



Genpact-Massachusetts Institute of Technology Intelligent Operations Exchange

Crowdstorming: Sourcing the best ideas from the global community

Genpact, a spin-off of General Electric, is a global enterprise that provides large-scale business process development and re-engineering services. It reports more than \$2bn in annual revenues and employs more than 67,000 workers in 24 countries.

In November 2014, Genpact and the Center for Collective Intelligence at MIT announced the launch of the Intelligent Operations Exchange (IOX). The IOX is a “crowdstorming” (crowdsourcing + brainstorming) forum designed to bring together innovators from different areas of emerging technology so their concepts can be challenged, tested, developed and commercialised.

Churning the innovation funnel

Genpact is in the business of designing, transforming and running complex business processes, so it is constantly on the lookout for disruptive technologies that can enable “intelligent operations”. MIT’s Center for Collective Intelligence (CCI) studies how people can work together more effectively using information technology and has done extensive work on crowdsourcing. Together, they decided to crowdsource innovation using a technology platform to garner ideas from large numbers of people across the globe. They wanted to create a web platform that could draw on insights from students, MIT scientists, Genpact engineers, aspiring entrepreneurs and mad scientists. These contributors would come to IOX with different languages, cultures and levels of experience. This meant the partners would be sourcing ideas from hidden inventors and then channelling them through an “innovation funnel” to identify the best concepts and bring them to market as rapidly as possible.

First step: collaboration at the top

The partners worked to build a solution that leveraged their respective strengths. Genpact would create an innovation portal and devise ways of aligning ideas gained through crowdsourcing with business operations. MIT would identify disruptive technologies and practices. Robert Laubacher, CCI associate director, explains his organisation’s motivations: “The MIT motto is ‘Mens et manus’ [mind and hand], he says, “so there’s a very practical orientation at the institute to try to solve real-world problems. When Genpact came to us with this idea, we could see that it would create joint value and we thought it would be interesting to try it out.”

Helping serendipity and creativity collide

The challenge was to build a sustainable community of innovators with minimal obstacles to participation, while applying scientific rigour (from MIT) and hard-headed business judgment (from Genpact) to focus on the most viable ideas. “I think Genpact sees potential for crowdsourcing to create business value for their clients,” says Mr Laubacher, “but for us the angle is mostly about identifying case studies on how

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Robert Laubacher
CCI associate director

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technology allows work to be done in new ways.” With these goals in mind, the partners describe IOX as “A deliberate collision of creative and serendipitous perspectives”.

Simple and clean

Subroto Gupta, digital transformation and innovation leader at Genpact—himself a graduate of MIT—says the technology platform was the easiest aspect of the IOX initiative to implement. It was up and running within three months of conception using a custom cloud application deployed through a commercial cloud service. “There were no design or technical challenges since the community was designed to be minimalistic,” he says. “We went through the usual iterative stages of UI and UX design and content, but otherwise it was pretty straightforward.” The goal was to keep it “very simple and clean”. From Genpact’s perspective, the harder part was the cultural change required to push the thinking of operating teams so that new ideas could be tested by application to large-scale business processes.

Participants use the IOX portal to discuss approaches using forum-like interfaces for different topics—with ideas advanced through voting using “like” buttons and through a selection panel of judges. Genpact and MIT staff keep discussions on track by seeding the portal with questions about potential applications for new technologies. For example, they recently posted a question about how wearable devices such as Google Glass could support business processes on the portal’s main page. This drove a discussion of using virtual reality devices to guide warehouse workers in locating stock as part of the fulfilment process. This concept is now in pre-commercial testing.

Achieving critical mass

Within four months of launch, more than 6,000 collaborators were engaged in IOX. Scalability was not a problem because the portal runs on a major hosted cloud service. But IOX architects were challenged to boost participation by keeping the IOX open and transparent while enabling community members to influence the flow of ideas through the “innovation funnel”.

According to Mr Laubacher, the primary challenge has been climbing the “ladder of engagement”, bringing in as many users as possible in the full knowledge that only a minority of visitors to crowdsourcing platforms typically contribute. “For a hundred users who look at a site, maybe only ten will post something and only one will become a major contributor,” he says. “We’re never going to get more than a small percentage of heavy-duty users, so our job is to make that initial number of users as big as possible.”

Incentives could also drive participation. So far, community members receive only “social recognition” as a motivation, but Mr Gupta says plans are in the works to offer financial rewards for projects that reach the commercial deployment stage.

Redefining the art of the possible

True brainstorming starts with a large number of unfiltered ideas—and a cloud-based solution has proven highly effective. IOX has sharply accelerated the flow of ideas presented for consideration by business process designers. Mr Gupta says that even after a few months of operation, Genpact is already well on the way to achieving its longer-term goal, which is to “redefine the art of the possible” and dramatically shorten the concept-to-commercialisation process.

CCI leaders are also pleased with the results. They say the effort shows the potential of crowdsourcing. “Last semester we found roughly 150 new technologies that seemed interesting,” Mr Laubacher says, “and we vetted those and identified a couple of dozen that became candidates for discussion on the IOX. And now we’re starting to see ideas on the site about how those technologies can be applied, posted by people from around the world, which is really exciting.” ■

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