Paul Thies: Thank you so much for joining me. My name is Paul Thies and on this edition of If/When, we're going to be talking about innovation as a service. And I'm delighted to count as my guest today Kate Willison, she's our global innovation lead at Jacobs, and Matt Stewart, a senior business [00:00:30] designer at Board of Innovation and the founder of Life Sprint. So Kate and Matt, thank you both so much for joining me today.

Kate Willison: Thanks. It's a pleasure to be here.

Matt Stewart: [inaudible 00:00:40] Paul.

Paul Thies: Excellent. Excellent. So Kate, I want to start with you and so the title of this episode is around innovation as a service. And so I think that's something that's somewhat unique to Jacobs, or it may not be something that a lot of people have heard about, the concept innovation [00:01:00] as a service. So I wanted to start with you and ask how would you explain what that is to someone who hasn't heard it before?

Kate Willison: Sure. So innovation is a service, it's one of the tools we've developed to support organizational innovation. And so what we've done is in partnership with Matt and Board of Innovation, we've trained and deployed a team of facilitators from the UK, the US, Poland, Australia, [00:01:30] Canada, and the Middle East. And those facilitators help our project teams and clients reframe problems to embrace diverse thinking, to explore and ideate, to assess and prioritize innovation activities, and ultimately obviously to incubate and scale ideas more successfully. And they do this both in structured and unstructured ways. So they run sessions, both in person and obviously in today's [00:02:00] world, virtually now as well. And that can be everything from a one hour session over lunchtime to explore maybe sustainability ideas, or multiple week long sprints where they really dive into a particular product and solution.

Paul Thies: Mm. And then Matt, so Board of Innovation was brought in to work with Jacobs to help with kind of enculturating an innovation [00:02:30] spirit. And Board of Innovation works with a number of global companies around the world. And you all have built your reputation on the tools and services and thought leadership that you have there. What do you see are the key elements for successfully implementing an innovation culture?

Matt Stewart: Yeah, thanks Paul. I think, I mean, innovation culture is hard, right? And there's a lot of really interesting papers that talk about [00:03:00] all sorts of different components that make up an innovation culture. And we all know it from all aspects of our lives, how like the dynamics between different people, a complex system and organism that is a company, is not something you can just switch a key and turn overnight. But for me, I guess the key things that I find innovative cultures, like at companies that I find really inspiring, one of the core things is always around empathy and customer centric [00:03:30] mindset. So that's obviously something which Amazon has grown to become well renowned for.

But it's something that kind of permeates throughout the whole company. So when everyone is kind of driven to think about who the customer is, what you're creating, I think is super important. Leadership, I think obviously it's key, but I think that strategic direction and resourcing, and we always learn from those above us about what's important and what isn't.

You only [00:04:00] have to look at leadership in terms of the US and elections or what have you, what people are doing above you kind of really drives the way people know what's important for them to do. And then I always think about accountability, but for the right things. So instead of just reporting for the sake of reporting, it's really a culture that celebrates effort, failure, stepping stones, and understands that it's kind of a journey. And then the final thing for me that I guess I see a lot [00:04:30] in innovative companies is what I call collisions. So it's really the fun part where people inside the company get exposed to different people, different things, inspiration. The fun part about innovation is that it's also creative and it's fun, even though it's important to have a structure around it. So having opportunities for people to learn from the outside, from the inside, and cross paths and not be silent is also a core part of that.

Paul Thies: Hmm. Okay. And then recently [00:05:00] Jacob's hosted a innovation as a service facilitation training that both you and Kate and a number of other colleagues put together. And so Matt, let me ask you, what does successful innovation training look like? What are some of those key components?

Matt Stewart: Ooh, so it varies. Also that training that we run in Manchester, I think in February, was one of the last in-person sessions that I did before we all switched [00:05:30] our whole world and trainings have become very, very different looking. But I think what a successful training is still, like a lot of things are similar. So for us, it's everyone being able to walk away and realize that innovation can be rewarding and fun, but it's also not easy. It's participants being able to, like as you mentioned before, pick up new tools and have the confidence to use them already in a project that they have. And that doesn't mean they have to take that out to a client, but they [00:06:00] just say, oh, okay, actually their group meeting, they can roll out this tool. But the trainings themselves, I think it's important that they're always hands on.

I'm a big believer in learning by doing. I don't like lecturing much. I think it's much better that you try something and you fail and you rehash it, than too much time just sitting and listening. And then also that it's fun, it's fascinating. And that's the fun part about my job is that we always get to work on interesting [00:06:30] projects even when we don't quite understand them. And then apart from that, I think another thing that's particularly important with the digital world now when we're doing everything remote is the format needs to be mindful of human needs. At the end of the day, we're people, we can't stare at a screen for too long. We get hungry. We need periods where we're intensely

working, but we also need to chat and enjoy and have a laugh. So I think it also incorporates that human [00:07:00] side.

Paul Thies: Hmm. Excellent. And then Kate, turning to you, a large part of your role at Jacobs is incubating new ideas. And once the colleagues kind of get the innovation bug and they start thinking about how they can innovate, then it's how do we operationalize those innovations? And I know you're very hands on in things like the awards program, where people were evaluating innovations that come [00:07:30] through and also the incubation of ideas. Why is it important for an organization to promote an incubation program, do you think?

Kate Willison: I think there are several reasons why it's really important to do that. I think going back to one of Matt's earlier points about how you create an innovation culture and what that actually looks like. You know, one single innovation program [00:08:00] won't cut it. One program doesn't make an entire culture. But there are lots of challenges that people face internally within large organizations that can act as barriers to innovation. And you do need some formal programs, I think, to overcome them.

So in a consulting environment where people are delivering projects for clients, often they're challenged by their day job. They're busy delivering [00:08:30] and they find it difficult to have the wide space that they need to really ideate and explore these new ideas. And so the benefit then of a formal innovation program is that it gives people the time, it's about providing them access to the right resources. So for example, some of our internal grant programs that we operate, yes, it's about giving people time and money to explore these things. [00:09:00] But it's also about providing the context and the wider team. So, can we connect them to legal expertise that can help from an IP perspective? Can we engage our business and commercial professionals to help them think about their business models and pricing? And so it's really important to develop that community that is a system and acts as a network to help accelerate these ideas.

Paul Thies: [00:09:30] Hmm. And then as a follow on to that, Jacobs is a 15 billion dollar company, 14-15 billion dollar company. We have north of 55,000 employees worldwide, so it's a pretty big company. And so, what are the challenges and benefits of helping a mature organization, such as Jacobs, think and act like a startup?

Kate Willison: [00:10:00] I think, yeah, lots of different challenges and benefits associated with that. I think in Clayton Christensen's book, The Innovator's Dilemma, he expresses it really well. You know, as a mature business, we have all kinds of processes in place that are there for a very good reason. There are layers of bureaucracy, there are financial and accounting practices that we have to follow to be successful. [00:10:30] But sometimes those things can then inhibit innovation and act as barriers, as I mentioned previously. And so some of the benefits about thinking and acting like a startup is really around that, it's about

moving fast. It's about moving quicker. How can we work around some of those barriers or remove them, even temporarily, so that people can sort of unleash their creativity and work [00:11:00] through these innovation processes quicker? And it's not easy and there's a real balance to be achieved, but I think there's ways that you can work around it.

Matt Stewart: Can I just add to that, Paul, as well, especially working with Kate and you guys at Jacobs. I've already just seen things changing even internally with conversations you guys have around like billability. It's like as a consultancy, the old model is, I need to be billable, [00:11:30] I need to be on projects. And so reframing that kind of reference around, are you doing a good job, do you [check 00:11:38] boxes, is hard. And then the other one is, and you guys are obviously very good at it through the work that you do and from being a large company, is risk. You're constantly managing risk in an excellent way. And when you start to act like a startup, you need to kind of lean into risk in a different way where you don't avoid it, but you manage it so to speak. You say, you know what, [00:12:00] the risk is this level. So we can afford to put this much resource towards it, rather than just trying to shy away from it all together.

Paul Thies: Yeah. And maybe to your point, Matt, because you're a mature organization, you have maybe a longer scope or a longer vision of that risk so you can make better informed decisions than say a startup who doesn't have that. But the startup is, of course, they have that more aggressive, risk embracing [00:12:30] mentality. So it's just a matter of being able to, like you said, lean into that. Now Matt, what are some of the best practices you've witnessed of organizations who have implemented a robust innovation program?

Matt Stewart: So there are obviously a lot of good examples out there. Some recent ones, I guess, that I've been delving into a bit more or rehashing, one is Nike. Which is like, when you tie back [00:13:00] to a company that continually is able to reinvent itself in where it sits, that place. Customer centricity is absolute core to what they do. And I think in the last 10 years, even though they're focused on new developments, the number of patents they have, I think is higher than pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer or even Ford. And so they're constantly exploring new things. And I think another thing [00:13:30] they do really well, which I hope all innovative companies must do now is focus on sustainability as well. So I think they've kind of really somehow managed to, through that core process of customer centricity and that constant exploration of being able to stay ahead of that curve.

Another example, which is a bit of an older one now obviously, but is Lego, which I really love. Which is really famous for almost killing itself by just doing what we all said through [00:14:00] innovation was meant to happen. But one thing that I love about the what they really learned through kind of coming back from the dead was that you need to kind of know your value to the world and play within that space and continually create within there. And don't stray too far away from what you really offer to the world. But also partnerships. Like

who can you partner with to bring in to create synergy that can kind of get you past the next step [00:14:30] to explore new worlds or to create new opportunities as well?

Paul Thies: No, I like that a lot. Because like that example you said about Lego, I mean, it's really about being true to yourself, right? It's not trying to be too many things to too many people or all things to all people. But really being true to what is it that made you great to begin with and being true to that. So Kate, let me ask you, what is something you've learned about organizational innovation that [00:15:00] has changed the way you approach your work?

Kate Willison: I've learned so much. Where to start? For me, I think probably one of the biggest things is that it doesn't happen by corporate mandate. I mean we often joke that the innovation team at Jacobs is 55,000 employees strong. And so instead of trying to centralize and sort of put a boundary around innovation functions, such that it's seen as [00:15:30] somebody else's job, it's constantly about asking ourselves, how can we ensure that relevant opportunities, methodologies, and support networks are readily available to all? And it comes back to the individual. And what I've sort of understood and what I'm committed to is then adopting these behaviors that support an innovation culture. And it's easy to say and harder to do. [00:16:00] And I've had to go on a change journey myself. So for example, an experimentation mindset is really important.

And so I've committed to experimenting more. And that can be as simple as, you know what, I'm going to run a meeting in a new way. I'm going to set aside 10 minutes and we're going to celebrate a first on this project. It might be using one of Board of Innovations tools to explore the potential for new business [00:16:30] models. And going back to one of Matt's earlier points, experimentation can feel really risky because it can lead to failure. But for me, sort of what I've come to understand is that it's not about failure. It's instead about learning and then iterating. So based on what you are learning, you tweak something, you pivot, you persevere, you redo. And I've seen a fundamental shift then in how I approach problems over the last few years.

Paul Thies: [00:17:00] Mm. Now Matt, Kate just mentioned the Board of Innovation tools. And if you listening haven't had a chance, go to the Board of Innovation website, there's a lot of free tools that they make available, and they're fantastic. They're a lot of fun and they also help, they help kind of get that innovation brainstorming going. Do you, Matt, have a favorite ideation tool? And if so, what is it and [00:17:30] why?

Matt Stewart: Yeah. So yeah, absolutely, if you're listening, all the tools are free on the website. My favorite innovation tool that I like working with with people on is actually, it's called opposite thinking. So it's a relatively simple tool that kind of follows a simple process where you start by mapping out all the assumptions, all the obvious assumptions you have about a certain topic. So let's say, [00:18:00]

for example, we're trying to reduce loneliness amongst the elderly. Because during COVID, it's very difficult for them to relate with other people. And then what you do next is you take these obvious assumptions that you have, so for example, we say, elderly people are not so good with technology. And then the next thing you do is you flip it. So you say, imagine it's a world where it's actually opposite of that.

Let's say, [00:18:30] for example, elderly people are actually whiz kids at technology. They're up with everything in that, just as an example there. And what you do then is you say, okay, if this world is true, what's different about the world? How has that happened? What's changed and what can we learn from it? And one of the things that you often find is that, one, you have a whole bunch of assumptions about the system that exists that are not necessarily true. For example, if I told you 10 years ago, what [00:19:00] if all songs in the world could be available to you at a subscription? That would just be such a mind boggling thing. And so by switching obvious assumptions to be the exact opposite, you can often find a world where new possibilities are available that you may not have thought of.

Paul Thies:
Hmm. And then Kate, the same question for you. You've been working very closely with Matt and the Board of Innovation team for some time now and have been running these workshops. [00:19:30] Do you have a favorite ideation tool, and what is it and why?

Kate Willison:
So following on from Matt's discussion about assumptions, mine is something called the assumption mapper. So I find myself using this on a weekly basis. And it's all about, A, you first need to understand what assumptions have you made about a particular situation or a solution? It's also a good reminder to test those assumptions [00:20:00] with other people. What assumptions might I have missed or because I'm so embedded in a situation I simply can't see? So once you've then got a list of your assumptions, it's then about mapping them. Are they important assumptions or not important? Are they difficult to test or easy to test? And it's just a really simple matrix. And so for those assumptions that are easy to test and that are important, so a killer [00:20:30] assumption, if it's true, it might kill this idea. And it's easy to test. Well, you've got to get out of the building and test it now.

Matt Stewart:
Do you have any examples, Kate, of any assumptions that you've realized was wrong that you had on the project? That's always interesting, I find.

Kate Willison:
Probably there was an assumption, there was a product that I've been [00:21:00] involved with developing and one of the assumptions was around, well, people once they start to use the product, they'll continue to the conclusion. So part of this product is it's a solution that helps you work your way from A to B, through a process. And the assumption was that, well, [00:21:30] once they've started at point A, they'll just continue through to the very end. And so when we actually went out and tested it though, what insights came

back was actually, well, a bunch of people were dropping out halfway through and not coming back to the process. And we were then able to explore well, why was that the case? What was leading them to do that? And we were able to have those conversations and find out why, which gave us some really rich learning [00:22:00] that we were able to pivot our idea in a new way.

Matt Stewart: That's awesome. I think that's always so fascinating for me. Like some of the craziest assumptions come in different contexts. Like I did a project in Zambia last year when we were looking at insurance for the poor, basically people who had limited incomes. And we were focusing on people in markets. And so the assumption was from the insurance companies we were working with is that these [00:22:30] guys don't really understand risk. And so they needed to probably educate them on what risk was in order to convince them that this micro insurance product was useful.

We went out and spoke to them and they knew more about risk than these insurance people ever did, because they're constantly worried about a fire happening, about the corrupt officials coming in. They're always on the edge of some kind of thing happening that can kind of turn their whole operation and risk their family. And so it was super [00:23:00] interesting to also see that where the insurance companies were just blown away by going, you know what, our whole messaging is wrong. These guys understand they need it. They just don't necessarily trust that what we're offering can solve it.

Paul Thies: That's interesting because it's like you uncover bias and then you also, you uncover like, you've got blinders on in terms of your world view or your strategic roadmap and like so if you don't take those, [00:23:30] if you don't really kind of question those sacred cows as it were, whatever, you may not uncover that kind of those learnings, like Kate said. And it's all about, it's not a failure if you learn something. You know, if you can get better because of the experience.

Matt Stewart: Absolutely.

Paul Thies: Well, Kate and Matt, I really appreciate you taking the time to sit down with me today and educate me and our listeners about [00:24:00] innovation as a service and some of the exciting stuff that we are doing. If you're looking for more information, I invite you to look on the jacobs.com website for our Beyond If program where you can learn more about what Jacobs is doing in the innovation space. And then also check out Board of Innovation. Like I said, they've got just a battery of tools and reports and just all kinds of fascinating things about organizational innovation and creative thinking that would [00:24:30] really be a benefit to whatever project you might be working on. So thank you both very much.

Matt Stewart: Thanks so much, Paul.

Kate Willison: Thanks Paul. Thanks Matt.