



Crowdsourcing Is Not a Numbers Game

It may seem counterintuitive, but too much participation can ruin your crowdsourcing efforts. Focus on careful curation rather than a cattle call.

Even the best companies have blind spots. It may even be true that the bigger the company, the larger and more potentially damaging its blind spot. To offset this, firms are **increasingly turning to crowdsourcing**, in hopes that outsiders will pinpoint innovative solutions or ideas that are difficult to see from within the organisation. And since you never know where the next great idea will come from, it's best to be as indiscriminate and open-ended as possible when soliciting suggestions from the crowd — or so many companies seem to think.

However, there are two serious problems that arise when crowdsourcing becomes an open invitation. The first is obvious: As the pool of crowdsourced content increases, it becomes harder to give each contribution the attention it may or may not deserve. You could end up overwhelmed, up to your neck in mostly-unusable ideas. But on top of that, my research uncovered a second factor that may cast doubt on the innovation potential of cattle-call crowdsourcing.

The Perils of Crowdsourcing

My recently published paper **“Distant Search, Narrow Attention: How Crowding Alters Organisations’ Filtering of Suggestions in**

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Crowdsourcing” (co-authored with Linus Dahlander of ESMT) documents findings suggesting that as crowdsourced contributions cram organisations’ finite attention spans, the ones most likely to contain kernels of innovation are also the most likely to be ultimately ignored. In other words, ideas that represent a departure from the organisation’s status quo are at a disadvantage in the free-for-all battle for company attention.

We arrived at this conclusion based on an unusually rich dataset from a leading provider of crowdsourcing software, tracking how 922 organisations — ranging from city governments to companies from across 14 industries — handled more than 105,000 crowdsourced suggestions from external contributors. Using various methods such as cutting-edge text and network analysis, we analysed how novel each suggestion was for the organisation. We found an inverse relationship between a crowdsourcing campaign’s success in drawing participation and its success in spurring the organisation to go in a new direction.

“Crowdsighted” Organisations

When their crowdsourcing efforts draw a strong response, organisations experience a condition we call “crowding”— resulting in a pressing need to

filter the feedback in order to pave the way for action. But this condition, we argue, goes against the reasons companies adopt crowdsourcing in the first place. Instead of compensating for blind spots, crowding seems to act like a set of blinders, erasing outlying information so that organisations can't help but move down well-trodden paths.

It's easy to see why. Consider this example: Faced with a crowded email inbox upon return from a week's holiday, many of us would tend to turn our attention to the easiest requests first, to get them off our plate. More demanding tasks must wait until we no longer feel pulled in quite so many directions. This effect is compounded in crowdsourcing situations because in many organisations there is pressure to act on a certain fixed percentage of suggestions received. When the pool of crowdsourced suggestions threatens to become unmanageable, employees may feel increased urgency to discharge the quota by taking on ideas that are easily actionable, meaning not exactly revolutionary. Chances are, these sorts of ideas will bring about changes that are, at best, merely incremental.

Crowdsource Smarter

Is it possible to have crowdsourcing without crowding? Yes, if organisations shift their primary focus from achieving the highest possible *volume* of suggestions to extracting the highest possible *value* from crowdsourcing. Instead of aiming to gather 10,000 ideas from the crowd, it may make more sense to shoot for 100 ideas from an extremely diverse range of contributors. This goal may require a change in tools: For example, an email sent to a select group may work better than an online platform open to the general public or a suggestion box on a company website.

Organisations may also want to consider more transparent prompts. If innovative ideas are what they're after, they should encourage the crowd to think big, not incremental. Otherwise, it's a potential waste of everyone's time.

Finally, organisations should make relevant employees aware of the possible innovation-killing effects of crowding. This may help them keep their eyes on the goal as they sift through suggestions. On the management side, awareness of the dangers may cause them to reconsider imposing arbitrary quotas on the crowdsourcing process that trigger premature action.

Overall, being more selective about crowdsourcing makes it more likely that you'll find the diamond in the rough — the unexpectedly brilliant idea—that makes the whole endeavor worthwhile.

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