Varying involvement in digitally enhanced employee-driven innovation

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to advance knowledge about the mechanisms behind, and the implications of, varying involvement in digitally enhanced employee-driven innovation (EDI) by studying how a firm integrates a web-based tool in the organization of its EDI process.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on a qualitative in-depth interview study with managers and employees at one high-performing and one low-performing office of a global IT firm, a critical discourse analysis was performed. It explored how the EDI discourse was produced, distributed and consumed in relation to the web-based tool for collecting and selecting employee ideas.

Findings – The results demonstrate that the production of the innovation discourse by the top-level management, which emphasizes client satisfaction rather than employee engagement, restricts the employees’ utilization of the digital platform that distributes the discourse. However, at the high-performing office, employee participation is ensured because the local managers act as co-distributors of the digital tool.

Research limitations/implications – The single case study design limits the generalizability of the results, but is nevertheless relevant for understanding the mechanisms and implications in similar contexts where web-based tools are used to enhance EDI processes.

Practical implications – The study provides practical insights into the importance of local management’s active promotion of digital tools in order to ensure employee involvement.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the EDI literature by identifying some mechanisms behind and the implications of varying employee involvement in digitally enhanced EDI processes.

Keywords Employee participation, Critical discourse analysis, Managerial implications, Employee-driven innovation, Digitalization, Web-based tools

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
In today’s knowledge-intensive economy, innovation has become imperative for unlocking competitive advantage and enabling companies to thrive and survive. However, entering uncharted innovation territory may be a challenging experience for a company, as there is a wide range of options for how to orchestrate innovation processes to achieve concrete results. One potential path to achieving innovation is the use of digital technology, and particularly web-based tools, to invite the whole workforce to contribute innovative ideas (Beretta et al., 2017; Bergendahl et al., 2015; El-Ella et al., 2013; Gressgård, 2011; Gressgård et al., 2014; Yoo et al., 2012). Lately, the innovation management field has put a greater emphasis on creative efforts outside R&D departments and innovation-specific functions (Franklin et al., 2013; Gressgård et al., 2014; Kesting and Ulhøi, 2010). As a result, it has been argued that “ordinary” employees, meaning employees without an innovation-specific position, are essential sources and drivers of innovation and this is commonly referred to as “employee-driven innovation” (hereafter EDI) (Kesting and Ulhøi, 2010; Smith et al., 2012).

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Employee involvement in innovation is being increasingly talked about, in research as well as in practice (cf. El-Ella et al., 2013; Xerri and Brunetto, 2013; Zacher and Wilden, 2014). A common denominator of the current debate is the significance of, but difficulties in, engaging employees to take part in innovative work aside from their regular work tasks (cf. Moosa and Panurach, 2008). Regardless of whether ideas are managed digitally or not, scholars suggest that the complexity lies in the fact that novel ideas are the result of non-contractible initiatives that are indirectly and unpredictably connected to employees’ routinized work tasks (cf. Hellmann and Thiele, 2011; Krasteva et al., 2015). Consequently, such engagement may reach beyond prescribed responsibilities. This debate highlights the deadlock of initiating and maintaining EDI, while at the same time keeping up daily business as usual. As indicated in previous studies, it further poses the question why some employees are more likely to participate in innovative activities organized by the firm than others. The participation of ordinary employees in innovation is a crucial, but understudied, issue in the quest for an understanding of what fosters or impedes EDI work in knowledge-intensive organizations (Høyrup, 2012; Høyrup et al., 2018). Furthermore, how managers intervene in the employee innovation process remains unclear from a theoretical point of view (cf. Bilton, 2007; Høyrup, 2012). The support of digital technologies in the EDI process can be further investigated in order to explore how employee ideas are monitored, evaluated and selected by management (Gressgård et al., 2014). However, little is known about the structural and behavioral implications of digitally planting bottom-up involvement by ordinary employees in innovation in order to be able to harvest concrete EDI. Høyrup et al. (2018) thus suggest a dual research focus on both employee reception and enactment of EDI and managerial intervention in order to be able to scrutinize the managerial dimensions that encourage and facilitate employee participation in innovation.

The aim of this paper is therefore to advance knowledge about the mechanisms behind, and the implications of, varying involvement in digitally enhanced EDI processes by studying how a firm invites all employees to contribute to innovation with the use of a web-based tool in the organization of its EDI process. Based on empirical data from two offices of a global IT firm, located in Sweden, the main research question guiding the study is:

**RQ1. Why are some employees more likely than others to participate in a centrally organized digital innovation program?**

This is addressed by means of a critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA), which allows an exploration of how the innovation discourse is produced, distributed and consumed by the top-level management, local managers and employees. This study thus responds to the call made by Gressgård et al. (2014): to use alternative methodological approaches to enable comparative analysis of how web-based tools are utilized in EDI. The methodological lens of CDA offers a way to capture the interaction between the central management of digitally organizing and promoting EDI, and the local employees’ participation in such innovation processes.

The first section of the paper presents the theoretical framework, focusing on EDI in general, and web-based tools in particular. The research design is then outlined, including the CDA approach, followed by a section presenting the results. Finally, conclusions and implications are discussed.

**Theoretical framework**

**Employee-driven innovation (EDI)**

EDI is a phenomenon that has recently been on the rise and highlighted by scholars from numerous fields (cf. Gressgård et al., 2014; Haapasaari et al., 2017; Laviolette et al., 2016). Over time, various practices have been adopted by organizations to capitalize more intensively and extensively on employees’ ideas, knowledge and competencies.
Traditional innovation research, however, tends to focus on the initial phases of creativity and idea generation, while neglecting the later phases of implementation and market diffusion (Amabile et al., 1996; Brem et al., 2016; Ganzaroli et al., 2016; Mumford et al., 2002; Rekonen and Björklund, 2016). The recently expanded research stream of EDI directs scholarly attention to the later phases of idea development, promotion and implementation as a way of conceptualizing the entire innovation process (Hiltunen and Henttonen, 2016; Høyrup, 2012; Kesting and Ulhøi). Unlike traditional innovation management research, which tends to focus primarily on employees with innovation-specific functions such as R&D workers, the EDI concept demonstrates the significant role of ordinary employees (cf. Franklin et al., 2013; Laviolette et al., 2016). All employees are regarded therefore as essential idea generators, as well as idea executors and co-creators of innovation outcomes (Smith et al., 2012; Watanabe et al., 2015; Zejnilovic et al., 2012). The EDI process sheds light on the encouragement of all employees to innovate outside their regular day-to-day activities, regardless of what position they hold in the organization or what their background is (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2010; Laviolette et al., 2016).

As a concept, it has been argued that EDI includes multiple dimensions since it is an umbrella term covering a broad range of issues and processes (Høyrup, 2012). Høyrup argues that the importance of EDI has intensified because Schumpeter’s (1934) traditional focus on novel products and their economic benefits fails to unveil the daily work practices that innovation encompasses. Thus, when scholarly focus is directed onto the social processes that unfold in the organization to produce innovation, the interaction between members of the organization becomes a crucial unit of analysis. In this context, EDI offers a lens through which to conceptualize the local involvement of employees in relation to central management in joint innovation processes. Høyrup (2010, 2012) illustrates this interaction in a typology where “third order EDI” refers to an innovation process where top-level management invites all employees to contribute to innovation. Whilst Høyrup (2012) theorizes about EDI in terms of incremental innovation and individual learning, Laviolette et al. (2016) propose that “EDI is a disruptive process from routines that is conducted by employees with the support of managers” (p. 231). The collective and social endeavor of the innovation process steers attention to employees’ direct participation in terms of proposing, developing, and implementing initiatives, and accordingly how they become sustainable co-producers of innovation (cf. Banerjee, 2013). In this scholarly conversation, Høyrup et al. (2018) specifically underline the need to further investigate employees’ reception and enactment of EDI, while simultaneously focusing attention on managerial interventions. They argue that this enhances the understanding of what mechanisms foster or impede employee participation. Additionally, as suggested by Gressgård et al. (2014), the use of web-based tools in the EDI process offers a way to explore how employees actually respond to the invitation by management to contribute their professional expertise.

**Web-based tools in EDI**

With their in-depth and context-dependent knowledge of products, processes and services, ordinary employees represent a key asset in the innovation process (Kesting and Ulhøi, 2010). Therefore, the EDI concept entails a “democratization of innovation” (von Hippel, 2005), described by Laviolette et al. (2016, p. 230) as an “innovation policy and management system designed to enlarge the scope of innovations and innovators.” Organizing and managing the innovation process is a complex task that requires a balance between various behaviors and approaches (Rekonen and Björklund, 2016). In this social and collaborative process, the interaction between employees and managers is a significant unit of analysis. This interaction often entails the use of web-based tools to facilitate the management of ideas in the organization (cf. Björk et al., 2010; Gressgård et al., 2014; Bergendahl et al., 2015). The digital tools are expected to more
efficiently collect, share and disseminate knowledge and ideas between various levels of the organization (Gressgård et al., 2014). Today, firms are becoming increasingly proactive in trying to stimulate the generation of employee ideas and consequently, scholarly attention has been directed at the management of such ideation processes (Karlsson and Björk, 2017). Physical suggestion boxes are nowadays often replaced by digital idea management systems, as a way to stimulate and exploit employee creativity (cf. Beretta et al., 2017; El-Ella et al., 2013; Sandström and Björk, 2010). As a consequence, management has adopted new ways of shaping and managing ideation processes. The benefits of digital ideation systems have been highlighted in terms of cost reductions for sharing ideas as well as improved efficiency in finding ideas previously “hidden” in the organization (cf. Bergendahl et al., 2015).

Gressgård et al. (2014) highlight a number of implications of adopting such web-based ideation systems. Unless these are integrated in daily work routines, the EDI process will not be effectively facilitated. This seems evident particularly for later stages of the innovation process, where refinement and realization follow the initial idea formulation (Kesting and Ulhøi, 2010; Smith et al., 2012). Theorized from a knowledge management perspective, Gressgård et al. (2014) point out that these web-based tools need to be aligned with regular work processes and the employees’/management’s established understandings to function effectively. Otherwise, the digital tool may impede innovation performance, particularly if no adjustments are made to existing structures and processes. According to previous studies, this may include various structural and behavioral implications (Gressgård et al., 2014). Structural implications refer to increased access to internal knowledge and its distribution. Behavioral implications refer to the web-based tools’ influence on the interaction between people and processes which may aid, or hinder, innovation, depending on how the knowledge is shared and understood by the people involved in that interaction. Other identified shortcomings with web-based ideation systems are their selection and handling mechanisms. This challenge entails the difficulties of understanding and making sense of employee ideas, and consequently of finding the appropriate organizational context for an idea to belong and generate value (Beretta et al., 2017). Another challenge reported in the ideation literature is maintaining and sustaining employee participation over time (Beretta et al., 2017; Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Fairbank et al., 2003; Soukhoroukova et al., 2012). Despite the noted challenges, little is known still about “the managerial dimensions that have an impact on employees’ motivation to conceive, formulate, and eventually develop innovative proposal[s] in the context of EDI” (Høyrup et al., 2018, p. 318).

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis

Since employees are argued to be the foundation for the successful initiation, refinement and implementation of innovative ideas, EDI is essentially conceptualized from a bottom-up perspective (Van Knippenberg et al., 2015; Reitzig and Sorenson, 2013; Smith et al., 2012). However, as Høyrup (2012) points out, the EDI process is complex since it involves multiple actors, including both ordinary employees and managers at various levels. This highlights the social process of innovation, encompassing human interaction rather than just isolated individuals (cf. Bäckström and Lindberg, 2018; Hiltunen and Henttonen, 2016; Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). A suitable framework for capturing such social interactions that includes a dual focus on the structural and behavioral implications, is CDA, which is the methodological lens applied in this paper. Unlike critical linguistics, which is sometimes used interchangeably with CDA, the CDA lens takes into account the content of a text (communicated in writing or orally) as well as the context in which it is produced, distributed and consumed (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Of the multiple schools of thought
within the scholarly circle of CDA, this paper draws on Fairclough’s three-layered CDA framework (see Phillips et al., 2008 for an illustration).

In Fairclough’s framework of CDA, discourses mediate the relationship between social practices, which are expressed through texts, and the social context (Phillips et al., 2008). This duality reinforces that the discourse is shaped by the social context and the texts involved, while simultaneously (re)shaping the social context itself. The three layers thus cannot be dismantled, as this would conceal the interaction between the production and consumption of discourse. Hence, a strength of CDA in the current context is that it provides a framework for understanding relationships between language and social context, and allows for an exploration of broader social and political structures (cf. Bacchi, 1999; Fairclough, 1995). Additionally, this lens offers a way to capture the utilization and function of the digital tool in the interaction between managers and employees that shapes the social context studied. This is aligned with the argument that a successful innovation endeavor depends on the extent to which people, tools and processes are integrated in EDI (Gressgård et al., 2014). Thus, the analysis of discourse involves attention to processes of text production, distribution and consumption/interpretation. The main assumption is that written or spoken text cannot be separated from the social context and the discursive practice in which it is embedded (Fairclough, 1995).

Designing and conducting the study
The empirical data in this study were gathered at two offices of a global IT firm, situated in Sweden, during 2016–2017. The selection of these offices was based on the difference in their performance regarding the number of ideas submitted to the firm’s joint digital innovation platform. This discrepancy enabled a structured study of why some employees are more likely to engage in EDI processes than others. In order to distinguish the offices, they were designated “the low-performing office” and “the high-performing office.” The empirical data consists of 20 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with ten ordinary employees (i.e. employees without an official innovation function), seven middle-level managers (i.e. local managers), and three top-level managers at the two offices. In total, 12 interviews were conducted at the low-performing office and the remaining at the high-performing office. The study was complemented by observations at the two sites, written texts (mainly strategy documents) derived from the firm’s intranet, and spoken texts in terms of an internal podcast that was transcribed.

Interviews were seen as a crucial source of material for acquiring initial insights into the employees’ and managers’ perceptions of factors motivating them to contribute to, or dismiss, idea submissions to the centrally organized innovation platform. In-depth and face-to-face interviews were considered a suitable method for obtaining knowledge of informants’ experiences and how they make sense of the concept of innovation (cf. Alvesson, 2003; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min, depending on how much time the informant could devote to this, and were recorded and later transcribed in full. Access to the interviewees was initially given by the top-level manager at each office, with the intention of including diverse roles among the informants. It was key to find informants who worked in different teams, in order to enable comparisons of experiences across ongoing processes. Also, to avoid relying too much on the top-level managers’ selection of participants, additional unstructured interviews were carried out at the two offices during the weeks spent there. These casual conversations, often taking place by the coffee machine or at lunchtime, were not recorded and transcribed but recorded as field notes.

As noted by Silverman (2007), there are shortcomings with interviews as the main source of empirical data. First, there is a risk of steering the interviewee in a certain direction during the conversation, and as a result the informant may provide pieces of information that s/he thinks are expected of her/him. To overcome this, open questions were posed
where the informants could speak freely about their daily work routines and their ongoing projects. Their own storylines could thus define the conversation, rather than being asked direct questions about the innovation process. The informants were also given an opportunity to define the concept of innovation according to their own views and define how to apply it in relation to their daily work tasks and responsibilities. Silverman also concludes that interviews generally provide more information about how interviewees think and talk about a certain topic, and less about what the participants actually do in practice. The interview data were therefore triangulated with additional data sources, such as observations and text material.

**Analyzing the empirical findings**

Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015) three modes of analysis were adopted when processing the data, which entailed the steps of coding, condensation and interpretation. In the coding phase, codes emerging from the collected empirical material (*in-vivo codes*) were compared to themes identified in the literature (*a priori categories*). The *in-vivo* codes uncovered dichotomies in the interaction between the managers and the employees when promoting and utilizing the web-based innovation tool. Examples of such tensions were client focus vs employee focus, short-term profit focus vs long-term employee satisfaction, hidden innovation vs visible innovation, separation vs togetherness and resistance vs acceptance. In order to compare and contrast these themes with the extant literature on EDI, the CDA lens was applied in structuring the findings according to the three categories of production, distribution and consumption/interpretation of the EDI discourse. The second phase of condensing the data consisted of structured readings, re-readings and writing of the thematically structured data. There was a comparison of how top-level managers centrally organized the digital innovation platform, including the intentions behind this set-up, and how local managers and employees perceived and reacted to this process. In the third phase, the condensed data were interpreted in the light of the EDI literature, particularly regarding the ICT tool as a means of distributing the EDI discourse, to be able to fully explain the findings.

**Results**

*The ideation process*

In 2014, the IT firm implemented a digital innovation platform in order to enhance innovation and enable all employees to become innovators (cf. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). By adopting this web-based tool, it was possible to invite the entire workforce to participate. The digitally enhanced innovation program is illustrated in Figure 1 and consists of three main stages. The phases comprised in the innovation

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**Figure 1.** Phases of the digital innovation program

*Note: Authors’ original model*
program represent one way of arranging digital idea management systems in order to exploit employees’ expertise (cf. Beretta et al., 2017; El-Ella et al., 2013; Sandström and Björk, 2010).

The web-based platform constitutes a strategic and systematic way of inviting employees to generate novel and useful ideas based on a pre-formulated theme or area of interest that the top-level management deems worthy of further exploration. According to Høyrup’s (2010, 2012) typology of EDI, this way of organizing bottom-up innovation resembles a “third order EDI” structure, where management invites ordinary employees to participate in innovation. In the case studied, employees are given a formal opportunity to share ideas with fellow employees and superiors in order to receive feedback to enable improvements on their specific ideas in a digitally transparent manner. Thus far, the themes initiated by the top-level management have encompassed transportation, the public sector, digitalization, etc. After introducing the theme on the IT firm’s intranet, employees have two to three weeks to formulate and share their ideas. In the meantime, employees are also encouraged to comment and vote on their peers’ ideas. During the second phase, employees can no longer post ideas but can still interact with peers. The final stage then introduces the selective element where a team of experts, consisting of managers or employees selected by the innovation manager, chooses the winning ideas. These are announced at the top of the intranet page. Whether the ideas receive funding or not then depend on clients’ willingness to engage in the formulated employee projects, and whether the board of directors approves the framing of the project.

The innovation manager emphasizes the purpose of the EDI program in terms of a dual mission: on the one hand, to create and maintain employee engagement in innovation, and on the other hand to enhance innovation performance and outcomes for the organization as a whole. When submitting an idea to the web-based platform, employees are required to specify the innovation proposal in terms of the value proposition it represents for the IT firm and the value it creates for the firm’s clients. According to the innovation manager, the web-based ideation system is a way to democratize innovation and engage a wider range of participants. Although organized digitally at a central level in the firm, with the program being accessible on the intranet for all employees to easily participate, the innovation manager emphasized the importance of active local management in order to spark employee innovation. Local managers are thus responsible for recognizing employees’ efforts, since this is not dealt with at the central level. The Swedish offices of the IT firm work with different clients in diverse projects. The central innovation platform functions as a way to make each process visible and inspirational for the whole organization. The innovation manager highlights the importance of the joint platform for expanding the use of local experiences to more clients and projects, thereby disseminating knowledge and ideas across the organization.

Production of innovation discourse

The employee innovation discourse produced centrally by the management seems closely related to the firm’s clients’ needs and wants. When submitting an idea on the digital innovation platform, the employee is required to specify how the idea is going to add value for the clients. This discourse is further shaped by the top-level managers emphasizing clients and the proactive role of employees in creating and maintaining client relationships. One of them says:

Our clients expect us to be innovative […] but it is equally important to stimulate it [innovation] at an internal level, not only to let employees participate but to demand from them to be innovative and proactive in everything we do […] (Top-level manager).

The data indicates that the external client focus is prioritized as the innovation discourse is formed, while the internal dimension of engaging employees seems secondary. This tendency
is illustrated by the same top-level manager when talking about the importance of evaluating client satisfaction as a key indicator of innovation performance:

[...] in our [client] projects we make an overall assessment of how the client perceives us, and one question directly relates to whether the client views us as proactive and innovative in our delivery of the products and services we provide [...] (Top-level manager).

In this conversation, the emphasis was put on the client rather than on the employee carrying out the client projects. Another top-level manager comments on the relationship between the firm’s EDI approach and the client assessment of the delivered results:

I can’t see that we have benefitted from it [the innovation platform] yet, nor have we promoted it to our employees [...] but at the same time, this is an opinion from our clients, that we’re not innovative enough [...] they think that we should be more innovative [...] (Top-level manager).

When the same manager was asked a follow-up question about employee satisfaction assessment after discussing client satisfaction, the answer was:

I can’t remember if there is any question about [employee] ideas in our assessment of employee satisfaction at work [...] there is a question about the employee’s experiences of influencing work practices, but there is no question specifically on innovation or creativity [...] (Top-level manager).

This is further supported by the two following quotations, derived from a podcast produced by the firm with the intention of informing employees about the innovation platform and the importance of sharing ideas and experiences:

The most important thing is that we focus on our clients’ needs and challenges.
We should generate ideas that generate significant value for our clients.

Instead of employees being the starting point of the innovation process, as promoted in the EDI approach (cf. Hiltunen and Henttonen, 2016; Hojrup, 2012; Kesting and Ulhøi, 2010; Laviolette et al., 2016), clients appear to be communicated as the primary social context. This is aligned with a top-level manager’s description of how the web-based EDI program is applied in practice:

I haven’t encouraged my employees to use it [internal innovation platform] that much [...] yet [...] I have mostly worked with it when I’ve been in meetings with clients to show them that there are employee initiatives in our organization (Top-level manager).

This finding suggests a mismatch between what the innovation platform is initially claimed to be by top-level management (i.e. an emphasis on both employee engagement and client satisfaction) and what is done in practice (i.e. emphasis exclusively on clients’ perceptions and priorities). Findings from the two offices indicate that this ambiguity in the production of the EDI discourse is interpreted differently by the local managers, and consequently distributed and consumed in diverse ways among the employees at the two sites. Since the top-level management produces an innovation discourse that is primarily linked to the clients’ needs and wants, structural and behavioral implications arise. This key mechanism is reflected in the utilization of the digital platform that distributes the innovation discourse to local managers and employees, as elaborated on in the subsequent sections.

The low-performing office
According to the innovation manager, the local managers have a responsibility to encourage employee creativity in order to increase the number of ideas submitted to the innovation platform. The EDI discourse is reflected in different ways at the two offices studied. At the office deemed to be low-performing in terms of the limited number of ideas submitted by its employees, lack of time is repeatedly communicated as a threshold for innovation.
Both managers and employees at this site seem to share this perception. As the innovation discourse is shaped in a client-specific direction via the digital platform, the social context is pervaded by short-term profit streams that appear to constrain the innovation process at the low-performing office. One employee explains, “as long as the client pays [for the project] you can be as creative as you like.” Two employees further comment on the perceived support:

[…]. The only problem is that we don’t get any time to spend on it, to continue working on our ideas […] they [the managers] encourage us to be creative and to find new solutions to problems, but how are we going to find the time for it? (Employee).

 […] the frames [of innovation] are always expressed in monetary terms […] steering the work […] [silence, the informant reflects] What we suffer from is […] that they want the money not today or tomorrow but rather yesterday […] I sometimes say that it is totally fine to sell the bear’s skin before the bear is actually shot, but you simply must have the gun ready to be able to shoot it in the first place, and it’s not always the case that we are provided with a gun […] (Employee).

In the consumption of the EDI discourse, the digital platform seems to restrict employees in their creative processes rather than allowing them to pursue their ideas. The perception of lacking resources to engage in innovation outside the given client frames appears to impede employee involvement. When talking about the digital innovation platform, a local manager at the low-performing office describes it as “doing it all wrong”:

I know employees who have worked on their ideas on the sidelines and then demonstrated it as soon as the idea was conceptualized […] things they do based on their own initiative […] But that’s not good, really, we’re not supposed to do that because we’re not getting paid for it […] Employees are already working more than full time on their projects and you cannot demand from them to engage more […] I wish we could drive innovation in another way, inside the given frames […] officially […] that we were given time to be innovative […] but there’s never time […] (Manager).

The role of the digital platform as a distributor of the innovation discourse is closely paired with the local managers’ utilization of it. The centrally communicated opportunity to participate in innovation seems not to be reciprocated locally at this office, due to the lack of local manager engagement in the activities of submitting ideas. The mechanism of local management thus seems to be central to the behavioral implications. It appears to affect employees’ interpretation of the importance of utilizing the tool in order to develop and promote ideas. The quotation “I mean, it cannot only be goals and visions that are mentioned once in a while […] you must manage […] this is how you show that it is important” is another example of an employee’s perception that reflects how the ambiguity is consumed as the EDI discourse is distributed locally. Another employee comments:

[…]. They will act in the same way as you, so you’ve got to practice what you preach […] and if we have a top-level management that really thinks that it’s important to nurture our ideas […] then they must also try to boil it down to everyday practices (Employee).

Nevertheless, there were some examples of employee-initiated innovations at the low-performing office too. These tended to remain hidden from the digital innovation platform though, as they did not fit the frames defined there. The developer of such an innovation describes the main challenge for implementing it as “the constant battle of promoting it [the idea],” and that:

[…] the innovation platform is really important […] but my feeling is that they only want to focus on contemporary ideas […] if there is a hype around the idea right now […] and those of us who have ideas that are not enjoying any hype right now, we are not doing the interesting stuff […] if you fail to frame your project according to the right buzzwords you become an outsider (Employee).
Thus, a significant structural implication is how the web-based platform facilitates or constrains employees in branding their ideas there. Instead of facilitating access to internal knowledge and dissemination of ideas (cf. Gressgård et al., 2014), the structural arrangement of the platform seems to constrain it. The consumption of the EDI discourse reflects power-related mechanisms, since the employee is unable to probe, question and recalibrate an idea format that is ultimately based on clients’ perceptions of its value. Also, the emphasis on “contemporary ideas” and “hype” suggests that the employee is constrained by the meaning of value that is produced by management and distributed via the digital platform. This mimics the challenge of handling ideas in ideation systems (Beretta et al., 2017), particularly the willingness of management to present alternative ways of understanding the value of an employee’s idea and placing it in the appropriate context. As a consequence, the behavioral implication is limited employee participation.

The high-performing office
The EDI discourse seems to be consumed differently when distributed to the office designated the high-performing office with reference to the high number of ideas submitted by its employees. One manager at this office explains that:

When they [the top-level management] post an innovation challenge [on the innovation platform], we talk about it all the time [...] what kinds of ideas have been submitted, which ideas belong to our office [...] we discuss them [the ideas] and remind each other about the deadlines to follow [...] and encourage each other to vote (Manager).

This suggests that the web-based tool of submitting ideas is promoted by managers who encourage employees to use it on a regular basis. The mechanism of including the topic of idea submission on local and informal meeting agendas seems to enhance the digital ideation process. All kinds of activity on the platform seem to be considered important by these managers. Akin to the low-performing office, client focus is evident when the EDI discourse is distributed locally. At the high-performing office, however, local managers reshape the discourse with an emphasis on employees’ well-being in order to create a sense of belonging with innovative activities. Two managers at the high-performing office reflect:

[...] we encourage innovation [...] and the importance of establishing a sense of belonging to a team [...] and safety [...] it’s also about being tolerant [as a manager], to make your employees dare to come up with creative ideas and talk about them aloud [...] (Manager).

[...] it’s about being strong and believing in yourself, to be confident and safe [...] and in this [process] the workplace is here to assist them, to find that inner trust and belief in themselves (Manager).

At the high-performing office, employees are recognized for being the source of innovations, and self-confidence is not taken for granted but (re)produced in the EDI process. In order to boost this EDI engagement, tolerance and persistence are two recurring themes when managers at the high-performing office talk about the process. In the consumption of the EDI discourse at this office, it seems to be interpreted as a long-term activity rather than a short-term effort. One manager there says:

[...] we have wonderful clear-cut processes that are truly valuable to us and that we should follow, how we should do business [...] but when it comes to creative stuff that flows from the bottom up you simply cannot box these ideas with rigid frames right away [...] they need to flow freely for a while (Manager).

The quotation above highlights the mechanisms of understanding the value of bottom-up ideas, and how they can be related to the organization’s structured innovation processes. As pointed out by the local managers at this site, such efforts may be time-consuming and require tolerance and persistence. This challenge resembles the debate found in the ideation literature regarding
the valuation of ideas by management in order to align them with appropriate contexts (cf. Beretta et al., 2017). This long-term focus appears to support the innovative efforts at this office, enabling ideas to be transformed into EDIs, which are promoted and spotlighted on the digital innovation platform. In addition, it seems important for the managers themselves to introspectively reflect on their own values and ways of acting to be able to manage themselves before managing the employees in this innovation process:

[...] you may think that we work primarily with technical stuff, but we don’t [...] we work with people [...] so it’s truly important that we are close to the people we work with [...] that everyone is recognized for who they are and this is often a challenge [...] I manage many consultants and if they are working on a project at a client’s office I need to coach them remotely [...] but physical presence is key [...] so I’ll go and visit them instead [...] to avoid them losing their sense of belonging to our office [...] I need to feel that I’m close to them to build a trusting relationship, I need to get to know the person in order to be able to support her or him [...] it’s not like I’m successful every time [...] on a daily basis [...] but I try, again and again (Manager).

This quotation pinpoints the significant mechanisms involved in building a strong manager-employee relationship that reinforces the digital innovation process. The managers at the high-performing office emphasize the importance of being physically present in the EDI process and being available for small everyday chats with the employees about their ideas. This closeness and inclusiveness is further enhanced by employees commenting on the weekly staff meetings, where all teams meet in order to discuss and reflect on experiences from different projects. These meetings seem to be the physical equivalent to the digital platform, where employees and managers get to know each other’s skills and share ideas and knowledge. One employee comments:

[...] they [the managers] invite us to present what we are currently working on, or what we have done in previous projects, in part to show things that we have done well [...] I think that shapes a culture in which you want to contribute ideas and learn new stuff [...] (Employee).

In particular, the meetings seem to stimulate innovation and encourage employees to contribute to the digital innovation platform after getting the chance to discuss their ideas and gaining the self-confidence that is preached, and practiced, at the high-performing office. Because of this mechanism of integration, the web-based innovation platform is incorporated into local structures and practices, which seems to facilitate the EDI approach (cf. Gressgård et al., 2014). One employee explains that the benefit of meeting is that they have the opportunity to discuss different ideas in order to move them forward and identify different ways of applying a solution:

[...] it’s about making connections [...] how could we possibly use this idea? How can this be used, and in what contexts? If we find common ground for an idea [...] if we identify the potential of an idea to be implemented in a project, then we go on with it [...] (Employee).

Overall, the phase of idea promotion is demonstrated as decisive in stimulating innovation at the high-performing office. This seems especially important for inspiring the employees to continue working on their ideas and to formulate them in concrete terms. The end goal of implementation appears to be constantly in mind, to be able to harvest valuable ideas. One manager at this office explains:

[...] we often sit in the lunchroom, drink coffee and talk about ideas [...] and sometimes they come specifically to me to air an idea and see what I think about it [...] they need some kind of initial approval [...] or support in promoting it further [...] like in the case of X [an implemented EDI] where they [employees involved in the project] went to top-level management with the idea and they were really annoying, almost bothering them [...] and I told them “just go on and do it”, be persistent I told them [...] it’s all about being the owner of your idea and convincing top-level management about it (Manager).
In both offices, the employees need to convince top-level management about the value-adding properties of the idea for the firm and its clients in order to fit within the innovation frames. However, at the high-performing office, the given frames seem not to constrain the EDI process to the same extent as in the low-performing office. This indicates that the innovation discourse is distributed in different ways by the local managers at each office, and as a result consumed differently by employees at the two sites. In the process of stimulating innovation, the managers at the high-performing office appear to reshape the EDI discourse by conveying how employees can use the given structures to strengthen their ideas, rather than to be diminished by them. One manager at this office comments, “I’ve always focused on conveying the positive side of it [the bureaucratic structure] because it’s all about injecting energy.” In addition, the managers at this office are preaching, and practicing, the art of trial and error in EDI efforts:

[...] step one is about active listening and step two implies trying it [the employee idea] out [...] if you’re ready to test it then you’re also risking failure [...] we have tested many ideas that have not been successfully implemented [...] but we’ve also tried some ideas that have proved to be the start of a really successful innovation journey [...] (Manager).

The managers at the high-performing office thus demonstrate to the employees that it is acceptable to make mistakes. Submitting ideas to the innovation platform is not an end in itself: it is the beginning of an idea’s journey. In this way, the managers reshape the EDI discourse with the message that innovation is about embarking on a course of action without fear of failure or any guarantee of success. This trial and error mechanism is reinforced by the employees, who describe their managers as being “on the bleeding edge” by continuously taking risks in their own innovation efforts. Another employee comments that, “we are open-minded, it’s all about daring to speak up, to ask the wrong questions, and that this is accepted and received with a warm attitude by the managers.” In this way, employees avoid the constraints on what innovation should entail and the topics the innovative idea should address. Their understanding of, and conversations about, innovation are not framed by the web-based tool and the premise of successful client projects. Rather, their understanding relates to the craft and skill of improving ideas as the journey unfolds. This exemplifies how the EDI discourse is distributed by the local managers and simultaneously consumed by the employees in a reciprocal manner, based on mutual trust.

Concluding discussion
The CDA lens applied in this paper (cf. Bacchi, 1999; Fairclough, 1995; Phillips et al., 2008) sheds light on how the difference in the number of employee ideas submitted from the high- and low-performing offices relates to the interaction between the top-level management’s production of the EDI discourse at a central level in the studied IT firm and how this discourse is distributed and consumed locally by managers and employees. Table I provides an
overview of the comparison between the low- and high-performing offices. In line with Gressgård et al. (2014), this study confirms that web-based tools in EDI have to be well integrated into daily work routines and tasks in order to ensure employee involvement in practice. By applying a CDA lens, this study contributes further insights into the mechanisms behind the noted variations in employee involvement, as well as its structural and behavioral implications. The findings demonstrate that the top-level management produces an innovation discourse that emphasizes client satisfaction rather than employee engagement. This asserts an assumption that the clients – not the employees – are the primary possessors of knowledge concerning what innovations are valuable, which is at odds with the main point of the EDI approach (cf. Høyrup, 2010, 2012; Kesting and Ulhøi, 2010; Laviolette et al., 2016). In turn, this ambiguity is interpreted differently at the two offices. As the web-based innovation platform distributes the innovation discourse defined by top-level management, the local managers have a critical role in reshaping the innovation discourse to facilitate local employee involvement in EDI activities.

At the low-performing office, the digital innovation platform discourages employees from engaging in innovation and submitting ideas. This structural implication seems to stem from the local managers’ interpretation of the centrally arranged digital innovation setup. To the local managers at this site, the digital platform is disconnected from ongoing client projects, which need to be prioritized in the short-term. The local managers’ separation of EDI activities from daily work routines thus constrains the employees’ utilization of the web-based tool. The behavioral implication of this finding is that the employees feel hampered by the given structures, resulting in a low number of ideas submitted to the joint innovation platform. This echoes the challenge of handling employee ideas as identified in the literature on web-based ideation management (cf. Beretta et al., 2017; Gressgård et al., 2014). Unless managers actively try to make sense of the employees’ ideas and fit them in where they can generate added value, innovation is impeded (cf. Beretta et al., 2017; Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Fairbank et al., 2003; Soukhoroukova et al., 2012).

In contrast, the local managers at the high-performing office act as co-distributors of the digital tool. In this way, they reshape the innovation discourse by communicating the supportive structures of the web-based tool when it comes to the activities of submitting, promoting and branding employee ideas. At this site, the employees are recognized as the main source of innovation by their managers, and hence the emphasis is placed on building employees’ self-confidence and satisfaction. The managers continuously encourage persistence and tolerance, with a long-term perspective on success. Furthermore, the digital innovation platform is complemented by physical meetings, where the managers and employees exchange thoughts and experiences. In this way, the long-term perspective also reflects the relationships established with employees in handling their ideas, creating and maintaining long-term relationships between local managers and employees, and employees and the web-based tool, in order to sustain employee participation (cf. Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Fairbank et al., 2003; Soukhoroukova et al., 2012). Rather than focusing exclusively on client projects, local managers at the high-performing office assist employees in finding an appropriate organizational context for their ideas, in order for the employees to be able to brand their ideas on the web-based innovation platform. This, in turn, forms work practices that integrate the web-tool in into daily routines (cf. Gressgård et al., 2014).

Despite the differences in the registered innovativeness between the high- and low-performing offices, the findings are somewhat more nuanced than these designations reflect. Examples of implemented employee innovations were also identified at the low-performing office. However, these remained hidden in the joint EDI process as they did not fit the given frames of client-focused design and formal submission as manifested on the web-based innovation platform. This finding highlights the importance of not
mistaking a low number of submitted ideas for a lack of innovativeness among employees in EDI processes. It further reflects the power relationships involved in shaping the EDI discourse (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Bacchi, 1999). Hidden innovations may indicate that there are ideas that are not fully understood by the management, and hence not made visible on the web-based platform. When the innovation discourse is primarily defined by clients’ needs and wants, and ultimately their approval of a defined idea for financial support, there seems to be less space for the employees to challenge an innovation discourse that is produced from the top down. However, the findings demonstrate that the EDI discourse may be reshaped by local managers when they function as co-distributors of the web-based tool, allowing local employee involvement to be stimulated.

Although EDI reflects the ambition to democratize innovation (cf. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2010; Laviolette et al., 2016), this study contributes an understanding of how local managers can be a threshold for achieving this. Unless the managers actively adapt the centrally defined EDI discourse to their local context, this structural implication may limit employee participation. Thus, the CDA framework allows an exploration of the interactions between top-level managers, local managers and employees that shed light on the power structures that shape the structural and behavioral implications. If local managers do not actively encourage and enable employees to utilize the web-based innovation tool, they simultaneously manifest power by choosing not to welcome ideas outside ongoing client projects. The high-performing office, however, demonstrates the other side of this coin by using the power of the local managers to reshape the innovation discourse and embedding it in the local context. In doing so, the managers give employees the mandate to incorporate their ongoing ideas into client projects and encourage them to promote these ideas on the digital platform. This accords with Gressgård et al.’s (2014) conclusion, that efficient management of knowledge flows within organizations requires an ability to truly exploit the employees’ exclusive in-depth and context-dependent knowledge, which managers often lack. A high level of employee involvement in a centrally organized digital innovation program thus seems to depend upon the recognition and encouragement of employees’ interpretations of needs and solutions. This study hence provides practical insights on the importance of local management’s active promotion of these digital tools in order to ensure employee involvement.

Two propositions may hence be formulated, based on the findings:

P1. The effectiveness of web-based tools for implementing EDI initiatives depends on active promotion and use by local managers (i.e. middle-level managers).

P2. The mutual trust between local managers and employees boosts the confidence of employees to promote their ideas locally as well as centrally on the digital innovation platform.

The single case study design used here limits the generalizability of these results, and a multiple case study across different types of organizations in the private, public and civil sectors could provide further validation. Further studies might also explore how managers intervene in the EDI process by using methodological lenses other than CDA in order to increase the understanding of the management structures that foster or impede employee involvement in innovation at a practical level. The CDA approach enabled an exploration of the interaction between the top-level managers, local managers, and employees, while leaving out other factors that may affect the innovation outcome. These could be studied further by means of other theoretical and methodological approaches in order to expand our knowledge of EDI involvement, including literature on ambidextrous leadership (cf. Martini et al., 2015; Rosing et al., 2011) and managements’ transformational leadership (cf. Zuraik and Kelley, 2018).
References


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