Kent Academic Repository

THE POTENTIAL OF WEB-BASED SUGGESTION SCHEMES IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

Ursula Fuller, Cornelia Helbling and Roger Cooley
University of Kent at Canterbury
Canterbury, Kent, UK

1 1   Introduction

Suggestion schemes have a long history in both public and private sectors, yet they have never become established in British universities. This paper discusses the benefits that could accrue to higher education institutions (HEIs) from the adoption of institution-wide suggestion schemes and examines the drivers that may lead them to do so. It reviews a number of designs for information systems to support suggestion schemes, identifying the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

This paper is based on fieldwork in the UK, involving a survey of HEIs and a series of extended interviews with suggestion scheme managers in a range of private and public sector organisations. The survey established that there is a very low incidence of suggestion schemes in higher education but that interest in setting up such schemes is increasing. The study of existing schemes in other sectors showed that they are used as

- • a source of innovative ideas,

- • a means of collecting market and customer information,

- • a channel of communication from operational level employees to their managers.

It also draws on a pilot study at the University of Kent in Spring 2000 in which a web-based suggestion scheme, open to both students and staff, was operated for a period of one month.

2 2   Suggestion Schemes

A suggestion scheme can be defined as 'a formal mechanism, which encourages employees to contribute constructive ideas for improving their organisation' (Dunn and Lloyd, 1997). In its simplest form, a suggestion scheme will elicit suggestions from employees, classify them, and dispatch them to 'experts' for evaluation. If the suggestion is adopted the suggester normally receives a reward. Some schemes also provide token rewards for unsuccessful suggestions. Our fieldwork shows that the majority of suggestions come from operational level employees and are aimed at modifying and improving the rules governing standardised work processes.

Suggestion schemes have been adopted in both private and public sectors. In the private sector, the motives include the desire to increase profits, reduce costs, enhance staff morale and improve staff retention (IdeasUK, 2001). In the public sector, schemes are encouraged by the UK Government as a way of improving responsiveness to the public, and as a means of facilitating innovation and service improvements.

3 3   Suggestion Schemes and Higher Education

Over the past ten years, higher education in the UK has had to face the challenge of a huge rise in student numbers, declining unit resource, global competition and ever greater demands

for accountability. Its traditional stakeholders (students, businesses, Government) increasingly see themselves as customers. As a result, universities now have to perceive themselves as customer-focussed, multi-million pound businesses rather than collegial communities of scholars (Dobson and McNay, 1996).

The culture of universities has always been characterised by freedom and tenure, almost autonomous academic departments and committee-based communication and decision-making. In theory, all members of the community were free to put forward ideas through the committee structures. Quality was delivered through the innate desire of individuals to do their best, rather than through standardised procedures. This was not an environment in which institution-wide suggestion schemes could flourish, and our survey of UK HEIs revealed that only about 7% had a suggestion scheme of any sort in 2000.

The external pressures on universities to improve the quality of their provision, coupled with ever-increasing financial stringency, has led to far greater codification of procedures and a greater desire to disseminate good practice than ever before. As a result, the working practices in academia are now much closer to those in the organisations studied in our fieldwork. It is therefore not surprising that our survey revealed that nearly 25% of our responding institutions were considering implementing a scheme in the near future.

One of the issues facing our pilot study was who should be allowed to participate. The position of students in a university comes somewhere between employees and external customers. We included them, and discovered that this tended to generate 'suggestions' that were closer to complaints or discussion of previously submitted ideas.

4 4 Suggestion Schemes as Information Systems

The suggestion schemes studied in our fieldwork all took the form of partially or wholly automated information systems. The lowest level of automation consisted of storing suggestions in a database that was only accessible to the scheme administrators. The second level gave online access to suggestion evaluators and scheme managers, but not to the suggesters themselves. At this level, communication between the scheme administrators and the evaluators was via email, and reminders and acknowledgements were generated automatically. The highest level of automation allowed all staff to access the database of suggestions via the corporate intranet. This allowed potential suggesters to see what suggestions had been made in the past and by whom, and enabled current suggesters to monitor the progress of their suggestions. It was clear from our interviews with scheme managers that this highest level of automation enabled organisations to gain considerably more benefit from their schemes than would otherwise have been the case. The publicly available database of suggestions formed a knowledge base that encouraged other suggestions and raised their quality (and hence their value to the organisation). In addition, senior management could analyse the suggestions to see which departments were particularly active in seeking improvements to their working practices.

5 5 Conclusions

A wide range of public and private sector organisations find that suggestion schemes are of benefit to them in increasing profits, cutting costs and generating the innovations needed to keep them competitive. Although rare in universities in the past, the challenges now facing HEIs means that they are increasingly likely to wish to set up suggestion schemes as a way of reducing costs, improving procedures and disseminating good practice. This paper has described three approaches to designing information systems to support suggestion schemes, and has concluded that a web-based approach available to all potential suggesters (and

consistent with universities' moves to intranet-based administration) is likely to maximise the benefits to be gained from a suggestion scheme.

References

Dobson, S and McHay, I (1996), 'Organisational Culture' in D.Warner and D.Palfreyman (eds), *Higher Education Management: The Key Elements,* Ballmoor: SRHE and Open University Press.

Dunn, A and Lloyd, G (1997). *Suggestion schemes – the management tools for the 90's,* London: MBA Publishing.

IdeasUK (2001), IdeasUK *Annual Survey* http://www.ideasuk.com