thewhitepaper

How Firstsource fosters excellence through innovation programs

The importance of cultivating an innovative mindset in a business environment

Introduction

Future-ready organizations standing out as leaders have one common factor: **Innovation**. No matter the industry or current standing, an organization cannot expect to maintain a competitive edge if innovation is not part of their overall business strategy.

Being in an ever-changing business environment, and catering to clients across multiple industries, Firstsource's goal was to nurture an innovation mindset and culture within the company. They wanted to challenge the status quo; question stereotypes and leverage the collective intelligence of employees to create new pathways.

The company set out to introduce innovation programs within the organization that would act as a catalyst — allowing new ideas to emerge and thrive in a dynamic business environment. Innovation-led transformation can enhance capabilities and allow teams to conceptualize, create and execute pioneering solutions for their clients.

Firstsource Solutions Limited, an RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group company is a leading provider of business process solutions spanning the customer lifecycle across Healthcare, Banking and Financial Services, Communications, Media and Technology and diversified industries. With an established presence in the US, the UK, India, Mexico and the Philippines, Firstsource acts as a trusted growth partner for over 150 leading global brands, including several Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 companies.

Firstsource services and offerings are mapped to a mindset of continuous evolution and innovation, enabling them to meet the demands of a dynamic business environment and helping clients simplify complex business operations. The company leverages Intelligent Automation — a combination of Robotic Process Automation (RPA), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Analytics, Machine Learning (ML), and Natural Language Processing (NLP) to create more personalized experiences for customers across the business lifecycle and achieve better business outcomes for their clients.

A holistic approach to nurturing innovation

In an effort to create a culture of innovation and continuous improvement across the organization, Firstsource's Process Excellence (PE) team crafted a program called INDEX - Innovation and Digital Excellence.

Under INDEX, there are a host of strategic initiatives that have helped Firstsource bring about a mindset shift towards innovation and excellence within the organization.

Index Learning

To equip the employees with digital, critical problem solving, creative imagination, and operational excellence skills and mindset.

Hackathon

To drive a culture of solving 'big rock' business problems through a customer-focused, iterative, prototype-driven, digital-first solutioning approach.

Idea Hackathon

To improve transparency and speed of idea evaluation and implementation through time-bound, theme-based idea generation drives.

Ideasource

To journal and channel unbridled ideas for innovation-at-large with an open canvas.

Culture Development

To cultivate a culture of curiosity, openness and recognition; enabling exploration and development of new-age digital tools, furthering remote collaboration.

Three of these five strategic endeavors — Hackathon, Idea Hackathon and Idea Source, are termed *Idea Management* – as they harness the power of people to ideate and innovate from the ground up. They plug into the employee's in-depth knowledge of businesses and customer pain points to design reimagined solutions. Crowdsourcing of ideas from the employees and rewarding idea generators serve as effective means to unlock collective intelligence in solving complex business challenges.

The following sections of this whitepaper give an in-depth account of two of the initiatives under INDEX program — **Hackathon** and **Idea Hackathon** which have brought about enormous benefits for Firstsource within a very short span of time.

The Benefits

Idea Management initiatives like Hackathons and Idea Hackathons are critical in Firstsource, and these kinds of initiatives when implemented can be extremely beneficial for any business that wants to accelerate organization growth and drive excellence.

The benefits include:

Getting access to knowledge from the frontline of the organization

Idea management empowers leaders with the ability to efficiently tap into knowledge from all levels of the organization. Frontline employees are the ones who interact with customers and execute day-to-day strategy, so they have a wealth of untapped knowledge that can be effectively utilized to accelerate organizational growth.

Increasing employee engagement and supporting a culture of innovation

Effective idea management platforms increase employee engagement by giving people a medium to contribute ideas and help improve business processes and performance. Besides, they promote knowledge-sharing to give employees a never-seen-before look at the innovation process and best practices from departments across the company. It encourages a bottom-up innovation in the organization.
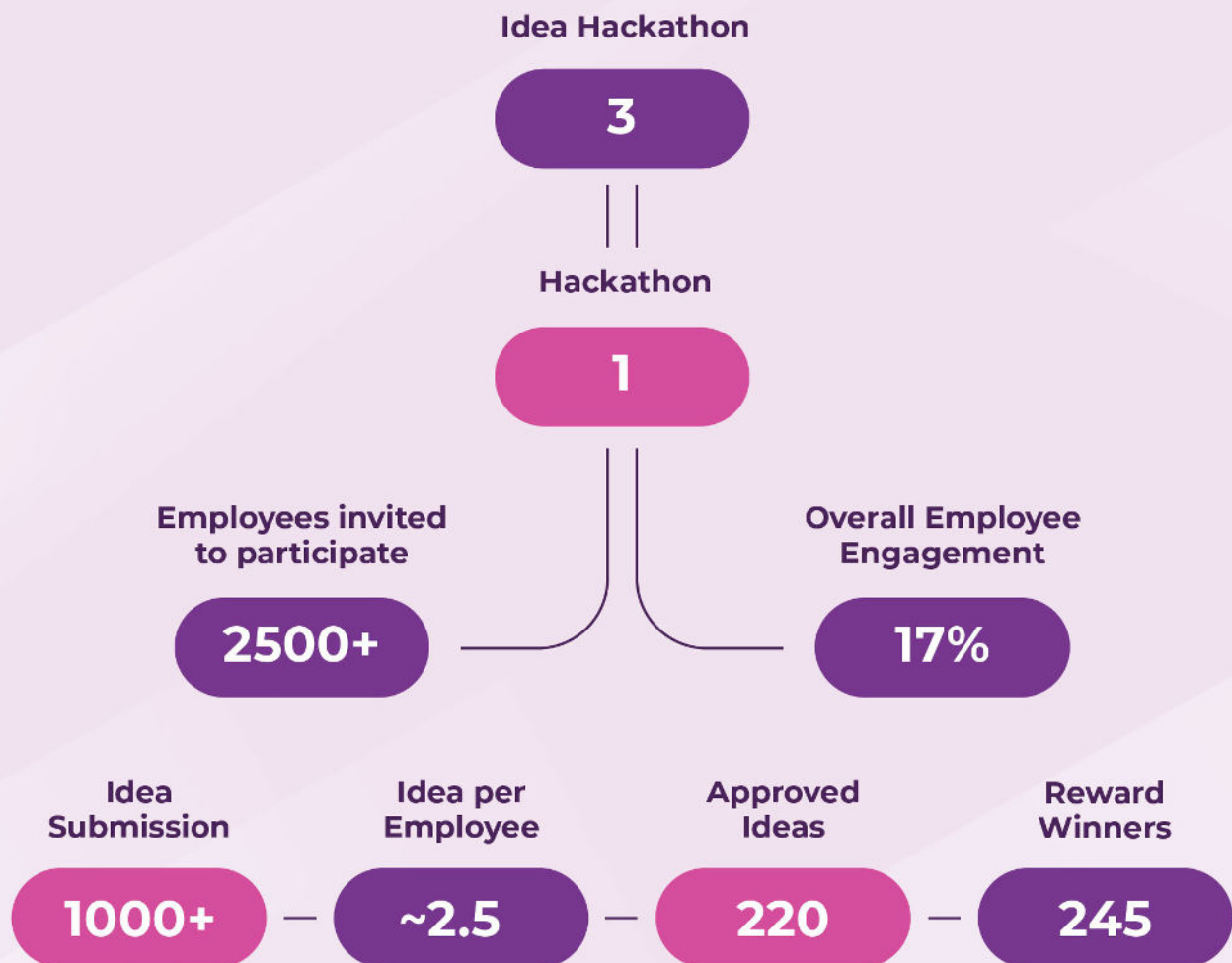
Helping to accurately measure and track innovation ROI

Effectively managed idea generation programs help track the ROI of the innovation pipeline and determine which innovation can be progressed further for development and commercialization.

Till now, Firstsource has conducted three Idea Hackathons on themes like:

1. *Net Promoter Score Improvement*
2. *Cycle Time and Average Customer Handling Time (ACHT) Reduction*
3. *Onboarding Experience and Quality Improvement*

A Hackathon has been run around the theme 'Team Leader - Associate' connect. All of them have contributed to improved service-level agreement (SLA) performance, better customer and employee satisfaction, as well as cost optimization.

Idea Hackathon

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Hackathon

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Employees invited to participate

2500+

Overall Employee Engagement

17%

Idea Submission	Idea per Employee	Approved Ideas	Reward Winners
1000+	**~2.5**	**220**	**245**

Driving innovation with Idea Hackathon

The Idea Hackathon pilot program was initiated to catalyze idea generation. The thought process behind the theme-based ideation challenge was simple: **ask the right questions to the right set of people to get the right thinking.**

The pilot program was run across four processes in a time-bound manner. About 590 associates, with their first-hand, 'in the trenches' knowledge, were chosen to give wings to this initiative.

The themes or problem statements identified for each of the processes were: **Net Promoter Score (NPS) Improvement, Cycle Time Reduction and Average Customer Handling Time (ACHT) Reduction** for clients operating in the energy and utility space. 118 employees (about 20% of the target audience) participated and 337 ideas were generated.

These ideas were evaluated by relevant teams and the average time taken for the evaluation of ideas was about five days. Interestingly, of the 337 ideas, 149 ideas were approved, indicating that **nearly 46% of ideas had the potential to be developed further.**

To encourage participation and appreciate the efforts of participants, Idea Hackathon also had a robust Rewards and Recognition (R&R) framework weaved into it. Participants had the opportunity to win in several award categories such as Fastest Fingers First, Star Ideators, Innovation Wizard, Ideas Champion and Most Innovative Team.

The winners in each category were rewarded using **FirstReward**, a cloud-based employee benefits and engagement platform for automated rewarding, on-spot recognition, peer-to-peer recognition etc. Points awarded to employees can be redeemed in the form of vouchers/gifts.

The Launch of Hackathon 1.0

From Facebook to PayPal, Microsoft to Chevrolet —**the biggest brands in the world conduct Hackathons to build an engaged workforce and foster an innovation culture**. In its earliest form, Hackathon was a social coding event that brought computer programmers and others involved in software development to collaborate intensively and create functioning software.

Hackathons have since acquired a broader meaning and form. **Now, it's an event of any duration where people come together to solve problems through ideation and prototyping.**

Following the successful pilot of Idea Hackathon, Firstsource launched Hackathon 1.0 in partnership with **Amazon's AWS** and **Ideawake** – a new-age collaborative Idea Management platform.

Hackathon 1.0 was organized for team leaders/ supervisors across businesses and geographies. As team leaders typically offer guidance, direction and leadership to associates, Firstsource urged them to draw on these qualities to evaluate and understand the problems that come in the way of *Team Leader-Associate Connect*. They were asked to share ideas to **design a new hybrid workplace experience and reimagine the entire working relationship model to inspire growth, ingenuity, and collaboration.**

To encourage ideas from the team leaders on how they can foster better connections with associates, **six challenge questions/guiding statements were presented to the team leaders.**

The questions were framed as **"How Might We" (HMW)** statements — concise but powerful questions that allow **reframing of insights into opportunity areas and innovation on problems found during research**.

The challenge statements around the Team Leader-Associate Connect were:

→ In a hybrid work environment, how might we **ensure TLs can spend more time meaningfully engaging with their associates?**

→ How might we continue to **foster purposeful collaboration between associates** in a hybrid working environment?

→ How might we **set up an open information network for our associates to seamlessly collaborate with people**, seek support, and share knowledge across the organization?

→ How might we **create a self-directed continuous learning experience** to enable teams to take charge of their own learning/development needs?

→ How might we **create an open, honest and transparent culture** where associates can discuss difficult issues and share honest opinions?

→ What kind of engagement and response would **make the associate feel comfortable voicing their opinion and issues** without fear of being judged?

# The Process of Hackathon 1.0

To convey the overarching objectives and expected outcomes of the Hackathon, roadshows were organized across Firstsource offices.

Amazon workshops were held for shortlisted Team Leaders to help overcome common roadblocks from a thinking/technology standpoint. Firstsource's internal portal was leveraged to encourage maximum people participation.

The entire Hackathon 1.0 event was conducted online on Ideawake's platform. The selection of the ideas was done in the following way:

→ Within **five days** of launch, **300 ideas** were received

→ Next, the **Process Excellence team screened ideas** to check if they were in line with the challenge statements and met idea submission guidelines

→ **Out of 300 submissions, the top 50 ideas were shortlisted** based on idea evaluation scoring criteria and were then made open for crowd-voting on the Ideawake platform

→ Based on **crowd-voting results combined with evaluation team's ratings, the top 10 ideas were selected**

→ **Hackathon teams were created for the top 10 ideas**, with five members in each team, including one person from technology. The teams worked on developing their ideas in detail and prototyping them

Amazon Web Services (AWS) helped the participating teams to bring their ideas to life through The Working Backwards workshop led by the Head of Digital Innovation from AWS.
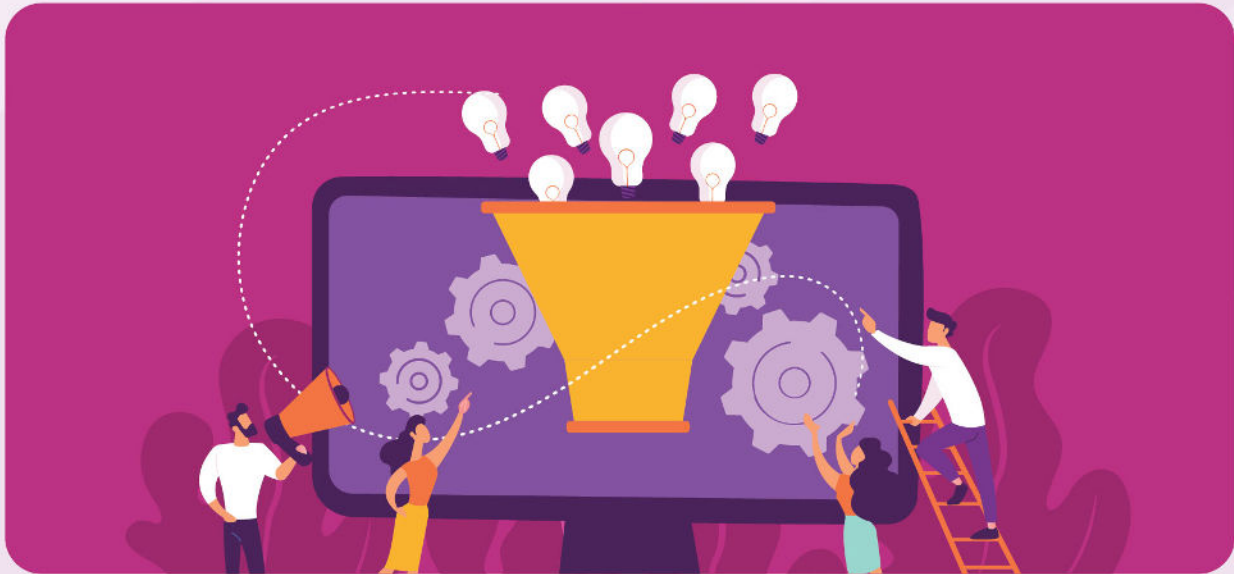
How it works

Working Backwards is Amazon's typical mechanism for innovation. Typically, Amazon starts by identifying an end customer, and their problem or opportunity. Then, continuing the Working Backwards process, they define a new solution that meets that customer's most pressing need. Next, they bring the idea to life in a future Press Release and Frequently Asked Questions document (PR-FAQ) which helps to get into the detailed granularity of the solution. After this, prototypes are built as needed to further validate and refine the concept.

During the four-hour session, Amazon applied the same formula to help our top 10 teams to define and polish their ideas. AWS also shared their perspectives on customer-centric innovation, and human-centred principles and exclusive Amazon-developed techniques.

The **ten refined ideas were presented at the final Hackathon** event held for three consecutive days.

Judging Criteria

The judges evaluated ideas and declared the top three winners based on criteria of desirability, viability and feasibility.

Desirability: 'Desirability' tests the creative, novel and innovative aspects of the ideas, and if the expected outcome is well-articulated and will address the challenge.

Viability: 'Viability' tests the time taken to implement and if the idea can be scaled and replicated across regions and business units and is aligned with the business priorities.

Feasibility : 'Feasibility' tests whether the idea can be practically implemented and if the value chain would serve for long-term sustainability. The idea should also have clearly articulated assumptions and constraints.

THE WINNING IDEAS

At the end of an exciting event that generated 401 ideas– three winning ideas were selected for implementation and each team was awarded INR 1 lakh.

- **Easy Travel App:** An App enabling employees to make their own transport arrangements, eliminating dependencies on Team Leads.

- **First Share:** A web-based all-in-one platform for sharing best practices across the company.

- **Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence (VIKI):** A chatbot to help Firstsourcers resolve their system issues in just one click.

An avenue for blue-sky thinking with Ideasource

Riding on the success of these two initiatives, Firstsource is currently focused on making ideation a day-to-day behaviour using Ideasource. An avenue for blue-sky thinking, Ideasource is a space wherein people can journal their ideas and brainstorm without boundaries.

Unlike Idea Hackathon and Hackathon 1.0, in Ideasource there are no themes or challenge statements and people can ideate on anything like Process Improvements, New Business Ideas, Employee Morale and Productivity, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Impact Sourcing, Inclusion and Diversity, and much more.

A model for nurturing innovation

Innovation is about action - transforming ideas/concepts into reality as part of organizational culture - turning business as usual into innovation as usual.

The ideation initiatives conducted at Firstsource have moved innovation from only a a buzzword to an action that consistently and continuously, addresses challenges and complexities within the organization.
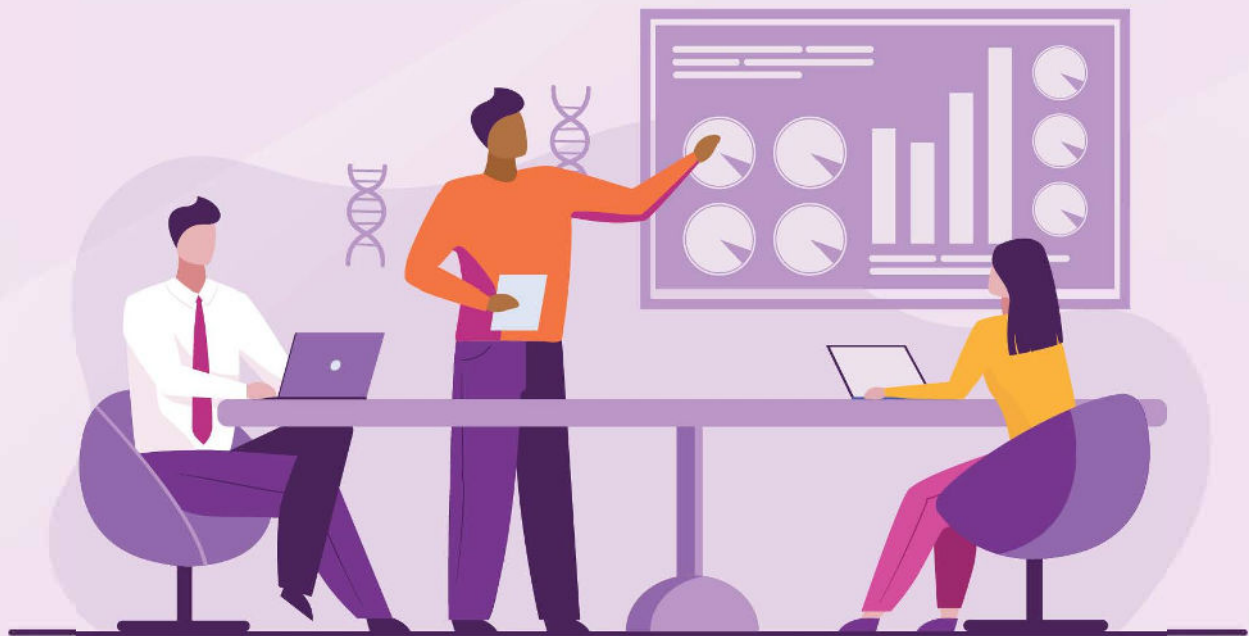
By supporting creative thinking, the Idea Management initiatives are driving a mindset of change and embedding innovation into Firstsource's DNA. They are not only serving as an employee engagement tool but also strengthening Firstsource's people-first and innovation-led culture.

EMPLOYEE TESTIMONIALS

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I think having the opportunity to share my ideas for improvement is great! Thank you for letting me have the opportunity to share my thoughts on an open forum! I hope that they come in handy.

*- **Bailey Schmidt**, Trainer - Service Excellence, Firstsource*

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The Theme Based Idea Generation created a buzz and momentum and opened great discussions within the advisor population resulting in great ideas and solutions that we can build on to help Net Promoter Score (NPS) and member satisfaction. The buy in from some teams and individual advisors were exceptional and their input was recognized through the good Rewards and Recognition incentives. I was pleased to participate in this project due to the manner it was run by all involved.

*- **Damian Carolan**, DGM – Operations, Firstsource*

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Take a bow! What passion! How brilliantly designed and flawlessly executed. To me this (Hackathon) also proves when we are solving problems for any group - we need to be applying design thinking which means co-creating with them. No design of engagement can ever be successful without engaging the end user.

*- **Shuchika Sahay** – Chief Human Resources Officer, Firstsource*

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> *This is a brilliant initiative; the theme-based idea generation has been very well received by all in the team. This approach has resulted in some valuable insight towards improving Net Promoter Score (NPS). Aside from the structure of the program, it has been passionately driven by the program leads and has made a difference in engagement. The teams are looking forward to this approach for future challenges.*
>
> **- Vivek Irudayaraj,** *SVP – Operations, Firstsource*

> *There are so many companies out there that do not give their employees a voice unless they are in upper management and I'm so glad that Firstsource isn't like that. I am so grateful to be able to share my ideas and know that they matter. I am very grateful for the fact that my idea was one of the chosen ones. I'm so happy to be a part of a company where I feel valued and am proud to work for.*
>
> **- Andrea Tietjen**, *Trainer - Service Excellence, Firstsource*

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