Improving Diversity and Engagement through the Wild West Challenge
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A word on where we started

In 2016, Willis Towers Watson was formed with the merger of UK-based Willis and US-based Towers Watson. As with any large merger, this raised challenges and opportunities. One such opportunity was to conduct a review of innovation across the newly-combined organization. The resulting analysis showed that very few colleagues were involved in innovation and the pipeline of ideas was not so much flowing as it was slowly trickling.

To add to this, the employee engagement survey showed that colleagues did not see the company as particularly innovative and thought that more time and effort should be dedicated to developing new, cutting-edge solutions for clients.

The good news was that many colleagues expressed a passion for being more innovative and were interested in collaborating with each other across lines of business. Therefore, our problem to solve was how to better engage colleagues in innovation.

In 2017, the new Head of Innovation, Karen O’Leonard, worked with the firm’s Operating Committee and leaders across the company to reset innovation priorities, with colleague engagement at the heart of the new approach.

Some quick progress

Over the first year, the corporate innovation team focused on reinvigorating innovation – finding out what had worked (and what hadn’t) in the past, experimenting with different approaches, and learning lessons along the way. One effort involved using the Planbox idea management platform to expand access to colleagues across the globe. In addition, for the first time, we provided colleagues with the ability to vote on ideas, so even if they did not want to submit an idea, they could still have a say in the ideas the firm would pursue.

The results were largely positive – with a huge uptick in colleague contributions to innovation – more than 10 times higher than the year before. The number of ideas submitted was also three times higher than the prior year. The innovation challenges, hackathons, sprints, and other programs were engaging more colleagues than ever before, and leadership was excited by the new flow of ideas.

But some worrying underlying data emerged

Despite this early success, the innovation team was not complacent. When analyzing data on the innovation programs, a significant issue surfaced. Programs such as hackathons and ideation workshops, where participants were chosen by the innovation team or business leaders, had good diversity of participants. But in broader-based idea challenges, where colleagues were invited to submit their ideas individually, roughly 75% of ideas came from men and there was a strong bias towards more senior colleagues.

The innovation team was acutely aware that to get the best ideas out of the company, far more diversity was needed. As such, the team set out to do some research, working on a few hypotheses as what was inhibiting better representation from across the company.
• **Hypothesis 1: Individualized idea challenges are less compelling to women.**

Research on gender differences in entrepreneurship and risk-taking shows that men are far more likely than women to participate in competitions, such as innovation challenges. In addition, women are less likely to risk failure as individuals, such as submitting an idea individually to an innovation challenge. A team-based approach may be needed to make more women comfortable in taking risks in submitting ideas.

• **Hypothesis 2: An overly professional or “corporate” tone of communications does not resonate with younger, early-career colleagues.**

At Willis Towers Watson, our normal communications are very polished and professional in tone, yet for many younger colleagues, corporate culture can be off-putting. A more relaxed and fun approach to innovation might entice more young people to participate.

• **Hypothesis 3: The type of award offered in an innovation program impacts the types of colleagues participating.**

Over the course of 2017, the team had run several types of challenges with different rewards ranging in monetary value from $500 to $20,000. They also ran programs offering no monetary reward but with widespread recognition and the ability to take time off from one’s job to prototype and test the concept. The type of reward did not seem to affect diversity in terms of the percentage of women or younger colleagues participating.

**Experimenting with a team-based challenge**

Armed with these hypotheses, the team set out to try a new approach to an idea challenge in early 2018. The program was targeted to all colleagues in the U.S Western region. The corporate innovation team partnered with Maureen Tarantello, leader of the West region, and Mike Fox, market leader for Southern California/Southwest, to develop a challenge that would encourage a wide spectrum of colleagues to participate in generating ideas aligned with three key themes:

- **Client Service:** Solutions designed to improve the way we serve our clients.
- **Sales/Business Development:** Solutions designed to improve sales or develop new markets or prospects.
- **Improving Efficiency:** Non-client-facing solutions designed to cut costs, save time or improve profitability.

We decided to make this a team-based challenge and to encourage diversity within the teams – colleagues from different legacy companies, offices, job levels, age, tenure, gender and just plain different perspectives. To incentivize the team approach, we announced that extra weight would be given to more diverse teams when evaluating ideas. It was up to colleagues, however, how they wanted to organize themselves.

**Making it fun**

To make the challenge more open and accessible to colleagues, a lot of thought went into the communications and branding. We decided to abandon our typical corporate style guidelines in favor of something new. Hence, the “Wild West” Challenge was born. Maureen “Marshal” Tarantello presided over the challenge, even sending a voice message to all
colleagues in her best Texas drawl. Teams (or posses) were invited to submit photos and many did so in their Wild West attire. Throughout the challenge, leaders encouraged participation through regular communications, including significant efforts in local offices to ensure that everyone felt involved. (See below for examples of the communications and photos submitted.)

Exhibit 1: Example team photos
Exhibit 2: Example communication

Once Upon a Time...In the WTW West

Our leaders out West, led by a marshal named Taranrello, have commenced on a hunt for the most innovative ideas, and they’ve set a bounty of up to $1,000 per cowboy/cowgirl, up to a maximum of $4,000 per posse, for the winning ideas.

It’s the Wild West Innovation Challenge, and it begins today.

Requirements
1. Form a posse (Posses that are diverse have a natural advantage.)
2. Innovate (The West is vast and grand, so think like a Westerner! All ideas big, small and WILD are welcome.)
3. Make sure your innovation falls into one of these categories:
   a. Client service
   b. Sales/business development (improving sales or markets, not creating new products)
   c. Improving efficiency

Marchal Taranrello will see that the finalists meet up at a far corner in the Northwest Territory (aka Seattle) to receive their fair share of the bounty.

The deadline is April 19.
Learn more about joining this challenge on our Innovate site.

To sign in, click on the SSO button on the left if you have a Willis Towers Watson email address. You must be on the WTW network for the SSO to work.
Email wtw.corporate.innovation@willistowerswatson.com for help.
The result: A diverse set of cowboys and cowgirls

By all measures, the Wild West Challenge was one heck of a rodeo. In total, 187 colleagues participated, representing all four of our business segments. Fifty-seven percent of participants were women, and participants came from every job level and role in the organization.

Of the finalist teams chosen to pitch their ideas to the West region leadership, 9 of the 14 team members were women, and more than a third were in early career roles. See below for photos of the finalist teams.

The chart below shows several key metrics of the Wild West Challenge compared with an all-colleague innovation challenge conducted in 2017, which was open to individual idea submitters and had a "corporate" tone. The data clearly demonstrates the Wild West Challenge’s higher representation of women and early-career colleagues.

Exhibit 3: Comparison of Diversity Metrics

Importantly, the Wild West Challenge engaged many colleagues who had never participated in an innovation program before. Darla Ashe, an analyst in San Diego and a member of one of the winning teams, said that the experience helped her come out of her comfort zone to share her ideas with leadership. She describes it this way:

“I’m a pretty shy person and wouldn’t normally have participated, but my teammate was instrumental in asking me to be on her team, and that helped me share my ideas.”

Another Wild West participant, Patty Walsh, an administrative assistant in Dallas, attributed her participation to the tone of the communications:

“To be honest, I have been too intimidated to enter past innovation programs. The Wild West Innovation Challenge, on the other hand, being a regional challenge, was very compelling… the fun and friendly tone gave me the courage to give it a shot.”
These comments supported the numbers and reinforced the notion that this type of team-based challenge with a fun theme would bring out new ideas and engage colleagues who wouldn’t have otherwise participated.

Exhibit 4: Finalist teams
Diversity leads to better ideas

The West region leadership team was impressed with the teams and their ideas, selecting four to move forward. To ensure that these projects are quickly shepherded through the next phase of the innovation process, the teams will be accompanied by a senior business sponsor, with coaching and guidance from the corporate innovation team. Beyond the recognition, accolades, and fun experience, it is vital that colleagues see the results of their efforts. One of the winning team members put it this way:

“One of the most valuable parts of the experience is that my team and I now have an amazing opportunity to make a positive impact on WTW colleagues all over the world!”

Speaking after the finalist event, “Marshal” Maureen Tarantello, said, “The Wild West Innovation Challenge exceeded our wildest expectations – with the number of posses submitting ideas, the quality and diversity of the ideas, and the energy and enthusiasm generated. I couldn’t be prouder of the quality and thoughtfulness of the ideas. I issued the challenge to all our cowboys and cowgirls, and, wow, did they respond!”

Meanwhile, participants commented on how much fun the process had been and many are already planning how they could use this experience to contribute ideas to improving our business in the future.

For innovation across Willis Towers Watson, these lessons will be captured and implemented more broadly. It was clear that the program was successful due to a number of factors:

- A strong partnership between corporate innovation and business leaders. This program required a degree of trust and collaboration to test a new, experimental approach.

- Active engagement from local leaders. In many cases, colleagues responded to the encouragement from their local leaders, with whom they are more familiar than regional or corporate leaders.

- Small, diverse teams working collaboratively on ideas. Three of the four finalist teams had members spanning several levels in the organization, two had team members in different cities, and all teams had a good mix of colleagues in terms of job roles, tenure, and gender.

- Fun and engaging communications and branding. The Wild West theme, the ability for teams to upload photos, and fun communications all helped to make the program feel very accessible to colleagues.

One of the finalists summed it up best by saying:

“I learned that being courageous and going outside of my comfort zone can really pay off, and that team collaboration can make all the difference.

Karen O’Leonard reflected that teamwork is one of Willis Towers Watson’s core values, so perhaps it is entirely appropriate – and no surprise at all – that teamwork is also the key to better engaging colleagues across the company in innovation. The Wild West Challenge in itself is only one innovation program, but it has demonstrated that it is possible to break the mould and find new ways of engaging a wide spectrum of colleagues in innovation.