Improving 'Crowdsourced' Creativity
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Polling the crowd can be an effective way to boost creativity, and evidence suggests that the principles of good performance management and rewards apply just as they do with traditional employment.

Call out:

Innovation challenges that are improved with well-aligned instructions, tools and rewards for collaboration — not just individual activity — produce results that are significantly more integrated and higher quality.

Story begins:

As I've noted in previous columns, the non-regular workforce is an increasing part of many organizations. Even if your workers are mostly regular full-time employees, the effects of the emerging ecosystem outside regular employment are profound.

Yet organizations often treat regular full-time employment as completely distinct from alternatives such as freelancers, contractors or platform-based workers. It is not unusual for professionals in functions other than human resources such as procurement or operations to make decisions about the use and management of workers who are not regular employees.

These disciplines can provide great value to decisions about non-regular employment sources, but there is also a vital role for talent leaders to play, bringing expertise about human behavior and organizational effectiveness to these decisions.

A prominent alternative to getting work done through regular full-time employees is crowdsourcing through contests. Platforms such as Innocentive, Tongal and Topcoder are prominent examples of using contests with incentives to create software code, online advertising and media such as logos and website features.

If your organization uses such platforms, it behooves you to consider the participants on these platforms as an important part of your workforce, and to consider carefully how to apply your best talent management principles to insure their performance.

Innovation contests are particularly interesting because they are designed to amplify the quantity of ideas produced, as well as to engage the crowd in evaluating them and combining them into new ideas. However, the rewards and incentives in such contests often actually work at cross-purposes to these objectives, and some fundamental principles from traditional employment performance and incentive systems can make a big difference to their effectiveness.

A 2014 article by Arvind Malhotra and Ann Majchrzak in *California Management Review* noted that innovation challenges too often result in solutions that fail to have "competitive advantage potential." That means the solutions fail to "provide new strategies and alternatives that can help the company differentiate itself from competitors."

This is not a reason to abandon crowd-based innovation challenges, but it requires participants to integrate their knowledge with others, not simply share and rank their ideas. They noted that such contests must motivate participants to share (post ideas, examples, facts and trade-offs), highlight the best quality (vote on posts and promote others' comments), and combine ideas (create solutions by putting ideas together from multiple sources and posts).

Their research showed how carefully constructed performance management and incentive systems can enhance the performance on online innovation challenges. They conducted experiments in which they varied the performance instructions and incentives provided to crowd-based participants.

Less successful challenges received conventional instructions that emphasized posting, tweaking others' ideas, being encouraging and not critical, and voting on whether you liked an idea or not. On the other hand, the more successful group received knowledge integration instructions that emphasized posting ideas designed to stimulate others, comment in ways that modify others' knowledge, integrate with other knowledge to form complete solutions, and vote based on whether an idea was useful in solving the challenge.

The research also revealed valuable changes to incentives. Typical contests award money for the ideas receiving the most votes from the crowd or experts. The experimenters replaced the

conventional "Top Contributor Board," based on the number of ideas contributed, with a "Top Collaborator Board," based on developing, highlighting and combining others' contributions into new ideas.

Top collaborators received similar cash awards ($75-$300) as well as opportunities to meet with expert judges, recognition certificates and sponsor apparel.

Collaboration-focused performance and incentive changes produced better results. Those contests generated more comments and votes per participant, and the clients rated the solutions significantly higher for their likely contribution to new strategies and offerings.

The researchers also found that when participants were asked to label their contributions as either "facts," "tradeoffs," "examples" and "seeds," the per-participant average of top-level posts was 2.5 times higher; the average of comments was 2 times higher; the number of votes was 4 times higher; and the number of solutions was 2 times higher.

Enlisting a workforce through a crowdsourced context may seem exotic compared to regular full-time employees, but the value of careful attention to performance management principles is just as valuable.

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