WHITE PAPER
BUILDING AN INNOVATION PROCESS
INTRODUCTION

When many people think of innovation they generally think of the introduction of something that is new, and often specifically a new thing. While this is true, is it not all that can rightfully fit into the broader category of innovation?

Innovation also means doing things in new ways (new processes or methods) or bringing already existing things together in new ways. Peanut butter is good on its own, and so is jelly. Put them together, however, in a classic PB&J, and you have something entirely new that could have a "value" above the sum of its parts (peanut allergies notwithstanding).

While innovation implies "new", it also implies "better." It might be a more productive, quicker, efficient, or profitable way to do things. Possibly, it could mean a stronger or more lasting way to put things together. Also, it might be something that presents us with functions, capabilities, or utility that was not available prior to the innovation. Often, today, innovation is the life's blood of an industry or company. In a world and marketplace where change is the norm and where competition is almost always global, innovation must come to be constantly expected.

"IN A WORLD AND MARKETPLACE WHERE CHANGE IS THE NORM AND WHERE COMPETITION IS ALMOST ALWAYS GLOBAL, INNOVATION MUST COME TO BE CONSTANTLY EXPECTED."
For the most part, innovation doesn't just happen. Innovation needs fertile ground to germinate in. It also needs to be cared for to grow and flourish. An innovation process, then, needs to find fertile ground. It needs to be provided the light, nutrients, and water that it requires. It must be cared for and pruned mindfully to allow it to grow and spread the best that it can, until it flowers or bears fruit.

Deciding to put a real innovation process in place within your company or enterprise is the first and most important step to identifying and laying out the fertile ground. This cannot be merely a half-baked afterthought. Rather, it must be a real focus on par with your other important enterprise endeavors.

Just as you would likely not place your garden within the daylong shadows of a big and densely leafed tree and then expect things to grow there, neither should you make an innovation process anything less than a valued component of your enterprise. While plants cannot grow if the light cannot reach them, likewise, people can readily sense whether an innovation process is valued or just a form of "lip service" to the idea of innovation. Without a concerted effort to make your process appreciated, the "mirage" of an innovation process can actually do more harm than not having one at all. This because it can send a contrary message of managerial disengagement. Worse, it can be perceived as a transparent patronization of employees' thoughts and ideas.

For an innovation process to be successful and provide you with the fruit and input of ideas that you need and want from it, it cannot be perceived as a suggestion box that sits over a "circular file."

As every gardener or farmer will tell you, not every seed that you sow takes hold, not every plant grows healthy and tall, and not all will eventually bear useful flowers or fruit. You need to plant enough seeds in order that a subset of them grow to provide enough fruit to harvest.
ENTERPRISE INNOVATION PROCESS

How do you build an enterprise or company that works to openly receive as many innovation ideas as possible? By creating a clear, valued, responsive, nourished, and rewarded enterprise innovation process.

This does not mean that every innovative idea put forth will be invested in or otherwise pursued. Minimally, however, each is openly received and given an appropriate level of consideration. It is then either moved forward via tangible support or not pursued. In either case, the idea and its creator are acknowledged and appreciation is shown for the effort. Clear reasoning is also given as to why it is not being pursued.

This respectful and considered form of bypassing on a proposed idea is important because: (a) it is polite and (b) you do not want to discourage those who are spending the time to propose innovative ideas to feel that it is, in any way, pointless to do so. A lack of considered and respectful feedback can lead to a counter-productive attitude in your employees.

Innovation, or the seeds of innovative ideas, most likely will not come entirely from the few people at the very top of the organization, or from the board, or only by those who possess some level of power or authority. All people within your enterprise bring different experiences and perspectives to their jobs. This uniqueness should be considered an asset. A robust enterprise neural network should be promoted.

THE ENTERPRISE NEURAL NETWORK

Every person in your enterprise, at every level, do much outside of the workplace. They have conversations with others; they have family and friends; they have varied and unique interests or avocations; they watch different programs on television; they visit different websites; they belong to different social groups. This does not even mention their diversity in cultures, experiences, etc.
A single employee's mental / experiential attributes, influences & knowledge

When you look at the lives, minds, and experiences of all of your employees (both within and outside of your workplace), you can start to see them collectively as a broad, diversified, and far-reaching enterprise neural network to tap into.

The enterprise's extended neural network
You can tap into this enterprise neural network in many ways, but one valuable way is via an established and valued innovation process.

DEVELOPING AN INNOVATION PROCESS

WHAT MAKES A GOOD INNOVATION PROCESS?

Not all innovation processes are the same. They can be good or bad, and I’m assuming you would like to have a good one.

The critical attributes of a good innovation process are:
1. Is **owned** by someone who has a relative level of authority
2. Is open and available to **everyone**
3. Is clear and easy to **access** with little to no barriers
4. Provides **feedback** to submitters all along the way
5. Is perceived to be and is **valued**
6. Provides **incentives and rewards**
7. Adheres to **timelines** for reviews, responses, and decisions
8. Takes real and visible **actions** on good innovation submissions
9. Has **zero judgmental** or punitive aspects to it whatsoever
10. Is rolled out and evangelized thoughtfully
11. Is monitored and **improved** over time
12. Allows anytime submissions and **challenges**

Speaking up and making suggestions, especially to superiors, is very easy for some and very difficult for others. This does not, however, mean that those who speak up easily and often are the only ones with good or valuable ideas. It is, therefore, essential that your innovation process be respectful, valued, and wholly non-judgmental to increase your chances of including those less prone to speak up.
WHAT IS AN INNOVATION PROCESS COMPROMISED OF?

Innovation processes are comprised of several key components:

1. Designated **owner**
2. Easily accessible submission **intake mechanism**
3. Defined **process, steps and timelines**
4. **Rollout** / Evangelization plan/process
5. **Recognition**/Incentive basis
6. Anytime and challenge **submission paths**

HOW SHOULD AN INNOVATION PROCESS OPERATE?

**Transparency and Ease**

Transparency and ease are critical for an innovation process to be successful. Any barriers, real or perceived will limit the number of ideas put forth. Ideas should be allowed via a “constant and always open” semi-formal channel. It should not be taken, however, from every direction imaginable (e.g., conversation in the hallway or an email to various non-designated people). This is because you want creators to know where to go and to use this channel. If the options are too numerous or endless then there will not be a reliable place to go to submit ideas.

**Feedback Loop**

You want to give these ideas adequate attention and thoughtful responses. If these ideas come from a variety of ever changing avenues, then it becomes far more difficult to ensure that responses are controlled and that appropriate and timely follow-up steps occur.

When you establish your standard review and response times in your process, keep them realistic. Ensure that they do not go on for an extended time without review and response. You also must allow enough time for adequate and considered review.

This can be somewhat organization and size dependent, but two weeks for initial review and feedback seems like a reasonable time. It is neither too long or too
compressed. The final feedback may take longer, and may be dependent on when the larger regularly group meets (at most quarterly), but at least, by that point, the idea has been acknowledged and an initial determination has been made and fed back to the submitter.

**Submission Options**

One alternative is to establish an innovation email address and mailbox within your domain (e.g., Innovation@[Company Name].com). Someone will need to monitor that mailbox on a daily or bi-daily basis. Each submission should be assigned an innovation submission ID that is returned to the submitter upon receiving the email. This email should what the next steps will be and the approximate timelines of review, etc. that are expected. The person monitoring the mailbox will then register the innovation submission and position it to move further along the innovation path. In a relatively small company, the mailbox monitor may also be the reviewer and approver. Even in those cases, a consistent process needs to followed that lets people know that their idea was heard/seen, where their idea is in the innovation process, what is going to happen with it next, and roughly when this will happen.

Another option is to build and/or use an online collaboration tool (such as Sharepoint) for innovation submissions. This is better than a simple email address/mailbox, because it allows you to create an innovation submission form to gather important information about the idea. This also allows for a workflow to be built around the submissions. You first need to decide how public you want the submissions to be. Ideally, all submissions will be first reviewed before they are made public as a filter for any ideas that are maliciously bad or might cause unnecessary internal strife.

If a form is built, keep it simple. The less barriers to participation, the better.
ANYTIME SUBMISSIONS VS. CHALLENGES

There are two types of innovation submissions you want to be able to ask for and process:

Anytime Submission: Occur when people have an idea that is not related to any specific or expressed need, problem or challenge

Challenge Submission: The company posits a need, problem or opportunity in the form of a challenge and asks everyone who has an idea to submit those ideas with or without a deadline. Challenges can also potentially come with a higher than normal incentive.

DEFINING AN ACCEPTABLE SUBMITTED IDEA

There are a few things you need to consider when defining what is an acceptable idea. For challenge-based submissions, it needs to actually address the challenge put forth. Yet for all submissions, you need to assess three things:

- Is it something new and not something you are already doing or in the process of trying to make a reality?
- Has it already been submitted by someone else?
- Is it clearly expressed and actionable?

This latter point is partly based on whether or not you set up minimal criteria or forms for an idea submission. This has its pluses and minuses. You do not want to place barriers in the path for people to be able to freely and easily offer up innovative ideas. Yet, at the same time, you may not (depending on your size) be able to handle a whole bunch of ill-structured, not clear, and not well-defined submissions. This is a fine line to walk. Therefore, you should probably start out without any criteria or forms and see what your experience is with this open-ended format. If it works well and can be handled, then leave it the process open and barrier free. If it becomes (and stays) too much too handle, then think about
establishing criteria or forms to cut down on the “noise.” Early barriers may make it unattractive from the start, but criteria/forms added later, when the process is established, might not meet with as much resistance because the process has (hopefully) proven to otherwise work and be of value.

Barrier-free submissions are always best. You should only add to the "difficulty level" of engagement and submission if you find this to be absolutely necessary.

WHY BE SO STRUCTURED?

Why is this structure so necessary? Why can’t we just have an open innovation forum, like a think tank, where people can come, toss out ideas, and discuss them?

One of the reasons why we do not recommend a purely open forum such as the one described above (and certainly not as your only means to gather ideas) is that such a forum introduces many group and social dynamics that are hard to control, can become messy and ineffective if not handled properly, and tend to stifle the ideas of the naturally quieter while allowing the ideas of the more boisterous and confident to come through. Just because a person is the loudest, or the most confident, that they have the best ideas. This just means they are more forceful, confident, and naturally argumentative.

A recent study conducted at Stony Brook University and Penn State found that novel ideas are often met with greater skepticism and criticism than conventional ones. But because “disagreeable” folks (their term) are willing to argue and fight for their own ideas in the face of criticism, they may end up being more successful in actually getting their ideas implemented. The study further contends that while many people think of innovation as developing novel ideas, this research demonstrates that social factors play an important role in cultivating creativity in group and organizational settings.
The key then is not to let these strong social factors stifle or otherwise dominate the innovation generation conversation.

You can augment the standard process defined here with the occasional forum / think tank, but it should not be the only way you allow ideas to be raised. This is because of the strong social factors listed above, which are difficult to control and might present you with only the ideas of the "disagreeable." This of course is by no means where all the ideas or good ideas lie.

In addition, an open forum is going to be at a set place and time. This will naturally exclude people who cannot make it for any number of reasons. An open channel for ideas fits better to the needs and availability of all.

Finally, solely having an open forum that is messy and difficult to control does not demonstrate the same kind of management/executive commitment as does a structured process with feedback and acknowledgement. Further, as incentives are key, it is far harder to identify and incent a person in this type of forum where ideas are added to in piecemeal and possibly haphazard fashion.

Another alternative, is to first gather ideas via the more structured path outlined above and then bring the ideas that pass a defined level of muster to a think tank type forum for discussion. This will allow everyone to have an opportunity to defend their ideas, not just the more forceful idea generators. It also allows the idea owner to be readily identified and incented while keeping the forum somewhat constrained and controllable.

INCENTIVES

Good ideas are valuable. Often, they are extremely valuable. Occasionally, they are game changers. If innovation is the life blood of a company, then the ideas that lead to innovation are the bone marrow.
Adding incentives for innovation ideas that make it beyond a certain point of review is an essential aspect of a good innovation process. The incentives and rewards offered and given need not be only monetary. Peer recognition is one good alternative, so too is an extra day off. The extra day off is a good option because it is something the idea generator can take home to his/her family and proudly explain, "I am here with you today, at home, because I came up with a good idea at work and my company recognized it and rewarded me for it." This improves their self-worth and pride, not just in the workplace but into their "real" lives as well. You can see how this could add additional benefit well beyond just financial and peer recognition.

The bottom line is that you are asking people to give you something of potential value: their thoughts and ideas. This value should be met with something of value to the person. Any good and fair deal is a deal that is good and fair for all parties.

BEYOND THE IDEA

As previously mentioned, an idea is a seed. It is something with the potential to grow into something which can be harvested. This potential is only ever realized if it is well sown, nurtured, and cared for.

Once the innovative idea passes a certain review point, then it needs to be afforded a supported path and means to further realization.

While highly dependent on the specifics and scope of the given idea, the next steps, beyond the reviewing and approving the idea, consist of continuing to move it forward in real and measurable ways.

Options for this might include establishing a team, project, and/or budget to take the idea to the next level. This could be perhaps further research, feasibility study, or even prototyping. Another alternative is to clear up some schedule time for the
submitter to further flesh out the idea. You could even give the idea generator a
day or more to work on the idea from home, if viable.

Next steps will depend highly on your industry as well as the scope of any given
idea. In any case, there must be real and supported next steps to move an
accepted idea forward and as far toward realization as possible.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THE INNOVATION PROCESS?

From a perspective of input, everyone in the enterprise/company should be allowed to and
couraged to offer up ideas for innovation.

Yet there needs to be a single, designated owner of the innovation process. This should be
someone within the organization who has a relative amount of authority.

A Reviewing Group or Council may be established, depending on the size and diversity of your
company.

You might have one single overarching group for your whole company or you might have one
group per division depending upon your size. When something other than an enterprise-wide
group is put into place (e.g., by division) make sure there is a way that innovation suggestions
can be submitted at the division level but can be marked in a way to indicate that they are
intended to be enterprise level suggestions and that a path exists for them to be handled at an
enterprise level as opposed to a division level.
HOW DO YOU GET AN INNOVATION PROCESS STARTED?

DECIDE / PLAN
Once you decide to develop and operate an innovation process, there are several other specifics you need to determine, put in place, and operate.

WHO
Every process needs an owner; one owner, not several. If many people own it then no one owns it. You need to identify an owner who wants it and is excited about it. He/she must have some level of influence and authority in your enterprise.

HOW
How will you collect innovation ideas?
How will you put forth and run innovation challenges?
How will you review and approve them?
How will you incentivize/reward people?
How will you design the supported paths beyond the idea?

WHEN
By what date do what to have the process in place and operational?

You need to design this process as you would any other system of process. You are going to need and use tools (technology) to gather submissions, provide feedback, and put forward challenges. Therefore, you are going to need people
(owner and reviewers). You are going to need people and a plan to put it all in place and oversee its creation (PM). You are going to need work with HR for incentives and rewards. You are going to need communications to introduce, announce and promote it all.

**PROCESS**

This should be undertaken as you would a project to put any other new process in place.

A diagram below shows a generic process that you can use as a starting point.

**INTERFACE(S)**

You will need to define, design and build interfaces for submissions, challenges, reviews, feedback, and incentive awards.

**BUILD / TEST**

Make sure everything is working properly before rolling the innovation process out to the public. Any barriers, will greatly diminish the usefulness of the process.

**EDUCATE / ROLLOUT / EVANGELIZE**

One of the most important aspects of putting in a new (and sometimes uncomfortably viewed) process, such as this, is to be clear and energetic in communicating it to your workforce. Let them know that you are 100% behind this, that you view it as important, and that you value people’s input and participation.

Let people know when it is coming, what the process will be, and how it can benefit both the company in general and them specifically.
Reinforce this message periodically to let them know that this isn’t just another “new thing” that will be thrown out and left to wither and die from lack of use and attention.

RUN / EXECUTE
Pay attention to the innovation process, run it as promised and published, and keep to your stated turnaround times for reviews and feedback.

MONITOR / IMPROVE / EXPAND
Like all new processes, you need to keep an eye on it. This is especially true in the beginning. You need to see what is working and what is not. You must determine why it is or is not working and how to correct or enhance it. Then implement those corrections and/or enhancements.
Generic Innovation Process Flow
CONCLUSION

Innovation can be the life’s blood of a company. This is especially true in today’s highly innovative, transformative, constantly changing world. Ideas are the bone marrow from which that life’s blood comes.

When you consider collectively the knowledge, experience, interests, and groups each one of your employees has, and when you then plug this all together, you have a valuable collective Enterprise Neural Network you should be tapping into and taking advantage of.

Creating this Neural Network does not happen well on its own. You need to establish an Enterprise Innovation Process.

This process must be valued, respectful of every idea, and contain as few entry barriers as possible. Since you are asking your people to afford you the benefit of their knowledge, experience, and ideas, then you need to offer something back as a reward.

Building an Innovation Process should be done in the same way that any valued process or system is built: you must think and decide, plan, design, build, test, communicate, execute, and monitor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KEITH COMMANDER is VP of Engineering at Future Point of View. He has more than three decades of experience in IT systems architecture, development, analysis and IT project management for diverse businesses at companies ranging in size from start-ups to Fortune 20s across a wide variety of platforms and software languages.

He has managed multiple projects exceeding $50 million, and he previously owned and operated an IT consulting firm for 10 years.

Keith oversees a variety of projects for FPOV clients including software development, digital blueprinting, project assessments and rescues, security audits, project and portfolio management and many others.

For more information about Keith, please visit FPOV.com/keith-commander-bio.
For reasons of social and group dynamics, an open forum or think tank should not be your only means to gather ideas. Yet such a forum might be a part of your overall Innovation Process.

In the end, an innovation process is a relatively easy thing to put in place. Meanwhile, the rewards for doing so can be significant. Not the least of all, it will help you become a dramatically more innovative organization.
PARTNERING WITH FUTURE POINT OF VIEW

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

WE ARE INSPIRED BY TECHNOLOGY, LEARNING, AND POSITIVE GROWTH.

First and foremost, we love educating leaders. It’s what gets us out of bed in the morning; it’s our shot of coffee on the way to work. Seeing the organizations that we help thrive, even under challenging circumstances, is exhilarating. We believe in technology. We understand its power to transform. We are also aware that this transformation can either be a positive one or a negative one. We aren’t technology cheerleaders; we are technology teachers. We want technology to be a force for good in both the organizations that we work with and in the broader world. That’s why we do what we do. We are passionate about teaching technology so that it can provide a positive influence on organizations.

“We are passionate about teaching technology so that it can provide a positive influence on organizations.”
OUR **COMMITMENT** TO YOU

// We are committed to providing value to you and to being a positive force in your organization’s advancing journey forward. We understand our duty, and we do not take our mission lightly. We have rules that we have imposed on ourselves as a reminder of the importance of our mission and our responsibility to our clients:

// We will do no harm: We will not cause disruption, distraction, or drama while building solid relationships within all layers of your organization, and we will never become a part of internal politics. We will also honor confidentiality when working with the entire team.

// We will always charge a fair amount for services rendered: We always consider client return on investment when finding agreement on rates. We also will keep expenses to a minimum by traveling conservatively.

// We teach you to fish rather than fish for you: We are committed to completely teaching you how to be successful with technology because we want your organization to grow long after our engagement is over.

// We will always be frank with advice: Maturing with technology is never easy. That is why we are dedicated to recommending you the most honest advice, even if that advice is difficult to deliver. Sensitive topics will always be handled with complete discretion and care.

// We will always provide top quality work: From our ideas to the way we present these ideas, our work will always be above industry standards.

// The work we do lives on: All forms, documents, and tools which we provide remain available for your team to continue to use within your organization. When this project is closed, the knowledge gained and resources we worked on together remain behind and can mature with your organization.
About Future Point of View

Future Point of View is a technology-strategy firm with corporate offices in Oklahoma City, OK and resources spread across the United States. We have been helping organizations become world class at leveraging technology to create competitive advantage for more than eight years and have years beyond this in collective experience across our consultants.

We work with organizations in many industries, from medium-sized to multi-billion-dollar international entities. Our focus is simple: develop winning strategies, educate clients on market-leading best practices, support them in implementing these strategies to gain competitive advantages and sustainable results.

Our team has marketing-savvy technologists with a deep understanding in business operations, sales, and management. We work to help clients identify the weaknesses in their skills, processes, culture, or infrastructure, and then assist in closing those gaps.

Organizations must continually improve how they balance the use of technology with the human element of business processes. Maturity in this quest will lead to amplified profits and long-term prosperity. The economy will favor leaders who learn to be world class at executing on thought-leading strategies and will punish those who believe they can tread water. This is the life-long mission of FPOV: to help clients achieve a high level of digital maturity. We all benefit when people use technology in more powerful ways.