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## Idea Management Participation Rate Does It Really Matter?

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Two methods have been used for many years to determine the success of an idea management system: Return on investment and participation rate. I've previously tackled Idea Management ROI in a white paper, so it's time to look at participation rate.

Everybody, and I mean everybody, talks about participation rate. If you look at some of the literature, you will even find comparisons of one country versus another, and the results usually show Japan with a very high rate, Europe with a somewhat smaller rate, and the US at the bottom of the list. And of course, that is accompanied by grunts and groans that the US is way behind the rest of the world. Maybe. Maybe not.

Let's first consider why a company acquires idea management software.

Sometimes software is purchased via a human resources department to automate an existing, usually failing, suggestion box under the heading of 'employee involvement.' So, when the purpose of Idea Management is solely or primarily to keep employees involved, or at least to let them think they are involved in running the company, participation rate is one measure of how well the goal is being accomplished. The participation rate is often believed to be tied closely to the corporate culture, and you will hear the top-down bottom-up description applied to companies with either an open culture or a not-so-open one. A company with an open bottom-up culture should have a high participation rate, and vice-versa.

So, it should be no surprise that a country such as Japan which has long encouraged employee involvement would have a high participation rate in idea management.

But, is that really the purpose of idea management? Is it an appropriate measure of success? In most cases, no.

Today's idea management software is not usually run by human resources for employee involvement purposes, but is instead usually run by a manufacturing, engineering, R&D or innovation group. And their goal is not participation, but results.

In my ROI white paper, I posited my belief that idea management has only one purpose: 'Keep the innovation pipeline stocked with projects that will enable a company to meet its financial goals.' Note that there is nothing in that statement about employee participation.

Frankly, whether the ideas flowing into the pipeline come from all employees, most of them, or just a few of them, really doesn't matter. All that matters is that there are enough ideas.

Now, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't offer idea management to all employees. The fact is, we never know where a really great idea is going to come from. It might be the floor sweeper or the CEO. Or, a customer or vendor! So, all need to be included in the process.

But, there is an old expression, "Some will, some won't, who cares, move on!" that I think applies here. In short, it means that you need to provide the tools for creating ideas, make them available to everyone, and not worry whether the ideas come from a handful of people or all of them.

The philosophy of Gen 3 idea management is that a company should not seek a massive number of ideas, most of which will be nonsense and will create a huge amount of unnecessary work for the idea review committee, but instead seek a smaller number of well-thought-out ideas. That way we can dump the 'mass review' process, and replace it with an intellectual process based on merit.

Let's make idea management available to everyone, encourage its use, and make it easy to create a good idea, but let's not spend any more time worrying about participation rate. It has no importance in innovation. Instead, let's concentrate on the purpose of idea management – keeping the pipeline full of good projects.

If idea management accomplishes that, then no other measures are necessary.

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