



[Linus Pauling](#) , scientist and two-time Nobel Prize winner, once said: “To have a good idea you must first have lots of ideas.” How often do you brainstorm about a solution? When do you really tap on the wide expertise of people and the creative minds of a crowd? Normally it takes a workshop to brainstorm on ideas in a wider circle. The participatory web offers here some new ways to generate ideas and solutions to address development challenges. In a previous post we looked at interesting open collaboration projects, another approach is idea competitions.

A famous example is [Innocentive](#) , where companies seek for solutions to various problems. It started as a call for scientists, but has now evolved into a platform for finding solutions to all sorts of challenges. Now imagine a development project in the western world where all concerned stakeholders are well connected to the internet, during its planning stages – what about letting a crowd of experts, the project team and the beneficiaries participate in brainstorming ideas. This process is increasingly done online.

How can it work online?

There are different phases to run an “idea competition”.

1. To start with, the purpose and the outcomes need to be defined. What are the ideas for? What will happen with such ideas? Many initiatives just solicit ideas, but there is no follow-up or outcomes not shared with the wider community. A phased timeline sets the framework for such a competition.

2. There is the need for setting up a platform, which creates the space of interaction to share and exchange the ideas. The more user friendly the platform is, the better it will be used.

Here are some examples for idea-competition platforms: [Ideascale](#) , [Google moderator](#) , and

[User Voice](#)

3. Think about whether you want to make the competition private or public, and whom to invite. In the latter case you need to run a campaign and make incentives available to ensure participation.

4. Once ideas are put forward, these can be evaluated in different ways, such as voting or

through discussions. Through this process, ideas may be merged and discussed from different perspectives.

5. Lastly, there should be a procedure on how to select the best ideas and whether and how these could be implemented.

Stefan Lindegaard has some examples on [open innovation](#) for businesses and a list of [tools](#) .

One example for the development sector is Habitat JAM, where a massive online event was organized by the [United Nations Human Settlements Programme](#) and IBM. Mobile phones allow here new and easy ways to participate even from remote areas.

What are the advantages in online idea competitions?

Decentralized participation is possible and additional people beyond your organization or project team can be included. Such a competition can lead to a variety of ideas, which a small team could not come up with. These ideas can lead to approach a project from diverse perspectives. Such an online idea's generation process can be planned to start online and continue face to face. Such an approach is taken by the social innovation camp (<http://www.sicamp.org/>), a project where beforehand people are invited to provide ideas and the best ones are chosen to be dealt with at a special two-day workshop.

What are the success factors?

- Such a competition needs to be built around an open approach to trigger creative ideas.
- It is really important that idea generators are publicly recognised for their proposals and their knowledge. This recognition can vary depending on the context.
- If you think of an organization-wide competition, it is important to receive support to continue innovating or applying innovations.
- There is the need for a strong commitment by the people in charge to implement the ideas.

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