

INNOVATION FOR ASSOCIATIONS

Already in the 1980s management studies recognised that there is no executive task 'more vital and demanding than the sustained management of innovation and change' (Tushman, Nadler, 1986). Indeed, this could not ring more true for today's business environment. But is it a question for executives only? And how far-reaching would innovative practise need to be in order to become attainable as well as sustainable? Let us take a look at the concept of innovation from the point of view of the not-for-profit sector and associations in particular.



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WHY INNOVATION?

Innovation stands high on everyone's agenda these days. We all struggle to come to terms with what we need to do to implement more effective ways to generate income, increase and better serve membership while running our organisations more efficiently. In other words, move away from predominantly 'administrative' behaviour towards more 'out-of-the-box' thinking. Innovation helps us to 'make things better', somehow...

Following current thinking of experts in business and academia, innovation enshrines a variety of aspects

that are almost never replicated in real life but mostly stay in seminars, text books, LinkedIn discussions or other fancy media out on the internet.

One author describes innovation as turning an idea into a solution that adds value from a customer's perspective (Skillicorn, 2016). Another believes it is 'the implementation of creative ideas in to generate value, usually through increased revenues, decreased costs, or both' (Baumgartner, 2016). The list goes on. However, asking industry specialists about the mistakes made around innovation, everyone tends to agree that we all talk more about it than actually do anything with it. Usually because of lack of the very ideas, resources or plain laziness.

Innovation means change. Organisations, much like the people that run them, are creatures of habit. How to innovate if the structure of the organisation is rigid and not open to change?

INNOVATING HOW?

Particularly in the association and social sectors, organisations tend to be more reactive than proactive, in part because of the way decision-making is set

up. We all know the drill, annual meeting, members come together and decide about the past year and the year following, in the mean time we try and maintain status quo, get along with our boards and committees, and launch membership surveys to tick the box of collecting valuable data to add value to membership without a real plan of actually using the data outside a strategic brainstorming session.

When talking about innovation in your professional circles are you discussing innovation from a product level? Increasing and/or changing membership benefits, content delivery and – speaking of 'delivery' – technology?

These are all good areas to innovate and tackle the generational challenge of motivating millennials to join our ranks in the association world. At least in the field of technology, we would certainly never stop innovating judging by the rate of development of both hard- and software. How else would you try to lure the shy kid hiding behind a mobile screen, stereotypically perceived to only be interested in themselves with that vague idea of wanting to make 'an impact'?

However, innovation for associations goes much further than the mere renewal and change of technological



platforms or tackling generational issues. It is not so much about what you do but why you do it.

INNOVATING WHAT?

In other words, innovation starts at home. We need to open the discussion with everyone in the organisation about how we can get better at finding, testing and implementing great ideas we already have.

Framing the challenges correctly is key to innovation and the question of what it is we are trying to achieve is central to digging the right path. A scenario often employed in real life because of the assumption that the largest income flows would come from the low-hanging fruit is to grow membership for increased income. The entire team is mobilised to think about how to add more value to membership. But the actual question should probably be: if you wanted to increase income, why bother with investing in membership alone?

Innovating your culture is an investment in the long-term of your association. Of course, strategy is important and innovating single processes within your organisation will help you make the quick wins to convince critics that change is good and help you reach strategic short-term goals. It is, however, culture that drives most of the unconscious decisions that

permeate an innovation organisation (Foley, 2016). Big ideas take time and resources. Big ideas may fail on their way to realisation. A culture that nurtures and protects creative and diverse thinking can enable strategies we would call 'outside of the box'.

Such thinking is unfortunately too often confused as being a luxury when our organisations 'need solutions now'. However, nothing should stop us from continuously analysing our associations' (and members!) actual needs and thus build a road towards becoming an innovation organisation. Focus is key and with it our use of language. As social organisations, associations have grown accustomed to express gratitude for volunteer engagement often with superlatives in order to keep these volunteers committed. What happens, however, at the same time is that with us calling smaller ideas breakthroughs, we lower the bar and begin struggling with too many small initiatives instead of the big disruptive ones.

FOCUS INNOVATION

Innovation is good but only if it serves a clear purpose and there are techniques available to expedite cultural adaptation towards innovation. Set clear and simple goals that are understood at all levels. Start with what comes easy to the organisation to win over potential critics and instil the sensation of success. Determine

your long-term mission and support it with a vision. Think about investing in mandatory 'creative thinking sessions' at your events.

Let us try and remember: Innovation is the fundamental way our organisation adds constant value to our stakeholders and thus their stakeholders and so on. Or in the words of George Bernard Shaw: The reasonable man adapts himself to the world, the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself.

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author CHRISTOPH RAUDONAT, Business Development & Association Director, ICS Events, on behalf of IAPCO Vice President, Mathias Posch, ICS Events. IAPCO represents today 115 professional organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 41 countries.

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