

# The innovation incubator: Micro-grants and a culture of innovation

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**ABSTRACT:** Perkins+Will's Innovation Incubator program was established in 2010 with the goal of helping to foster a culture of innovation, creativity and exploration within our practice. The presenters of this presentation co-created the program, and continue to lead the program for the firm. Using the Kiva microfinancing model as inspiration, the Innovation Incubator encourages an entrepreneurial spirit within the firm, thus not relegating innovation to a small group of people, but rather empowering all staff members to seek opportunities for exploration in their work.

The objective of this presentation is to explore how relatively small investments in an individual's or team's creative ideas can lead to significant results without negatively impacting – indeed, positively supporting – a private design firm's productivity, profitability and culture. The Incubator program's structure, organization and processes are explained, along with the lessons learned in its first five years of existence.

Administered by a firmwide "Innovation Project Committee", a bi-annual online application process allows potential "Incubator Project Participants" (individuals or teams) to receive "micro-grants" of money and/or time to create or accelerate the development of innovative methodologies, collaborative research endeavors, special technical expertise, or other forms of intellectual capital that reinvigorate our practice in a relatively autonomous way. "Incubator Office Champions" offer inspiration, guidance and support at the local level for the selected Project Participants and ensure project results are disseminated. Each grant is a maximum of 40-hours and \$1,000 in reimbursables per individual, or 80-hours and \$2,000 in reimbursables per group. The Incubator program budget is set annually and tracked monthly.

In the Incubator's five years of existence, we have held ten bi-annual calls for entries, over 300 project applications, and over 100 project awards. Individual projects have led to breakthroughs in understanding environmental factors that contribute to exacerbating PTSD in veterans, advocating for reintroducing the street car to downtown Los Angeles, constructing a prototype parklet in San Francisco, building a successful case for applying nontraditional methods of bringing daylight into an urban infill project in Boston, and creating an interactive digital toolkit for gathering pre-occupancy information in a workplace environment. Current explorations involve testing virtual reality as a design communication tool, contributing to the emerging dialogue on tall wood buildings, researching correlations between health indicators and location, and creating a computational database of renewable energy incentives in support of Net Zero Site Energy Design.

The program intent is to spark innovative thinking in the form of focused, nimble explorations rather than to support extended research projects. Many times, however, the process does not end with the completion of an Incubator project. Frequently, these "micro" projects are connected with promising academic or nonprofit partners with which to apply for external grants, or shifted into Perkins+Will's nonprofit arm "AREA Research" for further development, or adopted by the firm as tools or methodologies to employ on our projects. All results are distributed internally and many are also disseminated externally through websites, conferences, papers, and research journals. The staff response has been overwhelmingly positive.