

**How to design, implement and run idea  
management programmes across borders?**

**10 BEST PRACTICES TO MAKE IT WORK**

# How to design, implement and run idea management programmes across borders:

## 10 BEST PRACTICES TO MAKE IT WORK

Pedro do Carmo Costa



**PEDRO DO CARMO COSTA**  
[pcc@exago.com](mailto:pcc@exago.com)

Director and Co-founder of Exago, Pedro leads business development efforts. His career has centered on the art and science of innovation for almost 15 years. He's worked to help large companies build an internal capacity for innovation, to evolve and grow successfully. Prior to co-founding Exago, he worked at Strategos with innovation thought leaders such as Gary Hamel and Peter Skarzynski. Pedro lives in London and is the proud father of four.

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**Exago** is a pioneer in software and services that use collective intelligence to solve key business challenges, with an innovation-led approach. From cost reduction and customer engagement to behavioural change, we help organisations worldwide unleash people's hidden potential to achieve real results.

Our solutions are based on a gamified platform and field-tested best practices that rally communities and harness their collective wisdom. Our model is highly engaging and efficient as well as sustainable over time.

Since 2007, Exago has grown with our clients and partners worldwide. Together, we've reached 19 countries across four continents (Europe, Asia and North and South America), spanning a variety of industries - from major retailers and telecom operators to energy suppliers and health organisations.

We presently have three office locations: Lisbon, Portugal; London, the UK; and São Paulo, Brazil.



# INTRODUCTION

It's a one million (or likely more) dollars question that companies worldwide have been striving to answer: How can we successfully implement and run an idea management programme across borders? In other words, how can organisations with complex combinations of countries, businesses and languages extract value out of corporate wide effort - in particular, when running country specific idea challenges in parallel with corporate challenges?

Organisations have long realised that innovation is the cornerstone of any corporate growth imperative. It's the ongoing attitude that makes it possible. A source of opportunities, to create differentiated business models, products and cost structure that can ensure resilience and growth, at a global scale.

However, as you know, if you've been walking the innovation road for some time, relying on an innovation team or department to do all the work does not function, particularly at such large scale. You need to tap into the ideas and experience of everyone working with you.

Your internal diverse crowds - employees and stakeholders - are your most valuable asset. They:

// Have been exposed to many experiences, also personally and socially;

// Come from different backgrounds and education;

// Are consumers, with good and bad experiences to report, in all walks of life;

// Have worked in other departments, other companies and even other industries and countries;

// Are diverse in gender and age and nationality.

Just think about the expertise and knowledge of each and every one of them. Multiply that by a single, shared purpose you identify as a top priority. The possibilities are endless. Many of your employees and stakeholders have, in fact, the potential to be real innovators. But they may lack the tools, methods and incentives to do it.

Where to start such complex enterprise? How can you make sure your idea management initiatives do reach them, across all frontiers?

Running a corporation-wide programme is not an easy task. Social and cultural differences and language may pose real threats. Geography is the ultimate barrier, yet nowadays easier to overcome with new tools and global online networks.

So, before the journey, you have to start by planning a comprehensive idea management programme with ambitious but real targets, deadlines and evolution steps. One that fits your organisation's goals and features. Try to anticipate at each turning point in that evolution process when and how to involve your branches and affiliates. Then, learn to adapt as the transformation in your company happens.

Over more than a decade of running innovation efforts across continents, we have learned what works and what doesn't with leading organisations. We have distilled this accumulated learning into a set of principles.

We next share 10 top best practices to guide you in designing your cross-countries idea management process definition and governance model. They will help you maximise your results.

# #1

## Get leadership's commitment

These days, you rarely find an organisation worldwide where innovation is not part of leadership's mantra. Yet the time and resources dedicated to it are far less than other disciplines, like quality and customer service.

The challenge is that innovation is (will always be) a leap into the unknown that rarely brings immediate measurable results.

Make sure you get leadership fully engaged - CEO, Executive Committee, business unit leaders - by addressing their own business concerns and challenges, by educating them on the topic of innovation. And by showing them how innovation will deliver results to your global and local business challenges. Get their commitment and engagement, not just their sponsorship and involvement.

Make also sure they are aware of both the tangible and intangible outcomes, that expectations are clearly negotiated ahead. No one-year innovation plan should be put forward, as it is too easy to be shut down by short-term results oriented executives. Moreover, in a multinational setting, you will need time to grow and expand your efforts.

Innovation demands resilience, and both top-down and bottom-up support.

**# Get leadership's active engagement, not just sponsorship**

**# Take a leap of faith and be resilient**



# #2

## Secure a budget

I won't lecture on the importance of having the capital to effectively launch and manage an idea management programme across countries. A lack of funding is among the main causes for the demise of such initiatives. This is clear, and I'm sure you're taking care of it.

Secure a minimum three-year budget. That way a commitment is made and risk of short term shut-down is minimised.

In addition, ensure your budget includes funds to support promising and interesting business ventures that stagnate simply because they don't have a natural owner in the organisational chart.

### # Secure a small venture development budget



# #3

## Gather and prepare your human resources

What sometimes is less obvious is the need for a constituency inside your company to provide needed support throughout different phases of the innovation process. For instance, you'll need internal backing for communication: to reach out to employees and stakeholders in far-flung parts of the company, to give a little boost when necessary to a particular idea or venture and so on.

Still, forget about employing a huge army of innovation musketeers. That's not going to happen. Since you've not been given an army of trained consultants to fight the innovation war, you need to find creative ways to build a constituency.

Ongoing training programmes that 'produce' innovation practitioners is one way to go. Over time, you'll build up a constituency ready to support you in your efforts, especially if you have this contribution codified into each individual's performance evaluation targets. Spread your advocates strategically across branches, with different levels of innovation proficiency and sharing a commitment to this cause. They are the foundations of your governance model.

But how can you actually take your idea management programme to this next level? At Exago, we asked that question of ourselves when a client commissioned us to design a programme to build an internal army of innovation practitioners. Together, we defined a set of outcomes to increase the success of initiatives by improving content quality, accelerating throughput and de-risking opportunities. We named the programme 'Innovation Sigma' and based it on efficiency-focused Six Sigma principles:

- // Definition of four different levels of innovation proficiency;
- // Curricula (tools and courseware) that qualify participants at each proficiency level;
- // No full-time allocation (tapping into pivotal resources inside the organisation);
- // Guidelines describing how individuals can progress from one proficiency level to the next.

Whatever the programme you adopt, what's important is that you create a homogeneous system, throughout your organisation:



with a portfolio of offline tools, methods and processes that allow trained individuals to push innovation further. Build your own army of innovation practitioners to enhance innovation proficiency and deliver differentiation continuously.

There is no substitute to minds working together in a room ideating, elaborating upon an idea, and accelerating a venture. You need to structure these events in a way to assure they achieve the desired outcomes. This means designing the right set of tools, processes and facilitation for each session. Ideally, you should have a catalogue of offline programmes that you can easily draw from whenever you need to unstick an idea or a stalled opportunity.

**# Build your constituency, across countries**

**# Create offline processes to push innovation forward**



# #4

## Define a higher purpose

When launching your innovation effort, find a way to communicate that the initiative is bigger than just a simple project with a set of processes and tools. Follow up and build up on your organisation's mission.

Take a look at these global statements. Nike's goal is 'to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world'. Barnes & Noble bookstores' mission statement is 'to operate the best specialty retail business in America, regardless of the product we sell'. And Starbuck's motto is 'to inspire and nurture the human spirit - one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time'. What is the perfect umbrella for your initiative?

Individuals need a meaningful purpose to motivate them to dedicate their free time to activities that are not part of their official job description. So, you have to define a meaningful purpose for your innovation effort and identify 'the jobs-to-be-done' through innovation.

Show your teams that this is the opportunity to shape the company's future, to out-differentiate our competition. More importantly, to write history together.

### # Define a purpose that is bigger than the business itself



# #5

## Find (local) relevance

Whether you seek to apply innovation to solving very specific business challenges or to creating a companywide culture and capability, ask yourself, 'What do I want to change in my organisation?' Understanding your ambitions helps you materialise a migration path, set your expectations and allocate resources more rationally.

Therefore, guarantee your programme is relevant both to your people and to the organisation:

**// Have business relevance:** Don't solve problems you don't have. Pick the right fights aligned with your strategic leadership agenda. Key business challenges make the most relevant innovation challenges.

**// Focus people's attention on relevant matters:** Channel awareness toward the need to tackle an explicit problem, concentrating your people's collective intelligence on what really matters. Explain pressing needs and priorities but also the low-hanging fruit and other demands that can, in their own time, become equally important.

**// Narrow down your challenges:** The narrower the scope of the challenge, the more imaginative the audience becomes. The more ideas you will secure.

This is of crucial importance in widespread organizations - inefficiency in the headquarters compound energy usage in Switzerland is probably very irrelevant to your Peruvian employees. Even though corporate challenges do intersect your organisation, remember to align them to local reality, also giving space to specific priorities, within specific industry and geography scopes. Your local innovation advocates are crucial to defining, monitoring and reporting on these advances.

**// Have problem champions:** International idea management programmes have triumphed by negotiating innovation challenges with particular business unit leaders. Take leaders' challenges and name them innovation challenges - you will have your own champions.

- # Don't solve problems that you don't have**
- # Make business challenges innovation challenges**
- # Be very specific in defining your battles, across countries and businesses**



# #6

## Communicate clearly, always

Active and clear communication is fundamental to maximising participation. It also assures community awareness, guaranteeing your initiative's success. Building a witty communication plan - one that lives and breathes innovation - is paramount.

When putting it together make sure you have a complete plan with clearly defined targeted audiences, across cultures and business units, key messages, a media strategy and frequency expectations. For such undertaking, you have to involve your HQ communication teams, as well as country and business communication teams, to develop more detailed and oriented plans.

Communicate continuously, as the process evolves. The more individuals see the success of projects to which they have contributed, the more likely they are to remain mobilised.

**# Have a witty communication plan**

**# Adapt communication locally**

**# Communicate continuously**



# #7

## Define an appealing incentives plan

‘What’s in it for me?’ is the question your people will ask. Incentives motivate people. It’s not necessarily about tangible rewards such as prizes, but, most of all, recognition. Being recognised and to gain visibility inside the organisation motivates people to contribute to idea management programmes in every stage of the process - from thinking to creation to action.

Give your affiliates enough autonomy to adapt the plans to the local reality. Design your incentives model thoroughly to be productive and appealing to ensure employees are engaged and aligned with leadership agenda. The incentives can address different motivations: From simple vouchers and charity donations to opportunities to training in specific areas.

In addition, you should have a mechanism that recognises engagement. This means rewarding idea generation and participations that create value. By and by, celebrate idea implementation and identify the relevance and impact upon your business:

// When using online participation mechanisms, you can create a virtual **leaderboard**. It’s a great way of showing everyone who is helping your company to create more value, across branches.

// Acknowledge, as well, people’s contributions outside the platform - for instance, **public recognition** in the year-end enterprise get-together is a strong motivator.

**# Offer rewards and recognition (a.k.a incentives).**

**# Give constant feedback.**



# #8

## Use social tools wisely

Online platforms are powerful innovation enablers - the building blocks that produce outcomes. But they won't stand on their own. If you want to create a true innovation culture, you need to have as many people as possible participating in the process. You need to manage those tools efficiently.

The typical suggestion box mechanism in which participants' activity gets restricted to submitting ideas is certainly not up to the challenge. The forum model - where people can submit and comment on other people's ideas - also has its limitations.

Your participants need to get involved in the evaluation and selection processes, as well. This is the only way to boost the scope of your target and to convince people their contributions are valued.

Idea management software, functioning as an 'idea market', has proven to be highly effective at unleashing your people's and communities hidden innovation potential, crossing all boundaries. Geared to reaching goals, this gets each person to engage and participate more over time, whether you're seeking to improve performance, find new products and methods or develop a widespread, collaborative culture of innovation.

These platforms can collect everyone's ideas and insights, regardless of individuals' geographical dispersion, when carefully designed to:

// Be **flexible and customisable** to several languages and different look-and-feel;

// Be **inclusive**, motivating different types of people;

// Be **transparent**, so that participants understand the rules and constraints;

// Provide (immediate) **feedback** for people to remain engaged and understand how they can improve their participation;

// Provide **social interaction**, since sharing, competition and collaboration are decisive stimuli motivating people to contribute;

// Have clear **incentives and recognition** mechanisms;



// Be entertaining - using gamification mechanics, that make the process more attractive and sustainable.

Following these guidelines, we base our solutions on expert services and a software platform that mimics a stock market - all can submit, comment and next invest in the ideas they believe in, and be recognised and awarded for creating value. Using gamification, this model keeps adoption levels high over time.

Additionally, we use and recommend the adoption of prediction markets mechanisms. They allow dealing visibly with high volumes of information, typical in multinational organisations, and make decision-making more efficient, harnessing your community's collective intelligence.

**# Make participation inclusive**

**# Make work fun - gamify**

**# Use prediction markets' powerful evaluation engine**

# #9

## Be transparent

People need to understand clearly the common journey ahead (purpose-driven communication in action), and to have a voice in the process. Besides, they need to trust the process.

Prediction markets, as mentioned, are powerful engines to generate, screen and select ideas - in the most efficient and transparent way.

You should also give constant feedback on contributions and provide adequate guidance. Both on idea submission and commenting, it's important to 'filter' what is not value-creation and ensure people understand how they can create value and improve outcome.

Again, remember to communicate individual and group contributions to ensure transparency and reap the engagement rewards. If you don't provide constant feedback, engagement will quickly fade away. Once credibility is lost, it's much more difficult to get people back to the game.

**# Implement transparent screening processes**

**# Communicate successes, contributions and outcomes**



# #10

## Get, measure and share results

No returns, no play. Many innovation programmes have been shut down based on this mindset. How to make sure that yours won't?

Our services and software teams have joined efforts to create a structured model that makes sure idea management works and you, as an innovation executive, regain control of your mission. We have thus developed an idea management formula that produces results. Always.

This equation is the product of many years of practice, building on expertise in several multinationals. Perfected to achieve tangible outcomes efficiently and sustainably, it reveals that **compelling results are achieved when you succeed in engaging your people and multiply that engagement by a strong shared purpose.**

Nevertheless, results do take time. Innovation is a process of trial and error. Most innovations come with steady, continuous improvement. So, you have to capture every single win at the beginning and throughout the process, an incremental idea that is well supported, significant levels of participation - in both specific branch, country and corporate challenges. Learn also how to establish your own metrics.

Your idea management programmes can deliver profound, often unexpected 'intangible' additional deliverables. Do not neglect them: engagement and strategy alignment outcomes; talent spotting; increased implementation opportunities. And once more, remember to share and celebrate the individual and community's achievement.

**# Quick-wins are wins**

**# Learn no measure results, also the intangible**

**# Prevent selected ideas from falling into the implementation void**







## SUM UP...

The biggest challenge multinational companies face today is how to build an organisation where collaboration is sustainably enabled by technology, processes, capabilities and behaviours. Where collective intelligence becomes the ‘muscle’ behind innovation. And where people, individually and as teams, work beyond their job description, and everyone, anywhere, can make a difference.

To make sure your idea management programme does thrive, remember then to:

- #1 Get leadership’s commitment:** Not just their sponsorship.
- #2 Secure a budget, at least a three-year budget:** Minimising risk of short term shut-down.
- #3 Gather and prepare your human resources:** Find and train local innovation advocates and ambassadors to liaise with the other branches and the headquarters.
- #4 Define a higher purpose:** Make sure someone on the other side of the world feels they can contribute to the growth and sustainability of the entire organisation.
- #5 Find (local) relevance:** Get to know people’s needs and aspirations and launch local challenges.

**#6 Communicate always:** And adapt the communication plan to local habits and ‘flavours’. Remember that the challenges themselves, the positive incentives provided, have to be aligned with a common and clear purpose that is publicly communicated.

**#7 Define an appealing incentives plan:** Motivate each branch to be the best in class by giving them visibility and recognition, as teams and individually.

**#8 Use social tools wisely:** Use a collaborative model for the participation of a large and diversified group of people, as well as game mechanisms, to make participation fun, engaging and continuous.

**#9 Be transparent:** Idea management programmes need to embed the sense of proximity in participants and depend on the transparency of the process to gain credibility. Prediction markets are a powerful and highly transparent way to do it.

**#10 Get, measure and share results:** And turn the best ideas into projects.

Never forget that people really want to be listened to and to be part of the process. You must mobilise them and keep them involved around meaningful business challenges.

This also means that, throughout the process, you have to empower your local branches, give them a mandate and autonomy. Get their buy-in into the programme. Empowerment comes with responsibility.

To give the extra edge is also an extra responsibility on top of someone’s day job. So, finally, if you want to get your people’s attention and encourage them to participate, across cultures and countries, equip yourself to be positive, resilient, and to lead the way.

**exago.com**

**LISBOA**

RUA LUCIANO CORDEIRO, 123 – 5.º ESQ.  
1050-139 LISBON, PORTUGAL  
+351 210 997 443

**LONDON**

26 CADOGAN SQUARE 3RD FLOOR  
LONDON SW1X 0JP, UNITED KINGDOM  
+44 20 371 4 0723

**SÃO PAULO**

R. CINCINATO BRAGA, 43 4  
01333-010 – SÃO PAULO – SP, BRASIL  
+55 (11) 3340-3333

**exago.com** | sales@exago.com



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