

# ISA | Innovation & Idea Management Center

## Does HR Run Your Innovation Program? Then Why Would You Use HR Software?

By Bill Shockley, ISA Senior Partner & Consultant  
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If you've read some of my white papers, you know that I've spent some time looking at the history of suggestion systems and idea management.

What you may not know, or might not have thought about, is that employee suggestion systems are traditionally run by human resources groups for the purpose of employee involvement.

When Idea Management was invented about eight years ago, it was those same human resources groups that used the new software. Why did they want software? They received so many ideas that they couldn't keep track of them – and often didn't.

So, what were these systems used for? Well, for lots of things, like cost savings, process improvement, gripes, safety issues, and just about anything else that you can think of – except innovation!

In the past several years, we've seen rapid growth in the importance of innovation, as more and more companies have started innovation groups, named a chief innovation officer, and the like. So when these new groups needed a way of collecting innovative ideas, guess what they looked to? Right – idea management.

To meet the new innovation need, Idea management suddenly made a sharp turn and re-invented itself. Or did it?

Well, no, it didn't, and that's the problem. While at least one of the software companies created a new version of its software for 'innovation,' eventually they merged it right back into the old one.

And that is where we have remained for the last five years. Innovation groups are continuing to try to use human resource software for innovation and that is what the software companies are providing.

On the plus side, idea management is marginally capable of handling incremental innovation, that is, ideas that are simple, straightforward, easy to understand, and easy to kill with 'mass review' processes. What it has not been able to do consistently is promote the process of innovation and help people create really good – or even breakthrough – ideas.

So, while the software companies will tell you their anecdotes about how their idea management product created gazillion dollar markets for some of their customers, those anecdotes are pretty few and far between, and perhaps exaggerations, anyway.

What is wrong with idea management and what can be done? There is no question that innovation professionals need a process to create and evaluate great ideas – they just haven't seen one.

Software companies can't do it. Their understanding of innovation is really pretty minimal, though they may spend a lot of time on the lecture circuit. Just ask them how large their innovation consulting staff is, and if they are honest, the answer should be, "Huh?"

Let's understand what innovation is.

Forget all the definitions that you have heard. It is the process that will keep your company alive and ahead of the competition. That's sounds easy enough, but the software companies haven't

figured it out. Why? Because they don't understand that a different process is needed for innovation than for human resources.

I've written before, and lamented, that creativity has been in short supply in major corporations for a long time. That's why the Big 3 are producing gas-guzzling SUVs when gas is three bucks a gallon. Some people blame that on a failure to build a culture of innovation, and I'll buy into that to some extent, but there is more to it.

The problem is that even if your company has an innovative culture, your employees still need to know how to be innovative, and nobody has ever shown them how. It's one thing to know what to do, and quite another to know how to do it.

There are some really good innovation consultants out there, and maybe you have talked with one or more of them. Maybe you've even talked to us. The consultants understand that employees have to be taught how to be creative, and the consultants have tried very hard to teach processes that will accomplish that.

But how do you teach thousands upon thousands of employees? Or make it a regular routine for them, not just a one-shot deal? There's the rub. Oh, sure, you can do train-the-trainer stuff, write company manuals, run each new employee through a lecture, and so on, but none of that ensures lasting results.

The better way is to take the Idea Management tool and make creativity an integral part of it, so that it is no longer simply a human resources idea collection box, but is a substantive creativity and innovation tool. Aha!

How do you do that? Simple. You take some of the innovation tools that have been created by the consultants and marry them to idea management.

OK, it isn't quite that simple, but it can - and has been - done.

Now, innovation groups can integrate all of their company's employees into a creative process of incremental and breakthrough innovation to help meet their goals.

Call or email at 1-732-226-4053, [bshockley@ISAinnovation.com](mailto:bshockley@ISAinnovation.com), for any of the following:

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