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Understanding idea advancement efforts in innovation through proactive behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – Innovations lie at the heart of both entrepreneurship and marketing. While research has long focused on the idea generation phase at the beginning of the innovation process, ideas need to subsequently be realized through efforts in idea development and implementation. This paper aims to study the antecedents and practices of idea advancement behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – Seven product developers of an international company were interviewed in-depth based on a critical incident technique.

Findings – Idea advancement behavior was found to be distributed in time and between people, pervasive in the development process. Antecedents for efforts were identified at personal, interpersonal and work organization levels. Although personal antecedents were most numerous, interpersonal and work organization antecedents distinguished successful and unsuccessful efforts. Key idea advancement behaviors were centered on the inclusion of others and communication channel choices.

Research limitations/implications – The current study offers a complementary micro-level point-of-view to championship literature, illustrating the situated and dispersed nature of everyday advancement efforts as opposed to the dominant depictions of heroic relentless championing individuals. However, as the study was conducted in a single company, the findings still need to be validated in more varied settings.

Practical implications – The results highlight the need for supporting idea advancement behavior across organizational levels and function, instead of focusing on identifying individual champions. Time management, supporting switches in the driving force, and communicating value are necessary for sustaining advancement efforts.

Originality/value – Idea advancement practices have been largely ignored in previous innovation literature, with the exception of systematic processes and championing. This paper explores idea advancement as a commonplace proactive behavior, revealing several levels of key antecedents for successfully advancing ideas into innovations.

Keywords Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Creativity Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Numerous earlier studies outline the criticality of innovations and innovativeness in the modern economy for the long-term success of both organizations and industries (Christensen and Utterback, 1998; Dougherty and Hardy, 1996; Lawson and Samson, 2001). Indeed, innovation and creativity seems to be critical for entrepreneurship (Brazeal and Herbert, 1999; Parkman et al., 2012; Stokes and James, 2006; Walton, 2003), and pervasive in the conceptualizations of entrepreneurial behaviour (Drucker, 1994; Simsek et al., 2003), entrepreneurial orientation (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996; Rauch et al., 2009), entrepreneurial opportunities (Hansen and Lumpkin, 2009) and entrepreneurial marketing (Shaw, 1999; Fillis, 2010). While the importance of innovations are recognized for new and established companies alike (Christensen, 1997), much research has been conducted in relatively separate streams with little cross-pollination (Brazeal and Herbert, 1999). While there is a generally shared

agreement that ideas alone do not constitute innovations, and most authors draw a line between creativity and innovation (Amabile, 1996), research has largely focused on creativity and idea generation (Woodman et al., 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Paulus, 2000; Taggar, 2002; Parzefall et al., 2008; Hülsheger et al., 2009). Indeed, the assumption often seems to be that new ideas are scarce (Vissers and Dankbaar, 2002). However, in addition to idea generation, innovativeness also includes idea promotion, development and realization. In this regard, many earlier works outline that creativity is only half the deal and that innovation includes not just the generation of ideas, but their implementation as well (Garcia and Calantone, 2002; Luecke and Katz, 2003; Von Stamm, 2003; Trott, 2005). In the same vein, Amabile et al. (1996) define innovation as “the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization”. Thus, creativity by individuals and teams is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for innovation. In addition to creating a range of promising ideas, these ideas must be pushed forward and ultimately implemented. The latter phases of idea advancement and implementation might in fact be even more challenging, with organizations actually often ending up with more ideas than they can handle (Vissers and Dankbaar, 2002).

Few earlier studies have focused explicitly on idea promotion and development, a range of activities which we denote here generally as idea advancement. Literature dealing with the latter phases of idea advancement and implementation within the innovation process tends to focus on the role of systematic processes (Von Stamm, 2003) and champions (Schön, 1963) in promoting ideas, as opposed to advancement as distributed commonplace efforts required from all contributors of the innovation effort often taking place in informal arenas within and outside organizations. Hence, this paper intends to fill this gap and explores idea

advancement from the perspective of proactive behaviour (Grant and Ashford, 2008) targeted at the specific aim of producing innovations. To this objective, this paper briefly reviews previous research on idea advancement and proactivity, after which idea advancement is empirically investigated in a large international organization. The results help to deepen our understanding on how new ideas are not just generated, but developed into actualized innovations.

Research background

Entrepreneurship and innovation

Innovation and Entrepreneurship have been growing fields of study for the past three decades. In a number of streams, including innovative entrepreneurship (Garcia and Calantone, 2002), ideation and opportunity recognition, and escalation of commitment, the two areas of study are increasingly focusing on the same topics and factors to determine outcomes. In this regard, numerous earlier studies describe an existing overlap between innovation and entrepreneurship, for instance, Stokes and James (2006) outline that the study of innovation is a major contributor at the interface of marketing and entrepreneurship. Other studies affirm this observation and accord an important role to innovation in entrepreneurial success (Brazeal and Herbert, 1999; Walton, 2003), entrepreneurial behaviour (Simsek et al., 2003), entrepreneurial orientation (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996; Rauch et al., 2009), entrepreneurial opportunities (Hansen and Lumpkin, 2009) and entrepreneurial marketing (Shaw, 1999; Fillis, 2010).

Furthermore, change is generally considered in the entrepreneurship literature as being a precursor or antecedent of the entrepreneurial event. Innovation, like change, may be conceptualized as either a process or an outcome. Even though numerous earlier studies highlight the importance of innovation and creativity to entrepreneurial success, much of the research has been conducted in relatively separate streams with little cross-pollination (Brazeal and Herbert, 1999).

Innovation and idea advancement

In addition to idea generation and creativity, innovativeness also includes idea promotion, development and realization. Most works on innovation acknowledge that creativity is only half the deal, and that both the generation and the implementation of ideas warrants consideration (Garcia and Calantone, 2002; Luecke and Katz, 2003; Von Stamm, 2003; Trott, 2005). While research has paid ample attention on the creative generation of ideas and its organizational antecedents, studies relevant to the subsequent advancement of these ideas into

innovations are significantly scarcer. In order to avoid a reductionist perspective on the issue, in this paper we adopt the term idea advancement to denote to activities referred in literature as the promotion, further development, and realization of generated ideas. Idea advancement thus includes a range of activities contributing to taking an idea towards being realized, that can be formal or informal, concrete or abstract (e.g. technical development vs selling the idea to others), and individual or social.

To further position our study, some terminology we use requires clarification. The use of the term innovation is quite varied and thus the term can be ambiguous. We adopt the vocabulary found in the review of Garcia and Calantone (2002) and define innovation as being about some tangible distributable product, service, or behaviour. Therefore, an idea, as creative it can be is not an innovation until it has reached a sufficient level of maturity and concreteness. Beyond this distinction, there is also variance whether commercial success is required for something to be called an innovation. Practically all depictions of an organizational innovation process describe the process as proceeding from a more abstract level (ideas) towards concrete, developed, commercializable outcomes (products, services, etc.). However, while some authors include the post-launch (or commercialization) phase of the process, others exclude it. Following the division of the innovation process to three phases; the fuzzy front end, new product development (NPD), and commercialization proposed by Koen et al. (2001), we focus on the first two phases, excluding the commercialization phase and the diffusion of the innovations to market. Therefore, we do not require what we call innovation to be “proven” at the market.

A common view emphasizes that the successful implementation of ideas requires processes, procedures, and structures that “allow a timely and effective execution of projects” (Von Stamm, 2003), and a significant amount of effort has been put into producing prescriptive systematic models and processes for organizing innovation.

While the need for systematic approaches is likely to be true, merely implementing methods, processes, and procedures is not enough to ensure the successful utilization of the ideas. Systematic procedures often fail to address the complex real-life dynamics of the transition of ideas from generation to implementation. Instead, successful innovation is highly dependent on individual innovative behaviour, which includes promoting or championing ideas also in the informal arenas of the organization (Scott and Bruce, 1994; Kleysen and Street, 2001). Champions are described as individuals who informally emerge in an organization (Schoen, 1963) and make decisive contributions to innovations by actively and enthusiastically promoting its progress through critical stages, especially those early on in the process (Reid and de Brentani, 2004; Howell and

Shea, 2006). This has typically been seen as being accomplished through selling the idea to the management and getting the management sufficiently interested in the project (Chakrabarti, 1974). Even with the recognition of the need of understanding individual innovative behaviour, significant gaps still exist in the understanding of these idea advancement activities. First, champions are traditionally viewed as heroic individuals who fearlessly and relentlessly push ideas forward. Second, literature on championing often focuses on recognizing the champions, describing how they are distinct from non-champions, and explaining or supporting their emergence and efforts (Beath, 1991; Markham et al., 1991; Shane, 1994; Howell, 2005; Kelley and Lee, 2010). The enduring perception of the importance of champions, illustrated early on by Schön's (1963) notion; "a new idea either finds a champion or dies", may however underplay the importance of distributed grass root level activities of idea advancement that may not be reliant on any single individual taking a leading role in pushing an idea or a project forward.

Contrasted with the focus on a few specific individuals in championing, as well as a traditional focus on management and passive employee behaviour (Grant and Ashford, 2008), literature has highlighted the growing need of proactive behaviour from all employees in current uncertain, competitive environments (Crant, 2000; Parker, 2000; Sonnentag, 2003; Frese et al., 2007). Indeed, the past decade has brought on a considerable amount of research on proactive behaviour (Crant, 2000; Parker et al., 2006; Grant and Ashford, 2008; Parker and Collins, 2010). However, even to date much research has been conducted on more passive employee behaviour, for example the vast majority of research in organizational citizenship behaviour has focused on behaviours that maintain or reinforce the status quo rather than promote change (Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Frese and Fay, 2001; Choi, 2007). As Rank et al. (2004) have identified, "creativity and innovation research could benefit from an integration of proactive behaviour research". An interesting manner of addressing this issue may be through exploration of idea advancement at the grass root level.

Idea advancement as proactive behaviour

Proactivity has been a stable dimension in entrepreneurial orientation (Rauch et al., 2009), and Campbell (2000) outlines enterprising qualities as a core characteristic of proactive employees. Proactivity has been connected to success on both individual and organizational levels (Seibert et al., 1999; Baer and Frese, 2003; Frese et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2009), and it correlates with idea creativity and initial engagement in the creative process (Binnewies et al., 2007) as well as the amount of rewarded improvement suggestions (Frese et al., 1999). Furthermore, Baer and Frese (2003) have found process innovations to increase performance only in a climate of initiative, or proactivity. Numerous earlier

studies have outlined the emergence of proactive employees who use their initiative and are self-starting (Bateman and Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000; Parker et al., 2006; Campbell, 2000; Grant and Ashford, 2008). Previous research also outlines that this proactive employee behaviour tends to benefit firms in several ways, such as in improved sales (Crant, 1995), enhanced entrepreneurial behaviour (Becherer and Maurer, 1999), and better orientation towards innovation (Seibert et al., 2001; Kickul and Gundry, 2002). Proactive behaviour is self-initiated, anticipatory and involves taking control (Parker and Collins, 2010), is inherently change-oriented (Bateman and Crant, 1993), and requires mindfulness of the effects of one's actions on one's self and the environment (Grant and Ashford, 2008). Grant and Ashford (2008) proclaim that this behaviour is enhanced especially through pressure for innovation, need for greater self-direction and growth of decentralized organizational structures. In this regard, idea advancement represents a specific type of proactive behaviour. Focusing on the dynamics implementation, the operationalization complements previous innovativeness research highlighting creativity (Paulus, 2000; Hu'lsheger et al., 2009). On the other hand, research on championing has exerted significant efforts on describing what makes champions distinctive from non-champions (Shane, 1994). Conceptualizing idea advancement as proactive behaviour allows research to side-step the question of what is a sufficient degree of action in order to be considered as championing an innovation, a question which has raised conflicting views in the innovation literature (Markham et al., 1991). Rather than being restricted to viewing championship as an all or nothing phenomenon and the accompanying problems with establishing the critical threshold, the concept of idea advancement behaviour enables researchers to measure champion-like behaviour as a continuous variable. As opposed to the study of innovations, the conceptualization is not limited to successful outcomes. The present study thus defines idea advancement behaviour as actions targeted at gaining and sustaining resources for developing and implementing generated innovative ideas, where resources refers to both the required material and immaterial contributions, including (but not limited to) gaining permission, cooperation, support and input to further efforts to realize ideas into innovations. The study proceeds to explore the nature of engaging in these actions, as well as their enablers and hindrances, through investigating the actions reported by the contributors of an innovation process, namely product development employees.

Research methodology

In order to study the antecedents and nature of idea advancement behaviour, data for this study was gathered in seven in-depth, critical-incident based interviews conducted in a large, international organization that develops highly sophisticated

new technologies for business-to-business markets. The focus included both product ideas that might lead to development projects and eventually to launched products, and minor ideas related to the development work at ongoing projects, like ideas on specific elements and aspects of a product under development. Thus, the interviews considered all stages of development from the initial conception of an idea to its possible embodiment as a launched product, taking into account both the front end of innovation (FEI) and NPD phases (Koen et al., 2001). The seven participants were chosen around two development projects – one that had been a clear success, and one that had stalled for years – and one development team. The two projects were identified by a company manager, who was instructed to name a project that had proceeded particularly well and one that had been surprisingly difficult, and to aim for diversity in recommending different types of participants (in terms of roles in project, backgrounds, etc.) to be interviewed from the projects. The manager had overseen both projects, and worked with all of the participants. All of the participants were currently employed in the same large Finnish-lead private sector company, four of them at managerial level (Table I). All of the participants were Finnish men. The years working in the company ranged from 8 to 42, averaging at 17 years, and the average participant had a Master's degree in engineering. The youngest participant was 31 years old, and the oldest 70 years, the average age being 44 years. The in-depth interviews utilized a critical-incident approach (Flanagan, 1954; Chell, 2004), focusing on the two product development projects, one that had exceeded all expectations, and another that had stalled for years. In addition, other significant development-related experiences (as judged by the interviewees) were charted. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, the mother tongue of the interviewees, and thus all excerpts presented in the paper have been translated.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 195 minutes, averaging at 89 minutes. The audio-recordings were transcribed, and the data was segmented into individual arguments (Chi, 1997). Segments related to idea advancement behaviours (i.e. actions targeted at gaining and sustaining resources for developing and implementing generated innovative ideas) were first identified from the transcripts, resulting in 147 segments. The length of segments ranged from one to 18 lines, typically being a few lines, such as “in a sense you get the big wheel rolling and start to partially commit to clients, or start to already tell the tale to clients, because our, typically after all when we introduce something new it takes a while for the market to ripen for it”, or “There are opportunities where if you have ideas you can present them, in these questionnaires, performance appraisals, and we have also in our intranet, I think we have there the opportunity, that you can at any time submit an idea. But I've never used that. Rather, exactly in these other [normal] discussions, I've suggested.”

The 147 segments were then content coded and categorized based on thematic

similarity. First recurring statements and specific ideas were searched for, resulting in 37 repeated ideas (repeated between two and seven times) and 23 single occurrences. These were grouped together based on content similarity into 11 mutually exclusive thematic groups (later referred to as categories), each containing five to 27 segments and representing a distinct dimension. For example, the segment “on the other hand [client beta testing] can also be used as a reference, in marketing materials when this already has it, and here then, it helps to advance” was first found to repeat the idea of “convincing with showcases”, and later grouped into the category of “inclusion of others”. Nine of the 11 categories were found to describe the antecedents of advancement efforts, and two to describe the actual advancement practices. The nine antecedent categories were further grouped together into personal, interpersonal and work organization according to the content of the antecedent categories.

Table I. Interview participants position in the organization and role in the case projects

Position at the time of the interview	Involvement in the successful project	Involvement in the stalling project
Product manager	FEI, NPD	NPD
Senior consultant	FEI	-
Vice President of a business area	Beginning of NPD	FEI, beginning of NPD
Chief Engineer	NPD	-
Project manager	End of NPD	-
Manager of a division	overview	-
Chief engineer	-	NPD

Findings

The interviewees produced a total of 147 segments related to idea advancement efforts, identifying antecedents (106 segments) and practices (41 segments) of idea advancement behaviour that surfaced in the interviews.,

Antecedents of idea advancement behaviour

The majority of segments described the inhibitors and enhancers of advancement efforts, or factors that could either promote or discourage advancement behaviours. All of the created categories included some segments from both point of views, i.e. examples were found when the factors had been both favorable and unfavorable for idea advancement behaviour to occur. Antecedents for engaging in and sustaining idea advancement behaviour were found to exist on three different levels: personal, interpersonal and work organization (Table II).

Personal level antecedents. The personal level factors were most abundant, containing 47 segments in three categories – intrinsic value, persistent self-directed efforts and grit, and courage. The largest of these categories was intrinsic

value, containing 27 segments describing the intrinsic value of the development target for the idea advancer, which was increased by the target affecting one's own work and encounters of recurring problems. In fact, the vast majority of segments in the category were examples of when the idea had had intrinsic value for the interviewee and it had motivated sustaining idea advancement behaviour, and such examples were found both in the stalling and the successful project. The category also contained some segments describing the general personal interest and enthusiasm towards the topic, and the desirability of novelty and perceiving the impact of actions in general. While one interviewee perceived development as an important part of his identity, perceiving developing the organization's products as his hobby, and engaging in it in his leisure time as well, another did not identify himself as "the developing type" (yet he engaged in some development and idea advancement actions). This lack of identification seemed to have held the interviewee back on some occasions. Only the last segment, along with two segments describing a high threshold to initiate and one describing excessive perfecting, were found to inhibit development efforts, the other 23 segments in the category described a positive effect.

The second personal level category described the perceived need for persistent self-directed efforts and grit. The product development functions of the organization were rather decentralized with several separate functions and departments involved in the activities, and the employees were allowed a relatively a high degree of autonomy within the organization. These issues likely had an influence on the need for initiative, persistency and self-directedness within the idea advancement efforts. The interviewees reported that ideas do not advance themselves, and that a consensus does not secure action. Development ideas required persistent "pushing" and significant amounts of grit from the idea advancer.

Finally, eight segments described the demand of courage to proceed and maintaining courage despite negative past experiences. In some examples, the ideas had been self-censored already in an early phase by the developers with their colleagues, due to either the belief that the idea would be too radical to sell for conservative clients, or lack of belief in the viability of the idea.

It is noteworthy, however, that while personal level antecedent were most numerous, the differences between the successful and stalling project were not as marked on the personal level as on the other two levels, suggesting that personal factors might be necessary but insufficient conditions for idea advancement. In other words, although belief in the value of an idea, persistency and courage are all required, outside contextual factors might determine whether the same person with the same idea engages in advancement efforts or not.

Interpersonal level antecedents. Interpersonal idea advancement behaviour antecedents consisted of 21 segments in two categories, the perceived importance of the development target to others and the perceived development attitude of others.

Table II. Antecedents of idea advancement efforts

Level	Category	Content	Amount of segments
Personal	Intrinsic value	A need in one's own work or encountering a recurring problem, genuine interest, enthusiasm, and developments as a part of one's identity	27
	Persistent self-directed efforts, grit	Persistent "pushing" of the idea, consensus does not lead to action, need for flexibility and variety to sustain efforts	12
	Courage	Advancement efforts require courage and belief in efforts	8
	Total		47
Interpersonal	Perceived importance for others	Perceived priority and value to others, inferred from interest, support and rewards	16
	Perceived development attitude of others	Attachment to old solutions, willingness to experiment, conservatism	5
	Total		21
Work organization	(Low) level of fragmentation of work	Simultaneous projects, lack of time, frequent switching between tasks deter advancement efforts	16
	(High) degree of organizational clarity	Unclear boundaries of roles and responsibilities; unclear processes and information flow; level of unity within the organization	9
	Presence of deadline	Lack of or far away deadline increases the threshold for advancement efforts	8
	Intermittent spurts	Advancement efforts occur in intermitted spurts, requiring occasional rest periods	5
	Total		38
Total			106

The category of perceived importance of the development target for others contained 16 segments describing the inferred priority and value of the development target to others. The category represented one of the clearest differences between the successful and stalling project; whereas the successful project was frequently reported to have been perceived to be important to others and had been initially revived by outside interest, the stalling project was perceived to be a low priority to others. Perceptions of importance and desirability were based on expressed interest (or lack thereof) and support of peers, managers and outside-organization members. For example, little outside questions had occurred in relation to the stalling project and the development progress and results – or the lack thereof – were neither rewarded nor punished. In addition, advancement efforts were also perceived to be affected by the current reward system (two segments), which was seen as supportive but insufficient.

Five segments, in turn, described how also the more general development attitudes affected both the interviewees' willingness to pursue and the success of idea advancement efforts. Most of these segments described the hindering effect that the conservatism of others (clients, colleagues) had on idea advancement efforts in general.

Work organization antecedents. The third level of antecedents included 38 segments in four categories describing the enhancing or inhibiting effect of how work was organized both in the development cases (presence of deadlines and intermittent spurts) as well as in general (fragmentation between projects and organizational clarity). The largest category contained 16 segments describing the degree of fragmentation of work, mainly the negative effect of having several simultaneous projects and the resulting need to frequently switch between tasks, as well as insufficient time for development tasks in general. There was a marked difference between the successful and stalling projects in terms of the ability to concentrate efforts on the projects: whereas in the successful project key persons were relieved of most other duties, the stalling project was an extra responsibility to its key developer. In general, daily hurries and revenue generating external projects were often perceived to dominate resources, leaving insufficient time for development work.

The second category included nine segments related to the degree of organizational clarity, mainly describing the lack thereof and the negative effect that it had on advancement efforts. Unclear boundaries of roles and responsibilities, as well as unclear processes, were perceived as major inhibitor of idea advancement efforts. The interviewees felt that they had a very limited influence over others due to this unclarity and the autonomy of all employees. For example, dodging tasks was seen as easy for others in the midst of the role and responsibility myriad. These conditions applied to the context of both the stalling and the successful project.

In terms of the organization of the specific development projects, eight segments described the significant effect that the project deadline had on idea advancement efforts. The majority of segments in the category described the lack of urgency and deadlines, particularly in relation to the stalling project, and the negative consequences their absence had on willingness to expend efforts.

Finally, advancement efforts were also described to occur in intermitted spurts (five segments), where some periods were more critical than others. In order to maintain persistent efforts, occasional rest periods were required (which had not been possible in the stalling project), and the primus motor of the successful project had changed several times during the idea to product process.

Reported idea advancement behaviours

41 segments were found to describe different practices of idea advancement that the interviewees had engaged in (Table III). These were centered around how to communicate to (potential) stakeholders and including them to the process in varying degrees.

Practices related to communication channel choices. 22 reported idea advancement behaviour segments were related to communication strategies, in terms of communication channel choices and persuasion tactics. First of all, 13 segments were related to communication channel choices. Face-to-face conversations were perceived as having a large role in advancing development, and were carried out with other organizational stakeholders, colleagues, management, experts, and clients. Documentation and intranet idea management systems were seen as secondary, and were used successfully only combined with face-to-face conversation. However, in one instance of the successful development project, the documentation of an old idea was found by an unrelated organizational member who contacted the idea author, triggering new development efforts after an initial pause in project (before the development idea had proceeded to be a project). On the other hand, documentation by itself was insufficient for advancing an idea, and could produce a false sense of completion. E-mail was identified as a particularly poor channel for advancing development in two segments. Whereas on-site personal development pitches were regarded effective, e-mails were seen to easily dissipate in thin air. Development could stall when an e-mail round was initiated for approvals, as answers were not received.

Further, nine segments described persuasion tactics that the interviewees had utilized to promote the project in order to gain acceptance and resources. The interviewees aimed to create showcases early on, providing references of success in order to convince others. Advancement efforts were begun early on, laying the foundation for future proposals. In addition, concretizing the nature and implications of ideas by means of, e.g. numerical values, drawings, models and prototypes could persuade others towards the idea. The possibility to experiment and interacting directly with customers were also beneficial for both persuasion and for discovering opportunities to test and implement ideas.

Table III. Reported idea advancement behaviours

Category	Content	Amount of segments
Communication strategies	Communication channel choices: Face-to-face conversations with different parties, complemented by documentation, while avoiding e-mail	13
	Persuasion tactics: Convincing others with showcases, documentation, numbers and concretization	9
	Total	22
Inclusion of others	Advancing within a smaller circle, no need for permissions, balanced with sharing credit and including key stakeholders	11
	Dispersion within the organization	6
	Opportunism in who to include	2
	Total	19
Total		41

Practices related to whom to include. 19 segments, in turn, were found related to the inclusion of stakeholders to the development process, with both benefits and problems identified with all degrees of inclusion. These segments were grouped into three issues: the degree of inclusion of stakeholders, the dispersion of stakeholders across the organization, and opportunism in collaboration choices. First of all, there seemed to be a delicate balance in the extent to which people and stakeholders should be included in the advancement efforts. The lack of needing permission to proceed and working with a small amount of people were perceived as an important precursor of advancing ideas. On the other hand, the need to include key players in order to prevent future resistance, and share credit for positive results, was recognized. Working alone easily leads to impasses.

In addition to other inclusion options, the possible dispersion of the development between organizational structures was perceived as an important decision. Dispersion within the organization was another marked difference between the successful and stalling development projects. Whereas successful efforts had been long concentrated in the hands of one department, the stalling one was affected by the different goals of two departments from the start. Transition phases, where the responsibility was handed to another party, were seen as challenging, and one should not trust that efforts would automatically be continued after the transition. However, transition and having the right people advance the development at the right phases were seen as important elements of success, whereas the stalling project had relied on a single prime idea advancer for a longer period. Unlike in persuasion tactics, no clear-cut best practices could be identified in terms of who should be included and when.

Finally, two segments described the opportunistic nature of advancement efforts, taking advantage of previous contact, and finding testers from geographically convenient collaborative partners.

Discussion

The results of the present study of idea advancement behaviour at the grass root level revealed that proactive advancement efforts were perceived as a major contributor towards the overall accomplishments of innovation projects. Successful overall idea advancement was the result of interplay between the efforts of a number of people with the primus motor of advancement changing between different phases. Three levels of antecedents were identified for idea advancement behaviours, namely personal, interpersonal and work organization antecedents. Initiating efforts required valuing the idea on a personal level, as well as grit and courage. Sustaining these efforts hinged on the intrinsic value of the target for the developer, but even more markedly on the target's perceived urgency and importance for others, as well as organizing work in a manner that provided opportunities for both concentration and rest. Identified advancement practices, in turn, were all related to collaboration issues, identifying various communication strategies and considering different degrees of stakeholder inclusion.

Contributions to theory

A growing amount of entrepreneurship research highlights the active, transformational nature of the entrepreneurial process (Certo et al., 2009; Chandler et al., 2009; Dew et al., 2008; Read et al., 2009). Indeed, Becherer and Maurer (1999) point out that both entrepreneurship and proactivity suggest acting relatively unconstrained by present resources and limitations. While much previous research may have implicitly considered developing innovations as a proactive endeavor, cross-pollination between both innovation and proactive behaviour research (Rank et al., 2004), as well as entrepreneurship and proactivity research in general, has been scarce. In general, ideation-centric innovation literature has been more aligned with entrepreneurial opportunity recognition research, rather than with entrepreneurially exploiting and actively creating opportunities in uncertain environments (Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005). The current study bridges proactive behaviour to idea advancement efforts, thus helping to shed further light on the entrepreneurial process of discovering and exploiting opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Kuratko et al., 2005; Harper, 2008).

The current study makes contributions to the innovation literature on three levels. First, it offers a complementary view to championship literature, which tends to focus on the more macro-perspective of entire project and product ideas, and the activities of a few identifiable individuals who undertake extensive advancement efforts. In contrast, the current study focused on the more micro-level proactive actions that product developers in all roles engaged in throughout the development path from the initial idea onwards. Furthermore, all individuals engaged in both

successful and unsuccessful advancement efforts, whether the project ended up as a success or a failure, highlighting the need for a more grass-root level study to understand the antecedents of successful idea advancement behaviour, compared to the more global role of individual champions. The results portrayed idea advancement behaviour as a team effort of “passing the ball around” rather than lone individuals carrying the torch. This is quite pertinent since it has been noted that only a few organizational members ever choose to become champions and that championing is a fairly rare organizational phenomenon (Howell and Higgins, 1990a, b; Shane, 1994; Howell et al., 2005), which underlines the importance of proactivity displayed as idea advancement behaviour by non-champions. In line with this, the results of the study highlight the need for everyday idea advancement behaviour by all developers in addition to, or perhaps even more importantly than, heroic acts by champions.

Second, the study also outlines how this process of “dispersed championing” takes place within firms, what mechanisms are used to foster new ventures, and which mechanisms are successful (Venkataraman et al., 1992; Howell et al., 2005). The present study complements research on championing that addresses these process dynamics, as well as furthers knowledge on the antecedents of proactive behaviour in general. Previous research has suggested antecedents such as accountability, ambiguity and autonomy (Grant and Ashford, 2008), proactive personality, job autonomy, co-worker trust, role breadth self-efficacy and flexible role orientation (Parker et al., 2006) and individual differences such as personal initiative, job involvement, need for achievement, as well as contextual factors such as management support, organizational culture and norms (Crant, 2000). The present study highlights the significance of the case-by-case variation of personal value and perceived interpersonal value of the target of proactivity as antecedents for the same individual acting proactively in the same organization, in addition to more stable individual, interpersonal and organizational antecedents. Thus, the situated nature of proactive idea advancement behaviour is highlighted in the study.

Third, the present study illustrated the importance of proactive behaviour displayed by contributors across the line, as advancement hinged on short-term efforts by different individuals in different phases of an idea’s development path. The study highlights that the interviewed product development professionals were highly aware of the need to proactively self-advance any ideas, and many had little trust in general idea management tools and systems, rather emphasizing inclusion and persuasion by personal efforts, and concretizing the potential benefits. Recently, having a learning goal orientation has also been connected to several proactive behaviours, including individual innovations – “perhaps not surprising given the high degree of effort, persistence, and recovery from setbacks that is required for proactive action” (Parker and Collins, 2010).

Practical implications

In terms of practical implications, the findings of this study may assist innovation efforts taking place both within established organizations as well as in an entrepreneurial context by both demonstrating the need for pervasive idea advancement behaviour and revealing several antecedents required for such behaviour to be initiated and sustained. Indeed, the study clearly illustrates the need to focus on micro-level, grass root level proactive efforts in advancement of ideas and concepts. Organizations can end up producing high quality ideas that are never acted on, while entrepreneurs may fail to carry out business ideas to realization. Systematic procedures may fail to address the dynamics of the transition of ideas from generation to implementation, and focusing on prominent idea and product champions can overshadow equally important collective grass root level advancement activities by contributors all across the line. The study helps organizations and innovation leaders better comprehend that idea advancement dynamics and tactics aimed at teammates, co-workers, customers and other stakeholders are essential for supporting the development of ideas to innovations and overcoming organizational inertia at different levels. The findings underline the importance of supporting the activities of contributors across the line rather than merely focusing on the identification and supporting the efforts of particular product and idea champions. In fact, local inefficiency might be required in order to achieve overall effectiveness, as while development benefitted from autonomy and could advance at a faster pace when limited to a smaller circle, ultimate success depended on persuading other organizational members and outside-organization stakeholders. While no clear-cut successful heuristics could be identified regarding the appropriate degree of inclusion, face-to-face communication was perceived as the most effective communication channel. Thus, contributors should be allowed to have sufficient time and opportunities for discussing their projects with non-project members to receive feedback from their peers. This means allowing enough slack time for project members to interact with their colleagues related to projects that they themselves are not officially engaged in.

In fact, the present study outlines several critical antecedents and practices associated with successful idea advancement behaviour. First of all, time distribution seemed to be even more critical than the total amount of time available. The opportunity to concentrate most of one's working time on a single development project was a crucial enabling factor for the successful advancement of the project. Second, switches in the driving force were seen as necessary, advising against allocating excessively long periods in one project or relying on a single person to act as the primus motor within a development team. Although necessary, these switches may however require special attention to ensure that the development efforts do not dissipate when there are changes in the people involved

in the development. Third, the importance of the development target had a strong influence on engaging in advancement efforts and the perception of importance was formed mainly through the interest expressed by peers and management. On the other hand, showcases and other forms of making ideas more concrete were crucial tactic in attracting resources and commitment from other stakeholders, Finally, autonomy and trust signaled by a lack of excessively strict control and surveillance were regarded highly positive and important. Thus, there is a delicate balance to be sought between freedom and control. Management needs to pay attention to projects thus signaling interest, but avoid giving an impression of keeping a close eye because of mistrust. Therefore, unofficial and informal ways of following the progress of projects combined with sufficient, but minimum amount of formal supervision would seem to be a valid approach in terms of encouraging proactive advancement of ideas.

Limitations of the study

While the present research succeeded in illuminating some of the dynamics of idea advancement, there are some obvious limitations that should be taken into account. The amount of interviewees was fairly small and represented a single organizational setting. Some specific organizational aspects, such as the high level of autonomy of the interviewees, likely had an effect on which antecedents and behaviours of idea advancement were portrayed as significant. Different results might be obtained in dissimilar organizational settings, such as more controlled environments or in an entrepreneurial context where development takes place within a smaller official group with significantly less established organizational structures. In addition, as all of the interviewees were male and represented the same nationality, cultural and gender factors might affect the advancement behaviours and motivations of the contributors in other contexts. Furthermore, the retrospective nature of the interviews limited the level of detail especially in relation to the idea advancement behaviour realized as practices and concrete activities. While hindsight offered the advantage of an improved overall picture of the situation, providing a solid basis for investigating perceptions of enablers and hindrances, further longitudinal empirical research and observations are needed to explore the concrete activities taking place in idea advancement and the practices that are utilized in different settings. Nevertheless, regardless of the limitations, the study provides important insights into the often hazy dynamics, antecedents and practices of idea advancement in innovation, which have relevance beyond the specific organizational setting and context of the study. The discussed issues and phenomena exist regardless of the amount of personnel or the extent to which established organizational structures are in place, even though their extent and relative importance may vary.

Conclusions

This paper presented a study of a specific type of proactive behaviour in innovation, namely idea advancement efforts at the grass root level, investigating the antecedents and practices of idea advancement at a large international technology development organization by investigating two distinct development projects. The results revealed that significant advancement efforts took place in both the successful and stalling development project, and the type and amount of advancement efforts were perceived as a major contributor towards the overall accomplishments of the two projects. Idea advancement was described as a self-directed, persistent activity that all project members engaged in. Successful overall product idea advancement was the result of an interplay between the efforts of a number of people, and the primus motor of advancement changed between different phases. Key antecedents were found on three distinct levels, namely related to the personal, interpersonal and work organization context of the idea. While personal antecedents, such as the value of the idea to the advancer, grit and courage, were most numerous, differences in the interpersonal and work organization antecedents were more marked between successful and unsuccessful efforts. The results thus suggest that while personal antecedents are necessary for the initiation of idea advancement behaviour, the organizational context such as the reactions of others and work distribution, largely determines whether these efforts are sustained and ultimately whether they are successful. Key advancement practices, in turn, were all related to collaboration issues, such as the inclusion of different stakeholders with various opportunities to contribute, giving credit, personal communication and persuasion through concretization.

While passive and reactive behaviours still dominate research, the present study contributes towards understanding the type of active contribution that is especially important in uncertain environments and fuzzy front-end conditions where the most effective behaviours cannot be defined in advance – in other words, the arena of entrepreneurship. Overall, the nature of idea advancement was in line with proactive behaviour, defined as anticipatory, self-initiated, change causing action. Conceptualizing idea advancement behaviour as actions targeted at gaining and sustaining resources for developing and implementing generated innovative ideas leads to a more detailed, grass-root level understanding of how ideas are turned into innovations, compared to focusing on the role of more long term individual idea champions. The results highlight the significance and pervasiveness of advancement behaviour in innovation, and the type of distribution of time, communication of value and appreciation, and grit that sustaining such efforts require. The findings also cautions against over-emphasizing efficiency, as the inclusion of various stakeholders often resulted in local resource inefficiency but significantly increased overall effectiveness of the innovation projects.

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