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The Hidden Value of Intergenerational Collaboration

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Find Your Next Big Challenge



BY KATE RUSHTON | 6 MIN READ

Two years ago I attended my first intergenerational innovation challenge. It was not my last. This hackathon was all about designing with ‘not for’ aging. My team of twenty and thirty-something coders, designers and entrepreneurs were paired with John, a man in his seventies full of life and full of ideas.

Through the next 48 hours, we developed a very early stage website, Travita, meaning ‘travel life.’ It aggregated travel reviews, demographic data and booking information for older adults to make their lives easier. Just in the same way that John made our team’s lives easier. John was an expert in all senses of the word: on how technology has changed over the years, on the topic for this hackathon - ‘travel challenges that older adults face,’ and on life in general. He was and still is my new friend and an integral part of our winning team.

Afterwards, I occasionally thought about this new way of working and my new friend John. It sparked my interest in intergenerational co-creation. Not only as a way to build bridges between generations to create solutions for older adults but as a way to innovate in general. By using an older adult’s experience-based knowledge, which is known also known as deep smarts, and the younger generation’s fresh eyes and new perspectives intergenerational co-creation can help create more rounded solutions.

In my opinion, this model that lends itself to open innovation and crowdsourcing, both of which aim to find innovative solutions by ‘looking out there’ outside the walls of institutions. There are many reasons why I think intergenerational co-creation is the future of crowdsourcing. Here I am going to touch on just three of these reasons.

The world is losing expertise through retirement

Firstly, when someone with expertise often retires their managers ‘don’t know what they have lost until it is gone’ and even then they might not know. That person has left with all their knowledge and connections. Now, what if this experience could be harnessed and made available in a way that is enticing and low effort for the retiree? When I spoke to a retired civil servant about retirement he told me, “The best thing about retiring is no longer wearing a shirt and tie and doing a full working week. After I retired, I did some consultancy work but continuing to chase payments made me stop. I would love to share my expertise in a way that is more informal. I do miss being part of a team.”

Swissair, the former national airline of Switzerland, tapped into the knowledge and skills that retirees have through a crowdsourced project. Swissair retirees were contacted and asked to volunteer to identify and describe images from the company’s photo archive. This is where the retiree’s insider knowledge proved vital, not only identifying the actual images, but also in refining

the keyword tree for a database of the images. This project was a relatively low lift for the retirees. The work could be done on their own time and remotely as long as they had a computer and access to a wifi connection.

However, the Swissair project centered on the *known* knowledge of retirees. But, what about the unknown knowledge? The 'known, unknowns' and the 'unknown, unknowns' I digressed, but this is where intergenerational crowds could come in. For example, if a company like Swissair wanted to source new ideas from the crowd, they could pair some of their retirees with members of the crowd. This could be a University student working on an early stage idea or a team with a winning idea that want help to test and develop their concept. The 'crowd' could benefit from the expert and near 'insider' knowledge on the company and its process without having to rely on current employees whose time maybe stretch and have a myriad of other work commitments.

There has already been intergenerational hackathons (like the aging hackathon I participated in) and intergenerational innovation workshops and mentoring. It just has not fully translated into online open innovation crowdsourcing projects. A recent study by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that around 75% of adults aged 65+ use the internet. Given that most crowdsourcing challenges are online, participating in crowdsourced projects might be ideal for the retirees who spend on average 58 hours a month surfing the net and want to keep their brains active and focused.

Intergenerational Teams are more Innovative

Also, the older generation uses the Internet in a similar way to the general public. Even my own parents use Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter. So, maybe the typical crowdsourcing challenge participants in their twenties and thirties have more in common with 65+ adults than they realize. My experience is that collaboration between the generations is easier than most people think and the generational differences are not that wide. Also, intergenerational teams are much more innovative.

Something echoed by Paula Tinkler, the commercial director at Chemoxy International who is quoted in Forbes as saying that "Innovation and creativity are incubated wherever you have the right combination of experience, enthusiasm, and curiosity, and an intergenerational team is a perfect way to foster the perfect mix". However, it was also noted in the same article that many companies feel they are falling short in making progress in age diversity. Maybe their lack of intergenerational teams is hampering their progress in creating innovative solutions.

This is where crowdsourcing could come in. Crowdsourcing could be the tool to create online teams between people of different ages, backgrounds and from different parts of the world who have never met and are unlikely ever to meet. It is known that 'more diverse range of people thinking about a problem is going to have empathy for a larger range of users.' Something that would be a key advantage if the solutions to a problem need to reach a wider audience.

Many of the world's biggest challenges are complex and intergenerational

The final, but by no means, the last, point is that the biggest problems in the world are complex and cross generations. For example, climate change is not just affecting the younger generation and their future offspring; the older generations are affected too. Research by the Gerontological Society of America found that not only are older adults at risk for the effects of extreme weather events and climate change; they are also a resource for climate action. It is suggested that older adults can create action through leadership in their families and communities. So, why can't they also co-create solutions for climate change through intergenerational crowdsourced challenges? This is exactly what I would like to do.

I would like to host an open, intergenerational, crowdsourced innovation challenge to answer the question - How might we better inform people on how to reduce, mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change?

How would the Climate Change Educational Challenge Work?

This challenge would be open and inclusive. Anyone from anywhere in the world could submit an idea. As long as the idea is related to intergenerational education on climate change and really inspires action, it is eligible. The submission process would require the applicants to outline their idea and post a video introducing themselves and the ideal skillset and background of the people they would like on their team.

At the same time, anyone else from anywhere in the world could apply to become a team member. Of course, there would be targeted outreach to ensure retired experts from environmental agencies, education and the media are informed and encouraged to join. On the other end of the spectrum, early career professionals and University students would be targeted too. But, the onus would be on volunteer participation from people who can commit a few hours a week to this challenge, and are fully engaged in the topic and the ethos of crowdsourcing and open innovation.

After a selection process to identify the most promising ideas and ideators, the ideators with the top ideas would pitch to a closed forum of potential teammates. With the help of moderators, participants would be introduced based on their expertise and age to encourage the formation of diverse teams with different skillsets. Then through guidance from the challenge managers, the ideators and their teammates would collaborate on a plan of action to prototype and test their ideas in their communities. To test if the ideas resonate and inspire action in different generations in different parts of the world, and understand how each idea would need to be adapted to get 'results' in different markets.

For the final round, the number of ideas in the running would be reduced further as part of a process of identifying ideas that resonate and fit the brief. This top cohort of ideas would receive microgrants to do the actual testing and prototyping. Based on their results, the winning intergenerational teams would be identified to receive funding and support to take their ideas to the next level. But, only if the team stayed intergenerational and committed to the ethos of sharing of information, resources, and expertise.

But, the challenge could not just end there. In the interest of testing if intergenerational teams help retain the expertise of retired professions, are more innovative and are the answer to solving complex and intergenerational problems, there needs to be a control. Teams that are not intergenerational.

These 'control' teams may be just as innovative as the intergenerational teams. They may come up with even better ideas. But, as my seventy-year-old dad says, "Don't discount us old folk just yet! We still have a few surprises up our sleeves". Usually just before he opens up this laptop and starts working on his website.

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