CHAIN REACTIONS

THEMATIC BRIEF PRODUCTION

IDEATION WORKSHOP WITH ALL EMPLOYEES

ABOUT INNOVATION BRIEFS

CHAIN REACTIONS addresses the challenge for industrial regions to increase regional capacity to absorb new knowledge and turn it into competitiveness edge and business value. There is a strong need to help SMEs to overcome capacity shortages for innovation and integration into transnational value chains.

The project aims at empowering regional ecosystems with the knowledge and tools to help businesses overcome those barriers and generate sustained growth through value chain innovation.

CHAIN REACTIONS focuses thereby on modern approaches considering value chains and their complex developments rather than linear technology transfer approaches. The framework of value chain innovation builds on Porter's 5 forces framework (new entrants, substitutes, customers, suppliers and rivalry) and transversal innovation drivers: key enabling technologies, resource efficiency, digital transformation and service innovation.

During the project lifetime CHAIN REACTIONS will publish about every third month an INNOVATION BRIEF presenting the rationale behind specific innovation drivers and illustrate them with practical examples.

IDEATION WORKSHOP WITH ALL EMPLOYEES

Introduction

An ideation workshop with all employees? HOLZ automation from Backnang, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, dared to try this experiment in September 2020. For a whole day, 56 employees worked together to develop ideas for improving internal processes. Many concrete results emerged from the ideas, and at the same time the workshop day strengthened the sense of togetherness within the company in times of short-time work and home office. bwcon Innovation Academy advised the HOLZ automation team of moderators during the preparation.

Four months later, Alexandra Rudl from bwcon interviewed Andreas Holz, Agile Coach at HOLZ, about the results of the workshop and what he learned from this first company-wide workshop.

Figure 1Video conference with Andreas Holz, in the background a photo of the workshop in the assembly hall

Alexandra Rudl: What was the motivation for the company-wide workshop?

Andreas Holz: In September we went from full capacity to short-time work in some areas within two weeks. The employees came from service assembly and immediately went into short-time work. We knew we had to do something. Even though we already had short-time work in some areas in April, the situation was different in September - with many areas on short-time work. So on the one hand we wanted to give our employees hope, perspective and confidence, but on the other hand we also wanted to give them work so that they would work less short-time allowing them to earn their money. And a workshop like this produces a lot of work that brings added value to the company. At the same time, it is also an opportunity to apply agile working in practice and thus to do something positive for the company in the long term.

Alexandra Rudl: Who had the idea for the workshop?

Andreas Holz: The idea came up in a conversation between our Managing Director Jürgen Holz and our Business Innovation Manager Stefanos Parussis. They first presented the idea to the smaller management group and then to the core team (consisting of 7 managers). After they had agreed, the idea was launched. At that point, we had no idea what exactly it would look like. The workshop design then developed in consultation with bwcon Innovation Academy.

Alexandra Rudl: Was what you imagined at the beginning of the workshop design phase ultimately close to what it was in the end?

Partly. At the very beginning, for example, we had the idea that we would be in different rooms with different facilitators whom we would brief beforehand and that we would go from room to room with the 3 facilitators. We then rejected this idea and decided to hold the workshop in our assembly hall. Because there is enough space for the teams allowing them being next to each other in a Corona-compliant manner. This allowed us to create more of the feeling of togetherness that was important to us.

Alexandra Rudl: Can you describe how you then proceeded in the preparation phase?

Andreas Holz: On the one hand, we presented the interim status again and again to [Managing Director] Jürgen and the core team. It was important to us that we have the workshop design

approved by them and that no one said after the workshop that we should have done things differently.

At the beginning, we didn't know exactly what we should focus on - on "in-house processes and interfaces" or "new markets and technologies". We somehow wanted it all at one time. Our consultant from bwcon Innovation Academy talked us out of it. Quite rightly - she played a big part here in ensuring that we didn't get lost and fail by tackling everything at once. We finally decided on the topic of "in-house processes". The reason for this was that we had restructured our sales department shortly before and let our colleagues loose on new sectors. If we had then done an additional workshop on new markets while the sales department was still looking for and perhaps overhauling something again, we would have caused more confusion than added value. And we knew that we had an unbelievable number of internal challenges that we had to work on. Before the short-time work period, we were always overloaded, so we couldn't take care of these issues.

In the end culture, digitalization and internal processes, these were the focus topics of the workshop. We believe that if we are well positioned in these areas, then we can next do a workshop with a focus on the outside, on new markets. We also believe that if we position ourselves well now and in three to four months the wave of orders comes, then we can work it off better. Maybe this year we will do the workshop on new markets.

Finally, details were gradually clarified, such as the size of the teams, the composition of the participants, what material we need, how we make the whole thing Corona-compliant.

Then we constantly thought about what we had to do so that our employees would go out of the workshop and say "that was really good". It was supposed to be a successful day. After all, we have never facilitated a workshop of this size before, and to be honest, until today we haven't really found anyone who has done it with that amount of people. When I look at it now, we could have done it with 80. We had an amplifier with a microphone, a large digital board, and a stage with Euro pallets so that people could see us.

Alexandra Rudl: Let's move on to the workshop day - what was the final composition of the participants?

Andreas Holz: In the end, there were 56 participants and 3 moderators. For Katharina, our trainee, it was her first moderation ever and then directly in front of so many people. She did a great job.

One issue beforehand was the participation of our managing director. We had different options to choose from: either he does not take part in the workshop at all, or he takes part as managing director and goes from team to team in the role of managing director, or he goes into a team as an equal member, i.e. as one of 56. Taking him out completely was not an option because he was insanely interested. Then there was the question, can he take a step back as a person so that it works in the team. We answered that for ourselves and also discussed it openly with him. He was very keen to join a team as one of many. That's how it was then and that's how it was good. Interestingly, we had other teams in which managers had difficulties in relinquishing their leadership role.

Alexandra Rudl: Had you also spoken as openly with the managers beforehand as you did with your managing director?

Andreas Holz: The focus of the communication with the managers in the run-up was mainly on the workshop process. We presented to them what was planned and asked them to contribute

their thoughts. We asked them to clarify all their questions with us in advance so that they would then support and positively accompany the workshop and also put the staff in a positive mood about the workshop. That worked well. But in fact we did not brief the managers in the same way as we did with the managing director, i.e. combined with the request to put aside their leadership role. We didn't even recognize this necessity because the hierarchies are actually quite flat in our company. In retrospect, however, we would also say to the managers that they should let the teams work as best they can and not exert too much influence on them. That is certainly one of the lessons learned from the workshop.

Alexandra Rudl: When you think of the different moderation formats you used, what comes to your mind spontaneously that worked particularly well?

Andreas Holz: The "Ask 5 Times Why" format comes to mind, i.e. asking five times why is it like that, why do you feel something is a problem, so that you understand the issue with all its aspects in its core before you start generating ideas. In the idea generation, we then gave the teams inspiration through prepared templates by asking questions like "How would Elon Musk do it?", "How would you do it if you didn't have the money to do it?" How would you do it if money was no object?". The template that the participants used to concretize their ideas at the end also worked well, with guiding questions such as "what problem would be solved", "what does the idea look like", "how could it be implemented", "what would be improved by it", "how much effort would it take to implement". Then there was a field where the employees could sign in if they wanted to participate in the implementation. In the end, it was almost everyone writing for 45-60 minutes.

Alexandra Rudl: Do you also remember something that didn't go quite right?

Andreas Holz: Well, I remember one team where there was a bit of a problem in the cooperation and where we as facilitators were challenged. It was actually the case in almost every team that a facilitator emerged who took things into his/her own hands. In this team, however, no one really took the initiative, so we had to intervene to get them going.

Alexandra Rudl: How did you do that?

Andreas Holz: We often went in and asked specifically "who documents, who moderates, who asks the questions, who looks at the time? We assigned moderation roles without explaining it in detail. We communicated the need for organization. In another team, someone took it a bit too much. Here we found out afterwards that it was due to the composition of the team, because there were two trainees and the training manager in it. The latter then took on his usual role. Unfortunately, we had not noticed this suboptimal composition when we formed the teams. We had given the opportunity for the teams to form themselves in a self-organised way, but we had set guidelines for diversity (e.g. gender, age, length of service, experience, job descriptions). We did take corrective action, but we overlooked this in the case of the team mentioned above.

Alexandra Rudl: When you look at the results of the workshop today, four months later, what is still present in the company?

Andreas Holz: A lot. I'll try to make it concrete with a few examples. We had a total of 111 ideas that were developed on the day. We compiled these into 38 special tasks with the core team. We combined a few ideas, took out duplicates or ideas that were already being implemented but not yet known. We informed everyone about this. We then integrated the 38 special tasks into Microsoft Planner and created a permanent special tasks board. For example, as a result

of the workshop, there is now a team that coordinates confidants for the staff. Another result is the redesign of our project kick-offs when it comes to special machines. The agenda has been completely changed by dividing the kick-offs into two parts, which are filmed for documentation so that when someone joins the team later, he/she can watch the recording. Of course, this also had an impact on the media release and our HR department had to get permission from all staff members for video recordings.

The project debriefings have also been redesigned and are now split according to how the project went technically and how the cooperation and communication in the project team went.

Alexandra Rudl: Are all 38 special tasks still active?

Andreas Holz: Some have already been completed and a few have not yet started. We have also not implemented some at all. This applies, for example, to the idea of installing a punching bag. We did some research and found out that there are scientific studies that say that a punching bag trains aggression. With this reasoning, we cancelled this special task.

We also called back one team because we realized that the members could not solve the task. It was about the digitization of the responsibility organization chart, but the team members were not familiar with the digitization topic. Therefore, we handed over the additional task to our digitalization team.

Alexandra Rudl: What about the goal of giving hope during short-time work and strengthening togetherness in the company - can you also see a lasting effect here?

Andreas Holz: The fact is that we have been on short-time work and in a home office since April. Since then, contact between the staff has decreased. Some staff members have therefore welcomed the workshop as an event during which they are together for a whole day. A kind of excursion feeling, even though you are at home. We also did various group warm-ups outside, such as a line-up according to seniority. That created a great group dynamic. We have a picture of one of the warm-ups in the hall, where everyone is laughing - no matter which face you look at!

Afterwards, by the way, we did a digital survey and asked what was good, what was bad and what we could do better. The workshop was praised very much, especially that it was a communal experience.

And on the subject of agile working: we started training three agile coaches at the beginning of last year. Until the workshop, it was pure theory. We were always looking for ways to really bring agile working into the company. At a first Design Thinking workshop last July with trainees, we realized that you simply have to do it. At the workshop, we saw that through the workshop day and all the follow-up work, the teams learned to work in an agile way. The teams formed themselves after the workshop, the employees selected tasks themselves. That was new - it was not decided on one. Then, for the special tasks, the teams only received a starter information with the request to inform the workshop facilitators how they organize themselves, when they want to finish, who will take over the facilitation and at what intervals they will report back. Just by answering the questions, we have given the impulse for self-organization. We only went in as facilitators, scrum masters or supervisors. We didn't have a specific name for our role in the end, even though we thought about it for a long time. In the end, we just left it open. If someone asks me today, I say "workshop facilitators", even beyond the actual workshop day.

The nice thing is that this Planner Board, which was created for the workshop, is now being renamed and will remain a permanent institution, namely a collection for special internal tasks that a self-organized team can work on. A culture has now developed that either staff members sign up themselves or, if too few sign up, colleagues are approached and asked if they would like to participate. This has become a permanent institution.

Alexandra Rudl: Is there anything else you would like to say in conclusion?

Andreas Holz: Off the top of my head, I can think of a few times I've been asked to tell the "workshop story". At the WRS Stuttgart and via linkedin, some people have written to me about it who would like to do something similar and talk to me about it. They became aware of it through our social media posts. Because there are many companies that have similar challenges right now. Although this was not our intention, the workshop has also changed our external image. So that is a positive side effect. The view of our company is now such that, in view of the various challenges, be it Corona, transformation in the automotive industry, we do not simply surrender to our fate, but take things into our own hands. And one more thing: we would not have managed to conduct the workshop in this quality and clarity if we had not had the external advice of bwcon Innovation Academy, because none of us had the comprehensive experience in preparing and conducting such an ideation workshop. Afterwards, we were told that we had moderated it well, and bwcon Innovation Academy played a big part in that.