KM COLUMN

Ideation applications on the intranet

As organisations look for ways to transform and innovate their businesses, the intranet is playing an important role. Many modern organisations are using ideation applications on their intranet to recognise the skills and experience of staff as part of broader business improvement programs.

Ideation applications are online tools to tap into staff knowledge by facilitating the creation, sharing and evaluation of ideas across the organisation.

Some solutions are very successful, like previous Intranet Innovation winner American Electrical Power (AEP), one of the largest electrical utility companies in the United States. Their 'Ideas Now' application produced demonstrable organisation benefits in the first few months. Unfortunately, some other attempted solutions languish in no man's land and are not mentioned again.

In this article we outline the broad principles for a successful ideation system. The first three relate to the offline processes for the whole initiative:

- executive sponsorship
- end to end accountability
- a stated overall purpose

The next four impact the design and execution of the ideation application:

- anyone can submit ideas
- anyone can comment on or rate ideas
- acceptable user experience
- an adoption plan

At the end of this article we include examples from AEP, Luxottica and PwC.

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Staff at all levels are a source of good ideas

Benefits

Successful ideation applications have tangible outcomes, even in the first few months.

AEP's system focused on a target to identify $1.7 million in cost savings in the HR department. Within one month over 100 ideas were submitted. Four ideas were immediately highlighted and were considered highly viable. Together, they represented about $2 million in cost savings, enabling the group to surpass its annual goal in one month. By the end of the process 10 ideas were chosen which represented $4 million in cost savings.

Luxottica manufactures, markets and distributes frames for glasses and sunglasses. Their ideation system, IdeaLab, was used by the Zero Waste project to improve sustainability across the entire company. Accessible by 65,000 staff from headquarters in Milan, Italy, to 6 factories around the world and 1000's of retail outlets. Ideas were scored on their impact, cost saving, carbon dioxide emissions, market value, brand reputation and risk avoidance. Many of the ideas contributed to long-term sustainability improvements in packaging, logistics and new materials. IdeaLab contributed to the speed at which ideas were gathered and implemented as part of the overall sustainability project.

Executive sponsorship

Executive sponsorship transforms an ideation application from an open ended suggestion box that fades into obscurity into a credible and worthwhile opportunity for the staff to engage in improving the business.

Having a clearly defined and engaged executive sponsor inspires staff confidence by showing that their ideas will be thoughtfully considered.

However, a busy executive may not have the time to study and respond to all the submitted ideas. Instead, most sponsors for the ideation application will delegate the evaluation, or at least the winnowing, of the ideas to a team.

This can be an opportunity for the sponsor to select high-potential staff for the evaluation team, giving them high profile, broad, challenging experiences in pursuit of real solutions for real problems.

Sometimes an executive may want to restrict idea generation to only their department instead of sharing their problems across the entire company. Convince them of the value of a broader audience and different mind sets and skills in the whole organisation.

Idea evaluation is an ideal opportunity for high-potentials

End to end accountability

The most noteworthy aspect of good ideation applications is the realisation that innovation requires a process that can't simply begin and end with idea collection.

At each stage of the online and offline process a single person should be responsible for the idea from the initial suggestion through to benefit realisation.

The offline process for evaluating and implementing the best ideas is just as important as the ideation application.

Once ideas are generated a clearly defined process with an identified sponsor and evaluation team is needed. The staff members are accountable for idea consideration, implementation, recognition, and reward on the back end. Do not complicate the online tool with portions of the process better conducted offline.

Stated overall purpose

A shared purpose creates mutual understanding, which in turn builds commitment to a common goal. This purpose needs to be explicitly stated and may influence the design of the idea capture form, so that specific elements can be addressed, such as like including a field for estimated cost savings, or the product the idea relates to.

For example Luxottica's focus was on sustainability and AEP's on cost savings in a specific department.

Confining the ideas to specific problems channels the direction of ideas. Having the application open for a specific period creates momentum for the ideas. with a defined start and end date.

This raises the level of urgency for the problem and focuses attention. From a design perspective, after a problem is closed, all its elements are still reviewable, but staff are no longer able to submit any new ideas.

Ideation applications focus and extract the best ideas

Anyone can submit ideas

To fully harness the collective experience in the organisation any staff member should be able to submit an idea in response to a problem. From a design perspective, submitted ideas should automatically include the name of the person submitting, and be instantly posted for all to see. An interim stage to mediatate the idea is not recommended: it generally just creates backlog and creates unnecessary work for the intranet team.

Don't complicate the idea submission by asking for too much detail, however there at least needs to be a brief title for the idea, and a description which may be brief or detailed (although the latter increases the idea's chances of being noticed).

There is little value in random ideas. Some organisations ask that the initial submission include an estimate of potential savings and/ or cost to implement, to force a business focus to the idea. Alternatively those submitting ideas may be asked to classify their ideas, for example as a cost reduction or risk reduction idea or identify a specific product or process the idea applies to.

Anyone can comment on or rate ideas

Once the idea has been put forward, other staff should be given the opportunity to comment on the idea. This may involve asking for clarification. adding further suggestions or providing supporting evidence. This 'collaborative' response helps make the idea more viable and attractive.

Some organisations also include in their ideation application the ability to rate, like or grade ideas. This can add an element of gaming to the ideas and help immensely when there are lots of ideas to evaluate.

Rating and commenting also increases the overall ownership of ideas among all staff.

At PwC, a multinational professional services firm headquartered in London, any staff member can vote on any idea, with one vote per staff member per idea. Although the sponsor is under no obligation to implement the highest-rated ideas, this 'wisdom of crowds' feature helps filter the ideas to draw attention to those, based on popular opinion, that may be most viable or valuable.

Notifications from within the online system are expected

User experience

Design is a key pillar of any successful application, gone are the days of convoluted systems. Most staff use web tools in their personal lives and expect their work systems to behave similarly.

If the ideation application is too hard to use, people will not submit ideas. Also irritating registration systems requiring yet another login will be a potential blocker. Aim for a seamless and pain free experience.

Some of the basics that need to be included in any ideation application:

- submit form, with a balance of mandatory and free form fields
- interactive elements such as comment, rate, like, vote or watch
- for multinational organisations consider native language translation for comments
- automatic notification by email to sponsor and/or evaluation team whenever a new idea or comment is submitted
- an administrative interface to manage the ideas
- ability to generate reports (eg listing all ideas for a specific problem)

- manage status and ownership of idea
- view on mobile devices

Recognising ideas is essential to success

Adoption plan

Promotion and awareness of business problems and ideation applications are also key factors to success.

Don't forget to conduct an ongoing marketing effort. Promote the problems seeking solutions, and celebrate the problems that have been solved. Recognise and reward those who contributed to a solution.

The traditional promotion vehicles are still useful:

- news articles
- management briefings
- posters around the workplace

Some new methods we have seen include:

- inspirational videos
- postcards with chocolates attached

And one of the most powerful ways to encourage adoption is by reinforcing good behaviour and encouraging those who submit worthy ideas and comments. For example, AEP's team will often send a quick note to someone whose idea is particularly novel – just to reinforce the behaviour.

Summary

Ideation systems are an excellent tool to gather, share and implement ideas for a stated purpose.

Before embarking on delivering an ideation application for the intranet it is important to remember that unless there is a stated purpose and genuine commitment from senior management the intranet team could be wasting valuable time and resources.

Most intranet teams work across the organisation so they are well placed to help refine the online and offline processes need to make any ideation application successful.

AEP is one of the largest electrical utility companies in the United States. AEP Ideas Now includes the ability to vote on submitted ideas. A key factor in the success of Ideas Now was the executive support and online / offline processes implemented. The first ideas posted were projected to save US$2 million; by the end of the process there were US$4 million in cost savings. Screenshot courtesy of American Electric Power.

IdeaLab is a collaborative innovation project at Luxottica Group (Italy). The first project to use IdeaLab was the Zero Waste project, a strategic project to improve sustainability across the entire company. All ideas were scored using the materially matrix that analysed their impact on cost saving, carbon dioxide emissions. market value, brand reputation and risk avoidance. Screenshot courtesy of Luxottica Group.

Spark is the global ideas application for PwC, a large multinational professional services firm. Many staff have deep experience in a particular field. Spark provides the tool to allow staff to generate ideas and share expertise across countries, regions and departments. The ideas are voted on and rated by staff across the organisation. Screenshot courtesy of PwC.