

Innovation and consultation meet online at Kent County Council

Overview

■ **Business challenge**

Kent County Council was keen to create a culture of innovation within its organisation and to continuously improve service to citizens. To identify the best way forward, the council wanted to gather ideas from senior managers and to consult with internal staff, using a new way of communicating and consulting based on the latest technology.

■ **Solution**

The council held an innovative, thought-provoking two-day "ideation" (ideas generation) event in which it used IBM Human Capital Management expertise and technologies to engage senior managers in an online exchange of ideas about internal culture and service improvement.

■ **Key benefits**

- *A wealth of quality ideas about how to develop an innovative culture within the council and continuously improve services*
- *Encouragement of broad, cross-organisational collaboration rather than the traditional departmental view*
- *Each individual has the opportunity to share ideas and comment on those of others, in a positive, controlled environment.*



Kent County Council is one of the largest county councils in the UK, providing a wide range of services – from social care and planning to education and waste disposal – to Kent’s 1.3 million residents and employing some 40,000 people.

The council was looking to improve services to its citizens and to foster an innovative culture internally to fulfil this aim. Continuous improvement of services is a key component of the council’s “Towards 2010” vision, its strategy for making Kent a better place to live, work and visit. In order to meet the ambitious objectives of the strategy, the council wanted to experiment with new ways of consulting with both internal council staff and residents.

A forthcoming leadership seminar for 200 senior managers provided the perfect opportunity. The CEO of Kent County Council, Peter Gilroy,

had visited IBM’s innovation centre in Hursley and had been shown new technology for holding online ideas generation events. The decision was taken to experiment with this technology to garner senior management opinion on service improvement and cultural change at the council and to hold an online “ideation” (ideas generation) event instead of the usual face-to-face leadership seminar at a local hotel.

“Ideation worked well; it excited people and it made them think about the way we work. It has been extremely positive.”

– Amanda Beer, Director of Personnel and Development, Kent County Council

Transforming communication through innovation

Business benefits

- A wealth of quality ideas about how to develop an innovative culture within the council and continuously improve services
- Enthusiastic participation and increased collaborative working across the organisation
- Integration with existing initiatives to develop a consolidated action plan
- Raised awareness of the value of online collaboration among large numbers of people
- Establishment of ideation events as a potentially powerful way to communicate with staff and citizens
- Environmental benefits from reduced travel requirements.

“Kent is a large county and when we bring together our top 200 leaders for two and a half hours, they lose a lot of time travelling,” says Amanda Beer, Director of Personnel and Development at Kent County Council. “While the traditional face-to-face event is well attended, you can’t possibly get 200 managers to contribute their ideas, because of the time constraints. The two-day ideation event was an alternative way of enabling all managers to contribute towards innovation at the council at their own pace and in their own way. It was also run as a pilot to establish the feasibility and value of ideation events more generally.”

Preparing the ground

The council decided to run the event in mid-November 2006 and had just three weeks to prepare. During this period, it met with IBM Human Capital Management specialists to discuss the necessary preparations and to get advice on generating content. It put in place a project team, trained moderators to facilitate the event and conducted technical planning to ensure that its IT infrastructure would stand up if all 200 managers logged on at the same time.

The council developed the online content and set up log-ins for participants. Interest was generated through a “teaser” campaign, which involved emailing senior managers with reminders about the seminar but telling them not to go to the hotel. Indeed managers did not know the event was to be held online until the day it was taking place.

Consulting managers

The ideation event was run over two days in December. IBM provided the software and hosted the application through a third party supplier, while providing event management and technical support for the event’s duration. Once they had logged in, participants had two initial content areas to choose from – how to create a high-performance culture at the council; and how to improve service provision to citizens. They were then able to add their own ideas in their chosen area, comment on someone else’s idea or send their thoughts to another participant.

Council moderators sent emails to participants to remind them to log in and to keep them up to date with the most popular ideas. They conducted peer reviews on particular ideas and sent specific information to relevant senior managers. At lunchtime on the first day, a third content area was added, where managers could contribute their thoughts on the value of ideation events and potential future applications.

Some 144 senior managers took part in ideation – more than usually attend the physical seminar – and the pilot generated 78 ideas with 298 comment and review activities carried out. Following the online seminar, IBM produced a detailed report, including a summary of contributions, which Kent County Council used to categorise and agree which ideas to take action on.

“Ideation illustrates that when the corporate support functions within the council join up, the outcome can be very powerful indeed. If you were to extend it to citizens, who knows where it could lead.”

– Amanda Beer, Director of Personnel and Development, Kent County Council

Many of the outcomes of the ideation event are being fed into existing initiatives at the council, such as a culture and continuous improvement project. They are being allocated to one of the council's seven boards for particular service areas, so that they can contribute to existing work streams. Meanwhile the council is setting up a cross-directorate team to analyse the feasibility of ideas and to come up with an action plan to make them happen.

The value of online consultation

One of the most concrete outcomes from the event is the perceived value of ideation among the senior managers who participated. They can see particular applications within their service directorates and potentially with citizens in the wider community.

The event also served to reinforce the value of online tools that facilitate consultation. "The organisation has started to look at collaborative working generally and at how the Internet facilitates this," says Jacky Scobell, ICT Strategy Manager at Kent County Council. "The event helped to raise awareness of all the online facilities and their relative merits, such as blogs and chat rooms as well as ideation."

Fostering innovation and widening participation

Feedback from managers on the ideation event has been overwhelmingly positive. Indeed the council's CEO was impressed with the quality of the ideas and comments generated through this mechanism. This new method of consultation also fits in with the culture of innovation at the council. "We are always looking to improve the way we do things," says Beer. "Ideation worked well; it excited people and it made them think about the way we work. It has been extremely positive."

Although there aren't specific projects lined up to make further use of ideation, Beer is certain that this kind of event will be used again both internally and externally. UK councils are subject to comprehensive performance assessments which, among other things, look at how they consult and engage with their citizens and partners. Clearly ideation has considerable potential in this regard and facilitates wider collaboration.

"Ideation illustrates that when the corporate support functions within the council join up, the outcome can be very powerful indeed," concludes Beer. "If you were to extend it to citizens, who knows where it could lead."

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Why it matters

Kent County Council has identified an innovative and powerful way of consulting and communicating with its staff and residents, which has a multitude of applications across the organisation.



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