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Global

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## The case study

### How to innovate from the bottom up

Making ideas happen in a big company



**The story.** In 2005, Jordan Cohen, a mid-level manager at the global pharmaceuticals company Pfizer, realised that a lot of skilled employee time was in effect "wasted" on routine tasks such as using Excel and PowerPoint and doing basic research. Could individual employee productivity be improved by enlisting other people outside the company to perform such "grunt work"? And how could a relatively junior manager design and effect his idea for a web-based, one-stop shop to shift the work to external providers all over the globe?

**The challenge.** Mr Cohen faced several hurdles. First, the challenge of convincing Pfizer's leadership to invest in the project. Second, for the idea to work, he had to convince thousands of Pfizer's front-line employees to use it. This task was complicated by the project's association with outsourcing, which tended to make people worry about their jobs. Third, at the outset, the idea was rather fuzzy: if he were to stake his reputation on the scheme, could he make sure it would work?

**The strategy.** Knowing it would be hard to sell the idea without any backing, much less get a proper budget for it, he adopted a gradual approach.

First, he did a simple test by asking 12 colleagues to track how they spent their time by using the Task function in Microsoft Office. With the data from this test – which suggested that up to 30 per cent of their time was spent on routine tasks – he convinced his immediate boss to dedicate resources to the project but still kept it very quiet.

As the idea progressed, he initiated a low-cost pilot project, using his own personal network in the organisation to recruit 50 volunteers. As he conducted more experiments and built a small team to help him, he also adopted a highly flexible trial-and-error approach, structuring the development process so he could fix mistakes the same day they emerged.

To make the service truly useful to Pfizer's thousands of front-line employees was also a challenge. Mr Cohen knew that being based in the corporate headquarters in New York meant he could not fully understand the nuances of how people "in the field" – such as analysts, sales people and marketing

managers – would want the service to work. So he recruited to his small team a front-line veteran of 20 years, Tanya Carr-Waldron. In addition, Ms Carr-Waldron's own network also became a powerful vehicle for convincing front-line employees of PfizerWorks' potential value.

When Mr Cohen eventually wanted to publicise the scheme and presented his case to the chief financial officer and the vice-chairman of Pfizer, he had strong backing among ordinary employees as well as his accumulated data.

**The outcome.** Mr Cohen's idea was adopted, leading to big gains in employee productivity, freeing up more than 60,000 employee hours in the first year. PfizerWorks quickly became a popular tool with employees.

**Key lessons.** The PfizerWorks team managed to do what many consider an impossibility: devise a successful innovation from the bottom up in a big company.

## 60,000

**Employee hours freed in the first year of PfizerWorks**

It was possible because Mr Cohen already had years of experience in the company, so he could understand and navigate general company politics. Lone, obsessive geniuses may do well in a garage start-up but, in big companies, to make innovation happen, the manager first needs to embrace both the corporate machine and the people in it.

On a personal level, Mr Cohen had a keen grasp of his shortcomings and knew when to recruit different thinkers for his team.

He understood the iterative nature of the innovation process, accepting that nothing is perfect in the beginning.

As a result, while Mr Cohen did run some personal risks in undertaking such a project in this way, he minimised the risks through a careful management of the various stakeholders – and created his dream job as head of PfizerWorks.

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