

Using Innovation Games® to Help Your Ideas Become Effective Innovations

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At [Simon Associates Management Consultants](#) (SAMC), we had a wonderful client not long ago that was very good at generating a wide variety of great ideas. The only problem was that they had trouble figuring out how to design testable prototypes so they could determine which of their ideas could become valuable business innovations. Could we help?

This company happened to be in the healthcare arena, but the industry is irrelevant to the challenges often faced by organizations that see their market environment changing and are uncertain about how to adapt to the changing times. They initially work diligently at coming up with new ideas (brainstorming and idea generation seem more aligned with their skills and personalities). Then the hard job begins—figuring out a process for sorting the ideas, prioritizing their distinct features and benefits, and better understanding how they could be brought to market for testing, revising and manufacturing.

Today, businesses must become innovation experts or they probably will not thrive. And although innovation is a key driver for growth, between 80-90 percent of innovation efforts fail (Christensen 2007; McKinsey & Company 2010; Accenture, 2013).

So with all the innovation going on lately, why there is so much failure? Blame it on the segue from the “front end” or creative idea development side of innovation to the delivery or “back end” where those ideas become products, services and business models to either take to new markets or use to revamp existing ones.

Why Is The Back End Of Innovation So Difficult?

A large part of SAMC’s business is focused on helping organizations change. It doesn’t matter if companies call it “innovation” or “adaptation” or just “change.” They are usually facing a challenge to their growth. As we work with them, we watch them get past the idea generation stage and come out the other side with an abundance of fresh ideas. Sadly, they then head back to their offices and continue to run their businesses as they have always been. Are we surprised? No. The implementation of new ideas is difficult. The human tendency is to celebrate them but hope someone else has the ability and commitment to implement them.

This lack-of-implementation problem is often described in terms of the processes associated with the back end of innovation. While the front end (idea generation) is accepted as a very open, playful and “fuzzy” area where people let their creative juices take charge, the back end seems to be much more like “running a business,” where you take an idea and then develop the

processes and procedures to bring it to market and sell it. Sounds pretty straightforward, if not exactly simple.

Good news: The roadblocks to implementing new ideas and converting them into successful innovations can very effectively be broken down by playing specific, business-oriented games known as [Innovation Games](#). In this white paper, I will address the areas that are major obstacles to “innovation implementation,” then show you how certain Innovation Games can help address these issues in a systematic manner.

Enabling Ideas To Become Testable Business Opportunities

1. The Role of the Human Brain

Humans have wonderful creative potential in their brains. Yet from the neurosciences, we know that the brain often “hates to change.” In order to capitalize on the way the brain works, methods are needed which enable the brain to assume different roles at different times—sometimes directing in an executive manner, sometimes creating something new at the intersections of ideas.

Further, there is emerging literature on how to help the brain respond more successfully to the changes that must take place in order for organizations, managers and staff to better implement organizational change (those innovations). The work of [David Rock](#) and the SCARF process, focusing on how to help manage people with the brain’s function in mind, is among the most compelling literature on the topic.

2. Your Company’s Culture Holds You Back

Another hurdle to overcome is an organization’s culture. There are values, beliefs and behaviors that are well-established to keep an organization on a sound footing and running smoothly. However, these same cultural elements are often impeding the creation and development of new ideas. Why? The culture supports existing behaviors. The things that you do well may be counter to the very things you **need to do** in order for the implementation of an innovation to succeed.

Additionally, within a shared culture, organizations typically put people into roles that keep them operating in silos. These separate departments are not where new ideas are customarily generated and encouraged. For example, the role of finance is carefully defined and very different from that of marketing. Add in HR and operations and you can see how these sub-cultures are very adept at protecting their territories. They are not set up to implement major innovations, either for the company or their customers.

What is needed, then, are ways to engage and embrace possibilities that take people out of their silos and into team arenas where their disparate ideas can come together and form new ideas. Playing “games” brings about collaboration at its best.

3. The Challenge of Change

While we all know that the world is moving faster and faster, our skills at changing our patterns and processes lag far behind. Rarely do we find a client that has training and practice in enabling his or her organization (at any level) to change. Instead, people have been trained how to do a job well and often, not much more.

As David Rock writes: “Organizational change is a complex topic and requires a lot of conceptual thinking about future events—a task that requires a lot of cognitive resources.” To be successful at managing change, people must learn how to “help themselves and others get into a more positive mental state (toward state) so they could engage much needed cognitive resources for more effective problem-solving, creativity, collaboration and innovation,” he adds.

Can Games, or Serious Play, Help?

As corporate anthropologists, we realized years ago that we had to find a way to free people from their cultural constraints and their brains’ resistance to change if we were ever going to help them bring about true innovation. Searching for a solution, we were introduced to Innovation Games (IG) and obtained our training in 2011.

As trained IG facilitators and trainers, we quickly learned how Innovation Games can provide the skills needed to approach the back end of innovation with a new focus, rigor and enthusiasm. They are games, we often tell our clients. But when you put adults into a game setting and give them the tools and skills to play them, you find that their creative brains come alive with great ideas.

The underlying theory of Innovation Games is rooted in a range of disciplines, including cognitive science, evolutionary psychology and game theory. They can be played in person or online, in small groups or in large global companies.



The process around Innovation Games is designed to enable participants to actually craft a testable prototype for a new idea. There are specific games that can help them prioritize, scale and structure new business processes to convert an idea into an innovation.

And there are still other games that help them create an effective test market so they can turn the idea into a successful new business.

Innovation Games help participants:

- See with fresh eyes: customers, new market opportunities, innovative products that meet market needs, better ways to solve problems and design solutions.
- Collaborate more effectively so that teams can leave their silos and partner with fellow workers to build ideas “better, together.”
- Prioritize so that decisions have far greater impact.
- Eliminate “the paradox of choice” where due to too many choices, none can be made wisely.
- Run their operations more efficiently so that old processes and procedures can be refined, revamped and reimaged.

Which Innovation Games Work Best For The Back End of Innovation?

Let’s assume that the major challenges to the implementation of innovation come from:

1. Determining which of the ideas should be developed and tested.

“How do we know which one has the best chance for growing our business in current and new markets” is the common question. Answer: Allow user groups to become part of the innovation process, using games to test concepts. Using the game “Build a Better Product Box,” get



Constructing a team’s product box

participants to put together their version of the right solution to the problems you think you are developing better solutions for.

For example, we conducted a 3-day “Innovation Gym” with a client to help them prepare for major changes being mandated for their business. While they were very good at generating lots of ideas, they were unsure how these could convert into testable implementations. They were particularly concerned about how to allocate resources for the innovation.

Using “Build a Better Product Box,” several groups within the company were brought together to see how they would take the ideas and craft better outcomes. The ideas that emerged were very different from those that the staff had imagined on their own. Indeed, the framing of the test concepts took shape as the client heard what the real pain points were among the company’s current and prospective customers.

Whether this breakthrough thinking was still at the front-end of innovation or was a crucial part of the design of the back-end could be debated. But the continuum is important. The innovative thoughts they were seeking are two different parts of the flow from discovery to delivery as ideas emerge, are tested and then revised to build a better concept for the test market.

2. Prototyping

Ok, you have the concept and you have used Innovation Games to build a prototype. At this stage, the questions to be asked are very important. Do you have the right features, benefits and positioning? You think you heard your customers and prospects correctly, but what really are the most important features for their needs? Perhaps you should have those potential users “Buy a Feature” and “Prune the Product Tree” to help you truly understand what matters to them.

3. Developing the Implementation Plan

This is always a very iterative process. We like to use the “Remember the Future” game to start the process. If you can, map out what you have achieved at a future date, perhaps 2 years from now. Next, “backward plan” it. What will you remember about what happened 21 months from now, or 3 months earlier? For every 3-month period, what will you have accomplished? Once completed, the process can then be applied as the implementation program is developed. Each of the stages along the delivery path can be brought into an Innovation Games Session— deconstructed, rethought and rebuilt until it is ready for testing.

Further, if you are doing this collaboratively with future customers, the processes you’ve established allow you to engage with those future users in ways that enable them to become part of the design and delivery phase. They can help you build the implementation plan and design the business model that you will test as you go to market.

Ready To Play Some Games?

It is always challenging to take a new idea and turn it into a business. It doesn’t matter if you are an entrepreneur doing it for yourself or a large organization trying to craft a new line of products for the customer of tomorrow. It is just hard. Add to that the fact that the speed of change today requires faster solutions designed with more room for adaptation and adjustment than in the past. Games, particularly Innovation Games, provide a platform that can accelerate “speed to market” while enabling you to observe the market’s reactions and adjust or respond appropriately.

If you would like to know more about Innovation Games and why they might be right for your business, give us a call (914-245-1641) or email us at info@simonassociates.net. We’d love to talk with you and start playing some serious games!

Download our Innovation Games Workshop

To fully understand what Innovation Games can do for your company, download our workshop:

