Taking Innovation Training to the Next Level: Integration With Employee Networks

Innovation Training & Development White Paper Series
(Document 3 of 4)
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Introduction

The art and science of innovation management within large organizations is growing ever more complex.

The success that many programs are achieving at coming up with new ideas is creating a new set of problems, which leaders of relatively small innovation programs are struggling to address. These issues include how to scale a culture of innovation across large organizations, how to enhance the flow of innovative ideas being executed and how to create greater financial impact.

Increasingly, innovation leaders have responded to these challenges by focusing more aggressively on educating large numbers of employees around innovation skills, and then supporting them with personal networks and connections once they graduate from the training.

This series of four whitepapers outline key steps and examples on how to establish this kind of approach within an organization, in a way that drives the most value to all stakeholders. Whitepapers within the series include:

- Whitepaper #1: Why Bother? The Value of Training Your Employees Around Innovation
- Whitepaper #2: Can Innovation Be Learnt?
- Whitepaper #3: Taking Innovation Training to the Next Level: Integration With Employee Networks (This document)
- Whitepaper #4: Innovation Networks in Action – A Case Study

Each of these whitepapers can be downloaded for free from www.culturevateinc.com.

We hope that the combination of theoretical and practical approaches provided within these documents is helpful to readers and welcome any comments that you might have on these important topics.

Kind Regards,
Anthony Ferrier, Culturevate and Wendy Castleman, Intuit
Taking Innovation Training to the Next Level:
Integration With Employee Networks

In the previous two whitepapers of this series we examined both the benefits of innovation training and areas of innovation skills that mid-to-junior level employees can be taught. In this installment we will address an important topic that is often missing from innovation training / education programs: How to build effective employee networks that support employees who have been trained around with new innovation skills.

As companies look to develop new and sustained revenue streams they are expanding the resources and activities associated with their innovation programs to form fully developed corporate ecosystems that support and drive innovation. However, these new activities are often not positioned or executed in a way that generates maximum value to the organization. Program leaders are often judged on the activities that they undertake, rather than the actual value being generated to the organization. While the level of activity can form a decent proxy for success in the early stages of an innovation program, the focus needs to quickly shift towards more substantive metrics in order to ensure continued leadership support and investment.

“Program leaders are often judged on the activities that they undertake, rather than the actual value being generated to the organization.”

An example of this is when companies train their employees around innovation, and then send them out to practice their new skills within the organization. Success is often measured by the number of employees trained. Unfortunately, what often happens is that the learnings and education from the training are quickly lost, as those employees get bogged down in the daily grind of their existing roles. In addition, the cultural environment that they return to might not be supportive of innovative thinking, so attempts at innovative thinking are quickly squashed. When this happens, at best employees demonstrate marginal improvements in their existing roles, and at worst they get frustrated and disenfranchised, often choosing to leave their organization.

To counter this situation, it is important that employees who have been through any innovation training efforts continue to be engaged and supported by other activities within the corporate innovation ecosystem.
once their sessions are completed. The goal is for participants to retain their new knowledge and be encouraged to utilize their skills both within their existing role, and also in helping build new areas of thinking across the organization.

“Employees should be encouraged to learn more about their company’s innovation program.“

This is where the development and support of employee networks, specifically a network of innovation program catalysts / super-users, should become an important element in any training program. This network should aim to support trained participants, and importantly, direct them towards the execution of ideas that will drive value to the organization. Several companies such as Nordstrom, Intuit, and Qualcomm already manage successful innovation networks, driving value to their programs, participants and the broader organization. With these networks, the organization is looking to effectively move the crowdsourcing of innovative ideas from the front, to the back end, ie more focused towards the development and execution of ideas.

Employee networks can benefit innovation programs in the following way:

• Support and encourage employees who have demonstrated a connection to the innovation program
• Increase flow of executed ideas, generating a greater organizational impact
• Increase the level of innovation skills, and access to supporting resources
• Leverage impact of relatively small innovation program teams and build on the success of the range of activities that they direct towards employees
• Build the basis for enhancing a culture of innovation across the organization

Besides innovation catalysts / super users, other employee networks that an organization might support include:

• Governance Committee – To provide strategic support for an innovation program
• Business Unit Champions – Useful for centralized (corporate) innovation programs to provide a visible and regular connection into business units
• Regional Networks – Specific geographic regions might choose to run their own employee innovation networks, as a way to replicate existing organizational structures
“Without a strategic framework the resources needed to support a network can result in an effort that either fades away or backfires.”

Before developing any of these networks it is important to build a strategic framework that helps direct and maximize the benefit generated by the network over time. Any employee network takes time and resources to manage, and without this framework the level of resources could be unexpectedly taxing, resulting in an effort that either fades away or backfires.

Where networks are designed to further engage employees in your innovation program, including participants from innovation training programs, the following activities from across the corporate innovation ecosystem might be considered as tools to further engage network members:

- Exclusive access to additional training
- Exclusive challenges/ contests
- Networking groups and forums (such as an annual conference)
- Communicate to them directly
- Exclusive access to materials, reports and information
- Recognition through plaques, notification in publications (online and offline), avatars, etc.
- Exclusive access to leadership planning and development sessions (network participants could be invited to attend leadership meetings)
- Access to industry conferences and events
- Priority access to work on ideas in development, through an ideas marketplace feature, with a goal of increasing the flow of activity
- Credit for time spent working on the development of innovative ideas
- Access to funding pool for new idea development
- Position them as moderators / facilitators for future training sessions
- Business book distribution and book club sessions
- Exclusive opportunities to meet with leadership and discuss issues relevant to the organization
The above list is far-reaching and an assessment against your company culture and resources should be made on each activity to determine which are the most appropriate for your network and will drive the most value.

The catalysts / super-users employee network should aim to generate the following benefits to your organization:

- Create a base for broader cultural change across the organization
- Increase the flow of ideas and knowledge being developed by the program, contributing to a larger organizational impact
- Increase the empowerment of individual employees by connecting them with others who can support their growth or initiatives
- Improve levels of company and innovation program engagement
- Increase understanding of and alignment to leadership priorities
- More efficient use of training efforts investment

“Over time the focus of the employee network should shift toward the development of additional innovative ideas.”

With these benefits in mind, it is worth noting that these networks often start with a goal of further engaging participants in the innovation program and the company overall. However over time the focus should shift toward the development of additional innovative ideas, with a goal of enhancing the financial impact to the organization. This can be achieved through formal or informal ideas marketplaces, where specific needs for an idea to move forward are highlighted and network members are encouraged to fulfill these roles, for a limited or full time period of time.

In summary, it is insufficient to train employees on how to innovate without a plan to support them in taking their learnings back and apply them in their day-to-day roles. In order to drive the maximum value to the organization training programs should connect participants through an employee network that can ensure that skills and knowledge from training are applied and retained over time.

The next and final paper in this series will focus on a case study of Intuit, where many of the employee-focused approaches outlined within this series have been carried out.
**Author Biographies**

**Anthony Ferrier, CEO of Culturevate**

Anthony is the CEO of Culturevate (www.culturevateinc.com), which empowers employees to execute ideas and inspire a culture of innovation. He is a widely read author, speaker and advisor to industry leaders with 20-plus years experience in the innovation and business-to-business sectors. Prior to Culturevate, Anthony was a Vice President of Innovation Strategy at Spigit, advising companies as diverse as Pfizer, U.S. Postal Service, Johnson and Johnson, ADP and Fidelity on building effective innovation programs. Prior to that he led the innovation program at The Bank of New York Mellon and managed strategic planning for Pershing. He has also worked at Deloitte & Touche, Deloitte Consulting and Zurich Insurance in strategy and marketing roles. Anthony has a Masters of Commerce (University of Sydney) and Bachelor of Economics (University of Newcastle) and has lived in New York City for far too many years. Being a geek at heart, he loves the challenge of working with new clients and better understanding their innovation challenges and opportunities.

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**Wendy Castleman, Innovation Catalyst Leader and Design Thinking Strategist, Intuit**

Wendy leads the Innovation Catalyst Community at Intuit. She spends her time training and supporting this 200-person community using design-thinking so they can inspire others to innovate. Wendy has a PhD in Cognitive and Perceptual Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin, and has 20 years of experience in Experience Design and Design Thinking. Prior to working at Intuit, she worked at Remedy, Motorola, Philips and Lucent. Outside of work, she can be found inspiring and provoking her six-year-old daughter, hiking, skiing, and wasting a great deal of time on social media.

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Culturevate partners with clients to help enhance and build effective Innovation Programs that drive value to the organization. Culturevate empowers companies to execute ideas and inspire a culture of innovation with:

1. **Education** – Train employees around innovation skills, generating the best quality ideas
2. **Technology** – Engage employees with a dynamic portal / intranet site for your innovation program, with rotating materials and tools
3. **Employee Networks** – Build effective networks to scale your Innovation Program’s reach and impact

Learn more at www.culturevateinc.com