BPTrends ARTICLE

Increasing Employee Engagement in Process Improvements: The Case for Crowdsourcing
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Many organizations struggle with establishing a culture of continuous improvement. Employees are disengaged and resist the traditional checklist approach to identifying improvement areas. As practitioners of benchmarking and purveyors of best practices, we all know one way to move past a difficult problem is to look externally for answers.

Based on APQC's recent research report on continuous improvements, Crowdsourcing for Process Improvement, business excellence and process management departments can leverage open innovation tactics like crowdsourcing to engage employees and tap into ideas for process innovations or improvements.

Why Traditional Approaches Don't Always Work

Let me know if this sounds familiar: The process management or business excellence team goes from department to department to understand each of their current processes, sits down with the department managers to verify that the outline of their processes is accurate, and work with the department to assign priorities for process reviews. The department then identifies which employees are most involved in these processes and the team starts a conversation using a standardized template, asking each employee to:

- walk through the steps of their processes,
- assess cycle time and efficiency,
- identify the pros and cons of the processes, and
- look for potential improvements.

However, many times our efforts to engage the workforce in this manner either meet resistance or fail. But why?

The traditional approach to engaging front-line workers in process improvements has many flaws:

- Most people indicate they are happy with their current process.
- The onus is on the employee to identify flaws or problems in the current process from memory.
- Employees are apprehensive about speaking negatively about the current process. (They do not want to be perceived as a squeaky wheel.)
- Employees are sensitive to critiques of the current process. Many people are close to the process they use or in some cases may have invented it. Employees consider a critique of the process a critique of themselves.

In other words, the traditional approach for identifying process improvement opportunities doesn't work for two reasons: (1) it suffers from poor timing because

employees are asked to identify issues in hindsight, and (2) it lacks an employee engagement element, which is necessary because change is a sensitive subject that requires trust and enthusiasm.

One Solution: Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing is simply the idea that an organization can tap into the collective intelligence of a larger group to identify and solve problems. By incorporating contests and events in the crowdsourcing activities, organizations can include elements of play and competition and engage employees with a sense of ownership for process improvements.

Crowdsourcing efforts do not have to involve customers or external interest groups. Many organizations find success in solving business problems by conducting crowdsourcing activities with their employees.

Liberty Bank Example

To facilitate process improvement, Liberty Bank sponsored a contest to crowdsource information from front-line employees. For two months, employees in the retail banking division could submit ideas for process improvement areas.

Liberty Bank included an incentive for the contest, based on the idea's potential value or impact and all suggestions would receive attention, and the submitter of each improvement would be involved in the solution development. The information gathered in the submission form (figure 1) and subsequent interviews with the submitters was translated into a scope of the potential project.

Improvement Suggestion Form

Process Improvement Idea Form

- ✓ Description of the issue or inefficiency
- ✓ Indicate department affected
- ✓ Outline a possible solution (not mandatory but encouraged)
- ✓ Identify potential obstacles to a solution
- ✓ Potential ROI of solution (cost savings, cycle time, customer satisfactions etc.)
- ✓ Indicate what individual or department should be included in the solution development (initial stakeholder mapping)

Figure 1

Prioritization of the projects was done in collaboration with the department leaders. Using project scopes, the team combined similar projects, discussed their merits, and prioritized them based on their potential impact, which included improvements in efficiency, customer reach, information securities, and customer benefits.

Baker Hughes Example

Baker Hughes uses crowdsourcing and innovation workshops to tap into the broader knowledge of its work force to solve pressing technical, product, or business challenges (including process improvement opportunities). Its crowdsourcing exercises are typically virtual contests that span a few weeks. For example, Baker Hughes conducted a three-week contest open to the entire organization looking for solutions to a challenge. There were more than 1,000 unique ideas submitted and four winners, who then got to spend a year in the development of the solution.

Benefits of Crowdsourcing

So why does crowdsourcing result in an engaged workforce; who would proactively submit ideas—and in some cases solutions—for process improvement?

Compared to the traditional approach of sitting down with employees and going through a process assessment checklist, crowdsourcing-based approaches have several features that engage employees. They are:

- **voluntary**—employees want to participate and consequently bring their best ideas;
- **occur in real time**—employees are enabled to send suggestions as they come across them while conducting the process;
- **create momentum**—immediate recognition and a feedback structure keeps employees engaged and creates anticipation for the next steps; and
- **establish a sense of ownership**—through immediate recognition and inclusion in the development of the solution improvements become personal.

Timing and setting expectations are also important factors in crowdsourcing. The whole project requires a quick turnaround and a steady cadence of immediate recognition to keep employees engaged. Furthermore, there needs to be a due date for closing the loop with employees on how their contributions will be addressed; ensuring they know their voices are heard and have had some impact on the business. To ensure this occurs in a timely manner, set a date for when your process improvement team will assess and address all submissions—either create a project team to address the issue or reach back to the submitter to explain why the project could not be addressed (including a list of the reasons why.) By adhering to the principles outlined in this Article organizations can effectively leverage crowdsourcing to engage employees and overcome resistance to process improvement.

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