

Let's create some overhead

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Some principles, in business as well as in real life, are very simple and easy to understand. Focusing on the business spectrum of things, the most significant principle is the overhead

The actual main purpose of business is to create overhead for other organisations. Of course that is exactly what 'the others' are doing as well. The mechanism that is mainly used to convince the others that overhead is useful is called marketing strategy. Let's call it a way of life.

As is the case with most simple principles, there is a severe catch to reckon with: in order to survive, your business is required to be faster and smarter in creating overhead for others than they are. In order to obtain that goal it is strongly recommended that you allow others to create some overhead for you as well. It's even worthwhile to consider creating some overhead for yourself, in which case we can claim being innovative.

How to 'interface' employees

The most important overhead that is usually recognised as such is employees, and of course they are the main source responsible for thinking up and realising creative ways to increase the overhead of others. Naturally, employees are usually all too human, so not all their schemes will actually work as envisioned. That's the way we humans learn – by making mistakes and acknowledging that we did so. Fortunately, most ideas are 'p-ideas'¹ (practical ideas) – being an idea that already existed, but is applied in a slightly different fashion for a different environment. The other type, the 'q-ideas' (quality ideas), occurs very seldomly – and to be honest it's unlikely that q-ideas catch on quickly because by their nature they lack a common understanding (a characteristic of brilliance?).

Let's take a closer look at where ideas come from and how they usually surface. Ideas are sparkles of insight and direct results from the associative capabilities of the human brain. They mostly come (and go) in a flash. In order to make use of an idea, it is required that it is shared and discussed with others. The sharing and discussing of ideas will have several effects:

- Ideas can generate other ideas (associative process);
- Potentially good ideas will be discussed in greater length than poor ideas: a process of natural selection;
- Discussion of an idea implies that it is taken seriously and is appreciated. Appreciation will encourage more people to share ideas;
- It increases the chance that good ideas emerge and poor ideas are put aside if more people are involved and can freely and effectively donate their 'five cents' worth;
- The common practice in dealing with ideas – the need to extensively describe the idea (on a piece of paper), explaining its benefits and hoping that it is understood by the (small group of) people that will take the final decision – is one of the reasons why so few of them are actually brought forward.

Finding better ways to capture and share ideas and improving the capability of recognising and applying (good) ideas is probably the main challenge of this century. Assumptions are that the role of information technology, more specifically semantic Web technology, will be one of the main enablers for such devices. But it can never be just technology that saves the day.

The paradigm of community The next step is ensuring that ideas and associations fall on fertile ground, to give them a fair chance to sprout – really a natural process of recycling. Since ideas come from the human brain, most of the time it is also the human brain where these ideas should be sown, and more brains involved means more fertile arable land.

One method for creating an environment that is receptive to ideas is to arrange the organisation as a 'community'. The main characteristic of a community is the paradigm of shared responsibility. Especially on the World Wide Web there are good examples of how communities work and what they are capable of achieving. The most clear examples are the way standardisation bodies are organised², for instance the Wikipedia³ initiative.

Organising a community-based surrounding does imply some reorganising and, probably more importantly, some de-organising. For this community approach to function properly it should have a flat, non-hierarchical structure. This is a contradiction to the way most organisations operate today. The only solution that can be effective in the relative short-term is to create communities as virtual entities that exist alongside the physical structure of an (for-profit or not-for-profit) organisation.

Getting the focus right: aim for lasting results The great thing about the current state of affairs with information technology is that a lot of components – and the experience of using them – needed to create such an environment are available. Note the word 'components' used here. Most of the Web-based software is built using components or modules rather than constructed as a single vast binary executable. This is an important condition in order to guarantee a flexible functional system. Every day the number of components from different

communities (open source) and vendors that allows for integration grows. This method of construction is only workable thanks to the emerging open standards for information exchange. These standards are responsible for the entangling information, functionality and presentational issues, preventing information lock-in situations.

These conditions are the main reason why flexible and interactive information-centric environments can be created in an economically-effective way today, not least because they allow for a gradual implementation strategy, doing a step-by-step rollout.

Some issues to reckon with

- Clearly describe the goal for an implementation like this. Include envisioned timespan and migration issues as well.
- Start with creating a community right at the start of a project like this. This will greatly improve both involvement and commitment, which are key issues.
- Interfacing is of importance. Since with ideas, associative insight comes in flashes, it should be possible to add associations and register ideas in a matter of seconds. Integrate these functions straight from desktop computers.
- Evaluate your stored information on usefulness and use available structure and metadata as a starting point.
- Use technical standards like: Web Services, Service Oriented Architecture besides semantic standards like ISO's Topic Maps or the Web Ontology Language.
- Creating an effective environment is a multidisciplinary activity (business rules, technology, ergonomics etc.). Ensure that all disciplines are represented.
- Try to capture and associate relevant information from processes and procedures as well as from documents and messages. Keep in mind that the current information systems in use can very well be integrated (possibly with a slightly different focus).

This article is a pretty good example of reusable intellectual property. Please read it again and replace the phrase 'overhead' (for business purposes) with 'profit'. For not-for-profit organisations, use 'budget' as a replacement. Then read it once more by replacing 'overhead' with 'investment'. Try replacing 'employee' for 'customer'. Three stories for the price of one – that's what we call efficiency.

References

1. The terminology 'p-idea' and 'q-idea' is derived from the book Creativity and Artificial Intelligence by Prof. Margaret Boden. In this book it's called 'p-creativity' and 'q-creativity'.
2. Using Web fora to organise feedback on proposals and reaching consensus.
3. The largest freely available encyclopedia ever, created by a large community, donating, scrutinising and correcting contributions on a voluntary basis. See the result for yourself at: <http://en.wikipedia.org>