Cisco’s Innovation Hub

Go-to portal for employees fosters company-wide discussion, action, and connection around innovation
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Summary

In 2015, Cisco embarked upon a journey to build a culture of innovation across the company. This effort, named “My Innovation,” encompassed several workshops, awards, competitions, and resources. One of the biggest drivers of this cultural shift is the Innovation Hub, a one-stop portal for all things innovation at Cisco. The Innovation Hub has become a thriving virtual community where employees can participate in innovation events and competitions, discuss new technologies, and connect with peers and mentors with similar interests. A dedicated “Hub team” comprised of members from both IT and the Corporate Strategic Innovation Group designed the Innovation Hub in fall 2016 as a simple prototype that managed employee involvement in Cisco’s company-wide innovation competition. From there, the Hub team has engaged in continuous feedback and improvement loops to add features that attracted and retained users and effectively built an active community. By early 2018, the Innovation Hub had become an all-in-one center for everything innovation-related at Cisco and was generating the type of spontaneous peer-to-peer interactions that characterize a culture of innovation. As the Innovation Hub evolves to allow more nuanced insight and analysis into innovation flows, hot spots, and experts across the organization, it will enable Cisco to focus on the most valuable innovation experiences and leverage employees’ passion and strengths to accelerate future innovation.
**Introduction**

In popular mythology, innovation is the story of creative geniuses and upstart companies conceiving of and building out unique ideas. Less attention is paid to the processes that ensure that one novel idea comes to life and benefits the world, yet this infrastructure is crucial to converting new insights into real-world products and services. In large organizations and networks, it can be even harder to build a pathway where one employee’s spark can be heard, considered, and supported.

This is precisely the issue that an enormous enterprise like Cisco faces in its journey to nurture a culture of innovation. Cisco has introduced several discrete programs to spur this evolution, such as the Innovate Everywhere Challenge (IEC) and thingQbator maker spaces. It has also addressed the less-visible but equally vital work of knowledge management: How can Cisco ensure that there are low-friction, user-friendly pathways for its employees to share and connect around new ideas? How can a vast enterprise foster informal consideration of potential new products and services without having to rely on formal reporting and approval processes?

Cisco’s answer is the Innovation Hub, its go-to portal for all things innovation. The story of how the Innovation Hub came into existence offers valuable insights on how to create virtual spaces where employees actively collaborate on new ideas and develop them into viable ventures.

**Background**

In 2015, Cisco committed to infusing a culture of innovation across its enterprise through a company-wide effort that became known as My Innovation. One of the cornerstones of My Innovation is a company-wide competition for new product, process, and service ideas known as the Innovate Everywhere Challenge (IEC). The first IEC launched in September 2015 and the three winners were named in May 2016. These winning teams received cash prizes and resources to continue building their ventures. The IEC introduced many formal innovation supports to all employees for the first time and served as clear evidence of Cisco’s commitment to supporting innovation.

As Cisco reviewed employee feedback after the Challenge, it noted several common suggestions:

- Employees didn’t know where they could share and develop their new ideas outside of the IEC
- Many employees were surprised to learn about other innovation programs and events across the organization and wanted to be able to find these more easily
- Employees were hungry for ways to connect to others within the organization who shared their passions and could discuss or mentor them

When My Innovation started in 2015, Cisco had created an Innovation Academy, a web site where employees could find resources to help develop their innovation capabilities. Individual organizations had also experimented with different idea management software from third parties. However, usage of these resources was relatively low. The need to create a single place where employees could learn, innovate, and find other passionate innovators at Cisco was clear.
Inception

In summer 2016, with this problem statement in mind, Jyoti Sarin from IT and Mathilde Durvy and Alex Goryachev from Cisco’s Corporate Strategic Innovation Group (CSIG) started to discuss what such an innovation space would look like. They built on insights from employee feedback to design an “Innovation Hub,” a single portal for all things innovation at Cisco. This portal had to allow employees to actively engage in innovation activities and not just consume innovation resources. The design team thus decided to make the Innovation Hub the gateway to participate in the second IEC, which was starting in September 2016. This would drive thousands of Cisco employees to the Innovation Hub and quickly seed a significant volume of engagement and activity. Unfortunately, that left Sarin’s IT team with less than three months to take the Innovation Hub from concept to active portal—a highly aggressive timeline that seemed unrealistic to many within Cisco.

Sarin’s team wrote user stories and their minimum viable product specifications in July and August. From there, they sprinted to get the basic prototype ready in less than six weeks and introduced it just in time for the IEC2 kickoff in September 2016. At its launch, the Innovation Hub was simple but functional: a “minimum viable product” that was geared toward hosting the Innovate Everywhere Challenge but flexible enough to accommodate continued improvements (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Home screen of the Innovation Hub at its launch (Fall 2016)
The Hub team was able to meet its abridged deadline by building on top of existing components including a homegrown ideation and blogging software, a third-party idea management software, and content from Cisco’s Innovation Academy. It also contracted an external firm to build the initial site. More than anything, though, the Hub team’s success was a product of their intense belief in the value the portal would provide their fellow employees.

Soon after introducing the Innovation Hub, the development team started to add features that made it a wider innovation platform. While most users came to the Innovation Hub because it was a requirement for participating in IEC2, the Hub team knew that users would only return if they saw greater value in the portal.

The team quickly built out several new features:

- User profiles for employees to indicate their expertise, business interests, and passions (see Figure 2)
- The ability for employees to invest free tokens in others’ ideas and give feedback to idea submitters
- The ability to form teams to participate in innovation challenges and build a community of support around an idea (see Figure 3)

Enabling employees to create their own teams on the Innovation Hub has improved the quality of submissions to the IEC and other innovation challenges. People interested in submitting an entry now put out calls asking, for example, “Who else is passionate about virtual reality and has a marketing background?” Given that the best IEC submissions tend to feature employees with similar passions but different skill sets and experience, this feature has improved the quality of entries across Cisco’s innovation challenges.

“The IT team’s ability to launch the Innovation Hub so quickly shows what is possible when people find purpose in their work and know they are solving an important business problem.”

- Jyoti Sarin, IT leader for Innovation, Strategy, and Planning
To achieve a critical mass of users and engagement, Cisco started to actively promote the Innovation Hub in high-profile communications such as Cisco Beat, the monthly video cast hosted by senior leadership, and Cisco's main employee web site. The team also sent monthly email newsletters to highlight top news and content featured on the Innovation Hub.

**Establishment**

By early 2017, 14,000 employees were already using the Innovation Hub. To ensure that the portal remained aligned with employee needs, the Hub team put into practice design thinking principles. It conducted multiple rounds of user feedback, focusing on “extreme users” – those who data indicated were top contributors and users of the Innovation Hub. The Hub team set up Webex sessions with these users and asked them to explore the portal and talk through what they were looking for and interested in doing. This provided unique insights into the features these heavy users found most valuable on the portal. The Hub team’s user feedback rounds led to what became one of the most popular features on the portal: a searchable mentor network that allows users to find mentors by title, business unit, interest, expertise, and/or geography (see Figure 4).

*Figure 4: Mentor Network search result (Fall 2018)*

"The Innovation Hub is where employees go to learn about existing innovation programs and events both internally and externally. This is also where they can look for resources to help them develop their ideas into viable ventures."

- Kristen Caplan: IT Project Manager
To ensure that engagement on the Innovation Hub continued to grow, the Hub team borrowed best practices from social networks such as a personalized “feed” of news related to innovation and a “Mark Your Calendar” view that allows users to choose events they want to join (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Personalized user feed, calendar, and activity summary (Fall 2018)

In response to user feedback, the Hub team also added a “Discover & Engage” menu where users could find all existing Cisco innovation challenges, programs, events, and spaces (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: “Discover and Engage” menu and list of programs (Fall 2018)
Finally, the Hub team enabled employees to create their own events, programs, and spaces and invite others to participate. Empowering employees as creators of innovation experiences fostered deeper and more extended engagement on the Innovation Hub.

**Maturity**

While this increased functionality made the Innovation Hub a stickier resource for Cisco employees, its ability to serve as a platform for other competitions perhaps most galvanized engagement. Even before the first IEC, several teams across Cisco ran smaller topic-specific or geography-specific hack-a-thons and innovation competitions. Once the Innovation Hub was in place, the organizers of these events started to ask the Hub team if they could host these challenges on the Innovation Hub rather than having to set up and maintain their own platforms.

In response to these requests, the Hub team created a plug-and-play platform for internal Cisco program managers to host their own challenges. Cisco’s program owners can now create their own mini-sites within the Innovation Hub. They can easily configure the different phases of their challenge, manage the pipeline of ideas, personalize the submission form and judging form, communicate with judges, and much more.

With so much of the friction involved in managing an innovation challenge removed, the number of innovation challenges across Cisco increased along with participation in longstanding challenges. For example, Cisco’s network engineering team runs two hack-a-thons per year. Each of these previously attracted around 400 participants. After moving the competition to the Innovation Hub (see Figure 7), participation increased to over 650 participants even as the organizers dramatically reduced the time they spent administrating the hack-a-thon. The number of innovation challenges held across Cisco went from three in fiscal 2017 to 20 in fiscal 2018. In becoming a platform for hosting all innovation challenges, the Innovation Hub has taken on its own momentum as a user-generated collaboration space.

Figure 7: Homepage of EN Hackathon 2018, hosted on the Innovation Hub (Spring 2018)
The Hub team took another big step in making the Innovation Hub more dynamic and responsive by opening the portal to “inner-sourcing,” allowing any developer in Cisco to write source code to improve the Innovation Hub. Several developers have contributed to the Innovation Hub as part of Cisco’s 20% stretch assignment, which provides employees an opportunity to work on a project of interest beyond their core job. Inner-sourcing lowers the development cost for the Innovation Hub, but its bigger benefit is engaging the community in the development of the portal and thus exposing the dedicated Hub team to new ideas and talents.

Evaluating the Innovation Hub’s Impact

Cisco measures the impact of the Innovation Hub in two ways: 1) distinct metrics that capture usage of the portal, and 2) less quantifiable estimations of the degree to which the Innovation Hub contributes to Cisco’s innovation ecosystem.

There are two ways to evaluate usage of the Innovation Hub:

- **Engagement**: the number of unique users visiting the Innovation Hub
- **Participation**: the volume of actions taken on the portal (posting, hosting Challenges, volunteering as a mentor, etc.)

Both engagement and participation have increased over the past two fiscal years (see Figure 8). In FY2018, more than 40,000 employees—about 56 percent of Cisco’s total workforce—visited the Innovation Hub.

**Figure 8: Innovation Hub usage over the past two fiscal years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FY2017</th>
<th>FY2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement (number of unique visitors)</td>
<td>39,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User profiles</td>
<td>6,178</td>
<td>10,972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitted ideas</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>1,272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>6,055</td>
<td>5,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>2,706</td>
<td>3,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges hosted</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cisco’s fiscal year begins at the end of July, so “FY2018” refers to the period from July 29, 2017 to July 28, 2018.

As of 2018, the most popular functionalities on the Innovation Hub were searching for mentors, looking for challenges and events, participating in challenges, and commenting in discussion groups for specific ventures. Large innovation challenges continue to drive peak usage: traffic on the Innovation Hub is highest around the submission and voting deadlines for the annual IEC challenge. In these months, traffic can reach 4,000 unique visitors per month.
Beyond these discrete metrics, the true measure of the Innovation Hub’s impact is how effectively it spreads a culture of innovation across the enterprise. This is naturally harder to quantify, but several indicators suggest that the portal is accelerating innovation at Cisco:

- The number of mentors has increased, with over 4,000 Cisco employees now ready to help other employees innovate (up from 2,706 in 2017).
- The increase in innovation challenges hosted on the Innovation Hub from 3 to 20 in one year can at least partially be attributed to the ease and convenience of creating and hosting a challenge.
- Similarly, the number of events posted on the Innovation Hub jumped from 60 to 200 from FY2017 to FY2018.

Cisco employees state that the Innovation Hub has added visibility to the range of innovation opportunities and resources across the company, which has led to increased engagement. The ability to find employees with similar passions has also enabled more collaboration across formal teams and units. Cisco employees often use the Innovation Hub to announce physical discussions with tags for the particular topic or emerging technology they want to discuss. They then meet to discuss their interest live, bringing together people who previously had no natural channel to collaborate outside of their project assignments. For an organization as vast as Cisco, the sense of community this engenders can make a big difference in the overall corporate culture.

The Next Frontier

To keep engagement high, the Hub team is starting to gamify the platform to recognize users based on their level of participation and contribution to innovation. They are also working on ways to proactively give users suggestions on how they can become better innovators. Users will soon receive suggestions for challenges they may want to join based on their interests. The Innovation Hub will suggest potential mentors that users may want to approach as well as other employees with highly overlapping interests that users may want to follow. Cisco’s internal learning resources platform could also be integrated with the Innovation Hub to automatically suggest trainings or resources to employees based on their innovation profile and actions. Once these changes are made, the Innovation Hub will generate the critical mass of connections needed to truly increase innovation throughput at Cisco.

It is worth noting that several Cisco customers and partners have already shown interest in the Innovation Hub. As a result an “external” version of the Innovation Hub that is tailored toward the needs of Cisco’s partners may appear in the near future.
The Promise of Big Data on Innovation

The Hub team believes that engagement and participation data from the Innovation Hub can provide the next boost to Cisco’s culture of innovation. These data can offer key insights on innovation hot spots within the organization and enable Cisco’s leaders to identify correlations that they can use to drive management and investment decisions. Leaders will be able to answer questions such as:

- Does engagement in certain types of innovation events or programs lengthen an employee’s tenure at Cisco?
- Do employees who serve as mentors progress more quickly throughout the organization?
- Does a unit with a high rate of participation in hack-a-thons produce more patents than units with lower rates of participation?
- How engaged is my organization in innovation compared with others?
- Who are the top intrapreneurs on my team?

Cisco will be able to answer these questions with increasing sophistication and certainty and thus pinpoint which innovation experiences are most crucial to employee productivity, creativity, satisfaction, and retention. As Cisco determines the return on investment for each element in its innovation portfolio, it can focus its resources on the experiences that are best correlated to positive outcomes.

In addition, profiles and engagement patterns on the Innovation Hub provide unique information on employees’ interests. Someday, managers may be able to recommend assignments, career pathways, and stretch assignments to employees based on their engagement patterns within the Innovation Hub. To fully unlock this value, the Hub team is working on more powerful ways to visually present Innovation Hub data so that business group leaders can easily understand and analyze the information.

Conclusion

Fostering innovation at an enterprise level is notoriously hard. The Innovation Hub has played a key role in My Innovation’s drive to make Cisco’s internal culture nimbler and more supportive of incubating new ideas. It has evolved into a virtual community where employees can collaborate on innovation, connect with mentors and others who can help them build out an idea or interest, and participate in innovation events or competitions across the organization. As such, it is generating the type of peer-to-peer interactions that reinforce a culture of innovation in corporate DNA.

As the Innovation Hub produces more nuanced insight and analysis into innovation flows, hot spots, and experts across the organization, Cisco will be able to focus on the most effective innovation experiences and leverage employees’ passion and strengths to design future innovation. This low-cost portal with humble beginnings may be one of the key drivers in transforming the way that Cisco does business.

“The Innovation Hub has a critical role to play in understanding how employees engage with innovation. The data on the platform can help Cisco determine whether our investments in innovation are worthwhile.”

- Sylvain Baron, Innovation Program Lead, Innovation Hub

“Innovation is hard but the innovation Hub makes it easier by bringing it all together. It is truly a hub - connecting people, ideas, programs and resources.”

- Mathilde Durvy, Innovation Program Manager
Lessons for Others

Based on its experience, Cisco recommends the following best practices for others looking at creating an innovation portal for their enterprise:

1. Clearly identify what problem you are trying to solve.

Collect user feedback on your company’s internal communities. Identify community forums that garner a lot of traffic and determine what is unique about these platforms and/or their users. Find the extreme users in your virtual communities and observe and interview them to learn about their behaviors and what value they gain from these communities. Be as specific as possible in determining your employees’ unmet needs.

2. Don’t build your portal from scratch.

Start from your internal systems and capabilities, and partner with external vendors as needed. Connect rather than recreate. Adopt a “minimum viable product” philosophy. Quickly build something live that your users can react to, rather than aiming for the tool to be comprehensive from the beginning.

3. Work closely with your organization’s HR and IT divisions.

Work with your IT team from the beginning to ensure you create a site architecture that best enables future changes and added functionality. This will also help ensure your platform is properly supported moving forward. HR will help you build the portal in such a way that it connects to your people data and existing personal development and learning resources.

4. Leverage a competition to drive initial usage.

For Cisco, the Innovate Everywhere Challenge was the main way that users initially entered the Innovation Hub and saw its full range of resources. The Challenge provided a natural way to showcase the Innovation Hub’s value and drive future usage.

5. Make it very easy for internal groups to use the portal.

Build your site with (or buy) a plug-and-play architecture that makes it simple for internal users to create and manage their own competitions and communities of interest. Reducing the friction in this process does wonders for usage and engagement.

6. To keep the cost of running the platform sustainable, consider a “freemium” pricing model.

There should be no cost for employees to engage and contribute to an innovation platform. However, charging a small fee to run challenges on the portal helps spread the cost for development and maintenance across multiple business units, making the platform more sustainable.