Organisational Creativity in Context: 
Learning from a Failing Attempt to Introduce IT Support for Creativity

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ABSTRACT

As a much-needed quality in today’s businesses, creativity is an important area of research. While implementing and evaluating computer support for electronic brainstorming (EBS), it was noticed that the sheer presence of technology guarantees neither usage nor success. Contextual factors such as organisational culture and attitudes seem to have an equally important role, and this observation called for a more focused analysis of the motivational aspects of creativity management. Based on the empirical data from the electronic brainstorming system evaluation and literature on organisational creativity, three general pieces of managerial advice to promote corporate creativity are suggested: reconsider the use of extrinsic rewards, recognise creative initiatives, and allow redundancy.

Keywords: creativity management; information technology; intrinsic motivation; reward systems

INTRODUCTION: 
A NEED FOR CREATIVITY

As noted by many commentators, the importance of creativity in industry has risen dramatically during the last few decades. During the peak of the industrial era, a company could prosper from slowly developing and refining one single product or service. The increasing pace with which business now reshapes itself, propelled by the new capabilities offered by information technology, places higher demand on the organisational members to be able to see and grasp new opportunities. Globalisation, and the competition that accompanies it, further adds to the need for creativity in an entrepreneurial way, and it is argued that
employees of tomorrow will be valued more for their ability to create new knowledge than for being able to manage known facts (Carr, 1994; di Sessa, 1988; Drucker, 1993; Reich, 2002). The successful handling of creativity is therefore a factor of increasing importance and should be considered a vital aspect of (knowledge) management.

Creativity is typically defined as the development of ideas that are (1) novel or original, and (2) useful (or potentially so; Amabile, Conti, Coon, Collins, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Paulus, 2000), and creativity is seen as a prerequisite for innovation (e.g., the implementation of useful ideas in the organisation). An important part of the creative process is therefore to support and enhance idea generation (Paulus), and a traditional approach has been to encourage employees to submit their ideas to a suggestion system. This approach has been used in U.S. and European companies since at least 1880 (Robinson & Stern, 1997), and companies with suggestion systems have shown that this leads to production improvements. The ideas submitted are typically attended to and reviewed by a proposal-handling committee (PHC). Good suggestions are usually rewarded in some way, while not-so-good proposals are rejected.

Although being a well-known approach in practice, relatively little research exists on suggestion systems (Frese, Teng, & Wijnen, 1999). Nonetheless, a number of serious shortcomings with the suggestion-system approach have been identified (Frese et al.; Stenmark, 2001b). First, there is a problem of communication. Suggestions are seldom shared within the organisation. Good ideas may be implemented locally, but remain unheard of in other parts of the organisation, resulting in the “reinventing-the-wheel” syndrome. Other ideas may be prematurely rejected due to the user’s inability to accurately communicate the vision that he or she has, or the PHC’s limited capacity to understand and appreciate the quality of a perhaps innovative, and thus unconventional, suggestion. Had these ideas only been made public, they could have started other creative ideas elsewhere in the organisation (Stenmark, 2001b). Second, many ideas are never proposed at all for several reasons. One thing generally recognised as a serious performance blocker is evaluation apprehension: the fear of being measured by one’s peers. We are reluctant to present silly ideas if we risk losing face in front of our colleagues. Instead, we keep our potentially revolutionary ideas to ourselves, again missing an opportunity for organisational benefit (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Stenmark, 2001b). Another reason is the threshold an official suggestion system constitutes: We may feel that our idea is not worthy of being submitted as an official proposal, or we may lack the ability or motivation to write up our proposal in the form required for a suggestion to be accepted (Frese et al.). These problems threaten to undermine the system since Diehl and Stroebe has shown a high correlation between quantity and quality. Receiving many ideas is thus a fundamental principle if you want good ideas (Frese et al.).

To address these shortcomings, this action-oriented study aimed to promote the idea-generation phase by pairing the suggestion-system approach with the principles underpinning brainstorming as posited by Osborn (1953): that is, large quantities, elaboration on others’ ideas, and the absence of criticism. This hybrid approach resulted in the implementation of an online suggestion-system prototype called Mindpool. The technical features of this prototype have been described in detail elsewhere (Stenmark, 2001b, 2002) and shall only briefly be accounted for in this article. The focus is on the organisational
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