

Zero Experience

Want your company to become agile and innovative? Hire talent who have never set foot in your industry

HOW DO YOU GET A CONSUMER to stop scrolling through Twitter and click on something your brand created? That was the question Karina Wilsher, CEO of New York City ad agency Anomaly, was faced with answering for her clients. “If you look at the old model of advertising, it has an ascending story arc with a big reveal at the end, whereas in today’s world, with everyone on their phones, you need to deliver the headline first to get their attention,” she says. “I realized there’s huge learning that can come from news.” Rather than train her team to think like journalists, Wilsher went out and hired one: a former digital editor of *The Wall Street Journal*.

Anomaly hasn’t stopped with journalists. The award-winning ad agency, whose clients include Beats by Dre and Coca-Cola, has also recruited data scientists and tech-product designers. It turns out Anomaly is hardly, well, anomalous when it comes to companies reaching outside their conventional talent pool for fresh perspective, new ideas, and skepticism about business as usual. “If you want radical innovation, you need to look to unusual suspects,” says Marion Poetz, an innovation professor at Copenhagen Business School. As virtually every industry finds itself being disrupted by technology, companies are increasingly turning to outsider talent who can help push them forward, so they don’t get left behind.

For startups, that means considering different job candidates from day one. When Sarah Kauss founded New York City-based S’well, which makes a line of high-end water bottles, she wanted to set the brand apart with sleek, elevated design. “At first, we were just thinking about what’s on the market and how to reflect that,” she says of the cluttered category. Then she decided to hire designers from the fashion industry to create her bottles, which sell for up to \$45. The gamble paid off—soon S’well was setting trends rather than chasing them. “We had



Photograph by MAURICIO ALEJO

rose gold before Apple had rose gold, and then they called and asked us to do a branded bottle in the Cupertino store,” Kauss says. That deal and others helped the company hit \$100 million in sales in 2016, up from \$50 million the year before.

For many industries, outsiders can become your most innovative problem solvers. Ten years ago, Thomas Novacek, head of R&D for the escalator division of Swiss manufacturer Schindler Group, was stuck on how to maneuver huge, preassembled escalators around corners and fit them into tight spaces. Novacek reached out to experts in other fields, including one at a ski resort

ACQUIRING CHANGE AGENTS

Why recruit one outsider when you can buy a bunch of them?



Slow to the self-driving car space, General Motors bought Cruise Automation for \$1 billion last year, along with the startup’s 40-member team of A.I. experts. Cruise co-founders Kyle Vogt and Daniel Kan, both in their early 30s, became the youngest senior directors on staff at GM.



Travel publisher Time Out bought events startup HallStreet last year, promptly shuttered it, and then named the founders its senior vice president of product and director of technology for travel.

Preferred

© ODD MAN IN

A job candidate with no experience in your field may turn out to be your best recruit.



and another at a toy-train manufacturer. Eventually, a mining pro joined the team, bringing a solution that reduced the number of the escalator's components.

To ensure an outsider doesn't turn into an experiment gone awry, Wilsher says, stay strategic about the person's contributions. "Things could go horribly wrong if you just drop an interesting person into the mix and see what happens," she says. She started her journalist hire with a smaller client portfolio. "Sometimes, there's a danger in bringing a shiny new object in and everyone wants a piece," says Wilsher. "We have to be very disciplined about going slow."

When these kinds of transplants are brought into technical companies, they require more rigorous training. Novacek puts outsider hires through months of prep to ensure they understand things like the industry's incredibly detailed safety specs. But

once trained, they can quickly apply their expertise through that new lens. "To implement these radical ideas, you need in-depth knowledge," says Novacek, who has also poached talent from the aeronautics and automotive industries.

Ideally, fresh thinkers become in-house agents of change who will prompt the rest of your staff to remain curious and adaptable in a rapidly shifting world. When it comes to any employee these days, says John Sullivan, a talent management expert and professor at San Francisco State University, "the number one competency is the ability to learn on your own quickly." —KATE ROCKWOOD

THE UPSIDE OF OUTLIERS

Confidence, contrariness, and cultural fit—the benefits of curveball hires

Greater loyalty "There's a secret sauce in hiring a person who knows that I believe in him enough to take a chance," says David Williams, CEO of Fishbowl, an inventory software firm near Salt Lake City. Williams has hired everyone from his electrician to a guy who sold him a snowboard, and he's more likely to size up someone's creativity, sharp wit, and patience than what industry he or she hails from. That talent strategy has helped Williams steer Fishbowl to seven consecutive years on the Inc. 5000—and achieve remarkably low turnover.

Challenged norms "Long tenure in any industry comes with a lot of ingrained behaviors and assumptions that are hard to break," says Dan Pappalardo, founder and CEO of media company Troika. "If you make only cookie-cutter hires, everything stagnates." That's part of what led Pappalardo to hire a cultural anthropologist to help the Hollywood-based team better understand what drives consumers. A recent research report she did included an examination of what America's declining religiosity might mean for TV and film in 10 years.

Culture fit When you care less about industry-specific expertise, you can pilfer personal networks and nab known quantities. That's why Mike Catania, founder and CTO of Tallahassee, Florida-based savings site PromotionCode.org, hired his former University of Massachusetts, Lowell students for tech roles—never mind that his courses were in music theory. "Since I knew their personalities and work ethic, it was easy for me to get them trained—far faster than employees I'd hired conventionally with better industry experience," he says.



Management consultants and product designers typically end up on very different career paths, but in 2015 McKinsey & Co. snatched up Lunar, a design firm whose clients have included Apple, Nike, and Siemens.



AFTER HIRING LIVE-STREAMING startup Huza to launch its video platform, Kickstarter acquired the startup in February, appointing Huza's co-founders to lead its first international office.



Soon after Hot Studio, a 16-year-old design agency, was acquired by Facebook in 2013, the social network dissolved the brand and dispersed its employees among its design, research, engineering, and content strategy teams.

SOURCES: PWC, CAREERCAST, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, MICROSOFT

INNOVATE