
Innovation Jams: Lessons in Agile Product Development

An Experience Report

by **John Haniotis**,
Senior Vice President of Products
Accept Software

Accept Software, a supplier of software for product innovation management that uses crowd-sourcing for ideas and feedback, drank some of its own Kool-Aid. The outcome resulted in a much more egalitarian culture which both fortified its product team and accelerated its rollout of new innovations.

Introduction

For the better part of a week in September of 2010, my company attempted an experiment. It ultimately involved more than 80 percent of our 60-member staff. And it has had a lasting impact on our operating culture.

Here was the goal: we wanted everyone in our company – no matter what their job description or location – to have the chance to introduce new product ideas into our development process. So we crafted a two-week collaborative project to generate, screen, evaluate, and prototype ideas in seven different categories related to our company's core business. This paper explains how it worked.

The Context

Accept Software is based in Santa Clara, California. We make and sell an integrated suite of on-demand applications. They're designed to help our clients manage their innovation efforts from idea generation to product launch, and then throughout the life of the product in the marketplace.

The market for innovation management technologies like ours is a competitive one.

Others in that same space include giants like IBM, as well as lesser-known suppliers such as MKS, Ryma, Brightidea, and Imagination. So innovation is not only important to our customers for keeping ahead, it's critical to our own livelihood as well.

Key to accelerating decisions and driving consensus is crowd-sourcing – tapping into the intellect and experience of many different people at the same time. It's an idea advocated by a number of thought leaders, including U.C. Berkeley Professor Henry Chesbrough, under the rubric of Open Innovation. It is predicated on the conviction that good ideas don't necessarily originate from a company's executive suite. Instead, it assumes that everyone in an organization is equally capable of generating, evaluating and implementing good ideas. And through collaboration with one another, those ideas can bring exceptional value to the organization.

For most of our clients, the circle of participants who become involved in collective ideation extends beyond the company's internal stakeholders. It often includes customers, prospects, partners, distributors, suppliers, and others. In this experiment, however, we decided to limit participation to Accept's own staff members – some of whom are based in Santa Clara, but even more of whom are stationed in India. Fortunately, because of the nature of our product, we already had all the online tools available that we would need to collect, develop, screen and evaluate ideas from within our own ranks.

The Background

Prior to our 2010 Innovation Jam, Accept had attempted other collective processes to stimulate innovation. But we had used a much more carefully guided process. For example, great pains were taken to pre-select exactly the right stakeholders to take part in the exercise. There was also extensive market research done ahead of time; data was meticulously gathered and carefully crunched.

The problem was that by guiding the process so closely, we ended up essentially pre-selecting the ideas to follow through on. And if you're the one driving that process, you find yourself imposing a thought framework on it, so that team members are driven to think about a problem in a particular way. That's a serious flaw because it can presuppose one particular answer while, at the same time, steering participants away from even better ones.

So the potential benefit of trying something different was two-fold for Accept. First, it would allow the company to validate its faith in collaborative innovation. And second, it would enable the company to leverage its own needs, processes and innovation tools in a way that would essentially put that theory to the test. But there were more pragmatic reasons for trying it as well, like enhancing our own competitiveness and thought leadership in the market.

The Problem

During the first quarter of 2010, Accept launched a new development team in Pune, India, some 8,000 miles from Santa Clara. The time difference is 12 1/2 hours. For that launch to succeed, it would require the Indian team to be able to work effectively with their California colleagues, particularly on projects involving tight timetables. So, in part, we saw the exercise as a test of how well such a geographically dispersed company could work together under pressure.

But there was an important product aspect as well. We had identified some specific areas in which we wanted to create attractive go-to-market features, functions

and designs for our product suite. We also wanted to give a boost to ideas we had previously discussed, but which kept getting pushed off in favor of less risky product initiatives. And we wanted to see how we could accelerate the thought process inside our organization to get there more quickly.

The Overview

The idea of holding a jam to speed the creative process did not originate with Accept Corporation. It came instead from the world of music in which jazz musicians would get together and improvise in real time without lengthy preparation or predefined arrangements. [See Figure 1] Musical jams, which can be traced at least as far back as the 1940s, are typically used to create new material, to develop better arrangements, and to improve their individual proficiency in working with other musicians.



Figure 1. The musical jam is a metaphor we kept in mind to help guide the innovation process. The "jam" provides structure, but also allows each member to create and, as a result, to feel a sense of ownership over the outcome.

Nor was Accept the first technology company to adapt the concept of jamming to its own needs. In an earlier assignment, at Intuit, I had been involved in similar collaborative efforts, and our friends at IBM2 have done so as well. In each case, the particulars would vary. However, unlike jamming in the world of music, advance preparation in technology companies can be fairly extensive. But unless it's handled right, that preparation can reduce motivation and time-to-value when it leads to rigid processes.

In our case, we wanted to establish a high-level problem or goal for everyone in the exercise to think about, and then give them the freedom to develop solutions that were more comprehensive than they might have otherwise. So, for example, we encouraged them to come up with their own ideas about what processes they could use to achieve the objective, about how to apportion their time, and about how to divide up the tasks. But we insisted that all of the ideas submitted align with the larger theme of the Jam, which we identified as “Immediate Impact to Market.” This established the structure within which the teams could improvise, like a musical jam.

Under that umbrella, we identified the following general categories to ensure business relevance:

- Usability
- Visualization
- Business intelligence
- Mobility
- Integrations
- Collaboration & social networks n API/SDK

A Closer Look

Accept’s Innovation Jam was divided into two stages. The first we called an “idea jam.” It involved soliciting ideas from employees throughout the company which were related to the seven product themes we believed were key to our moving forward. The invitation to contribute was open for two weeks; anyone could submit multiple ideas. In the end, we received 60 or 70 idea submissions.

We had no expectation that the ideas submitted would be fully developed. Most were only a few paragraphs long. Their objective was simply to persuade others at Accept that the idea had enough merit to warrant further investigation.

Using our own software, all of the submissions were available to everyone else in the organization in real time. And people were encouraged to comment on, expand upon, ask about, and respond to questions concerning one another’s ideas; those exchanges were also open to everyone.

Then there was voting. We established a six-tier voting mechanism. Everyone could vote up or down as many ideas as they had time to review, but only one vote per person per idea could be cast. The idea’s score would go up or down based on points allocated for each of the six voting tiers. At its conclusion, the 15 ideas that ended up with the highest positive scores received closer scrutiny by an evaluation team. The team assessed the ideas using a number of criteria to winnow the field down from 15 to just five ideas that would move into the next phase.

Then each of the five finalist’s ideas received a hearing from Accept’s executive staff. Idea presenters used a bare-bones PowerPoint presentation style to show what was going to be built, what the market for it looks like, and why it would be successful with customers. In essence, they built mini-business cases around their ideas. And the comments that presenters heard back from company executives helped guide them during the project’s next phase. We called this next phase our “code jam.”

We formed teams of 6 to 8 members around each of the five chosen projects, using participants from the selected projects and volunteer members from rejected projects. They were augmented by others we appointed for their specific skills and expertise. Each team was to have at least one product owner and several developers. Their assignment was to take their team’s central idea and, over an intensive two-day weekend, turn it into a prototype product capable of demonstrating its functions to Accept’s senior management team. Their ultimate goal was to secure sufficient support and investment from the executive team to take the project to market. See Figure 2.



Figure 2. After constructing a business case and setting product requirements, team members quickly worked out an approach to their prototype, which required a minimum set of use cases which could be implemented in two-day code jam.

At the conclusion of the Code Jam, the executive staff scored each of the five projects from 0-20 according to a list of criteria which included customer impact, revenue results, market effect, degree of innovation, design advances, ease of use, demonstrability, and speed of introduction. Additionally, each evaluator could assign three bonus points for any submission or category they liked for whatever reason. Then three winning teams were announced and non-cash prizes, including flip camcorders and iPads, were presented to the members of each of those teams.

Scheduling

Like every other company, Accept has a full plate of day-to-day assignments and customer demands to satisfy. Hardly anyone today has the luxury of setting aside their core business priorities for days at a time, even for an exercise that could eventually produce real value. So one of our biggest challenges was balancing the need to satisfy our current obligations against the desire to engage in an exercise geared toward securing our future.

What resulted was a bit of a compromise. During the Idea Jam phase, people could participate as much or as little as their work-loads would allow. That effort was spread over the first several weeks. Then its intensity grew, culminating in a weekend-long Code Jam, followed by final executive presentations. Highlights of that schedule included:

- Sunday, 9/12: Jam announced, idea submissions accepted
- Friday, 9/17: FAQ session for interested participants
- Thursday, 9/23: Submissions closed, finalists announced, teams selected and organized
- Friday, 9/24: Idea jam proposal presented to executives by each team
- Saturday/Sunday, 9/25-26: Code jam conducted by each team
- Monday, 9/27: Code jam reviews, final business case presentations and demos to executives

The entire exercise was truly a volunteer effort; nobody's job was on the line and no one was required to participate. At the same time, there was an unspoken

recognition that every individual was also part of a critical group – one that ought to be contributing heavily to the success of the exercise, regardless of whether they were an engineer, a product manager, a sales person, or whatever.

There was also an element of 'is everybody on board and committed? Or is this something you simply can't be bothered with?' We wanted to find out what the level of response and support for the idea would be. We weren't sure going in, but by the end, we were gratified to see how high it turned out to be.

Night Shift

There is no overlap in normal business hours between workers in India and those in California. When it's 8:00 in the morning in Santa Clara, it's 8:30 or 9:30 at night in Pune, depending on daylight savings. That posed a challenge for the Innovation Jam. More importantly, it created a challenge for Accept's day-to-day operations. So we saw our innovation exercise as a vehicle for working out strategies to overcome what could otherwise be a very awkward time difference.

Indeed, of all our apprehensions about the jam, the worry that our far-flung geography would create logistical nightmares was the greatest fear. And surprisingly, at least to me, was that in the end, the concern over time differences turned out to be much more manageable than we thought it would be because we left it up to the teams to determine how and when to conduct their own communications.

For example, when we kicked off the project in Santa Clara, we used a direct conference call to heighten the sense of excitement and collaboration. We timed it to accommodate both time zones. It was early morning in California, and early in the evening in India.

We did that again a week later when we had the assessment of which ideas were selected to proceed into the coding jam phase. For the most part, though, once the team was underway, their ongoing communication was largely via email, supplemented by the occasional Skype conversation. See Figure 3.



Figure 3. Team members from the office in Pune, India crowd around a laptop while working out a prototype design. Each innovation team was geographically dispersed with members in both India and California.

The speed and clarity of the electronic communication channels between here and India have now become so good that it sometimes seems as though you're having a conversation between two floors in the same office building. Still, there were times we thought that if everyone were brought together in one place for an entire week, an exercise like the Innovation Jam could be even more productive because the teams could spend less time working out their communication hurdles and focus that energy on the project itself. Perhaps someday we'll be able to put that to the test.

The Roadmap not Taken

Like most technology companies, Accept is guided by a set of strategic plans and product roadmaps that we developed, some of which look years into the future. And we take those documents seriously.

At the same time, however, we recognize that unless we were quite deliberate about it, the outcome of an innovation jam could lead us in very different directions. Accordingly, the seven objectives we set for participants in our exercise were all derived from Accept's planning documents.

However, while the results of innovation jams do not replace the more traditional strategic planning tools – at least not yet – they definitely supplement them. And at some point in the future, once we become really proficient at doing jams on a regular basis, we may find that parts of those long-range plans would change as a result.

In our own exercise, we awarded prizes to the three top teams for their projects. But the fact is, everybody won. Today all five of the Innovation Jam's winning projects are in the pipeline, under development, and on their way to the marketplace. And our company's culture has been significantly enriched. It was a result in which everyone, regardless of their project, came out a winner. See Figure 4.

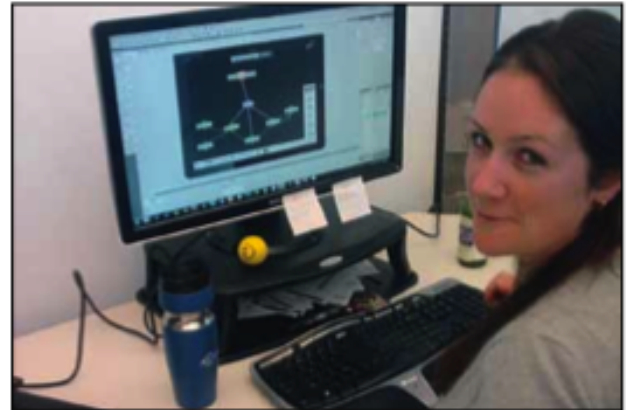


Figure 4. Accept's Kirstin Bergquist at work on a winning project she found challenging, innovative and highly rewarding.

We discovered that when we actually got our hands dirty through an exercise like this, we learned what's really possible and what isn't, as opposed to knowing what we want, without knowing how to build it. Through innovation jams, we can learn exactly what's involved in building a specific product feature or attribute. And as a result, we can modify its time line in our roadmap to be much more realistic.

Lessons Learned

Lesson #1: Intrinsic Rewards Provide the Best Motivation.

One of the best surprises to come out of our jam was seeing how much work actually got done during a relatively short period of time. Although that wasn't one of the explicit metrics we used, I'm convinced that our productivity was a lot higher than it would have been in a more traditional setting. I suspect that it's a reflection of what Daniel Pink³ talks about in his book "Drive," namely that some of the most important rewards of work are intrinsic – the value of getting the job done and achieving an end goal – even if no monetary reward is offered.

For example, the team working on a mobile application for capturing ideas actually produced their prototype on two different platforms (iOS and Android). They felt that a compelling aspect of their submission was that the application was scalable and wouldn't be limited to a single mobile platform.

Lesson #2: Being Inclusive Generates Value and Support.

Another lesson I learned – and not for the first time either – is the tremendous importance of being all-inclusive. There is a lot of valuable, and often untapped, knowledge that resides within any organization – regardless of what its individual employees do in their day-to-day jobs. There's a lot of enthusiasm, interest and knowledge about what could be done to improve the product, the processes, and the company. Good ideas come from every walk of life, and this exercise reinforced it. Also, including a broad mix of people in the "idea jam" generated a lot of excitement about what was to come and gave the teams a great deal of encouragement.

Lesson #3: Use the right tools and process for the job.

At Accept, we were fortunate in that the product we market is one already designed for an exercise like the Innovation Jam. But you also need to have a well thought-out process to accomplish what you're trying to achieve. You need absolute clarity about the outcome. Otherwise, mobilizing so many people can careen off in any direction. You need to define it well enough so people can focus on the outcome while, at the same time, refraining from prescribing for them the 'how' and the 'what.' We did this by outlining the different phases of the innovation jam. Each phase was brief in duration and had a clear end goal, like "sprints" in a release, so that each team could focus on what was required of them in that phase.

We also discovered that sometimes problems we think are going to be really hard, turn out to be easier once we jump in and actually start working on them. So, for example, the team that built a mobile application over the weekend for idea capture coded something using a platform they'd never used before.

That's partially why they built their prototype on two platforms -- just in case the new one turned out to be too difficult. In the end, though, it turned out that it really wasn't that hard for them; they surprised themselves.

Even if you believe a good idea can come from anywhere, it's one thing to say it, and quite another to act on and live out that axiom day to day. What we think this exercise helped to drive home, from top to bottom within our company, is that we are a geographically dispersed organization that expects everybody to be driving toward the company's success goals. We're all in this together; we all have equal value when it comes to good ideas and how we put them into practice. The innovation jam helped us in building a much stronger and more cohesive team.

Do It Again

Accept's Innovation Jam was not a one-off project. It was a process we are consciously trying to weave into our corporate culture. And we anticipate doing more of them on a regular basis – perhaps twice a year. I expect they will follow the same format, but with different sets of themes. We might even use one to create a disruptive innovation to what we currently do.

I'm also convinced that it can be adapted to -- and replicated with equally good results -- in other organizations. But there are some important prerequisites. For example, it requires a certain amount of passion from the people involved. It requires believing that collaboration and communication are the pillars of success in any organization that involves more than two people.

Although you don't have to be an Agile shop in order to use it, the Innovation Jam is highly representative of what the Agile doctrine is about – solving problems at the team level, having something demonstrable to show in an agreed time frame, and showing results through experimentation before agreeing on a specific implementation. You can think of it as something born from an understanding of the way Agile works and for organizations that have Agile as part of their DNA.

Of course, like anything else of great value, it's not free.

It requires a conscious investment of company time and staff resources to solve common problems, to improve the ways people work together as a team, and to influence the corporate culture. A jam has to be a repeatable event that becomes part of the culture. It is a place where leadership is formed; it's where real teams originate.

So far, we've only done it once. But it left us with some very strong impressions. For example, it's not for the faint of heart; you have to be in it 100 percent; you have to believe it and live it. You also have to be willing to do it repeatedly until it becomes entrenched in the organization. Just one time can generate real value. But doing it again and again will help you realize the full potential of jamming.

Our company's culture has been significantly enriched by the experience. It was a result in which everyone, regardless of their project, emerged as a winner.

References

1. **"Open R&D and open innovation: exploring the phenomenon."** Ellen Enkel, Oliver Gassmann, Henry Chesbrough. *R&D Management Special Issue. Vol.4, Issue 4. Pages 311-316. September, 2009*
2. **"innovationjam 2008"** IBM Executive Report
3. **"Drive: The Surprising Truth About What motivates Us."** Daniel Pink. Penguin Books, 2009

Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to my colleagues, Hari Candadai and Brian Glover, as well as to our good friend Scott Patton, for their tremendous help in preparing this report.

About Accept Software Inc.

Accept Software, Inc. delivers The Product Innovation Management solution that technology-driven companies use to decide which products to bring to market for the fastest time-to-profit. The Accept360 Suite is the only complete end-to-end software solution that tightly links company and product strategy through ideation, portfolio planning, roadmaps, requirements and execution. For more information, visit www.accept360.com

401 Congress Ave, Suite 2650,
Austin, TX 78701
512-201-8222

www.accept360.com
info@accept360.com