

Ideation - The Antecedent to Innovation

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Ideation or idea generation is a key driver of the innovation process. So how do we find our best ideas? Many of us generate our best ideas during the morning shower, or while we are listening to music or driving. Sometimes we come up with ideas when we are actively trying to solve problems, or when we wake up in the morning after our subconscious mind has had the opportunity to process information. The greatest impediment to extracting value from these ideas is firstly our ability to actively capture these great ideas before the hard work begins to harvest, evaluate and implement these ideas.

Converting ideas into successful outcomes or benefits, i.e. innovations, requires a disciplined approach, although creativity forms the foundation of the process. A typical idea management process, proposed in Figure 1, may involve a number of steps:

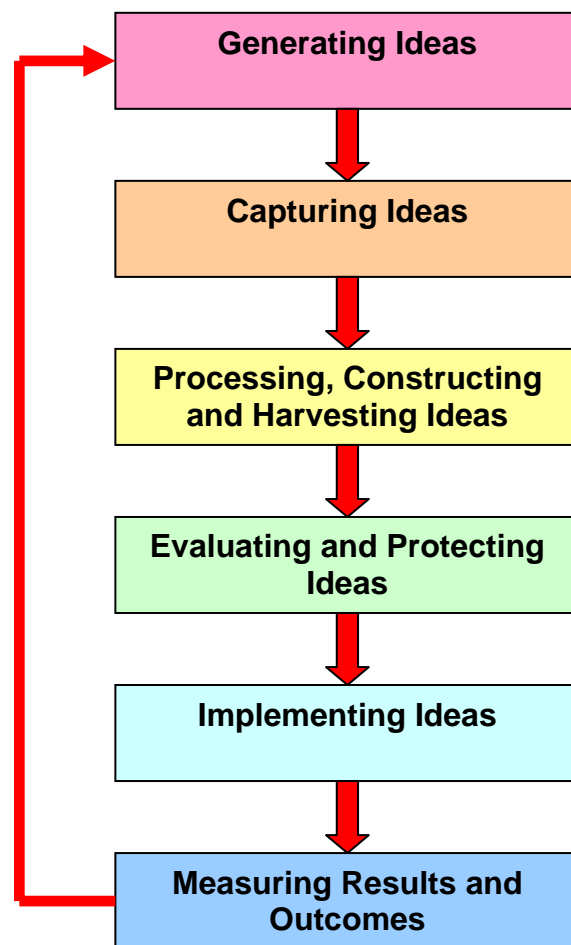


Figure 1 A Typical Idea Management Process

Generating Ideas

Dr Linus Pauling, the dual Nobel Prize Laureate stated “*The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas*”. The more ideas you produce the greater the chance of finding a winning or breakthrough idea. Idea generation was popularized by Alex Osborne in his 1953 book “Applied Imagination” where he described the concept of “*Brainstorming*”. Brainstorming is now widely used as a tool to generate a large number of ideas in a group setting. Furthermore, Tony Buzan’s Mindmapping® technique has also provided the means for individual brainstorming. Individuals or groups have the capacity to come up with ideas when they are in a conducive environment or state, such as relaxing on a couch in a quiet location or while taking a shower. Relaxation allows the subconscious mind to continue to process information and make new connections.

Capturing Ideas

Where do you look for ideas? You don’t need to go far. Ideas already exist within individuals or they can be easily sourced from the external environment, including the market, customers, competitors, the media and the Internet. We can improve the process of capturing ideas by:

- ❑ Actively looking for ideas around us through observation and listening e.g. talking to people, reading newspapers, magazines and books, and observing the environment around us
- ❑ Building idea sources such as reference books, thought leaders, mentors, social networks and the Internet
- ❑ Recording and banking ideas in notebooks, journals and electronic databases or PDAs

Discovery through serendipity occurs as a result of a random coincidence or an accident that triggers an idea or concept. An attentive or prepared mind is important in recognizing opportunities and capturing these random ideas. Alternatively, synchronicity or focused awareness is more powerful since the individual is actively seeking a new idea, investigating an opportunity or developing a solution to a problem.

Processing, Constructing and Harvesting Ideas

When ideas are generated and captured they are usually in a raw form and require further processing or constructing into a concept or application. The process can also be referred to as idea development or idea translation. For this to occur a number of creative thinking tools can be used including brainstorming, morphological analysis, scenario building, rearranging, cross-linking, synectics or randomizing. The final step involves harvesting the developed ideas that will either, satisfy an existing market need, solve a known problem or provide a new opportunity for further development. At this stage some people will include an incubation step to sleep on the ideas to allow the mind to further develop new concepts.

Evaluating and Protecting Ideas

The previous steps in the idea management process all involve some element of creative input, while, the evaluation stage involves traditional analysis of the ideas using a number of predefined criteria relevant to the individual or the organization, although intuition may also play a role. In evaluating ideas an initial feasibility should include a preliminary technical, market and risk assessment. An intellectual property (IP) search should also be conducted to determine the “freedom to operate” and to ensure that someone else’s patent is not being infringed. This step is followed by determining the value of the idea to the organisation and the costs associated with the implementation phase. Paralysis by analysis should be avoided if the idea is to progress to implementation. Promising or valuable ideas can be protected through a patent application or alternative IP protection strategy. Ideas that are not useful immediately may be discarded or recycled for later use.

Implementing Ideas

One of the most difficult steps in the idea management process is the implementation phase, as reflected by Thomas Edison’s statement, “*Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration*”. To develop great ideas and not to action them is the same as not having any ideas at all. Implementation requires planning, hard work and discipline to achieve successful outcomes. Many people underestimate the effort involved in converting their ideas into successful products, services or processes. A typical implementation process may involve: clarifying the objective, developing the plan, identifying key processes and tasks, prioritizing activities, resourcing and budgeting, sourcing funding, assigning task responsibility and then doing it! Developing a compelling business case or business model with a clear path to market is a key factor of success in taking an idea to market.

Measuring Results and Outcomes

Progress can be monitored using appropriate measures to determine the effectiveness of the idea. Measures include value currencies such as revenue, cost savings, efficiency gains, social benefits and environmental benefits. The idea management process can then be repeated with the generation of further ideas.

New ideas, the basis of innovation, need to be captured, processed and further evaluated before they can be adequately implemented. What the individual or organisation then does with the new ideas will have the potential to add value to industry or society. Although many individuals and organisations capture and record ideas they fail to develop these ideas further or fall short of converting these ideas into new products or services, new processes or new organisational systems.