

## Dealing with Information Through Social Lean Thinking

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### Summary

*Information can be managed in different ways. This paper explains how to increase effectiveness through information governance and to introduce continuous business process improvement into any organization with help of lean thinking through social business environment.*

**Key words:** lean, continuous improvement, social business network, knowledge

### Introduction

This paper is not focused on explaining what lean means or what the best lean practices are, but instead on how to introduce lean management in a unique way into any organization that wants to improve information and knowledge sharing between their employees. One of the important aspects in information management is the idea management and this paper will explain why social collaboration platforms are becoming inevitable today regardless whether an organization is focused on production or on services industry.

### New approach to software support for lean transformation

Although there are experts who think that lean management does not have anything to do with information technology, it can be proven that each principle (lean, continuous improvement, kaizen etc.) can be very well supported with IT if the IT system is completely in accordance with defined rules and practices. Not only this, but also well-designed and flexible IT system can bring a higher value for the customer than just following lean management best practices without IT support. Today, we can see lean initiatives not only in manufacturing industry, but also very often in service organizations and we can say without doubt that lean thinking can be applied to all business activities, especially information governance.

Through experience with customers, who either plan or already have implemented lean, we discovered a lack of IT support in their continuous improvement process. One possible solution to this challenge can be a simple idea management tool. There are many existing idea management tools that are not in accordance with lean principles nor applicable for every organizational process. Therefore, CROZ has developed a new approach in lean management; IT support which combines three key elements for a complete and rounded solution no matter on which platform it is delivered:

- Social business collaboration platform
- Lean management and continuous improvement principles
- Business process management

Social business collaboration platform features can help understand why choosing IT support should be the next step after recognizing the need for continuous improvement in an organization.

Social networks started to grow globally after 2005 when Facebook opened to anyone over age 13 and Twitter was launched. In the years that followed, people started using social networks as everyday communication platforms in private life and business as well. In 2011, LinkedIn had more than 90 million professional users. At the same time, IT companies that were dealing with enterprise systems recognized this trend and started releasing their enterprise social networks intended for internal employee's collaboration in organisations (IBM Connections, Jive, Yammer etc.). In the last few years, companies are starting to realize many benefits of such platforms and tools aimed for improvement of their internal communication and information management.

Idea management solution on top of social platform can be considered as a central place where suggestions on continuous improvement are gathered and further developed in business process management tool.

### **How does social business collaboration platform fit into lean?**

Information governance means dealing with an effective and efficient use of information in organizations. Social business collaboration platform has the same purpose; to find and provide information in more effective and efficient way than through e-mail, usage of static document management systems, etc. First among the lean principles collaboration platform should support is "coaching people".

Lean considers that each lean manager who is an expert for his/her area needs to dedicate his/her time to teach and coach other people. Social business collaboration platform can be very useful for knowledge distribution and easier information access. Each time when a new employee is hired, manager does not have to waste time on starting from the scratch with the new employee. All the knowledge is kept on collaboration platform and does not disappear.

Prerequisite for making excellent products and provision of quality services is coaching people. According to lean it is better if manager acts as coach rather than director. This approach shows people that they are able to approach their teachers without fear of failure or denial.

#### **Associate knowledge with people, not documents**

Most organization keeps their knowledge in document management systems. The problem with knowledge in static documents is that it gets old very fast (knowledge changes dynamically). Thus, it does not represent a natural way of sharing because people in real world share information in real time, mostly through different updates, posts, blogs, wikis etc.

If expertise in certain area is needed usually people do not search all possible documents on specific topic. Instead, an expert should be found first and his/her documents and blogs. Social business networks are focused primarily on people and their expertise because knowledge needs to be always fresh and relevant.

#### **Continuous improvement through idea management**

In further text, focus is given to Idea management and continuous improvement of business processes throughout information lifecycle: from idea creation, its transformation, up to idea implementation. Idea management that is implemented in accordance with lean principles can also support better management of information in organization.

#### **Idea management in lean organisations**

In order to give their best ideas, employees need to be challenged and have opportunity to express what they want without fear of bad feedback. Respect for people does not have to be achieved only through awards and good manager-employee relationship. There are many factors that can influence the level of seriousness and enthusiasm with which employees will get to work and understand their role in an organization. As mentioned, one of the factors is to feel safe and brave enough to express their opinion and have motivation to improve their work.

Lantech is a company researched by Womack and Jones [4] and can serve as a good example of challenges that company needs to overcome when implementing lean thinking. One of the main challenges for the Company at the first stages was how to consolidate communication barriers between different departments, especially the information flow. In this sense, collaboration and feedback from other employees/managers needs to be considered very important in the process of breaking down the barriers.

In order to solve existing problems, they need to become visible first to all shareholders included in a specific business process whether these are employees, managers, board of directors, etc. Furthermore, visibility needs to be enabled in order to fill social network with relevant content. Through visual man-

agement of information this can be easily done and checked because many people are included in the process.

### **Sharing information in a social way**

Not giving people an alternative for sending e-mails basically means forcing them to do a wasteful work. Social business networks can enhance teamwork through applications such as Wiki, Blog, and Communities etc. (see Picture 1). This is especially useful for geographically dislocated teams. Social business platform should at least have the following functionalities in order to achieve quality information governance:

- Possibility for teams to work on a project in different, customized and separated environments
- Forums for discussions about business topics in non-formal way in order to motivate people to give their opinions and answers to others questions
- Blogs for publishing new information, e.g. manager articles with company news and strategy, employees blogs on specific business domain, etc.
- Files sharing and versioning for easier file distribution
- Possibility for a whole team to work on one document (Wiki)
- Idea management functionality to enable continuous improvement through employees idea sharing
- Profiles with "wall" feature
- Expert network that can be searched by many criteria in order to find information and experts easily

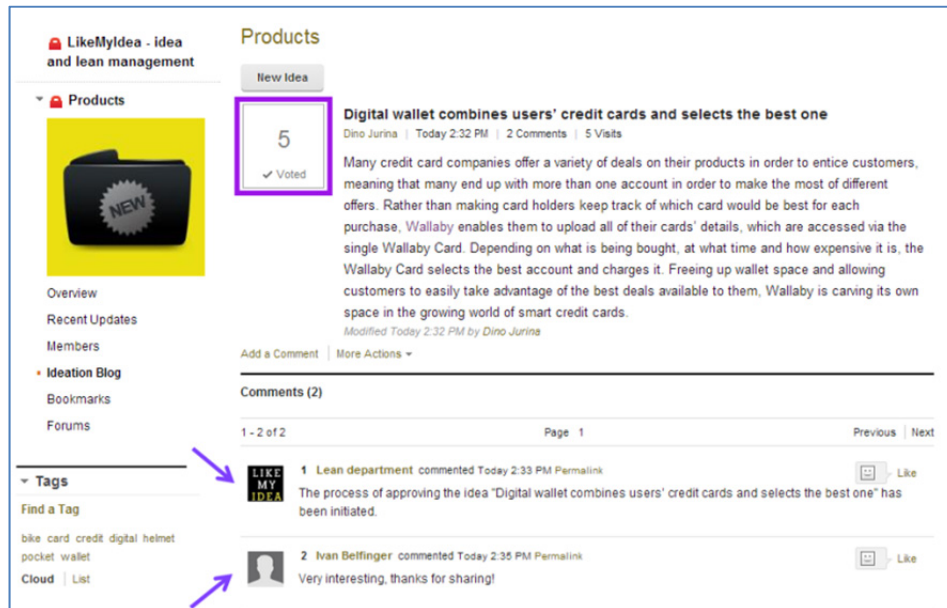
### **Gathering ideas from employees for continuous improvement process**

Management usually gives a task to employees to share their ideas on a specific topic that is in their interest (not important if it is via e-mail, web form, in person or written on a paper). Depending on whether the task is obligatory or -optional, two scenarios will probably happen. If the task is obligatory people will do it only because they have to and it is very unlikely that quality and innovative ideas will be gathered. If the task is optional, most employees will not even try to participate, because sending an e-mail or even worse, saying the idea in person to their manager frightens them.

The approach should be different. Managers should not ask for ideas only on certain topics or when they think there is a problem that needs to be solved. People should have a chance to express their opinions about the things they personally consider important at the time. These ideas often will not have anything to do with the business domain.

The way ideas are given is also important. If the ideas are sent only to manager's e-mails, managers will have a lot of individual ideas. Between all these ideas (especially if the organization is big) there will be individuals with similar

ideas or perhaps with small differences that can decide if the idea is feasible or profitable for an organization or not. In the first scenario, these individuals do not know that they have given similar ideas and cannot work together to make a single excellent idea. The key is to enable people to work together and to see all proposed ideas in order to comment each other's ideas and improve them.



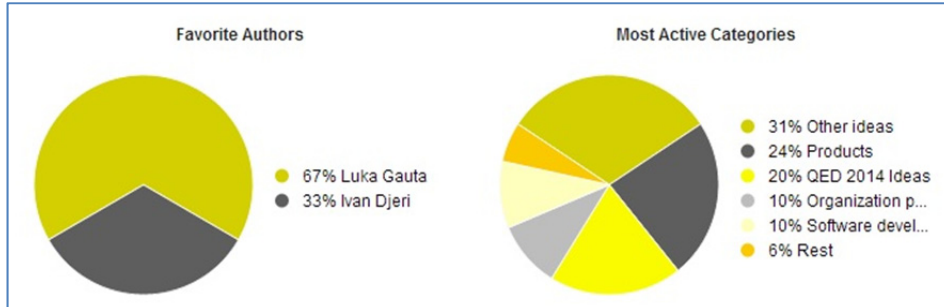
Picture 1. Commenting and feedback on the ideas provided  
(Source: LIKE MY IDEA tool)

It is a waste of time if lean department leaders need to look through e-mails in order to read every single idea. In big organization, this is not even viable. Why not allow the whole organization to evaluate the ideas through a simple voting process instead? Lean department can decide on the number of votes necessary for an idea to reach the next step of approval and deal only with ideas that are already filtered and improved among employees.

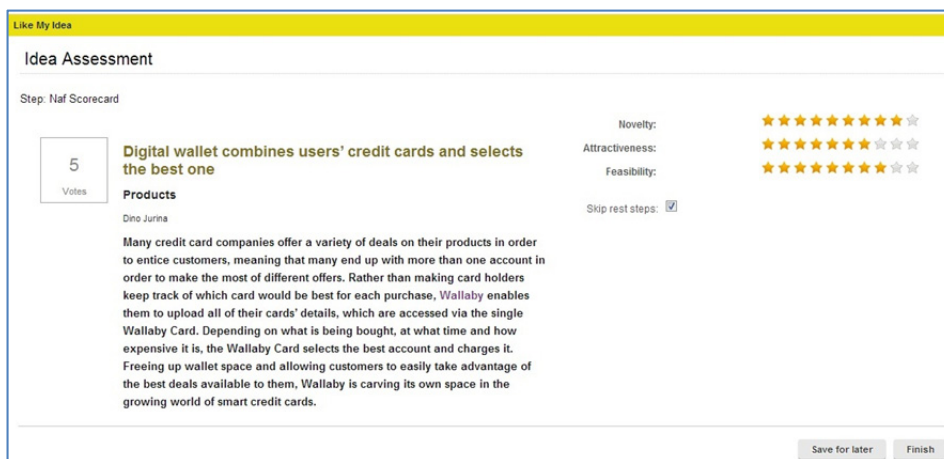
In the Toyota idea management system continuous improvement and innovation initiatives guarantee that team member's ideas will be heard and acted upon. LIKE MY IDEA also implements the system of trust among employees.

Continuous improvement process is possible because of following lean waste elimination: elimination of paperwork, no overloading of coordinator because only best ideas get to the evaluation process, electronic notifications and task assignments, escalation, visual management and metrics.

If we simplify the process we can say that continuous improvement is conducted through following 449juYx0ni steps: empower the employees, measure and evaluate ideas and the last one is to improve or act upon the ideas.



Picture 2. LIKE MY IDEA metrics  
(Source: LIKE MY IDEA tool)



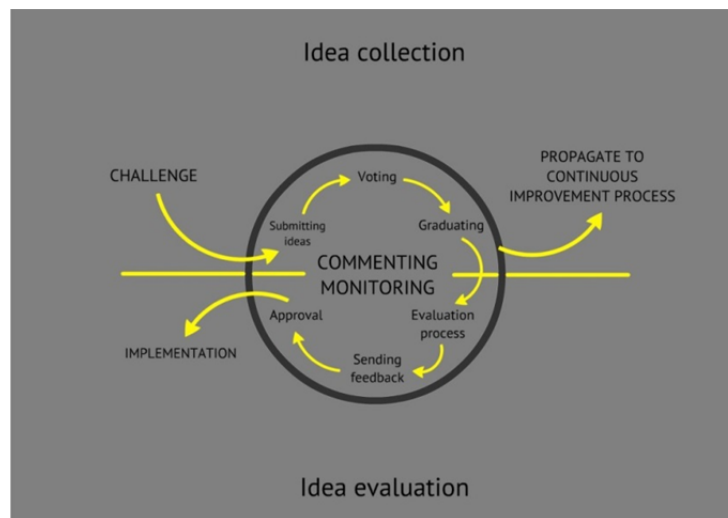
Picture 3. First step in idea approval evaluation  
(Source: LIKE MY IDEA tool)

There are many advantages of implementing such approach of communication on social business platform:

- Employees are more willing to give ideas because of the less formal environment, e.g. the ideas can be given in form of Blogs
- Ideas are visible to everyone and others can give constructive comments on already proposed ideas, and these comments are not considered as criticism, but rather as a help to improve the idea
- Each vote has very positive influence on the idea creator
- Gamification can be used on social business platform in order to motivate employees to participate (employees collect badges for voting, proposing ideas or commenting)

### **Achieving flexibility with business process management platform**

Employees have the means to create ideas on social business network in a motivating and informal environment. Ideas can be given both to general continuous improvement topics and also as a response to certain management challenges. If there is no need for all employees to participate in some topics, they can be closed for smaller groups or specific departments.



Picture 4. Idea collection and evaluation process

(Source: LIKE MY IDEA, <http://www.likemyidea.com/like-my-idea/lmi-overview/>)

After idea is given, the voting process takes place. All employees who have the option to give idea also need to have the option to vote for the idea or comment it. When enough votes are collected, the idea is ready to be propagated for evaluation. Different criteria, scorecards and other methodologies can be used for idea evaluation. The way the idea will be evaluated depends on customer practices. Therefore, IT solution that supports lean thinking in any organization should be very flexible and adaptable to customer's specific business process. There is no single implementation that can fit each customer's need. That is the reason why business process management platform is inevitable in IT supported lean organization.

Business process management platform enables very quick and flexible adoption of approval/evaluation/implementation process. The process can have three simple steps for organizations with smaller lean departments or very complex procedure that is impossible to change dynamically without business process management tools.

Although the procedure can vary from customer to customer, one step should never be avoided. All parts or at least most of the parts of the approval process should have output in form of feedback from lean department that is sent back to social business network (e.g. in form of comments on idea). This step is very important because of psychological reasons. This way, employees can see that something is happening with their ideas (e.g. they could see that their idea is now in redesign phase or that it needs an additional input from the author). Although this seems as a small step in the process, it has a big influence on employees' motivation.

### **Conclusion**

Through application of features and principles mentioned in this paper, idea management tool can grow into creative and intelligent community where employees will try to continuously improve their work and help others in doing so.

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