



Redefining the Corporate Foundation: The Innovation Foundation's Path to Social Impact at Scale



Rethinking What a Corporate Foundation Can Be

In 2020, the Adecco Group Foundation, the global corporate Foundation of the Adecco Group, faced a strategic dilemma. After three years of operation as a traditional foundation, it had reached a tipping point. Its portfolio had grown and diversified steadily, spanning initiatives from youth employment to elite athlete reintegration. On a parallel track, it had developed an early version of a Social Innovation Lab, a different operating model. With this breadth came fragmentation. Each programme inherited from the Adecco Group operated under a different logic, resulting in purpose dilution and strategic drift. Internally, the team reported feeling stretched thin across too many directions and stakeholders.

As the COVID-19 crisis disrupted labour markets globally, it also created an opportunity for reflection. Managing Director Cynthia Hansen led a comprehensive review of the Foundation's impact model, working closely with the Foundation's Board. What emerged was a fundamental question: What if we reimaged what a corporate foundation can be and how it can operate, focusing on developing our own scalable solutions to systemic problems, instead of investing in other organizations' solutions?

That question became the basis for a radical transformation that spanned all of 2021. In 2022, the Foundation relaunched as the **Innovation Foundation (IF)**. It abandoned the traditional operating model of corporate philanthropy in favour of running as a Social Innovation Lab. Legacy initiatives were restructured or exited. In their place, IF introduced a tightly focused mandate: to improve access to work for underserved populations by identifying root barriers and building actionable, scalable solutions.

As Cynthia reflected, *"It wasn't about doing more. It was about doing better; being laser-focused on where we could move the needle and make the most impact."*

Designing a Fit-for-Purpose Operating Model

At the core of IF's transformation is a methodology that is both simple and ambitious: **Scan – Build – Scale**. This structured innovation process draws inspiration from venture studios, public innovation labs, and systems-change initiatives.

The **Scan** phase identifies underserved populations and the systemic barriers they face in accessing the world of work. This includes desk research, expert consultation, and interviews with target populations to understand not only who is being left out, but why. **Build** develops social solutions using human-centric design and systems thinking, leveraging multi-stakeholder Working Groups. Around the most promising solutions, Venture Teams are created - small, cross-functional squads that develop Minimum Viable Products. Finally, the most promising solutions enter the **Scale** phase, where they are spun out of the Foundation and into partner organisations or as stand-alone entities to implement, operate, and grow beyond the



original geography and target audience. Crucially, IF does not retain operational ownership and steps into an advisory or convening role where needed.

Every solution is developed with the goal of spin-off, not long-term ownership or funding. The Foundation hands off its products to credible partners who are best placed to manage and scale them. This requires early partnership building, codified delivery models and roadmaps, and flexible governance.

Just as important is IF's commitment to learning. Each project is a time-bound experiment, with strict entry and exit criteria, and impact tracked not only by outcomes but by what it reveals about the system itself. This creates feedback loops that improve future work and inform peers in the sector. The model is open-source by design, having codified each phase of the process so that others (foundations, public agencies, corporations) can replicate or adapt the methodology. In contrast to programme-heavy corporate foundations, IF sees success not in accumulation but in strategic release.

Corporate Empowerment as the Secret Sauce

Though independently governed, IF is embedded within the ecosystem of the Adecco Group – the world's leading talent solutions and advisory company. Staying corporate-backed but operationally autonomous has proven critical to the Foundation's agility and credibility. It offers both proximity and independence: access to the Adecco Group's global expertise, data, talent, and networks, but with the freedom to chart its own course.

Strategically aligning with the company's broader mission – making the future work for everyone – allows IF to punch above its weight. This alignment ensures internal buy-in and unlocks more than financial support. The Adecco Group offers legitimacy, access to cross-sectoral networks, and additional resources such as seconded talent, shared back-office services and infrastructure, communication platforms, and data about the world of work.

Just as important is the fact that the Innovation Foundation Board blends the knowledgeable insight of internal board members with the outside-in perspective of external ones. This brings global perspectives and expertise in social impact and early-stage innovation while ensuring objectivity and mission integrity. As a result, IF operates not as an extension but as a credible actor in the global impact ecosystem.

Jean-Christophe Deslarzes, Chairman of the Innovation Foundation Board states, *"Although sponsored by the Adecco Group, the Innovation Foundation operates independently. The few employees from the Adecco Group sitting on our Foundation Board ensure that we leverage synergies, but the Foundation has its own vision and strategy, set by its Board and the Managing Director. This governance has allowed the Foundation to be actively supported, yet strive with its*



own approaches, as demonstrated, for example, by its Scan – Build – Scale methodology.”

What It Takes: Structure, Talent, and Culture

Adopting a Social Innovation Lab model required more than a new structure - it demanded a cultural shift. Traditional foundations are often built for stability, risk management, and long-term stewardship. IF needed the opposite: short-cycle experimentation, comfort with failure, and the ability to make high-stakes decisions with incomplete data.

To support the transition, the Foundation invested heavily in upskilling its team in design thinking, systems practice, and agile project management. The organization prioritized an entrepreneurial mindset, with a tolerance for ambiguity, iterative development, and “failing forward”. To allow for this, a new governance structure was set up, ensuring transparency and accountability with time-boxed sprints and decision checkpoints. Clear entry and exit criteria were embedded into each phase of the project cycle.

Perhaps the most difficult cultural change was the discipline of focus. Saying no to promising ideas that did not meet the mission was essential to preserving clarity of purpose. This tight scope gives IF its edge, allowing its small team to deliver initiatives with reach far beyond its size.

From Purpose to Practice: Lessons for the Sector

The Innovation Foundation’s journey illustrates that corporate foundations can be more than grant-makers or internal implementers. With the right strategic architecture, they can function as catalysts: surfacing unmet needs, building validated solutions, and transferring ownership to actors better positioned to sustain and scale them.

Three lessons stand out:

- **Strategic narrowing enables scalable impact.** Focusing on a single challenge – employability for underserved populations – enabled the depth and clarity needed to target systemic solutions.
- **Spin-off models are an act of empowerment.** IF exits its projects with a sustainable plan for local ownership and financing, ensuring that solutions grow beyond its walls.
- **Solutions that stick are solutions shared.** By engaging local partners, end users, and system actors from day one, IF accelerates uptake, reduces redesign cycles, and builds local capacity long before handover.

For those in the philanthropy sector looking to drive systemic change within or beyond corporate boundaries, IF’s experience offers a compelling roadmap. Not every foundation must become a lab. But every foundation could benefit from asking itself: *What if we designed for scale?*



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