Social networking for innovators

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New collaboration and strategic innovation tools developed by European researchers will help fast-track creative ideas by networking the most competent people to tackle the job.

Like gold prospectors, companies are willing to go to the ends of the earth to find innovative ideas; and like gold prospectors they often grow old looking.

For all its importance, innovation remains a fundamentally mysterious process, often the outcome of unexpected Eureka moments. It is crucial to competitiveness and it propels the world's leading companies, but ultimately the reasons why or how it happens often depend on who you talk to.

Some experts point to creative workplaces, while others cite incentive

schemes. Still others look to determined recruitment among the best and the brightest, while another faction claims that inspiration should be fostered in the workforce.

While one group might prescribe a directionless quest, others insist on a deliberate structure, like old-timers who swear that panning for gold leads to more lucky strikes than mining.

What all of them have in common is that they would like to discover or unlock a simple process to strike gold reliably, and often.

Collaboration 2.0

Meanwhile, every other sector of the corporate world, from resource planning to circulating memos, has its software tools, but innovation has had to make do with pencils and napkins as its primary supports. There is a certain romance to all this but corporate life is focused on results. Those results are now here.

EU-funded project Laboranova sought to develop a platform that would provide tools to help companies generate ideas, collaborate and evaluate projects and foster an innovation community and culture within a company.

"Very early on in the process we realised that a single platform could never properly support all possible innovation pathways," reveals Darren Morrant of EurExcel, the exploitation manager of the project.

"In fact, the project itself became a bit like a laboratory for the innovation process. We tried different formats and approaches to generate ideas for useful innovation support tools, and what we discovered was surprising."

In short, there is no innovation process, but there are many possible pathways in the fuzzy front-end of innovation. The aim is to help people come up with ideas and then to support them in all sorts of ways so that they can develop on them, he suggest. "We found that different approaches suit different needs, different companies and different situations."

Innovation suite

So rather than build an innovation platform, Laboranova chose to develop a suite of innovation tools that could work together or alone. "In this way, people can pick and choose the most useful tools for whatever they are trying to do," he stresses.

Once Laboranova developed a flexible attitude to generating and developing ideas, they started to crop up all the time. In the end, the team elaborated over 18 concepts and developed 10 core tools.

"Some concepts never got beyond the idea stage, some got a little development, but as time progressed and we worked through what we could do and what impact it could have, we settled on 10 key programmes that could respond to five innovation phases we identified."

The broad innovation phases were innovation games, which foster creative thinking, representational tools for presenting ideas in different media, support tools for the core programs, like mash-ups, which can combine different core programs in a single interface. The final two topics were evaluation and community tools for sharing and collaboration.

RefQuest, for example, is an innovation game. The game engine works with game objects, so the software can be adapted to any aspect of a business - whether players want to look at a process or develop a new

product - and the game introduces 'disruptive idea generation' using applied creativity, like lateral thinking and other techniques.

Once ideas are generated, they need to be represented or catalogued in some way and two tools; InnoTube and Melodie fulfil this role. InnoTube is like a private YouTube for businesses, where users can upload content that others can subscribe to, or comment on. It has been used by Lucent to poll alumni on their experience at Lucent's educational institute.

Wisdom of crowds

Melodie, on the other hand, creates visual maps of a range of ideas, like a MindMap. Users can comment or enlarge on ideas, and similar ideas are grouped close together. It provides an instant visual layout of multiple solutions to solving a particular problem.

Evaluation is the next phase of the innovation process. For this, Laboranova developed a program called Idem. It contains an idea generation element, or ideas can be imported from other tools. Its greatest strength, however, lies in its role as a stock market for good ideas. It also incorporates user comments, ratings and aggregation of users' preferences to support the selection of ideas.

It is a powerful way to unlock the wisdom of crowds, a theory that demonstrates how a large number of non-specialists, or even the general public, often make better choices than individual experts. The fourth phase focuses on developing an innovation community, through tools like GreatLinks.

"GreatLinks came as a complete surprise to me," reveals Morrant. "It's just such a useful tool."

It unlocks the power of social bookmarking and applies it to the enterprise. Social bookmarking allows people to share their favourite links, and acts like a reviewing system with the entire internet recruited to help out.

GreatLinks takes this concept and applies it to the enterprise. If users are researching a particular topic, they can rate links in a Google search. Other users can rank search results based on these ratings. The system also allows comments, can link to experts on a given topic within the company, provides a private blogging platform, and can rate and support document sharing.

Innovation gold dust

The final phase in Laboranova's innovation scheme is support for the various tools. Mash-up, for example, can combine the different key tools into one, unified interface so users can see all elements in one look.

For example, if a team is using RefQuest, GreatLinks and Melodie, the mash-up program can unify them into a single interface. This way, companies can develop the [tool](#) set that most suits their culture and their needs.

In all, it is an impressive body of work, and reaction to the tools was very positive when they were tested at companies like Fiat, Lucent and L'Oreal. Efforts are now underway to commercialise certain parts of the work and add other parts to existing software. For example, Agilent Technologies is marketing GreatLinks.

It means that the process of innovation finally has software dedicated to helping companies strike gold more often.

More information: cordis.europa.eu/ictresults