

Innovation Planning

“We need fresh ideas for the Acme proposal. Let's all sit down and brainstorm ideas some time this week.” How often have you heard something like that at your office? How often have the creative ideas of the brainstorming session been implemented? All too often, hastily planned brainstorming sessions bring up a lot of good ideas that somehow never get used, while the boring kinds of ideas you are trying to get away from seem to be used again and again.

One reason for this is the lack of an innovation plan. If you want to maximise the creativity of the ideas you generate and ensure the best ideas are implemented, you need an innovation plan. To make things easier, we have created an Innovation Plan Worksheet (PDF document; 17kb) here. As this article will describe the Innovation Plan, you may want to download it now as a reference.

Your Goal/Problem...

The first step of your innovation plan is to state the goal or problem. We'll look in detail at how to effectively state your problem in an upcoming issue of Report 103, but let us review the basics here. Imagine you are a product manager at a mobile telephony company and want to introduce new services to your clients.

Before putting stating a problem like “new services”, you need to think about your goal in a little more detail. Do you want to develop new revenue streams for your company or do you want to add additional free services? Are you targeting a specific group – such as business users or teenagers? Or should determining the target group be part of your goal? Bear in mind that I have used the term “goal” here. Think not just about what kind of ideas you want – but the goal of the ideas. Finally, be sure you express the goal in a way that is clear to everyone on your team.

You also need to establish how far you will take the innovation. Are you simply preparing a proposal for management or will you be responsible for the entire project life-cycle or does the limit of your responsibility fall somewhere in between?

Once the goal is stated, you should also consider several other issues...

1. **Participants:** who will participate in your innovation plan? Can you solicit ideas from the entire organisation or will you be restricted to a specific project team? Who can you call upon for evaluation and pre-implementation?
2. **Budget:** what is the budget for capturing and developing this idea?
3. **Resources:** what resources will be available for capturing and developing this idea? What tools do you need? Can you hire facilitators or an ideas campaign tool? Can you hire facilities for brainstorming? What internal resources will be available to you?
4. **Timeframe:** how much time do you have to capture and develop your ideas.
5. **Reward(s):** are you offering any rewards for ideas? You might want to offer a small reward for the best ideas. One well known company offers small cash rewards and dinner coupons to people who contribute exceptional ideas. Others offer gifts, points or recognition. If you are working with a relatively small team, you might consider rewarding the entire team at the completion of the product – or at major milestones if the project is long-term.

If you like to push the envelop and have fun, consider adopting a theme for this innovation plan. Themes are not necessary, but can be an effective means of focusing creativity in new ways and tying together various aspects of an innovation plan. Keeping to our example of a mobile telephony company, you could adopt the theme of “amusement parks”. In other words, you would use

amusement parks as a metaphor when generating ideas, implementing ideas and even naming new services that you devise. This doesn't mean that everything has to be about amusement parks. Rather, amusement parks are simply a focus of the team's thinking.

Idea generation methods...

Now, you are ready to plan how you will generate ideas. Don't limit yourself to brainstorming, there are several effective team ideation approaches worth considering...

- **Brainstorming:** is best when time is limited or the team is relatively small and in one location (although software tools, like our Sylvia web brainstormer, allow brainstorming between people in various locations). Brainstorming, in a nutshell, is getting a group of people together in a space and shouting out ideas for a limited time period. People build on each others' ideas and the creative energy pushes people to think more creatively and propose more radical ideas.
- **Ideas campaigns:** are best when there is more time or the team is large and dispersed across several locations. An ideas campaign is rather like a long, drawn out brainstorming session where people come in to the campaign from time to time, share an idea or two, build on other people's ideas and then leave. (Our Jenni ideas campaign is the best tool for setting up and managing an ideas campaign. Moreover, you can even rent Jenni for a single limited ideas campaign). An ideas campaign usually lasts from two to six weeks.
- **Experimentation:** is best when ideas are technical in nature. Experimentation is basically a matter of putting together various configurations and seeing how they work. Experimenting would not be an effective approach for our mobile telephony company example of developing a new service. On the other hand, if the innovation plan was about improving the efficiency of sending multimedia data across a GSM network, experimenting would probably be an important part of your innovation plan.

Other approaches to ideation can include outsourcing creativity to another company, buying the rights to an established idea or buying a company that has innovative products you would like to be able to offer your customers.

Once you start generating ideas, bear in mind that there is a tendency in teams to embrace the first creative idea that you capture. This can be a mistake. Rather you should push that first creative idea further and see if you can make it even more creative. At the same time, you should push people to come up with more creative ideas. This pushing for further creativity is important and should be included in your innovation plan.

Pushing ideas further could be a matter of doing brainstorming sessions on your best ideas, in order to develop them further. Alternatively, you could ask people to think about the best ideas overnight and give you more developed ideas in the morning. "Sleeping" on an idea is an excellent way to push it.

Pushing people's creativity further is about positive feedback, explicitly encouraging more radical thinking and inspiration. Inspiration includes all kinds of things, such as: bringing in professional brainstorming facilitators; taking the team to an art museum or ballet performance; participating in activities that open the mind; and using alternative brainstorming approaches (see back issues of Report 103 for examples of alternative brainstorming approaches).

Finally, you need to allot a specific time frame for the idea generation phase.

Initial evaluation...

Once you have captured some good ideas, you need to evaluate them to determine which are worth taking further. The 5x5 criteria matrix is probably the most efficient initial evaluation method (see our article on evaluating ideas for more details and a link to a free 5x5 criteria matrix evaluation tool). To do a 5x5 criteria matrix, you simply determine five criteria by which you can rank promising ideas. You then look at each idea, determine how well it meets each criterion and grant it 0-5 points for that criterion. Once you are finished, add up the points and you will have overall point scores for each idea. This is a very good basis for determining which ideas should go on to the next stage.

Other people prefer open discussion meetings for determining which ideas to take further. These can also be effective, although such meetings are usually less efficient and less objective than criteria based evaluation – at least for the initial evaluation. We recommend that you have an open discussion based meeting **AFTER** the criteria based evaluation in order to clarify any outstanding issues and discuss how promising ideas could be improved further based on the evaluation results.

You also need to allot some time to the evaluation phase.

Report...

If you are not involved in implementing the idea, the chances are your responsibility will end with making a report to your superior or to a project development team. If so, you can readily prepare a report based on the top ideas and their evaluations.

If you are involved in the implementation, on the other hand, you will want to go directly to the next step.

Pre-implementation...

Pre-implementation is a preliminary action, such as building a business case, doing market research, making a prototype or running a limited trial in order to test an idea.

You will doubtless already have standard pre-implementation methods in your company for developing ideas into products or services. Nevertheless, it is important to include the pre-implementation in your innovation plan. You also need to determine how much time to allot the pre-implementation.

Implementation...

By now, you should have a small number of very good and well tested ideas. It is time to implement them.

By developing such a structured innovation plan for specific projects, you can look forward to more creative ideas and a higher level of implementation of those ideas.

Good luck!

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