

Construct Your Own Innovation Pipeline

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Sometimes the best and brightest ideas come from the most unlikely or unheralded sources.

It's an obvious statement, but it's also the thought process behind a noteworthy and recent crowdsourcing and collaboration effort undertaken by AT&T. The tech giant developed a tool called The Innovation Pipeline (TIP) an outlet for company employees to share imaginative ideas with AT&T and one another. After rigorous examination and development, some of these ideas are turned into AT&T products, applications, and services.

Whether it comes from a senior executive, a mid-level manager or new-hire, TIP allows ideas to be shared with a broad audience of potential collaborators through an online platform. Ideas move through a rate-and-review process, and the best and most promising ideas are developed further and considered for funding. Everyone in a business enterprise, regardless of role, reputation, or geographical location, is afforded the opportunity to have his or her voice heard.

The top ideas are identified through votes, comments, and advisor approval. Then they are pitched to AT&T executives, who play a venture capitalist-like role in the process. Successful projects have the potential to be adopted by an AT&T business unit, spun off into an external company, or sold to another company.

According to AT&T, TIP has played a vital role in the development of products and services such as GeoCast, U-verse Upsale on the U-verse Help menu, Pay-per-Tweet, SmartCell, among others. It seems this tool is much, much more than a glorified online suggestion box. It's social innovation.

I wonder if manufacturers have implemented or considered implementing a similar platform for sharing ideas about product development or value-added services. After all, is it really smart business to rely on the same small brain trust to dream, scheme, and innovate when the alternative is an open competition for the best and brightest ideas?

Coming up with a hit product, application, or service is a tall task, no matter a company's previous track record of success or knowledge of the market. Expanding the brain trust and soliciting opinions from individuals with different backgrounds, education, and skill sets is certainly one way to both address the challenge of innovation and try to assure members of a workforce that they are valuable members of a team – not just a pair of hands working an assembly line or a computer keyboard.

Crowdsourcing and collaboration are hardly complex concepts, but AT&T's TIP is a sophisticated means to a straightforward end. It takes a number of steps to

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navigate the entire length of The Innovation Pipeline. So it's not the kind of initiative that can be developed and fast-tracked for implementation. It takes considerable time and great consideration, because what works for AT&T may not work for your average manufacturer of industrial products.

That being said, I love the thought process and AT&T's execution of the initiative. It's certainly the sort of project or undertaking just about any company can get behind.

Have you heard of a company developing an initiative similar to AT&T's TIP? How well has it worked? Email me at mike.schmidt@advantagemedia.com [1].

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