
Why You're Missing Out on the Best Ideas



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Businesses and leaders influence the kinds of ideas they receive without even realizing it.

In the quest for groundbreaking solutions, businesses actively seek a wide range of distinct ideas. However, the suggestions they receive – whether from employees or external contributors – eventually end up being quite similar. Why does this happen?

Our research shows that businesses influence the ideas they get because they send signals about what they like. By acting on certain ideas, companies inadvertently nudge and guide contributors to submit ideas that align with those preferences.

Take the case of a farming company that invited website users to share ideas for new features. After gathering numerous suggestions, the company opted to implement an idea related to monitoring spray product inventory. This choice not only revealed what the company preferred but also shaped subsequent contributions, resulting in a wave of similar ideas.

Many businesses and leaders aren't aware that their past selections can limit the variety of proposals they receive. They may begin with the ambition of letting a thousand flowers bloom but end up with only dandelions.

What you select is what you get

Our findings are based on data from the crowdsourcing efforts of over 1,200 organisations. We have previously used this rich dataset to show [why organisations fail to attract ideas](#) or [focus on a narrow set of ideas](#), and [how rejecting ideas strengthens relationships between companies and contributors](#).

For this paper, we analysed 1.44 million ideas from 1.07 million contributors to understand how organisations unknowingly shape the ideas they receive. The companies in our study specifically asked visitors to their website to suggest ways they could improve and then chose which ideas to implement.

We found that when organisations consistently picked similar ideas, it created a trend. Contributors started tweaking their ideas to match the company's preferences and suggested similar ideas. Others who believed their ideas wouldn't be chosen stopped suggesting entirely. While this enhanced the relevance of ideas, it diminished the overall diversity of suggestions over time.

The overall effect was influenced by how individuals were connected within the network. When new contributors weren't familiar with past choices or established contributors left, the pool of ideas was more diverse. However, when contributors were tightly connected, they tended to follow previous choices more closely, leading to fewer diverse ideas and more uniformity.

A narrow focus isn't always a bad thing

The idea gathering process can become increasingly narrow and focused within companies and teams too. Imagine a CEO sends a company-wide call for suggestions on new software features. Employees enthusiastically share ideas, including AI-powered automation, enhanced security features, and simplified user interfaces. The CEO chooses to prioritise the simplified user interface concept. Employees interpret this preference as a signal and, over time, begin tailoring their suggestions towards user interface improvements.

If this is what the company wants, crowdsourcing ideas that align with the organisation's preferences isn't necessarily negative. When contributors

tailor their ideas to match the company's goals, these suggestions are more likely to fit the organisation's needs and objectives.

However, focusing on a specific set of ideas also means the company misses out on fresh and innovative ideas. This happens because contributors might start thinking similarly to what the organisation has already done, unintentionally limiting their creativity.

In fast-changing industries like tech, narrowing the search won't lead to innovative breakthroughs. Similarly, in the context of pharmaceuticals, where finding the best solution is crucial, having a focused search may be less efficient. However, when time is limited or there's a lot of pressure to choose quickly, concentrating efforts on a narrow solution space might work better than broadening the search scope.

Escaping the innovation echo chamber

Furthermore, if an organisation or person consistently chooses one type of idea, it can be difficult to change that perception. Once they've been "pigeonholed", by demonstrating a preference for a narrow set of ideas, it is near impossible to broaden the scope again.

Even within a team, if a manager consistently (and perhaps unconsciously) favours one kind of solution, team members will interpret this preference and stop proposing creative or unconventional ideas, assuming they won't be accepted.

To foster an environment where innovation can thrive, leaders need to broadcast their receptiveness to a spectrum of ideas. This could involve welcoming inputs from team members who may not have the typical qualifications or experience for a particular project during brainstorming sessions. Or it could be as simple as actively promoting the submission of diverse ideas. Doing so sends a clear message that they value different perspectives and that everyone's input is valuable. This approach can naturally expand the pool of ideas.

Ultimately, if individuals ignore or don't respond positively to deviating opinions, they risk not receiving unconventional ideas in the future and missing out on the next big breakthrough.

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About the research

["Coevolutionary Lock-In in External Search"](#) is published online in Academy of Management.