

Press release

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 SIEMENS

Open Innovation: Fertile Ground for Innovations

Hoarding knowledge decreases a company's competitiveness. Companies are therefore turning to open innovation process that holistically incorporate both their own internal knowledge and external expertise. As they do so, they are expanding their own innovation potential. Siemens laid the groundwork for fast, open, and collaborative knowledge transfer years ago.

As data flows ever more quickly between research and development and production, innovation cycles are becoming shorter. In this context, an unhindered exchange of information regarding trends and new technologies is becoming ever more important. Many companies have therefore turned to open innovation (OI) as a means of bringing together knowledge from different departments – and even from outside the organization.

Open innovation is an established method at Siemens. Online knowledge exchange platforms and idea competitions link the company's research and development community worldwide. Employees discuss developments together, identify the best ideas, and transform their concepts into market-ready products. For example, Siemens' TechnoWeb online platform, which was established in 1999, now has more than 45,000 members. "Many of the topics that are hotly debated here will eventually become future trends," says Thorsten Krüger from Siemens Corporate Technology (CT), who has served as Technical Director of TechnoWeb since October, 2012.

Limitless Exchange of Ideas

TechnoWeb users describe a problem (for example, a question related to a development project), provide an assessment of how the problem will impact business, and then add tags to link the problem to specific topics. The system then automatically selects TechnoWeb members who might be able to help solve the problem. "Experience has shown that inquirers almost always receive several replies, with the first one often arriving within 30 minutes," says Nischita Sudharsan from Siemens Corporate Technology (CT) in Munich, who serves as TechnoWeb's Project Manager. "TechnoWeb users can quickly obtain information and assistance from inside the Siemens network," Krüger explains. Thanks to a new smartphone app, the service can now also be used on the move.

Generating new ideas by solving pressing problems is one form of open innovation. Another involves staging competitions to motivate researchers to develop new ideas. For example, researchers can bring together an online crowd consisting of several thousand experts who discuss, develop, and prioritize innovative ideas on a specific topic within the framework of a competition. This, too, is open innovation. The fact that ideas generated in such a manner can lead to innovations is demonstrated by the levee monitoring concept that received an award in an ideas competition five years ago.

Idea Competitions

Having been convinced of the effectiveness of open innovation, Dr. Falk Wottawah, Director of Visioning and Scouting at Corporate Technology, has developed approaches with his team over the last few years that are designed to continually improve open innovation at Siemens. A good example of this is offered by the company's Quickstarter competition, which was launched on April 1, 2015 as a pilot project limited to Corporate Technology. Unlike other idea competitions, it

is employees themselves rather than management who decide here which ideas are innovative. Within four weeks after the project was launched, Siemens employees from all divisions had submitted 111 ideas for innovations. Their suggestions were vetted by the online community, and colleagues also discussed the specific content of the ideas. The special thing about the project was that employees were also able to distribute a total of €500,000. More specifically, all 250 CT employees, who were registered as “investors” were each given a budget of €2,000 to distribute among the project proposals that they wanted to see implemented.

From Ideas to Reality

A total of 15 ideas completed the course and were provided with effective initial funding in this manner. “The project proposals were quite varied,” says Dr. Christian Homma, the initiator and Project Manager of the Quickstarter pilot phase. One example of a funded project is a study of urban farming that involves designing business models in this area and discussing them with the relevant stakeholders. The study focuses on farming in buildings and energy management in farm networks in cities.

Quickstarter is not meant to be a one-off project. Instead, it will be carried out on a regular basis in the future. The funding for selected Quickstarter projects could either come from Corporate Technology (CT) or from a business unit.

Research Partnerships

There are, however, numerous examples that show how Siemens also utilizes the benefits of open innovation outside the company. For example, Corporate Technology (CT) has been working closely for years with top universities and research institutes around the world. And that’s not all. Concrete cooperation projects with promising start-ups and the establishment of its own start-ups have made it possible for Siemens to develop innovative approaches and business models and test them under market conditions.

That too, is far from the whole picture. Siemens is also constantly on the lookout for new approaches. So CT established an internal Trends (2014) and Technology (2012) Scouting Department. Siemens is using this department to help internal research groups find the right external technology partners for their work and to identify relevant trends and apply them to their activities.

New Methods for Developing Ideas

TechnoWeb, idea competitions, and research partnerships are all examples of new approaches being taken to generate ideas. Among other things, they all require a cultural transformation. “It’s no longer a case of my knowledge, your knowledge, or my hoard of treasure,” says Christoph Krois from the Innovation Management department at Siemens Corporate Technology. “That’s because knowledge is the only thing that increases when you share it.” According to Krois, “it’s fascinating to exploit the huge potential at the company for the benefit of the entire Group, especially when you can do so anywhere and anytime. Many of the people who take part in TechnoWeb or in ideas competitions are looking for new challenges that go beyond their own areas of work. Moreover, they all know that you never stop learning”, says Krüger, who also points out that “asking the right questions and obtaining the knowledge one lacks is actually a strength!”

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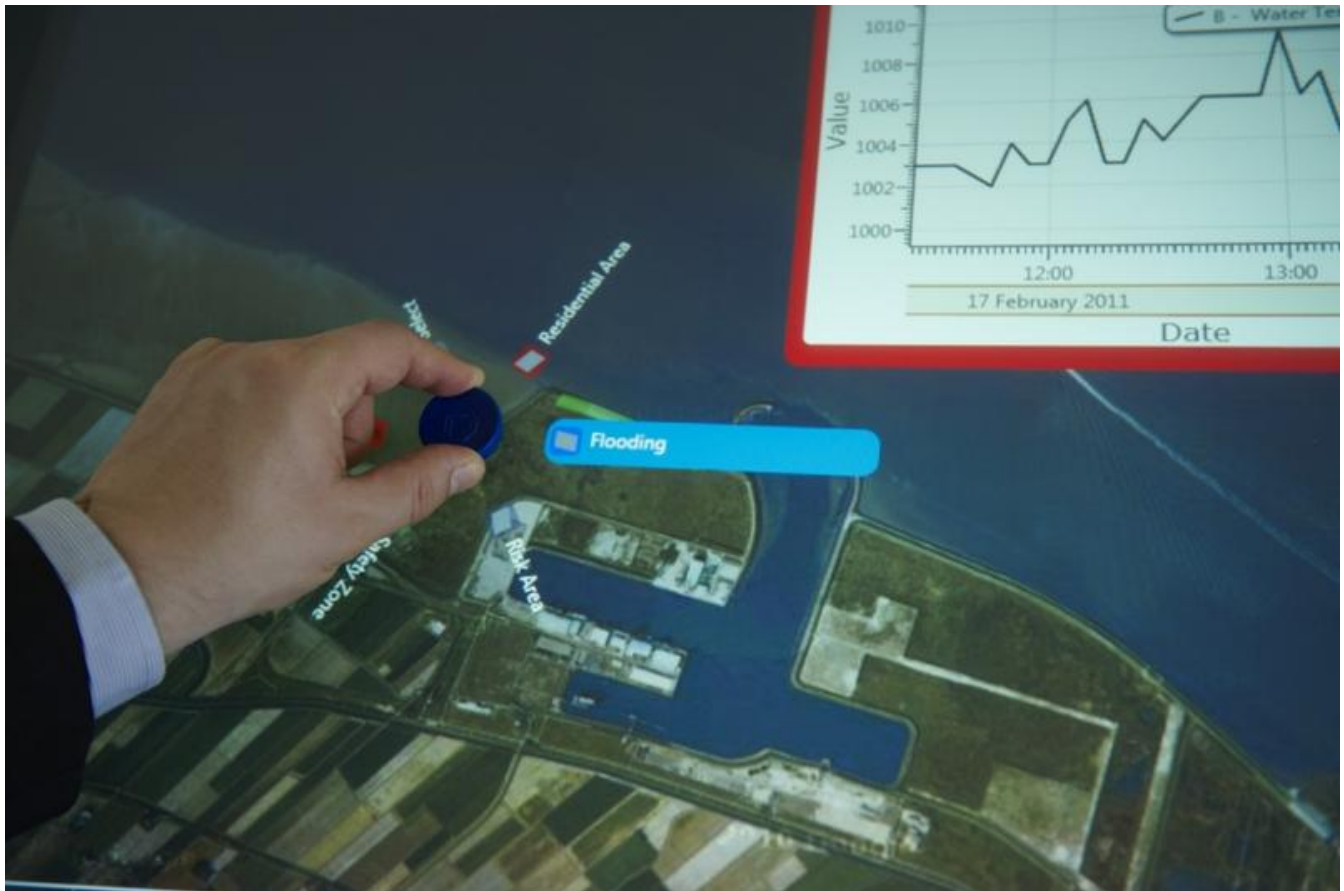
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Platforms for discussion and collaboration, such as TechnoWeb, promote the sharing of ideas.



A multi-touch display for simulating levee control. Five years ago an associated levee monitoring system received an award in an ideas competition.