Rapid Evidence Assessment of Empirical Studies on Antecedents of Innovative Work Behavior

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. What Is Innovative Work Behavior?

Innovative work behavior (IWB) refers to the activities employees engage in to develop, promote, and apply new ideas that benefit their organization. It is typically described as a multi-stage process rather than a single act:

1) Exploring — recognizing a problem, gap, or opportunity worth addressing;
2) Generating — producing novel and useful ideas or solutions;
3) Championing — promoting an idea to others, building support, and securing buy-in or resources; and
4) Implementing — turning the idea into practice and embedding it in actual routines or products.

Meta-analyses demonstrate that IWB is a genuinely multi-level phenomenon: no single antecedent dominates across all contexts, and evidence quality varies considerably between predictors. Most of the studies included in this review measure innovative behavior (the process of exploring, generating, and championing ideas), rather than innovative performance (the resulting quality, adoption, or business value of those ideas). For innovative performance, the literature points to an additional 'execution layer' — coordination, resourcing, and clear decision rights — distinct from what drives idea generation itself.

2. Individual-Level Predictors

The following individual characteristics are repeatedly identified as robust predictors of innovative behavior:

- Proactive personality — identified as the strongest individual-level predictor in multiple studies (β = .39).

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- Learning goal orientation — in one study, the only individual characteristic significantly associated with all three stages of innovative behavior (idea generation, promotion, and realization), even when tested alongside leadership and psychological safety.
- Innovative self-efficacy and psychological capital — both significant predictors; self-efficacy showed the single largest influence on IWB in one study of Vietnamese private firms.
- Creative self-efficacy, absorptive capacity, learning agility, and intrinsic motivation — among the strongest correlates identified in a meta-analysis of Korean corporate employees, though effect sizes may not generalize outside that context.

A head-to-head comparison found individual factors exert a somewhat larger overall impact on IWB than organizational factors — though this varies by study and context.

3. Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a group-level phenomenon that refers to the shared belief held by members of a group that the group is safe for 'interpersonal risk taking' - a sense of confidence that others will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is one of the best-supported predictors across the literature, operating both as a direct predictor and as the mechanism through which leadership and climate translate into innovative behavior.

- A meta-analysis of 94 independent samples found psychological safety moderately predicts individual innovative behavior (r = .30) and more strongly predicts team-level innovation (r = .44).
- Multiple single studies confirm a direct, positive relationship between psychological safety and innovation, in high-tech firms, hybrid-work settings, and office employee samples.
- Psychological safety mediates the effect of leadership style on innovative behavior — leaders appear to influence innovation largely by making people feel safe enough to take the interpersonal risk that suggesting or challenging ideas involves.
- Psychological safety also acts as a boundary condition: supportive HR systems and high-performance work systems translate into innovative behavior more effectively when psychological safety is present.
- In one head-to-head study, learning goal orientation outperformed psychological safety as a predictor of all three stages of innovative behavior — so while psychological safety is consistently important, it is not always the single strongest factor in every model.

4. Leadership style

Leadership style is a consistent predictor, though the evidence suggests it works primarily by shaping conditions (autonomy, psychological safety, fairness) rather than through some direct effect on its own:

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- Transformational leadership influences IWB both directly and indirectly, largely through its effect on innovation climate — though one study found no direct effect at all, suggesting this relationship is context-dependent.
- A meta-analysis of 48 studies found delegation of authority and staff participation in decisions positively predict IWB, with delegation showing the strongest effect.
- Leader-member exchange quality and employees' perceptions of fairness are also identified as consistent predictors.
- Inclusive, ethical, empowering and servant leadership each show positive effects on IWB, but are largely mediated through psychological safety.

5. Climate, Job Design, and Organizational Factors

The following factors were found to have positive impact on IWB, but the effect sizes were smaller than the predictors discussed above.

- Innovation climate: employees' shared perceptions of whether their work environment actively encourages and supports new ideas and creative problem-solving.
- Organizational and supervisory support: employees' perceptions of how much the organization / their supervisor values their contributions
- Job design factors: in particular employees’ discretion over methods, workload, and cognitive space to learn
- Knowledge sharing and communication with managers/peers

6. Limitations

The scientific literature as a whole shows considerable diversity: over 150 antecedent variables have been identified across models. Many of these are tested inconsistently — variously as predictors, mediators, or moderators — indicating real causal complexity rather than a single settled model.

7. References

Available on request

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