



Your Country, Your Call

How did a small team motivate tens of thousands of people around the world to help a nation to transform its economy? Find out in a case study that highlights the experiences gained during an innovation initiative in the Republic of Ireland.

In February 2010, the Republic of Ireland launched a global competition called Your Country, Your Call. The goal was to find two ideas that would transform the economy by creating jobs and opportunity. The competition, believed to be the first of its kind, asked for proposals to be submitted online in nine different categories. The competition was inspired by Dr. Martin McAleese and funded by supporting corporations from Ireland and abroad; its patron is the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese.

“We wanted to harness people’s thinking, show them that they can contribute, and stimulate people to take personal responsibility for the process of revitalising the national economy,” says Austin Hogan, who headed up a large virtual team of volunteer professionals as Program Director for Your Country, Your Call.

The website, www.yourcountryyourcall.com, which was set up to manage all the incoming ideas, was based on the I-Zone platform that supports Innovation Europe, Cisco’s internal ideas program. From the beginning, Cisco offered advice on the design and implementation of the competition, at the request of the organizers. Cisco also became the first contributor to offer services and products free of charge, providing collaboration technologies for organizers and entrants to use and acting in partnership with Austin Hogan and his colleagues.

Austin Hogan says: “When I spoke to Damien Dunne, who leads the Innovation Europe team at Cisco, he said: ‘We’ll tell you everything you need to know.’ From that time on, Cisco people gave us a huge amount of very practical help and their ‘can do’ attitude was infectious.”

Results and Next Steps

Between the launch on February 17, 2010, and the deadline for submissions on April 30, there were nearly 200,000 visits to the website from 176 countries and territories. In total, the website received 9000 proposals, which were narrowed down to 20 semi-finalists. Coaches were assigned to all the semi-finalists for a six-week period, to help them refine and develop their ideas before presenting them to a panel of judges who selected five finalists. The two winners, announced on September 17, 2010, were:

- “An Opportunity for Ireland to Become a Global Media Hub,” proposed by Neil Leyden
- “The Data Island Strategy,” proposed by Cianán Clancy and Colm Mac Fhlannachadha

The winning proposals received a prize of EUR€100,000 each, and there was a development fund of €500,000 for each proposal.

“Cisco is pleased to see the initiative come to fruition and looks forward to continuing the partnership,” says Damien Dunne, Marketing Director, European Marketing, Cisco.

After the winners had been announced, the next priority was to create an implementation team in order to turn sets of ideas into practical business plans. It was also necessary to bring in different types of specialist expertise—for example, the global media hub proposal focused on the digital content industry and therefore required a great deal of legal input. Similarly, technical input was needed to help reduce the initially broad scope of the data island proposal to a more manageable focus around the two areas of cloud computing and data analytics.

During this process of evaluation, it became apparent to the team that the winning proposals were converging in a manner that was unplanned and almost organic. “The two proposals began to develop in an integrated way, which is understandable because in many ways they need each other to operate,” says Austin Hogan. “We realized that, in building out content, cloud computing, and data analytics industries, we would in fact be establishing a digital services center for Europe, in Ireland.”

Consequently, the implementation team started taking an integrated approach to the winning proposals, with a focus on creating the opportunity represented by a digital services center. In addition to reflecting the obvious links between the two proposals, this approach also enabled the team to broaden the scope of the digital services center to encompass all the technology companies and professional services providers that had already set up operations in Ireland. “The concept of a digital services center enabled us to put an umbrella across the whole technology presence in Ireland and subsume all the existing services into it, too,” says Austin Hogan.

At the end of May 2011, the implementation team handed over the proposals to a public-private partnership that will oversee the rest of the project. During this stage, some of the partner contributors who have been involved with the initiative from the beginning could take on a more prominent role. Although full deployment is expected to take up to two years, it is hoped that Ireland will start to reap the benefits of the winning proposals much sooner. “We would like to be marketing Ireland as a digital services center before the end of 2011,” says Austin Hogan.

Top Tips and Lessons Learned

Generating and Evaluating Ideas

- Keep your competition website as simple as possible, and plan for higher levels of traffic than you expect.
- Make sure your evaluation process is robust, so that you can clearly identify proposals that meet your criteria for the competition. An independent quality assurance process is recommended for a public competition.
- Stay focused on your objectives. Your Country, Your Call was looking for proposals that would create significant numbers of jobs by building an industry, not just a business, and that could be realized in a meaningful way with the available funding. The competition generated more good ideas than it was resourced to develop, so it was essential to select the proposals with the greatest potential for achieving the objectives.

- Seek advice when you need it and as early as possible, and be prepared to trust your advisors. Business analysts from Accenture, one of this project’s sponsoring companies, helped review the original 9000 proposals. The project team also sought additional advice from experts who could offer an informed opinion of the highly technical or specialized subject matter in 180 of those proposals.

Developing the Winning Ideas

- Don’t be surprised if you end up somewhere different from where you originally intended to go with your ideas—this is a sign of success, not failure.
- Make the task manageable. Look at each winning proposal in its entirety, and then narrow your focus to smaller elements that can be delivered immediately, as this might also lead to the bigger picture taking shape.
- Consider creating an expert group of independent “critics” whose role is to assess and comment on the business plans you are developing. During the implementation phase of Your Country, Your Call, the team brought together a group of professionals who acted as a virtual board of directors. “We presented to the group every six to eight weeks, as if they were our investors,” says Austin Hogan. “It turned out to be an essential part of the process. It helped us to concentrate our efforts in between each meeting and provided us with high-quality feedback in a nonthreatening environment.”
- One of the goals of this type of activity is to motivate and involve people who would not normally think of taking part. By finding a way of developing some of the best ideas that do not meet your criteria, outside the scope of the main competition, you will help to enrich people’s experience as well as create wider benefits. Your Country, Your Call did this as part of its evaluation process, by organizing a workshop where the semi-finalists had the opportunity to pitch their proposals to professional organizations and development agencies.



Managing the People and the Process

- Be disciplined. Even if your initiative is not a typical project with known outcomes, it helps to set deadline dates for delivery throughout the agreed timeline.
- Be resilient. Not everyone will think your initiative is a good idea or will want to make it work. Expect a degree of cynicism about the project, particularly at the early conceptual stages, and plan in advance how you will manage it.
- Be receptive to change. This type of project is not static. New developments will happen on a regular basis that give you a different perspective, so you will have to find a way to deal with this.
- An initiative of this kind needs an effective, committed, and inspirational sponsor—in the case of Your Country, Your Call, this was Martin McAleese.
- This type of initiative can release huge reserves of goodwill and commitment as well as creativity. Your Country, Your Call unleashed real passion in many people who got involved, from the organizers and sponsoring partners to the winning proposers, who each gave three months of their own time to work with the implementation team. Non-Irish people also made a significant contribution, driven by their own responses to the project and its momentum.
- Diversity sparks energy and ideas among the organizers as well as the participants. “At the start, we had a virtual team of over 80 professionals, most of whom had never worked together before, and this showed us the power of collaboration—particularly when driven by goodwill,” says Austin Hogan.
- Don’t be put off by the risks involved. Acknowledge them, reduce or remove them as much as possible, and then carry on.
- Success is mostly about relationships: the power behind Your Country, Your Call was people’s ability to get along with each other and focus on doing something really well.

For More Information

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