IdeaGlow

The Biggest Flaw in Most
Idea Management Systems...
And the "Silver Bullet" to Fix It

I. Introduction

> **Most idea management systems (IMS) suffer from one huge flaw. This flaw severely limits how successful your IMS is.**

As you know, Idea Management Systems (IMS) are web-based software systems that help you implement a systematic "idea management" process. They help you to:

- Solicit ideas

- Capture ideas

- Evaluate ideas, and

- Implement ideas

As a result, IMS make for a critical tool in your toolbox for building a successful Innovation Engine at your organization. IMS enable you to approach innovation as a systematic process that can be repeated—rather than as ad-hoc *Eureka-Epiphany* moments that depend mostly on chance.

However, most IMS suffer from one huge flaw. This flaw severely limits how successful your IMS is—and can even cause outright failure.

This white paper identifies this flaw and outlines the resulting problems. It then offers a way to fix this flaw—a *Silver Bullet*, if you will—so that you can build a successful IMS at your organization. This will help your organization create successful products and services—repeatedly.

II. The Biggest Flaw In Most IMS

Most IMS allow your users (such as employees or customers) to submit ideas over the web. They even allow users to submit ideas into different categories or topics. However, they suffer from one huge flaw:

> There is no specific **focus** to the idea generation process.

Problems Caused By This Flaw

This lack of a specific focus often leads to several problems:

1. Users submit too few ideas into the IMS as they are not sure what ideas to submit.
2. Users stop using the IMS after a while, as there is nothing that spurs them to regularly submit new ideas.
3. Users submit ideas in areas that are not relevant to business goals.
4. People responsible for IMS have a hard time effectively managing and acting on suggested ideas. This further discourages idea submissions by users.

As a result of these flaws—most IMS are far less successful than they should be. Sometimes, the IMS even fails entirely due to lack of ideas—as ideas are really like oxygen for your IMS.

The Solution To These Problems

Fortunately, there is a solution to these problems! It is based on the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) Process—also known as the Osborn-Parnes CPS process.

> This is a process developed by Alex Osborn (co-founder of BBDO, and credited with inventing the brainstorming technique) and Dr. Sid Parnes (retired professor at Buffalo State College, New York).

Let us now take a look at CPS and how it can help us overcome this huge flaw of IMS.

Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem Solving (CPS) process is a proven, research-based method for solving a problem - it helps people come up with breakthrough ideas and take action on these ideas.

III. Osborn-Parnes CPS Process

Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem Solving (CPS) process is a proven, research-based method for solving a problem—it helps people come up with breakthrough ideas and take action on these ideas.

Alex Osborn and Dr. Sid Parnes conducted extensive research on the steps involved when people successfully solve problems, the result of which is the following 6 steps broken down into 3 stages:

- **Explore the Challenge**
  1. Identify Goal, Wish or Challenge
  2. Gather Data
  3. Clarify the Problem
- **Generate Ideas**
  4. Generate Ideas
- **Prepare for Action**
  5. Select and Strengthen Solutions
  6. Plan for Action

Please see this link for further details on CPS.

The Key Takeaway

The key takeaway for our purposes of building a successful IMS is this:

> Idea generation should **focus** on a specific **problem**.

Focusing on a specific problem (step-3 above) *before* generating ideas (step-4 above)—plus another key factor we'll cover in the next section—will help us overcome this huge flaw of IMS and the resulting problems.

Idea generation should focus on a specific problem.

IV. The "Silver Bullet" To Fix This Flaw

How can we apply our takeaway in the previous section to fix this huge flaw in IMS, you ask? Here's how...

The Silver Bullet: "Idea Challenges" (ICs)

Instead of using an IMS to invite users to submit any and all ideas (at any and all times)—use your IMS to create **idea challenges** and invite users to respond to these.

Here's the definition of "Idea Challenge":

> "Idea Challenge" is a **time-limited** campaign to solicit ideas **focused** on a specific **problem**.

ICs offer us two major advantages:

- They create **focus**
  - By targeting a specific **problem** before generating ideas
- They create **urgency**
  - By providing a **time-limit** (usually short) for users to submit ideas

Benefits of Idea Challenges

Because of these two advantages, ICs offer the following benefits to organizations implementing IMS:

1. ICs motivate users to submit ideas by providing both focus and a short time-limit to respond.
2. ICs encourage users to continue submitting ideas over time, as new challenges are posted regularly.
3. ICs constrain users to only submit ideas that solve problems related to strategic business goals. This constraint benefits your organization.
4. People responsible for IMS are able to manage and act on suggested ideas promptly - due to the combination of focus, time-limit and relevance to business goals. This further encourages continued idea submissions by users—creating a virtuous cycle.

Instead of using an IMS to invite users to submit any and all ideas (at any and all times) - use your IMS to create idea challenges and invite users to respond to these.

V. The "10-Step Process" For Using Idea Challenges in Practice

Here is the step-by-step process we recommend for using Idea Challenges (ICs) to build a successful IMS at your organization. These steps are based on the CPS process we discussed earlier.

1. **Create a list of goals or challenges** based on your company's business goals and priorities.

2. Research each of these goals/challenges and **clarify the problems** underlying each.

3. **Prioritize the problems** based on the strategic business value of solving each problem.

4. **Create an IC** for each problem. Each IC should consist of:
   A. A question.
   B. A description.

5. Formulate the **IC question**:
   A. Phrase the IC as a short question.
      ▪ Start it with one of the question words, such as: *How, What, Which, Why, When,* etc.
   B. Focus on a single problem in each IC.
   C. If there are multiple problems to be attacked, break them up into multiple ICs.
   D. Strike a balance between making the IC too broad and too narrow.
   E. Some examples of good IC questions:
      ▪ How can we reduce customer complaints about slow service?
      ▪ What incentives can we offer to increase sales of Widget-A?
   F. Some templates for good IC questions:
      ▪ How can we _____?
      ▪ What _____ can we _____?
      ▪ What are the new _____ we can use to _____?

6. Write the **IC description**:
   A. Provide details to help users understand and respond to your IC.

- ▪ In most cases, 150-500 words work well.
- ▪ Use attachments and images to communicate the IC clearly.

B. Do not specify strict criteria in your IC description.
- ▪ This is a very important point—in the "idea generation" phase, focus on encouraging more idea submissions.
- ▪ You can filter the ideas later using strict evaluation criteria.

C. Mention rewards, if any. If offering rewards, we recommend that you:
- ▪ Reward users based on the *quantity* of ideas, rather than *quality*. Offering rewards for "the best idea" often leads to fewer idea submissions—the opposite of what you want for your IC.
- ▪ Offer small, non-monetary rewards. These seem to work best at most organizations. Big, cash rewards can often be counter-productive—as such rewards can result in corporate politics and team discord.

7. **Select a short time-limit** for running your IC:
A. We recommend 1-4 weeks. For most ICs, 2 weeks work well.
- ▪ 1-4 weeks is long enough to allow even busy users to submit ideas—yet short enough to create a sense of urgency.
- ▪ We do not recommend running a single IC for longer periods - such as several months. This eliminates the sense of urgency—and can lead to fewer idea submissions, rather than more!

8. Launch the IC and **invite users** (i.e. your employees or customers) to participate:
A. Choose who to invite. Invite the group of users in the best position to contribute ideas for this specific IC.
- ▪ For some ICs, you'll want to invite all users.
- ▪ For other ICs, you'll only want to invite a small group.
- ▪ When in doubt, invite as large a group as applicable. You'll be surprised at the good ideas from groups you were initially ambivalent about.

B. Provide an easy way for users to submit ideas.
C. Offer a simple way for users to discuss and collaborate on

ideas with each other, so that they can flesh out the ideas.

9. **Evaluate and select ideas** for implementation, within a short time after an IC ends:

   A. We recommend completing this step within 2-4 weeks from the end of an IC.

   B. Evaluate ideas using strategic criteria - this will help you identify ideas that offer the most benefit to your organization. We recommend that you engage a small team of "experts" in doing this evaluation.

   C. Communicate to users which ideas have been selected for implementation, and why (i.e. how they were selected). This will keep your users engaged, and motivate them to keep submitting ideas.

   D. Announce rewards, if any. Remember the tips in point 6.C above.

10. **Implement the selected ideas:**

    A. Implementing ideas (i.e. practical innovation) is, of course, the ultimate goal of any IMS! Start implementation of the selected ideas by assigning them to project teams.

    B. Report implementation progress to users as well as executive sponsors of your organization's IMS. This will create a positive feedback loop, and will enable long-term success of your IMS.

Follow this step-by-step process iteratively—software tools such as IdeaGlow can help you do this easily. When you do so, you will be constantly creating and running new ICs—and evaluating and implementing ideas.

This will help you build a successful, thriving innovation engine at your organization—powered by ideas from engaged users. In turn, this will help your organization continuously create successful products and services.

Glossary

CPS

See *Creative Problem Solving* defined below.

Creative Problem Solving (CPS)

A proven, research-based 6-step process for solving a problem developed by Alex Osborn and Dr. Sid Parnes. It helps people come up with breakthrough ideas and take action on these ideas.

Please see this link for further details on CPS.

IC

See *Idea Challenge* defined below.

Idea Challenge (IC)

A short-term, time-limited campaign to solicit ideas on a specific problem.

Idea Management System (IMS)

A software system that helps you systematically capture, develop, evaluate and implement ideas.

Also known as *Idea Management Software*.

IMS

See *Idea Management System* defined above.

Innovation

Within the context of this white paper, "innovation" is defined as the creation of successful products and services.

Innovation Engine

A set of processes & tools to capture ideas and convert them into successful innovation. See this blog post for a detailed definition.

Osborn-Parnes CPS Process

See *Creative Problem Solving* defined above.

Users

These are the end-users of your IMS who submit ideas. This includes employees, customers, and other key constituents of your organization.

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