The Mindpool Hybrid: Theorising a New Angle on EBS and Suggestion Systems

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Abstract

Traditional suggestion systems, despite their shortcomings, have been used to promote creativity in industry for over a century. Independently, brainstorming has also been applied for almost fifty years as a method to increase idea generation. However, the two have never met. In this argumentative paper, it is theorised that by adding computer support and applying lessons from the realm of electronic brainstorming (EBS) to traditional suggestion systems, useful improvements may be achieved. A hybrid intranet prototype mimicking the attributes of an EBS system and at the same time serving as a complement to the suggestion system was therefore devised and evaluated using a theoretical framework. The implications suggest novel ideas for both suggestion systems and EBS research.

1. Corporate creativity

It has always been important for organisations to improve and develop the way they conduct their affairs, although this need has been further accentuated in the post-industrial society. Two important vehicles for organisational creativity that both have been used in industry for many decades are suggestion systems and brainstorming.

1.1 Traditional suggestion systems

The first recorded suggestion system was implemented at the Scottish shipbuilder William Denny & Brothers in 1880 [25]. Although more than a century has passed, many of today’s suggestion systems still consist of a box on the wall, and submitted proposals are typically handled by local Proposal-Handling Committees (PHCs), where committee members manually review the ideas. Good suggestions are rewarded in some way, while not so good proposals are rejected. However, while studying creativity and the usage and impacts of a large multi-national company’s suggestion system, two serious short-comings with this traditional way of handling suggestions have been noticed [25, 29].

Firstly, there is a communication problem. Submitted suggestions are seldom communicated sufficiently within the organisation and good ideas may be implemented locally but remain unknown in other parts of the organisation. Other ideas may be prematurely rejected due to the PHC’s limited cognitive capacity, the proposer’s poor communication skills, bad timing, or the idea being proposed in the wrong context. New ideas do not only have to be good but they must also be compatible with the prevailing political and philosophical assumptions [11]. However, all these ideas, good and bad, could have started other creative ideas elsewhere in the organisation, had they only been made public.

Secondly, many ideas are never proposed at all. One generally acknowledged reason for this is the fear of being ridiculed by one’s peers. As we are reluctant to present ideas if we risk losing face in front of our colleagues, we instead keep our potentially revolutionary ideas to ourselves, missing an opportunity for organisational benefit. Another reason for not participating is the threshold an official suggestion system constitutes. We may lack the self-confidence, the ability, or the motivation to write-up our proposal in the form required for a suggestion to be accepted.

1.2 The brainstorming approach

A parallel, but totally separate, approach to creativity is brainstorming [21], which since its introduction in 1953, has been widely used in industry and business as a technique for idea generation and problem solving. The fundamental aspects of brainstorming as posited by Osborn [21] are quantity over quality, elaboration on others’ ideas, and absence of criticism. This means that brainstorming, in contrast to the traditional suggestion system described above, presupposes that all ideas are visible to the other participants and thereby function as stimuli for their creativity.