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Problems when implementing innovation teams

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Abstract: This research explores problems occurring when practitioners use a research-based methodology regarding how to create high-performing innovation teams, namely the CIT-process, which has not been used by practitioners before. The CIT-process is recommended to be used prior to the ideation phase, which otherwise is considered to be the first phase in the innovation process. The CIT-process is a five-step process in which the innovation project kick-off is the final step. Prior steps refer to management commitment and identification and to the preparation of a convener and team members. A consultancy firm was educated and evaluated before organisations were involved, who brought real innovation projects to work on. Three innovation teams were created. Data were collected through observations at team meetings and interviews. Any problems were mainly caused by management that underestimated the value of preparation in innovation work. Scepticism towards the newly developed CIT-process and the practitioners' inexperience with the CIT-process were also addressed as reasons. The need for educational tools was highlighted. Further research is suggested.

Keywords: Innovation team; innovation group; innovation management; multi-disciplinary; X-functional; group development.

1 Problem

Recently, Johnsson (2017) developed a methodology to create innovation teams in order to avoid group-related problems (the CIT-process); this is further demonstrated in the following section. As teams perform better than individuals (e.g., Cordero et al., 1998), the purpose of the new approach was to diminish well-known issues when creating innovation teams, such as poor performance (e.g., Kesting and Ulhöj, 2010) and group-dynamic problems (e.g., Wheelan, 2013), and to support organisations in matching the ever-increasing speed of new products and services being launched on the market (e.g.,

Barczak et al., 2009).

The problem is that the CIT-process has not yet been studied when being used by practitioners, for example, consultants in innovation management. Therefore, this research aims to explore problems that arise when practitioners use this process to support organisations in creating innovation teams. In a parallel study to this, success factors are explored.

2 Current understanding

Processes for creating innovation teams and knowledge about these teams have been developed for decades (e.g., Farris, 1972; Im et al., 2013; McDonough, 2000; McGreevy, 2006; Neuman et al., 1999; Pearce and Ensley; 2004; West, et al., 2004; Zuidema and Kleiner, 1994). However, a similar hands-on guide to Johnsson's (2017) CIT-process has not yet been identified. The process comprises the following five steps. First, ensure top management and sponsor commitment. Johnsson considers this step to be very important, as management has the power to set the direction of innovation work and should do so. Without a clear direction based on a company strategy, the innovation work may be unaligned with the business model. Second, based on the innovation direction set in the first step, an innovation team convener (convener) is identified. A convener is not a project manager but a person who encourages common leadership as a team. A convener strives to keep the agenda up to date and communicate the project's progress with management and sponsor. If management is inexperienced in such work, Johnsson suggests that the work be assisted by an experienced innovation facilitator, further explained in the subsequent section. Third, if the convener is inexperienced in the CIT-process and the innovation work that follows, the convener should be introduced to the innovation process and group dynamic process. This part is significant, as innovation is highly complex work, claimed to range from the creation of the innovation team to market launch (Johnsson, 2018). The group dynamic process is well known (e.g., Tuckmann and Jensen, 1977; Whelan, 2013), during which a group emerges towards a team status through several phases, known as 'forming-storming-norming-performing'. The second phase, storming, is particularly difficult because the team members challenge each other, the overall project, and management, which stalls the expected work. The reason for educating the convener, and later on to the innovation team, is to ease the recognition of potential forthcoming problems. Fourth, the convener begins gathering and introducing four to six team members to the innovation project, with a maximum of seven, who have diverse functionalities and are key persons within their area of competence. Simultaneously, the convener and the potential team members ensure that managers approve participation and are fully committed to the forthcoming project. The fifth and final step is the kick-off. Now the innovation project officially begins, first by establishing the norms of the innovation team and then by setting the goal of the project. In this work, all prior steps are repeated to align all team members with the same mindset. The reason for focusing on the team first is to establish ways of working and to share individual expectations, only then focusing on project goals and achievements. According to Johnsson (2017), conducting the kick-off in this order is fundamental; doing it the other way around will lead to a storming phase.

The innovation facilitator (facilitator), as noted above, is critically important in the case of inexperience in creating innovation teams (Johnsson, 2018). In his work, Johnsson demonstrates that a facilitator's main purpose is to advise and monitor the innovation

team's work, steering the innovation back on track if it drifts away. Because innovation work is complex, a facilitator requires certain skills and abilities. Johnsson highlights 40 characteristics, for example, having the ability to provide hands-on advice, challenge the innovation team when necessary, and keep the innovation team focused on the project, all of which are important in supporting an innovation team in its work.

Further, Johnsson claims that the CIT-process is to be considered part of the innovation process, which otherwise is suggested to begin with an ideation phase (e.g., Adair, 2004; Milton and Rodgers, 2013; Tidd and Bessant, 2013; Trott, 2012). The problem that Johnsson highlights is that an incorrectly created innovation team may waste valuable project time establishing the working roles and direction of innovation work.

However, because the CIT-process was recently developed, it has not yet been adopted or employed by practitioners, which makes research relevant.

3 Research question

What problems, if any, occur when practitioners use the CIT-process to support an organisation in creating innovation teams?

4 Research design

This research was conducted in two steps, covering the pre-phase and the initial steps in the ideation phase of the innovation process.
In the first step, the researcher identified and educated two practitioners on the CIT-process to act as innovation facilitators at their consultancy firm. The practitioners were chosen because they were innovation management professionals certified by the Innovationsledarna, the association of innovation managers in Sweden, which is connected with the International Society for Professional Innovation Management (ISPIM). According to Johnsson (2018), the innovation facilitator plays a particularly important role when creating innovation teams. Therefore, the researcher evaluated the practitioners as part of educating them on the CIT-process. Their innovation-related skills, experience and knowledge were assessed through individual statement-based questionnaires and through audio-recorded and transcribed interviews that lasted about 40 minutes. The statement-based audit, consisting of 40 statements, were based on important aspects for a facilitator to handle, such as, 'I have ability to give hands-on advice', 'I have the ability to support the innovation team without bothering them' and 'I support the entrepreneurial spirit in the innovation team', as suggested by Johnsson (2018). In the interviews, the practitioners answered open-ended questions, such as, 'What experience do you have with the innovation and the group-dynamic processes?', 'Do you understand your role as a facilitator?' and 'Do you feel you have control over the situation?'
In the second step, the practitioners supported six organisations in creating three innovation teams, all with the purpose of conducting real innovation projects. Team A, consisting of four individuals, was created at one of the participating organisations. Two organisations created one interorganisational innovation team: Team B, consisting of 14 individuals. The three remaining organisations also created one interorganisational innovation team: Team C, consisting of six individuals.

Data were collected through recurrent reflective conversations with the facilitators. Furthermore, data were collected through transcribed, audio-recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews with the practitioners and the conveners from all innovation teams approximately one month into the ongoing innovation projects. In the interviews, which lasted about 40 minutes, the respondents were explicitly asked, 'What problems have occurred in your work?', 'Have you had conflicts in the innovation team?' and 'Do you feel that the practitioner has control over the situation?'

The focus of the interviews was to obtain explicit and inexplicit answers in order to reveal problems in the practitioners' use of the CIT-process. The group dynamic process, as suggested, for example, by Wheelan (2013), was used to identify group-dynamic-related problems.

The data from the interviews, based on the structure of the CIT-process and analysed through thematic analysis, were charted by clustering and identifying themes (Boyatzis, 1998).

5 Findings

Three main problems appeared in the data: management commitment, innovation-related knowledge, and lack of implementation tools. These findings were identified through analysing the data, as displayed in the following tables.

Table 1 – Ensure management and sponsor commitment (CIT-process step 1)

What	Problems sorted by function				Effect
	Management	Convener	Facilitator	Team	
Team A – No problems occurred					
Team sponsor left for sick leave	The new team sponsor was not involved in the project.				The team lost its management support
The new sponsor accepted the mission at first, but dropped the project later on.	The project was put on hold despite great results.				The project stopped.
Team B					
Two project owners	Did not manage to recrute team members	The first convener was replaced after a short period of time.		A request for too many team members, resulted in two sub-teams	Long, slow, and "messy" process.
	Difficulties to gather				The steering committee had

	steering committee.				insufficient knowledge and willingness to support the teams
	Too little time to introduce the CIT-process, which led to lack understanding .				The steering committee lack knowledge and willingness to support the teams
A central test environment to the project was closed down.				A feeling of uncertainty about future occurred.	Work slowed down
Unclear direction of innovation project	Steering committee changed direction late in process			Uncertainty of what to work on.	
	The steering committee were not aligned regarding overall project aim, definition of required work, and the definition of innovation.			Uncertainty of what the project was about.	The steering committee created uncertainty instead of a safe environment in the team.
Team C					
Internal skepticism to new methodology					Need of powerful internal work to change mind-set

Table 2 – Identify convener (CIT-process step 2)

What	**Problems sorted by function**				**Effect**
	Management	Convener	Facilitator	Team	
Team A – No problems occurred					
Team B					
Replacement of convener	Unclear directions, insufficient anchoring,				Long and slow process, draining time and energy.

	Bad planning for too long time				Conveners were replaced due to too long process. Uncertainty in team.
Unclear roles in project		Conflicting roles at ordinary work and in the innovation team roles.			Uncertainty in team.
	Time pressure and insufficient anchoring.				Unclear role for facilitator when to hand-over project to client.
Team C – No problems occurred					

Table 3 – Introduce convener to process (CIT-process step 3)

What	**Problems sorted by function**				**Effect**
	Management	Convener	Facilitator	Team	
Team A - No problems occurred					
Team B					
Replacements of conveners	Bad planning, lack knowledge and commitment.				Long and slow process.
Unclear roles	Skepticism to methodology	Lack commitment due to unclear roles	Not convincing enough, not sure about project.	Uncertainties	Practitioners spent extra time to explain and convince involved.
Unfit for project		Initially, there was a convener who acted formally and reported to the financier, which was replaced due to misfit for the task.			Slowed down process
Team C					
Lack knowledge	Did not fully understand CIT-process	The convener did not understand what the			The practitioner had to be consistent to prevent the

		project it would require regarding knowledge and experience			team from derailing from the process

Table 4 – Gather team members (CIT-process step 4)

What	Problems sorted by function				Effect
	Management	Convener	Facilitator	Team	
Team A – No problems occurred					
Team B					
Unclear directions regarding who to involve	Poor communication between managers.		Not allowed to support in selection of team members.		Uncertainties regarding if and when to start project.
Unclear roles	Team members were commanded to participate by management			Members lack knowledge of project and directions	Long, slow, and ”messy” process.
Too many team members	Management involved twice as many team members as advised to.				The practitioners had problems facilitating two team due to not being prepared for that event.
Team C					
					Not really a problem, however it was a slow process to gather team members. Finally, when the team was complete, it was a good fit.

Table 5 – Kick off project (CIT-process step 5)

What	Problems sorted by function, restart				Effect
	Management	Convener	Facilitator	Team	
Team A – No problems occurred					
Team B					

Too many restarts and new information	Poor planning and defining direction and scope of project. Not aligned in what innovation is, in what areas, and did not let knowledgeable act for the team's best.	Uncertain what to do, and did not communicate self-confidence	Lack self-confidence due to being first time as facilitator	Uncertain big group that was divided in two.	Too slow process and several restarts led to frustration.
Team C – No problems occurred					

Team A was created without any problems: management approved the innovation project, a convener was identified and prepared for the forthcoming work, the team members were invited and introduced to the project, and a kick-off was planned and executed. This was followed by work regarding ideation, all according to the plans developed by the newly created innovation team at the kick-off. However, as the project took off, the convener changed jobs, which caused some turbulence in the team but did not affect their progress. Things became more problematic when the project sponsor fell sick and his replacement was not informed about the project. As a consequence, the project was put on hold. Even though this had negative effects on the project, the CIT-process in Team A worked flawlessly.

In contrast, major problems were identified in the creation of Team B, mainly because the organisations' management ignored the facilitator's advice throughout all phases of the CIT-process. Because of unclear ownership of the project between the organisations, both management and sponsor lacked commitment and direction regarding the aim of the innovation project, which led to stalling in the recruiting of conveners and team members. Due to external project funding and a lack of innovation-related knowledge, management pushed to kick the project off even though preparations were not complete. As the kick-off approached, management ignored the advised number of team members, inviting twice as many individuals to the kick-off as recommended and not informing the facilitator about it. The innovation project was not introduced to three of the team members at all, nor was it explained why they were told to participate. The facilitators managed to split the group into two sub-innovation teams: Team B1 and Team B2. Because of poor preparation in general, the teams had to go back and define a direction to work towards, thus delaying the project. In hindsight, the facilitators agreed that they should never have kicked the project off under these circumstances. Instead, they should have explained the forthcoming negative consequences to management, as the practitioners were able to forecast the problems.

Minor issues were identified when Team C was created because management invited the team members to the kick-off without involving the convener or the facilitator. This resulted in a slightly slower start than expected due to the time needed to align the team members' mindset and to determine the aim of the innovation project. Some tension could be recognised in the aligning work, but this was handled as team issues.

Despite the issues that arose, no group-dynamic problems were identified in any of the innovation teams. The conveners felt that the facilitators were in control of the situation and adjusting to it. The conveners in Team B had asked for clearer leadership, but on the other hand, they were not fully informed of how management had prepared the project to begin with.

In interviews with the practitioners, it was recognised that Team A was the only innovation team in this study into which the CIT-process was fully incorporated and all parties understood the importance of fulfilling commitments. However, management in Teams B and C did not fully understand the importance of fulfilling all steps in the CIT-process. This caused major problems in Team B, such as unclear goals and unprepared team members, leading to a delayed project and a troublesome situation for the practitioners. In hindsight, the practitioners felt they should have stopped the kick-off in Team B until preparations were properly fulfilled. The reason for not doing so was both the practitioners' inexperience in using the CIT-process and lack of implementation tools. In Team C, the uncertainties were sorted out thanks to an open mind in all parties, and the ideation work could begin without disturbances.

Through the interviews with the practitioners, numerous suggestions to improve the implementation of the innovation team appeared. In the first step, when aiming for management commitment, it would help if the team management's co-managers or equal colleagues also committed to the project in the event of sick leave or the like. In this research, a perfect on-going project was put on hold because of lack understanding at the management level. Similarly, if the goal is a multi-organisational project in which a steering committee supports the innovation team, a suggestion is to introduce all members in the steering committee in order to ensure onboarding and the understanding of the importance of following the CIT-process stepwise. To ease this work, prior projects should be used to highlight success factors and the effects of poor management commitment. In the second and third steps, the work of identifying a convener and preparing him or her would benefit from a clear guideline for steps to take, including instructions for what kind of person to identify. Further, to enable a strong commitment to the forthcoming work, the identified convener should have instructions to read regarding the convener's role so as to have an understanding of what he or she is signing up for. These instructions should contain responsibilities and authorities to clarify the role of convener, and they should be approved by management. In the fourth step, the lesson learned when gathering team members is to ensure that the team members' management have the opportunity to be fully informed about the project, in this way ensuring their commitment. The team members should be confident that they are being empowered to act freely, to spend the time needed and to participate by their own free will. Finally, kick-off should not occur before the prior steps are fully completed.

Due to lack knowledge, managers underestimated the effect of poor preparation, resulting in that conveners left positions before kick-off, over staffed innovation teams etcetera. Due to inexperience in facilitating the creation of innovation teams, the practitioners underestimated the effects of poor preparation as well, which made it possible for managers to push for kick-off despite not being ready.

These findings reflect the need for two sets of implementation tools. The first tool set is directed toward practitioners who aim to learn how to use the CIT-process as a service;

that is, the tool set supports practitioners in understanding how to instruct their clients in the CIT-process. The second tool set is suggested to be used by practitioners to educate clients in the CIT-process, so that the steps in the CIT-process become fully incorporated and unnecessary problems are avoided.

6 Contribution

This research contributes knowledge regarding problems that may occur when implementing the CIT-process. This study also contributes to research regarding innovation processes, as it demonstrates that innovation projects may suffer from poor management commitment and planning and from their inability to consider advice from educated practitioners. The research also highlights the importance of educational tools to increase the usability of the CIT-process from a practitioner perspective. Even though the practitioners were well educated and experienced, the CIT-process was not easy to understand how to use at present status.

7 Practical implications and future work

From the perspective of practitioners, e.g., consultants in innovation management, the insights gained by this research may be valuable when consulting with organisations regarding the implementation of the CIT-process. However, given the limited number of innovation teams in this research, further studies on the implementation of the CIT-process are recommended in order to gain further understanding and to develop implementation tools to avoid these problems in the future.

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