

Crowdsourcing walking on thin ice

Taking from the basics of innovation, crowdsourcing works best when diverse employees are allowed to voice their free thoughts in an open environment. Get your crowdsourcing efforts on track with 'behind-the-scenes, beyond the tool' behaviours that drive collective intelligence.

■ BY SHAILJA KAUSHIK

Terrain India Ltd was facing a recruitment issue, which it decided to broadcast to its employees to take suggestions and resolve the problem. It deployed a web-based collaboration solution which garnered a lot of initial excitement. Crowdsourcing was targeted as the next big thing to tap into the creativity of its workforce. Everything was right until people started using the tool to voice their concerns, which deviated from the employer's view of things. Leaders did not know what to do with the employees' feedback and ideas; they were completely lost because their feel-good opinions were kicked hard by the ground realities that employees actually had to share. Rather than a creativity incubator, the tool had become more of a 'go along to get along' platform. *Alas!* **Moral of the story: Simply putting the question out there is not enough.**



Blinded by the shine

Now a buzz word, the term 'crowdsourcing' was coined in Wired Magazine by author Jeff Howe in 2006, however, the process of crowdsourcing was invented as early as 1714. As rightly put by Sucharita Palepu, Global Head, People Policies and Practices, Tech Mahindra, "Crowdsourcing by its very nature is nothing new...but with the advent of new technologies, the ability to involve large and diverse groups virtually has become easier. Also, with a growing Gen-Y & Z employee profiles and the need to cater to their socio-collaborative mindset, it's become imperative for organizations to adopt new age concepts while at the same time leverage the collective wisdom of a huge talent pool." Old wine in new bottle? But shaken, stirred and with a twist!

However, the biggest irony of crowdsourcing is that the very crowd of people who get together to generate new ideas fall prey to the collective delusion and wilful blindness to follow the lead of those with greatest status in the group

or submit to the most popular ideas - a situation that can be termed as 'group think.' Even if individuals have contrary or novel positions, they are unlikely to voice them due to the fact that taking a position or idea counter to the conventional wisdom can jeopardize their standing within the group. No one wants to be the Doubting Thomas who looks distrustful. The question that arise is, what should companies do to avert the contagious and self-limiting human psychology of 'You are either with the herd or you are against the herd' to sprout among the vulnerable crowd?

R. Anand, Vice President - Global Rewards, People & Leadership, HCL Technologies says, "With the transformation in how businesses communicate with consumers and employees, due to rapid digitization, one way that companies are tapping into creativity is crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing enables organizations to tactically draw upon the diverse experiences and knowledge of a large, heterogeneous audience, while extracting innovative solutions." Successful companies have experienced surprising solutions to internal problems and innovation needs. They recognize that their diverse employees collectively know more than any of their executive teams, and soliciting that knowledge has resulted in surprising solutions to difficult problems. Fostering social innovation at the workplace, HCL Technologies has what it calls 'Meme'; Tech Mahindra has 'Free Voice', Cognizant has C2, McAfee has Visual Flywheel and Virtusa has V+ that allows employees to connect, learn and grow by freewheeling their thoughts.

Sandyp Bhattacharya, Senior VP and Head of HR, Mahindra Comviva, feels, "It is only natural that the power of what needs to be experienced is decided by those who get impacted by it."

Crowdsourcing has found many takers among the HR fraternity, however, it has been successfully leveraged by only a few who have looked beyond the tool, and made intrinsic changes to their culture and outlook. TimesJobs.com survey 2012

revealed that nearly 57 per cent of the surveyed employers use crowdsourcing for recruitment purposes. According to organizations that have used crowdsourcing for one or more HR functions, more than 60 per cent have been highly satisfied with the results, revealed the study. Knowingly or unknowingly, the crowdsourcing champions have espoused what James Surowiecki in his book *The Wisdom of Crowds* identified as three conditions required for collective wisdom - diversity among members of the crowd, dissenting thoughts on the part of actors, and decentralization in the organization of the activity. Innovative solutions to problems could be found within diverse, decentralized and independent crowds that consist of both people who are



// Social platforms are all around us (in reality shows or news channels). This extends an advantage that employees are better able to identify with these interventions. However, on the flip side, this places a huge responsibility on employers. It's not just another "new and nice to have" program, but its success is built on credibility. //

Sucharita Palepu
Global Head, People Policies & Practices ■ Tech Mahindra



// Not all small and medium sized organizations have dedicated resources for developing an organization processes, systems or a culture. Crowdsourcing therefore is a powerful method that HR can adopt to help build industry best practices in organizational development. //

Prasad Menon
Director-HR & Corporate Social Responsibilities ■ McAfee India



// Before implementation, all the possible solutions needs to be envisaged and cost and cultural impact should be evaluated. Whatever be the challenges there should always be a commitment to honour the feedback and maintain a transparent culture. Though the method doesn't take away all the pains of the change, but acts as a significant shock absorber. //

Sandyp Bhattacharya
Senior VP & Head-HR
■ Mahindra Comviva

acknowledged experts and those with no formal expertise. Citing the benefits of crowdsourcing Bhattacharya says, "This enables HR programs to be well-accepted by the employees, allowing us to focus on bringing in further improvements rather than managing negative murmurs and non-acceptance. We get newer ideas which lay the foundation for innovative solutions. Also, empowerment and transparency, gets entrenched across organisational culture."

Crowding the truth

Today's ships, planes, bridges, buildings, technology and so on are all marvels of collective wisdom but

war and genocide comes to the mind as something that can also be accomplished by the way of Groupthink or Hive minds. Groupthink is most likely to occur when the group is highly cohesive, isolated from contrary opinions, and ruled by a directive leader who makes his or her wishes known. Such groupthink is highly dangerous as the group tends to limit its discussion to only a few alternatives, leading to inferior decision-making. Divide and conquer maybe an outcast philosophy in the political world, but it is surely a brilliant algorithm for effective crowdsourcing. The action of creativity must be broken down into very small individual pieces that

can be performed in the spare time. As Rahul Sahay, Director HR, Virtusa Corporation emphasizes, "Large tasks can be overwhelming because they are difficult to handle and time consuming. So it is better to break them into smaller manageable 'microtasks', which are more user-friendly." Sriram Rajagopal, Vice President, Human Resources, Cognizant puts forth the four key elements of successful crowdsourcing - encouraging a participative culture; involving employees into organizational policies and programs; taking feedback constructively; and acknowledging every individual's contribution. Once these key



// About 86% of Gen Y loves it. However, challenge lies on the other side with tenured managers who have to let go of control. In such scenarios, we follow reverse mentoring principles to bring about psychological change amongst the managers. //

Rahul Sahay
Director-HR ■ Virtusa Corporation



// For any crowdsourcing program to generate value, it must be created with care by carving out the "hot spots" in a process that can be crowdsourced optimally. Identifying the "hot spots" may take a while and deter teams from exploring the crowdsourcing option. Enterprise crowdsourcing, if not architected carefully, might be perceived by some employees as counter to their day-to-day assigned tasks. //

Sriram Rajagopal
Vice President-HR ■ Cognizant



// Overall crowdsourcing is a powerful tool. When it is well implemented and planned, companies can benefit a lot from this strategy, as long as the activity to be crowdsourced is right spotted, clearly explained and controlled in terms of management. //

R. Anand
Vice President-Global Rewards,
People & Leadership
■ HCL Technologies

elements are in place, crowdsourcing can be a very effective instrument for the HR function.

Steering the crowd

Dissent seeds originality: In his book 'Crowdsourcing: Why the power of the crowd is driving the future of business', Jeff Howe says that crowdsourcing is rooted in a fundamentally egalitarian principle that one has some knowledge or talent that another individual will find valuable. In the broadest terms, crowdsourcing involves making a connection between the two. Here consensus is seen as counterproductive. The best decisions are not the product of consensus and compromise, but of

disagreement and context. For example, the internal opinion platform at Tech Mahindra, Free Voice, allows employees to give feedback, express opinions and bring forward issues that are perceived as important to the health of the organization. This provides important feedback to the leadership on corrective actions to be taken as well as to demystify policies and quell misconceptions if any.

Diversity widens horizon: It is important to include as many diverse groups as possible. In Mahindra Comviva crowd-sourcing for HR programs are opened to employees globally. The higher and wider the participation, the higher is the buy in as well comprehensiveness

of its features, as people who feel and live the program and policy each day breathe life into it. "Inclusiveness in crowd-sourcing is also about careful coverage of the diverse stake-holder groups who represent needs faces by their own pocket of people" explains Bhattacharya. Vinnie Merchandani in her book *The New Polymath: Profiles in Compound Technological Innovations* argues, despite the brisk global expansion of Cognizant, it cannot be omnipresent. The real glue comes from its Cognizant 2.0 knowledge sharing and project management environment, which has empowered CTS globally diverse talent to be uniquely integrated. Leveraging on web 2.0 technologies

A VISUAL EXPLANATION OF Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing is all around us, used by brands we use everyday. But what is crowdsourcing and how are companies taking advantage of the powerful collaborative abilities of the internet? We take a visual look at crowdsourcing today, and how it could change our lives in the future.

What is crowdsourcing?

CROWD + OUTSOURCING

Coined by journalist Jeff Howe in the 2006 Wired article "The Rise of Crowdsourcing"

**FANSOURCING
CROWDCASTING
OPEN SOURCING
CROWDFUNDING
MASS COLLABORATION
WIKINOMICS**

Though it goes by many names, crowdsourcing is simply the practice of companies making an open call to a broad community to solve a problem, either through competition or collaboration.

A company has a problem that they may have previously hired an employee or contractor to perform.

Instead they involve a 'crowd' to help them solve their problem. By getting a larger group of people to work on their problem, they hope to get a better solution.

like blogs, wikis, instant messages and search engines, this crowdsourcing tool enable an associate anywhere in the growing family to tap into the firm's best thinking on how to handle a specific aspect of a project to leverage pre-existing IT and business process artefacts as well as domain experts across the globe. The essence of crowdsourcing relies on gathering in the widest possible number of views, experts or not, which could result in new combinations of ideas that would yield unexpectedly and profound wise outcomes. This shows how the diverse group of employees can create a winning solutions source.

Decentralization nurtures participation: It's also critical that crowdsourcing participants know their ideas are being heard and taken seriously. In a recent TOI story of companies setting up FB-like forums to tap ideas, Prithvi Shergill, CHRO, HCL Technologies reveals 20 per cent of the final ideas out of more than 930 business innovation ideas presented by employees on Meme are now a part of HCL's go-to-market offerings. He labelled the freedom of expression as the key factor behind its rapid acceptance among the workforce. Adding further, he said the comprehensive inclusion of employees across the work sphere is reiterating the company's belief in creating a structure of change by 'inverting the pyramid' of command. Though senior leaders must actively participate in discussions to demonstrate a top-down commitment but when people begin to share information horizontally, it cuts out hierarchies and diffuses the locus of power.

Naivety trumps expertise: Shunryu Suzuki, a Zen monk renowned for founding Buddhist monastery outside Asia, once said "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few." Innovative solutions to problems could be found within crowds, which include people with no formal expertise along with acknowledged experts. Karim Lakhani, an Associate

Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, talks about the ability of 'outsiders' to see a problem with fresh eyes and apply solutions that are novel to the problem domain but well known and understood by them. This is what played in the backdrop of Virtusa's crowdsourcing efforts when vInnovate, a company-wide ideation engine was launched to enable team members to share ideas, which can then be implemented for clients. Sahay informs, "There has been a 150 per cent jump in the generation of ideas since the platform was created, with 50 per cent of the ideas coming from the junior level team members who are new in their roles." A

we create a wrapper around crowdsourcing to make it amenable for the enterprise environment. Dependability and predictability are the two key milestones of enterprise performance, and to enable crowdsourcing to perform around these milestones, it is necessary that we build a management layer around this." Rather than attempt a 'try-and-fit' approach for all activities, create a crowd service catalogue that clearly list down all the activities crowdsourcing can perform. This ensures an effective utilization of crowds. It is also equally important to discover and engage the right crowd at short notice. To do this

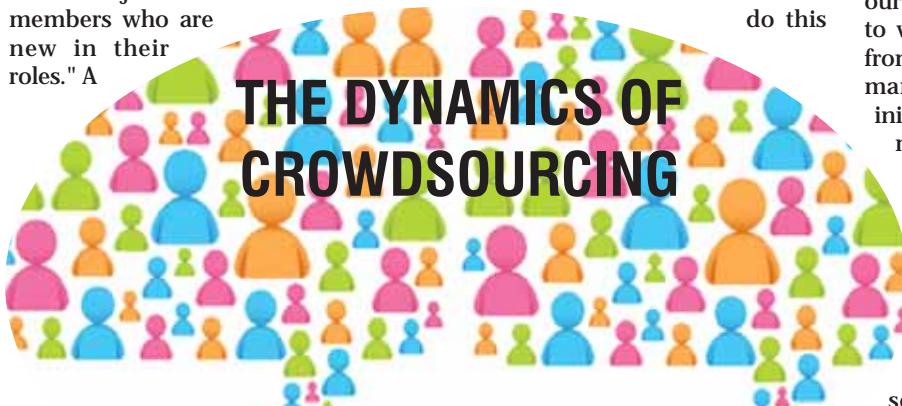
while setting up a crowdsourcing platform, companies need to be very clear in terms of what they are choosing it for and what not."

Leadership commitment is indispensable

Prasad Menon, Director - HR and CSR, McAfee India believes, "All organizations, big and small, have management aficionados and experts who are excited and willing to contribute their time, effort and energy voluntarily to make their own workplace better. At McAfee, we have experienced extraordinary interest and contribution to make our company one of the best places to work among employees ranging from first-time managers to senior managers. However, like any new initiative, crowdsourcing efforts will meet with lukewarm reactions from employees in the beginning. "As management perseveres and proves its commitment to open, honest communication, employees will embrace the project and begin the process of real collaboration. It's one thing to solicit employee opinions, but offering the opportunity to develop new ideas is empowering and can definitely boost engagement," adds Anand.

Ready to roll

None of these success elements are easy to meet but with planning, forward-thinking, focus and patience they can be achieved. In Sucharita's view, "It's most important to know why companies want to use this platform and what the commitment to the feedback is sought." McAfee India has rightly named its crowdsourcing mechanism 'Visual Flywheel' because once it has been given the right momentum; it seems to keep moving in the right direction with little intervention. So as you begin to crowdsource your workforce to engage in HR matters, don't forget to pull the right levers make your crowdsourcing efforts count. Don't let collective delusion dislodge collective wisdom of your crowds! (HC)



THE DYNAMICS OF CROWDSOURCING

Benefits	Challenges	Levers
Scalability	Lack of Control	Pricing
Abundance (Long Tail)	Quality Assurance	User Feedback
Cost efficient	Vandalism	Web Design
Engagement	Monetization	Category Structure
Network Effect	Trust & Safety	Social Filtering

recent news story of how a scientist discovers a massive 60-million ton of landslide in Alaska by posting the seismic data about location to crowd source the exact location is a fantastic example. This simply proves that there are indeed times when inexperience wins over familiarity.

Fine-tune the design

Rajagopal highlights, "At an enterprise level, it is necessary that

effectively, it is necessary that key information about the crowd is recorded somewhere. The profile pages of an enterprise's social network platform help to achieve this. A crowd management team and a community manager also enable smooth flow of information and tasks. Sucharita feels, "Many a time, policy decisions in a company are taken based on the external market and organization realities. Hence,