



Managers Develop Techniques to Foster Innovation Remotely

Some managers say the pandemic itself provided opportunities to innovate.

By Dervedia Thomas | February 2, 2022

Asset management firms have had to rethink their approach to fostering innovation as many workers remain remote and the Covid-19 pandemic stretches on.

Some managers already recalled workers to office locations last year, while others had hoped to bring staff back on hybrid schedules for in-person collaboration. However, many firms had to revert back to remote work as the omicron variant of the coronavirus emerged.

“Innovation often comes from what you could call serendipity,” said **Gary Brackenridge**, global head of asset management at technology consultancy **Linedata**. “We know firms that have struggled — I’m not going to be shy to say even providers like Linedata have struggled to keep innovation on track during remote work. That being said, is there still wild innovation happening in the marketplace? — There is.”

Some managers say the pandemic itself provided opportunities to innovate.

T. Rowe Price began hosting technology competitions during the pandemic to help employees across the firm come up with new ideas, said **Jordan Vinarub**, head of the firm’s technology development center in New York City and its data insights tech team.

The hackathons were open to employees from the entire company and have led to projects that employees continued after the hackathon, he said.

“We found that having the fun competitive atmosphere of a hackathon, where we bring in some new data sets and have people generate insights and look to innovate... has proven to be a big success,” he said. “Having that being done remotely has proven to be a great way to do it... [instead of] having to get hundreds of people to go to the New York office to physically be there.”

From the hackathon, teams developed procedures to use natural language processing to detect environmental, social and governance sentiment in earnings calls transcripts, created alerts based on alternative data and introduced new investment factors for the portfolio management process, such as a measure of “normalcy,” based on what occurred in the economy before and after the Covid-19 pandemic began, he added.

Employees from **Rothko Investment Strategies** have participated in hackathons outside the firm on topics that aren’t always related to investment management, such as forecasting power loading on electricity grids and biomedical research, said **Dan Philps**, head of the business, which sits within

Mondrian Investment Partners. “Side hustles” such as external hackathons and managing personal portfolios have allowed employees to bring creative perspectives to their jobs, he added.

“I think side hustles have come out as a thing over the pandemic in a bad way, in some senses, ... but you just get the scope to think more broadly because you’re not siloed in an office anymore and you’re not cooped up on a tube train,” Philips said.

Rothko hit the jackpot when one of its employees began exploring an idea with **City University of London** students and professors, with whom the firm does research projects. That idea turned into a business that Rothko has since spun out, Philips said. The business, called **GaiaLens**, uses big data to assess companies’ social responsibility, and Rothko is marketing it to U.S.-based foundations and endowments, he said.

“GaiaLens directly came out of a side hustle,” Philips said. “A team member was looking at this with our academic partners in a very transparent way, and we didn’t know if it would be successful but, in the end, ... everything came together.”

Leaders are also adapting their communication styles and applying company principles to the concept of innovation.

Related Content

January 25, 2022

Fidelity Launches Tech Biz for Compliance, Marketing Pros

November 22, 2021

AllianceBernstein Bond Exec Turned Poker Ace Antes up for Charity

June 29, 2020

Managers Kick-off Virtual Tech Competitions to Solve Biz Problems

Tikehau Capital, a \$38 billion alternatives manager, has centered its motivational efforts around the phrases “be curious” and “say yes,” to encourage employees to have an open mind and commit to solving problems as they come up, said **Cécile Cabanis**, the firm’s deputy CEO.

“Innovation is really something that you need in your mindset and in your behavior,” she said.

The remote environment is also forcing leaders to be more intentional about collaboration, Cabanis added.

“It has forced everyone to be more mindful and vigilant around proximity management, reinventing the way you meet with your team, ... modifying the

habit of the coffee [meeting] to something else,” she said.

Employees who were remote before the pandemic began may have been short-changed at times, but now employees are more cognizant of the need to be inclusive, Vinarub said.

“What you could get away with in the past doesn’t work or has a higher risk of people being disconnected. So, you have to take the time,” he said.

The pandemic, and the lack of a commute, also gave employees more time to improve their skills through websites like Coursera, Philips said.

Virtual lunch and learn sessions, trivia and community service projects have also helped T. Rowe employees bring creative ideas to work, said Vinarub.

“There's no one thing,” he said. “You have to do all these things, all the time. Back in the day, when we were five days in the office, you would get the benefit of community. When you don't have that, you have to just keep finding different ways to do it. And no one thing will be the thing because everyone gets Zoom fatigue and deals with the stresses and strains of how they're managing their life.”

Contact the reporter on this story at [**dthomas@fundfire.com**](mailto:dthomas@fundfire.com) or 212-542-1237.

FundFire is a copyrighted publication. FundFire has agreed to make available its content for the sole use of the employees of the subscriber company. Accordingly, it is a violation of the copyright law for anyone to duplicate the content of FundFire for the use of any person, other than the employees of the subscriber company.

An Information Service of Money-Media, a Financial Times Company