

Why take all the responsibility for creative thinking when you could be tapping into the genius of your staff and boosting their motivation at the same time? *Glynn Davis* examines how to unlock the creativity in your employees

Open to ideas

Most people have probably experienced the situation of sitting down to a meal in a restaurant only to find their table is on a surface so uneven that it rocks excitedly and spills their drinks.

The tried-and-trusted solution to this problem is to fold up a napkin or a beer mat and stuff it under the offending leg. This used to be the case at Malmaison and Hotel du Vin hotels until a member of the restaurant staff devised a small wooden wedge that quickly and easily alleviated the problem for affected diners without them having to resort to origami.

This is an example of how an employee – regardless of their status within a business – can contribute a good idea, which, when implemented, can have a positive impact on the running of the organisation. This could be through it enabling the better delivery of service for customers, helping the business to save money, or allowing the staff to do their job more effectively and efficiently.

Sean Wheeler, director of people at Malmaison and Hotel du Vin, says: "Having lots of wooden and tiled floors meant we had lots of wobbly tables, but

then a member of the restaurant team made a wedge at home, and we used this as a prototype for getting a lot of them made up. We now have a number of them in each hotel. It's this sort of thing that makes a difference to our guests."

It is obvious that such ideas can help innovation and that this can be the difference between a business's success or failure, but the issue for many companies is how exactly they go about unlocking this creativity from within their team.

FORUM FOR IDEAS

At Malmaison and Hotel du Vin, Wheeler says, "a number of systems and processes have been put in place. For starters, each hotel has a Your Voice committee – chaired by a senior manager – that meets once a month and comprises a delegate from each department. As well as being used to air views it also provides a forum for ideas."

To encourage input from all areas of the organisation the delegates are from a variety of levels. According to Wheeler: "People put themselves forward, and whoever has been voted in by each department is the

spokesperson. This helps [communications], because a housekeeper or junior member of staff might not like to speak to senior people."

In addition, the company also encourages ideas and feedback from its staff early into their employment through "coffee chats". And each employee also has a formal review each year – called a "talent tool box" – which includes an ideas and innovations section along with a blue-sky thinking component.

Along with the wooden wedges idea, Wheeler says other winning suggestions have included a solution to the problem of lots of products being stolen from the minibars. It involved removing the stock and, instead, installing a "shop" behind reception that stocked a range of minibar items that guests could order from their rooms. "We still add service, because orders can be phoned down, and we now provide an enhanced product range to include things such as muffins," he says.

Although you can clearly put in place formal mechanisms to generate ideas, Lawrence Alexander, chief executive of EasyHotel, believes you have to

enact them informally: "You have to do it in a natural way. In the work environment, people have their work hat on, and since you have to try to get through to them individually [for their ideas], you might have to get their work clothes off."

CREATING A CULTURE

He suggests that there should not be a whiteboard in sight, as it puts people under pressure and snuffs out any creativity. For Simon Hargraves, commercial director at Pret a Manger, it is also about creating a culture where all members of staff feel sufficiently confident to come forward with their thoughts and innovative ideas.

"At Pret, it all comes back to culture. We just try to keep things simple. We fight [against things getting complicated] all the time. We are very informal and have a flat management structure, so all staff have access to senior management. Co-founder Julian Metcalfe is in [the office] full-time, and staff – as well as customers – can get through to him, so our employees feel empowered," explains Hargraves.

Part of this is the "Dear Julian" e-mail that Hargraves ►

◀ says provides a risk-free method of engagement for all staff, with no fear of retribution, and no controls over the content of these e-mails to the boss.

Another medium where staff can put forward ideas is the monthly *Pret Star* magazine, which includes "a whole section where people can write their views", says Hargraves who adds: "It's open and honest and not clichéd in any way, which is essential to ensure openness."

Hargraves says the company also receives between 50 and 60 staff ideas per quarter in the more formal manner of a letter or e-mail. Although these frequently involve recipe ideas, other more innovative suggestions have recently included a recommendation that the company uses the staple-less stapler (which folds the paper).

Whenever a new recipe is introduced a shop is chosen and the staff informally road-test it through a test batch and are encouraged to throw in their ideas about how the steps in the production process can be improved.

AWARD-WINNING IDEAS

For any top ideas that are implemented, an award is handed out at the company's quarterly briefing. Among the award-winning ideas have been the "Again and Again" bag-for-life; the electric vans that the company uses for its Pret deliveries service, and which now number 20 in total; and the Pret charity run, which involves collecting and distributing food for 12,000 homeless people each week.

One of the most recent ideas is the thermo-mug – a flask-like metal mug with a handle – which will be launched across the company shortly. "Staff are given free tea and coffee through the day and therefore get through lots of paper cups. The idea for the thermo-mug was suggested to save paper, and it will now be part of every team member's joining pack," says Hargraves.

It is maybe not too surprising that food company Benugo – whose London operations include running the catering at the V&A, the British Film Institute and various City firms, including Lehman Brothers – is also built around a culture where staff are empowered, since its co-founder Ben Warner is a former employee at Pret a Manger.

TOP 10 TIPS FOR UNLOCKING CREATIVITY IN YOUR TEAM

1. Always provide accessibility to senior management and promote this direct access.
2. Provide an ideas box that enables anonymous ideas and comments to be posted.
3. Introduce relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) so that everybody's job includes spotting good ideas.
4. When holding one-to-one appraisals, place the onus on staff to contribute ideas.
5. Set aside time for brainstorming sessions and provide incentives such as free food and drink. Host these sessions outside the business and possibly include team-building activities to stimulate new thinking among the team.
6. Provide incentives, such as prizes for the best ideas.
7. Create a culture that helps generate ideas, and embed KPIs within this so that ideas are likely to be brought up at appraisal time.
8. Initiate job switches with other operations to help generate ideas from outside the business.

9. Initiate job switches across departments, as this brings a new set of eyes to a role, which could generate ideas.
10. In large companies, break staff meetings down into smaller groups to avoid intimidating people, and mix the groups up across departments to create a more fertile environment for ideas.

Sources: Lesley Reynolds, chief executive, Portfolio; and Liz Hartstone, managing director, London office, Profile Recruitment

Rather like Pret, there is a morning get-together – a "buzz" meeting – before service at each of its units to "encourage staff to feed ideas back to the company and to get the team members to feel involved".

What have proved particularly effective for the company are its "strategic project" groups, of which eight run at any one time.

Each typically involves between five and 20 people and currently include a social group, for organising events such as staff parties and sporting competitions; a newspaper group, which publishes a staff paper each month; a charity group, which aims to raise £20,000 this year; and an environment group, which has attracted people seeking to develop

environmentally friendly ideas for the company.

A recent idea that came from the environment group and has been implemented was the printing of the company's coffee loyalty scheme card on the cup sleeve rather than on a separate piece of card. So, rather than having their card stamped, the customer reuses their sleeve, and this is stamped up until they claim their free coffee when they have accumulated nine stamps. "It works very well, as it is less of a cost to the environment and to us," says Warner.

Alison Wheatley, marketing manager of the Athenaeum hotel in London, has also found that the environment issue is proving a strong incentive for staff to put forward their ideas. It was a suggestion by one of the hotel's housekeeping staff that has ensured that the establishment will be the recipient of one of the few *Metro* newspaper recycling bins to be distributed to businesses.

RECYCLING INITIATIVES

It will be positioned at the staff entrance to ensure they all recycle their copies when they arrive at work. Wheatley says it is staff members who have been instrumental in driving other recycling initiatives around the hotel, such as abandoning the plastic sleeves for newspapers that hung on the bedroom door handles in the mornings.

Such ideas typically come through the company's staff consultative committee meeting, which meets every month and comprises a representative from each of the hotel's departments. "It is an ongoing forum that we use to communicate across the board, and it has a relaxed communications flow," says Wheatley.

One of the most useful things to have come from the meeting was the idea for guest feedback notebooks that fit into staff members' pockets. They are used to take note of guest preferences, which are then fed into the hotel's PC-based guest history files. There is a competition each month to see who collects the most facts about guests, which helps the Athenaeum achieve its high repeat business level of 40%.

As well as hosting regular meetings at each of its 17 sites and holding a monthly get-together of its managers, the Giraffe restaurant chain has also, for the first time, recently sought ideas and thoughts from its staff through a questionnaire.

Juliette Joffe, co-founder of Giraffe, says seven were sent to each site to find employees' opinions and comments on the dishes being served on the current menu. "It is the first thing that we have done on a mass scale, and the response was terrific. We got lots of feedback."

Unanimously negative comments on the company's "happiness beans" side dish will ensure that it is removed from the next menu, while the "tangy and spicy turkey enchilada", which is regarded by many staff as the dish they are "proudest to serve", will remain. Based on the success of this first questionnaire, Joffe says, more are planned on topics such as the working environment at Giraffe.

What is clear is that staff at all levels can have a beneficial impact on all parts of a business – whether it is deciding what goes on the menus or fixing wobbly tables – if they are given the opportunity and a suitable platform on which to voice their opinions.



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