautes Études Commerciales (HEC Paris), revealed that purposeful leadership positively influences **corporate and organizational support for innovation** among over 1,500 surveyed firms.

This indicates that aligning organizational, leadership, team, and individual purposes can foster trust within teams and create the empowerment and autonomy essential for effective work in contemporary organizations. What's more, the better a leader's communication of that vision and purpose, the more positively team members rated their own **levels of team identification and engagement**.

Innovation is about creating value through generating, developing, and implementing new ideas, processes, and products, realized through **leadership, people, infrastructure, and culture**.

People

Research shows that diverse teams **drive innovation within organizations**. By bringing together employees with different backgrounds and perspectives, companies can make new connections and improve their ability to learn and adapt. In fact, cognitive, cultural, and demographic diversity can maximize a group's collective intelligence, supporting **up to 19% higher innovation revenue** compared to more homogenous organizations. But diversity alone is not enough—diverse and inclusive workplaces create psychologically safe cultures for innovation to thrive. As Korn Ferry studies found, inclusive teams achieve 75% higher success with their ideas, while **empowering diverse teams** leads to 87% better solutions and a 70% higher chance of accessing new markets.

Indeed, a recent Korn Ferry report, "From Moment to Movement," reveals that companies committed to diversity **experience positive growth impacts**, particularly those in leading sectors like finance and technology. Technology and other innovation-driven industries, such as life sciences and healthcare, excel by prioritizing competencies focused on valuing different perspectives and cultures, encouraging new and diverse thinking, and adapting approaches to changing situations.

What's more, top-performing companies with advanced digital presence benefit from investing in creating a diverse and inclusive organization, leading to higher retention rates, longer employee tenure, and improved gender diversity. Those same companies are better positioned to attract, retain, and develop the necessary talent and skills for leading tech-driven innovation. Our research shows that organizations with the highest gender diversity made one-third of their revenue from innovations.

Studies have also found that work engagement strongly predicts key outcomes such as productivity, employee retention, profitability, and turnover (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, et al., 2020). To this end, our research reveals that companies with high engagement scores have twice the net profit, 2.5 times the revenue growth, and 56% more employees who feel their jobs inspire their best ideas, leading to increased innovation.

But it's not just about having the right mix of people—companies also need the right systems and processes to understand and develop the necessary skills and behaviors so their people at all levels can contribute to and collaborate on innovative ideas. To do this, leaders must recognize new and emerging technologies as tools to support and advance human innovation, rather than solely viewing technology as innovation's end goal. New connectivity tools can serve as catalysts for deeper trust and collaboration across various work environments. What's more, companies should consider the bidirectional [relationship between AI and Learning & Development \(L&D\)](#), creating a culture of trust and growth by using AI to invest in upskilling the workforce while encouraging employees to adopt AI and emerging tech for innovation purposes.

While this may seem like a tall order, the importance of a people-first approach to innovation cannot be overstated. In fact, due to the emerging technologies, the people element of innovation can [shift from performing routine tasks to utilizing human cognitive abilities](#) for decision-making, strategy, and creativity. To realize this vision, organizations need to create the right environment to empower, upskill, and connect their teams, as well as have the right leadership to implement the most effective tools and practices to facilitate communication, feedback, and collaboration.

Infrastructure

One of the executive team's key roles is to create a robust infrastructure that supports innovation. Today's data-driven era defines a strong organizational infrastructure through data analytics, metrics, and key performance indicators (KPIs). Organizations can succeed by leveraging absorptive capacity, business analytics, and an early adopter mindset.

[Absorptive capacity](#) enables organizations to identify, absorb, and apply new information effectively. Two critical factors shape absorptive capacity:

1. **Prior knowledge:** A company's prior knowledge, existing expertise, and historical data provide a crucial foundation for an organization's willingness and ability to ingest and integrate new information.
2. **Diversity:** Diversity augments absorptive capacity by blending different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, which helps [maximize collective intelligence](#) through novel connections, multiple interpretations of information, and innovative thinking.

Absorptive capacity accumulates over time. [Consistent R&D investments](#) help organizations appreciate and integrate new internal and external information, therefore boosting both innovation and their learning capabilities. R&D, then, becomes a positive feedback loop that fuels both growth and adaptation. [Business analytics](#) also supports innovation, enabling organizations to better ingest data and generate new ideas. By accurately analyzing relevant data, firms can [respond quickly to market shifts](#) and improve their operating models.

A recent study shows a significant relationship between an organization's ability to increase its value through the integration of data and modern technology, such as generative AI. However, leading the market requires that firms capitalize on an early adopter mindset. Organizations with strong innovative cultures are those who turn the conversation into action: according to research, top innovative companies [deployed GenAI at scale](#) in their innovation and R&D functions nearly six times faster than their less innovative counterparts. Yet, a recent Korn Ferry survey showed that nearly 85% of respondents reported seeing only a 10% to 20% increase in hiring for emerging tech roles over the past year, suggesting room for growth.

Innovation thrives when teams collaborate across functions. Breaking down organizational silos allows insights and expertise to flow freely, sparking creativity and accelerating problem-solving. A strong communication system guarantees interdisciplinary teams can manage complex challenges effectively. What's more, dedicated innovation labs and integrated units like corporate R&D departments and innovation Centers of Excellence (CoE) are seeing a resurgence. These smaller, stable, multi-functional teams often have delegated authority to speed up decision making. This trend, led by tech giants such as Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, is paving the way for a new generation of R&D powerhouses.

Cross-functional collaboration is not confined to internal teams, though. Advancing innovation requires an ecosystem approach that extends beyond organizational boundaries. By actively partnering with start-ups, suppliers, academia, and industry peers, organizations can tap into a wealth of external knowledge. Researchers found that innovations often come from blending internal and external knowledge, showing a positive connection between organizational innovation and external support. Such support provides access to fresh perspectives and bolsters innovation through human and financial resources.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, experts increasingly leveraged external expertise through open innovation platforms, co-creation initiatives, and joint ventures, improving agility, accelerating R&D, and driving transformative solutions. Korn Ferry's recent survey found that while 83% of respondents considered cross-functional teams critical to their innovation infrastructure, only 45% had external partnerships supporting their efforts, revealing untapped potential. Those respondents with external partnerships showed stronger support for innovation and clearer strategies compared to those without.

Culture

Culture is instrumental for successful innovation in organizations. However, that same survey found that only about half of respondents feel their firm has a culture that supports innovation.

Without a supportive culture, organizations may miss innovative ideas that could transform their business. But culture is not one-size-fits-all. Each type of innovation requires a specific cultural environment to thrive:

- **Transformational innovation** thrives in cultures that focus on discovery, provide a psychologically safe environment with freedom to fail, and build trust to empower people to explore groundbreaking ideas.
- **Category innovation** requires a market-focused, collaborative, and empowering culture where cross-functional teams are guided by market insights and operate with a business-owner mindset.
- **Marketplace innovation** is favored by cultures that are based on clear business strategy and execution plans, with a can-do atmosphere that is matrix-driven, structured, and financially focused. This culture emphasizes speed in decision-making and execution.
- **Operational innovation** is best supported by a culture that deals well with "doers," commits to training and development, and operates with clarity and transparency around roles, goals, deliverables, and metrics for evaluating achievements.

For innovation to reach its full potential, it needs psychologically safe cultures that support, promote, and incentivize risk-taking, experimentation, collaboration, and diversity. Korn Ferry's employee engagement data shows that organizations focused on diversity and inclusion are seen as better organized and more adaptable to change, which contributes to their innovative capacity and short-term success. Yet, fewer than a third of respondents in Korn Ferry's innovation survey reported having rewards and benefits structures designed to promote innovation. Aligning innovation goals with incentive programs—such as offering recognition, career growth opportunities, and non-monetary rewards—can further encourage creativity. Giving innovators room to sidestep barriers and hierarchies can unleash creativity and drive positive change.

Innovation cannot happen without risk-taking, even if those risks don't yield immediate results. While predictable outcomes may feel safer—particularly in crisis—fear of failure can undermine an organization's culture and hinder growth. Indeed, research shows companies maintaining innovation efforts during crises rate higher on innovation metrics than those that take a defensive approach. Likewise, challenging the fear of failure in crises is essential to innovation. Research shows companies maintaining innovation efforts during crises rate higher on innovation metrics than those that **take a defensive approach**. And crisis or not, shifting mindsets from the fear of failure to the capacity to learn from failure is hugely beneficial for an innovative culture.

For innovation to reach its full potential, it needs psychologically safe cultures that **support, promote, and incentivize risk-taking, experimentation, collaboration, and diversity**.

Activating the Innovation Matrix

The Innovation Matrix is more than just a theory—it's a tool that helps organizations create a critical foundation for their innovation initiatives and achieve desired results. It enables them to optimize both incremental and transformative value by clarifying their vision for innovation, defining their strategic goals, and identifying the necessary talent, structures, and resources to support their goals.

Successful innovation requires a holistic approach. To achieve sustainable growth, organizations must invest in developing across the four key areas of the Innovation Matrix—and ensure alignment with their purpose, strategy, and business context. The combination of two of Korn Ferry's tools, the Enterprise Success Framework and the Enterprise Health Scan, help organizations progress from the theoretical model of the Innovation Matrix to actionable tactics. Taken together this approach helps organizations understand where they need to invest to build the foundation for their innovation journey. The Enterprise Health Scan assesses how organizations are performing in the four core areas of innovation, pinpointing what supports and what hinders their progress toward their most important goals. The Scan also measures an organization's capacity for innovation by analyzing how well it aligns with and adapts to the six dimensions of the Enterprise Success Framework: business context, purpose, strategy, organization, talent, and culture. By assessing organizational effectiveness across these equal, interrelated elements, the Enterprise Health Scan helps organizations understand their current performance and their potential to adapt and thrive in the future.

These tools enable companies to turn research into measurement and then into action. They provide a roadmap for creating a more innovative workplace, including guidance on identifying the optimal structure, finding the right talent, and aligning their purpose with their culture. This allows organizations to direct strategic focus and decide which investments should be prioritized.

Ignite innovation at your organization today with the Enterprise Health Scan! To find out more, please contact the Korn Ferry Institute at KFInstituteRequests@KornFerry.com.

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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organizational structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.