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In Pursuit of the Perfect Brainstorm

By DAVID SEGAL

Last month, in a small room on the fifth floor of a high-rise building in San Mateo, Calif., three men sat around a table, thinking. The place was wallpapered with Post-it notes, in a riot of colors, plus column after column of index cards pinned to foam boards. Some of the cards had phrases like “space maximizers” or “stuff trackers” written on them. Many had little three-dimensional ink drawings and titles, like “color-coded [Tupperware](#) horizontal stacker.” It looked as if these guys had been locked in and told they couldn’t leave until they dreamed up 1,000 of the wackiest home-storage items they could imagine.

Which was pretty much what happened. “We’re in our third month,” said one of the men, Clynton Taylor, “so we’re at about the halfway point.”

This was a project room at Jump Associates, a company with 50 employees that comes up with ideas to solve what it calls “highly ambiguous problems.” Exactly what problem was being solved in the room, and which client asked Jump to solve it, the company wouldn’t say. But Jumpsters, as its employees call themselves, are chattier about closed cases. Procter & Gamble asked Jump to study the future of water and what it portends for a company that makes water-dependent products like soap and laundry detergent. [Mars](#), the candy maker, asked Jump to define the current meaning of “indulgence,” on the theory that it now conjures pampering rather than stuffing your face. [General Electric](#) has retained Jump for at least 10 different projects.

Jump’s work has elements of management consulting and a bit of design-firm draftsmanship, but its specialty is conceiving new businesses, and what it sells is really the art of innovation. The company is built on the premise that creative thinking is a kind of expertise. Like P.&G. and Mars, you can hire Jump to think on your behalf, for somewhere between \$200,000 to \$500,000 a month, depending on the complexity and ambiguity of the question you need answered. Or you can ask Jump to teach your corporation how to generate better ideas on its own; Jump imparts that expertise in one- and five-day how-to-brainstorm training sessions that can cost \$200,000 for a one-day session for 25 employees.

This was a pretty exotic business model when Jump opened in 1998, but it isn’t today. In the

last decade, a quirky legion of idea peddlers has quietly invented what might be a new discipline and is certainly an expanding niche. How and why this happened is, naturally, a subject that everyone in the field theorizes about. What's clear is that in recent years, much of corporate America has gone meta — it has started thinking about thinking. And all that thinking has led many executives to the same conclusion: We need help thinking.

A few idea entrepreneurs, like Jump, Ideo and Kotter International, are companies with offices and payrolls. But many are solo practitioners, brains for hire who lecture at corporations or consult with them regularly. Each has a catechism and a theory about why good ideas can be so hard to come by and what can be done to remedy the situation. Eric Haseltine, who has worked for both [Disney](#) and the [National Security Agency](#), draws on the findings of evolutionary psychologists to explain to corporations why they are often unable to see opportunities that are right in front of them. “Although we like to believe we know what is going on in our brains, we know almost nothing about what is going on inside them,” he says. “We're not only blind to certain things, but we're blind to the fact that we're blind to them.”

Though they offer different messages, idea entrepreneurs have plenty in common. Nearly all are superhigh energy. (“I'm octotasking,” said one, speaking on the phone.) Many are just eccentric enough to straddle the line between crank and visionary. (In his spare time, Haseltine is inventing a communication system designed to work in the event of an apocalyptic disaster.) Quite a few of them have published books with the word “innovation” in the title. All of them hate to be called consultants. “I like to position myself as a thought leader,” says Vijay Govindarajan, a professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business and co-author of “The Other Side of Innovation.” “A consultant solves problems,” Govindarajan says. “That is not my role. What I want is for companies to self-diagnose their problems and self-discover their own solutions through my thought leadership.”

You often hear this from idea entrepreneurs: Don't ask us for the answers. Let us help you frame the questions, so you can answer them yourself.

When I visited Jump Associates in San Mateo in early November, it was conducting a one-day boot camp, attended by a couple of dozen executives from the region. The morning session started at 8:30 and was led by a handful of Jumpsters, most of whom were in their 30s. Dressed in identical T-shirts, they seemed plucked from the [Apple Store](#). Some of them were M.B.A.'s and former management consultants, but nearly everyone's résumé had a polymathic twist. One Jumpster was a former U.S. forest ranger and Korean foreign-ministry staff member. Another had an undergraduate degree in civil engineering and a master's in visual criticism.

The tone of the day was buoyant and rah-rah in a summer-camp kind of way; it began on a

sunlit terrace, where everyone stood in a circle for a few yogalike warm-up exercises, to ease our way to cogitation. Our goal, we soon learned: to conceive business plans that would improve the experience of commercial air travel. (This was a pure, Platonic exercise in innovation, since none of the executives hailed from the airline industry.) For the next few hours, we were schooled in Jump 101, which amounted to a series of interactive lectures, interrupted by small-group sessions in other rooms.

Despite the Up With People tenor, there was serious thought about how ideas are born and nurtured, and why some great ideas die after just a few gulps of oxygen. Like many of its competitors', Jump's core offering is an assortment of refinements to old-fashioned brainstorming. The analogy to weather built into that term is apt, it turns out, because Jump and others contend that without the right atmospheric mix, no brainstorming session will produce the cognitive version of lightning. Dev Patnaik, a sunny, kinetic co-founder and the chief executive of Jump, notes that even under ideal circumstances, traditional brainstorming can devolve into a kind of competitive idea tennis. You think of a new use for pencil. Then me. Then you. Then me. Somehow, the unstated goal is winning, however ill defined victory might seem, instead of ginning up virtuoso concepts.

At Jump, they prefer to brainstorm with a variation of a technique pioneered in improv theater. A comic offers the first sentence of a story, which lurches into a (hopefully funny) tale, when someone else says, "Yes, and?" then adds another sentence, which leads to another "Yes, and?"— and back and forth it goes. In the context of brainstorming, what was once a contest is transformed into a group exercise in storytelling. It has turned into a collaboration.

One of Jump's first megaclients was [Target](#), in 2001. Still early in its spiffy-design phase, Target was selling home products by the designers Michael Graves and Phillippe Starck. Kmart was teamed up with [Martha Stewart](#). Robyn Waters, then Target's vice-president of trend, design and product development, was worried that the company's famous-designer-on-a-budget success was being mimicked in categories that Target considered strongholds. One such category was back-to-college. Using a variety of methods, including "Yes, and?" brainstorming and having anthropologists analyze video footage of collegebound kids shopping for kitchenware, Jump helped devise a product called Kitchen in a Box, a collection of dozens of different utensils, pans, pots and a kettle, later designed by [Todd Oldham](#). Sales took off. "It worked phenomenally well," Waters says.

Why now? Why did innovation-mania take hold in the last decade or so?

One school of thought holds that corporations both rise and die faster than ever today, placing a premium on the speedy generation of ideas. The dot-com boom accelerated the process, Govindarajan says. "In the late '90s, people started to say strategy isn't about stability, it's

about change,” he says.

Other ideas entrepreneurs offer a “great man” theory, pointing to the enormous influence of Clayton M. Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor and an author of books including “The Innovator’s Dilemma” and “Innovation and the General Manager.” Christensen coined the term “disruptive innovation” in 1992 to describe the kind of technological and marketing ideas that blindsided established and seemingly well managed businesses. Think of [Netflix](#), which reinvented the way videos are rented and crushed [Blockbuster](#). Or Sears, a titan of retail for decades, which was poleaxed by discounters like [Wal-Mart](#). Christensen has plenty of suggestions for avoiding the fate of the disruptees; for instance, he urges corporations to wall off a division that is built to think creatively and is small enough to be excited by small profits. But all of his prescriptions can be boiled down to three words: Innovate or die.

Dev Patnaik of Jump has his own answer to the why-now question. He contends that advances in technology over the past three decades have gradually forced management to reconceive its role in the corporation, shifting its focus from processing data to something more esoteric. “My dad was a midlevel manager for [I.B.M.](#),” Patnaik explains, “and I remember him in the ’70s, sitting there with plastic [3M](#) transparencies, by hand, with marker, to make presentations. For years, the good manager was one who had data at their fingertips. What’s our sales in Peoria? ‘It’s actually 47 percent above last year.’ People say, ‘Oh, he’s a good manager.’” By the early ’90s, though, companies like [Microsoft](#) and [SAP](#) were selling software that digitized this task. The days when a manager at, say, the Gap could earn a bow just for knowing how many sweaters to ship to Seattle were over. “When that happens, what is the role of the manager?” Patnaik asks. “Suddenly it’s about something else. Suddenly it’s about leadership, creativity, vision. Those are the differentiating things, right?” Patnaik draws an analogy to painting, which for centuries was all about rendering reality as accurately as possible, until a new technology — photography — showed up, throwing all those brush-wielding artists into crisis. “Then painters said: ‘Well, wait, you can tell what *is* but you can’t tell me my *impression* of what is. Here’s how it looks to me, like Seurat. Or the Cubists who said, ‘You can’t capture what is going on from multiple angles.’” Technology forced painters to re-evaluate, which transformed their work. Something similar has happened in corporate America. As Patnaik puts it, “We’re in the abstract-expressionist era of management.”

Of course, as expressionistic as this era may be, it is far from an ideal moment to sell innovation. The recession caused many companies to pare back the number of consultants they retain. Meantime, giant consulting firms like Bain and Booz Allen Hamilton are peering down at this relatively tiny industry with an eye to co-opting it, says Ram Mudambi of [Temple University’s](#) Fox School of Business. “The traditional consulting firms have talked and advised about innovating for years,” he says, “but the advice was usually that it was dangerous for a large

company to innovate from within. The mantra was: ‘When you want new ideas, buy them. Find a small company and acquire it.’ ”

Precisely how Jump’s business model could work in a management firm with a vastly larger payroll is unclear. “But what Jump and others are doing is squarely in the management-consultants’ space,” Mudambi says. “So believe me, they’re watching.”

For the competition part of the day at Jump’s boot camp, we were divided into groups of three. Our first job, a Jumpster informed us, was to come up with an idea that would make air travel completely unbearable.

One team thought of a doozy. “A reverse auction,” explained Brad Oberwager, the founder of Sundia, which sells premium fruit cups. “Everyone buys a cheap ticket for, say, \$200, and then at the gate, an airline employee stands up and says: ‘O.K., who wants to get on the plane for \$400 more? You can sit anywhere you like.’ And so on until all the seats are sold.”

A nightmare, everyone agreed. Now, we were told, take that terrible idea and turn it into something that you actually like. After a few minutes of mental jujitsu, the group conjured this: Why not allow, say, a college kid in need of some extra cash to sell his prime window seat to someone willing to part with money to avoid being squished in the middle? If you had the kid’s e-mail address, a company, acting as a middleman, could send him or her a message: Would you take \$200 to move to 22F?

Airfair was born. After the group spent some time fine-tuning the business model, what was needed, as the deadline for presentations neared, was a catchy motto. People tossed out ideas, one after another.

“How about Airfair: Seat exchange in the air?”

“Exchange your seats in the air.”

“Airfair. Your seat choice.”

“Airfair: Upgrade in the air”?

“Maybe a play on fair trade.”

“Just ‘fair trade.’ ”

“Fair trade in the air?”

This, of course, is the animated and slightly chaotic sound of brainstorming, the term

popularized by Alex F. Osborn. In 1948, Osborn, the man who put the O in BBDO, the legendary advertising firm, wrote “Your Creative Power,” a jaunty, history-filled book that argued that creativity was essentially a muscle that, with enough exercise, anyone could develop. Especially if that exercise happened in groups, like the ones he started organizing at BBDO in 1939. The key to these sessions, he stated, was creating an atmosphere in which judgment about the quality of any idea is suspended. If participants worry about criticism, they edit themselves, which undermines the process. “The crazier the idea, the better; it’s easier to tone down than to think up.”

Most idea entrepreneurs offer what could be described as Osborn deluxe. Govindarajan, the Dartmouth professor, presents companies with what he calls the three-box framework. In Box 1, he puts everything a company now does to manage and improve performance. Box 2 is labeled “selectively forgetting the past,” his way of urging clients to avoid fighting competitors and following trends that are no longer relevant. Box 3 is strategic thinking about the future. “Companies spend all of their time in Box 1, and think they are doing strategy,” he says. “But strategy is really about Box 2 and 3 — the challenge to create the future that will exist in 2020.” He recommends to clients what he calls the 30-30 rule: 30 percent of the people who make strategic decisions should be 30 years old or younger. “The executives who’ve been there a long time, they grew up in Box 1,” he says. “You need voices in the room that aren’t vested in the past.”

Eric Haseltine, the entrepreneur who has married management consulting and evolutionary psychology, says he walks his clients through a series of exercises intended to demonstrate how little they know about their brains. One of his favorites is the “cocktail-party phenomenon,” in which he asks participants to eavesdrop on a single conversation in a crowded room. It’s possible only if you manage to ignore every other sound. “Tuning in requires tuning out,” he says, “but few people realize how much they are tuning out at any given moment so they can focus on whatever they are focusing on.” Tuning out is adaptive, he says — it helped our hunter ancestors to focus on their prey and avoid starvation. But his job is to point out to clients how that adaptation can also limit their perspectives without them realizing it, and to offer them practical strategies to deal with these unconscious limitations.

To Patnaik, the traditional groupthink session — even with modifications — misses something crucial about how great ideas are often generated. A lot of breakthroughs are born in meditative states, he says, the mind-set you’re in when alone and driving, for instance. In the past 20 years, he says, neuroscience has found, with the aid of devices like EEGs and fMRIs, a link between the slower rhythms associated with zoning out and creativity. “Why do you have great ideas when you’re in the shower?” Patnaik asks. “You’re at ease. Your sense of judgment is quieted, you’re making nonlinear connections, you’re more likely to come up with great ideas. A

shower is basically meditation for amateurs.”

They don't put employees or boot campers in showers at Jump, but they sometimes avoid the sort of directed group thinking that Osborn championed. At a five-day course for G.E. employees, the goal was to come up with a new revenue source for the company's aircraft-engine division. But Jump didn't just conduct brainstorming discussions. As the week neared its conclusion, and as the participants started becoming increasingly antsy, Jump sent them shopping. “We sent some to a cooking store, we sent some to a toy store, some to a hardware store,” Patnaik says. “And we told them, ‘We want you to buy something that is a metaphor for the solution.’”

One of the participants returned with a model jet, which was sitting on a pedestal that was a black square, painted to look like a small bit of runway. When Patnaik checked in, they were contentedly staring at the model jet and already had a motto for their solution: take the tarmac with you. Private jets, they explained, are generally based in a handful of airports near big cities, but they land in out-of-the-way places that often lack parts and mechanics. Which means the jets are frequently idled, waiting to be fixed. For a subscription fee, G.E. could guarantee jet owners speedy service in, say, 40 different airports. “That didn't happen from a brainstorming session,” Patnaik says. “If you read Osborn, he tells you to stay focused on the question.”

At the final event of the camp I visited, the results of Jump's techniques were on display. Nine different business pitches for air-travel improvements were presented, each to the entire room. Some were cockamamie (Skyloft, which turns the cargo section of the jet into a gym). Others were goofy (Paciflier, a pacifier that miraculously quiets babies). Every idea was vigorously applauded, but the crowd favorite, in a kind of clap-off that wrapped up the event, was Airfair. By then, the three attendees who imagined it were talking seriously about looking for investors. “I hope you're not planning to write about this,” one of them told me with surprising gravity, “before we have a chance to run with the idea.”

David Segal is a business reporter for The New York Times.