Simon Hill

How idea management help get the best ideas across a whole company

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

Simon Hill

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello Everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the innovation and creativity summit 2017, very happy to have my dear colleague and friend Simon Hill with us here, another guy from London doing innovation and he is the founder of wazoku which does innovation and idea management, Simon it's wonderful to have you here with us.

Simon Hill: Great to be here Nick, Thank you very much.

Nick Skillicorn: So for people who don't know you or the sort of work that you do, can you give us a brief background into how you got into innovation.

Simon Hill: Sure, as you said Nick I am the founder of innovation software company called wazoku and I think probably quite a lot of people who get into the software space in particular, I saw a problem and I saw an opportunity to come do something quite a bit different very much using innovation as an enabler for some of the changes that I though businesses needed to make. We have a software platform, the under pinning's behind all of it is the concept of everyday innovation. How can you make innovation with a small eye a part of everyone's job in every team, in every interaction every single day or at least the opportunity right so that great ideas don't walk out the door and so that they are captured and managed and governed and used in the right way for all the benefits that can bring. So that was a sort of grand vision that we set out with. I had some background on innovation as you know, we did a bit of work broadly in that space in our former lives as consultants but really it was a desire to come in and use innovation as a way of changing business culture and helping businesses to become innovative.

Nick Skillicorn: What exactly does that mean as far as the software solution goes because when people think of innovation, quite often they think of sort of meetings, workshops and postings it on some walls, but how does software fit into that.

Simon Hill: I think it's a great question, it's a difficult one as well, I think it's at the heart of what we do, its fundamentally simple, I don't really like the word innovation, I like to try and steer clear of the word innovation as possibly can because I think it's become a little bit of a dirty word or a little bit of a misnomer for organizations. We have to be innovative, we have to do innovation and no one really knows what that means or if they do they are confused by how they can be part of it because it's

this sort of big ticket, expensive, highly complicated stuff that involves lots of dramatic change in the business or new products and services. What I am trying to do is strip all the way back to its core essence of ideas to help make the business better in some way, shape or form and how do we make sure as companies we are targeting creativity of everybody that works for us and it remiss as businesses to not see everybody as capable of coming up with great ideas to improve the workplace, to improve the customer experience or to improve something else around the organization. In order to do that at that scale, you really do need technology and so we built a tool that helps businesses to help understand where are those innovation pinch points, where are those business challenges that you should be focusing people's minds on and allow you to very quickly spin those up and run those challenges outs of the organizations. I will you some examples later of what that means and those we know ideas and business challenges that complicates things and some of them require small number of process gates, small number of stages that we have to take things through so that we can just get on with develivering solutions at the end of it and some of them are very complicated hairy beasts that need a lot more evaluation, a lot more business case sitting behind them and probably more stake holders in the business to be there, so we built a piece of kit technology that allows you to go out and build that. Understands where those challenges are, build them very very quickly and throw them out to the right audience of people whether it's your staff, whether it's your contractors , your customers or whether it's the wider world, then give you the tools to not just capture those ideas but to evaluate them, to build them, to test them and ultimately to deliver them and then measure the value that comes off the back of the both in terms of engagement and also the real ROI of the ideas that comes through the process a swell

Nick Skillicorn: I think that's where the management aspect comes into it. A lot of people they struggle to get their head around the fact that innovation isn't just about generating ideas, it's about making sure something happens with them and this is where you talked about before the ideas get generated, there is work that needs to be done and after the ideas that get generated there's more work that needs to be done as well.

Simon Hill: Yes I mean the last thing you really want to do is give everyone the permission to innovate and set them off running around commit to come up with ideas in an unstructured unsolicited way, it will cause anarchy and chaos. I think the businesses that do that very very well have spent many many years and decades building that into their cultures so that people understand what it means, they understand why they have the permission to do certain things and try certain things, to do that in a flexible organization no matter how mature it is unto itself but from a cultural perspective takes a lot of time. The good thing is that if you bring in a piece of technology that gives you the over sight, that gives you that confidence, that gives you that understanding and control whilst also giving people a voice and the process around innovation that you can start to take some pretty big leaps quite quickly towards opening that cultural dynamic up and I think that's really you know as you get into what the nuts and bolts of everyday innovation offers and why software enables it , that is a sort of heart that message you really.

Nick Skillicorn: Let's talk more about this cultural aspect and what you have alluded there which is everyday innovation, what do you mean by every day innovation and innovative culture

Simon Hill: Maybe I will talk about this and give you some examples as we go, so anyone who works in innovation space is going to be familiar with the sort of horizons on innovation, whether you work

on H1, H2, H3, so near term, middle term, longer term type of innovation, whether we are talking about incremental through differentiated radical whatever it might be. The point being that as organizations we need to be managing that mix and we need to give people access or process into the home for all of those different things whenever we call them as an organization. There are things on a day to day basis we need to fix that just make coming to work easier, that make doing your own job better, that make the customer experience a little bit better and quite honestly they normally don't cost very much, they are normally just the idiosyncrasies of corporate life that just need changing and how do you capture those through the process of everything else. So let me give you some real customer examples of that, we have worked with Waitrose for a very very long time, with the business being around for six years, Waitrose has been a client of ours for much of that process much of that time. When they first came to us, one of the big challenges that they had is that how do you give an innovation voice to thirty odd thousand people and growing who don't sit behind the computer every single day. How do you capture that voice of incremental improvement at a shop floor level for the people that are stacking shelves, serving customers, making sure that when you are buying things as a Waitrose customer, your experience is as positive as possible, etcetera etcetera?

Nick Skillicorn: And for the people who don't know what Wait rose is, it's a very very large high end super market chain in the UK.

Simon Hill: Correct, yes it's a premium brand retailer in the UK, part of wider group called the John Lewis group also a premium retailer across all different things. We work with the whole group but I am going to pick one Waitrose out just as an example of that. So they were looking at in their first stage how do we bring operation efficiency, the Coe concept really of incremental and efficiency into the hands of the people that every single day serve our customers and so we start working with us, we help them shape a number of different operational challenges that they could throw out and then they could use things like bring your own device, ipads in staff rooms and a number of other things to help give the people that are not sat behind the computer a voice around innovation. So initiatives like it will be better if that allow them to capture those little ideas that if we just did this a bit different would mean that you and my life will be a lot better, we save money, we would make money whatever it might be and there are loads of just crazy things that you see every day that have come out of that and some big ideas that more as a message. I will give you again as we go through this over and over again is that they are striving, they are striving to be innovative and as a result of it they are finding great innovations, they are innovating as by product of building the capability to be innovative into the hands of everybody. So they run this as an ongoing process that means anyone has an idea at any point in time. The most interesting is we see lots of people coming at really strange times with ideas, they are coming off shift on a Sunday night even over the holiday you see people coming with different ideas to just weak little things. Some of it really quick obvious things right they save over 1000 grand a year just by dropping the Waitrose address off the bottom until we see. It adds absolutely no value, it wastes paper and so they change that, they take it out and over a hundred grand a year saving from the business just from paper and everything else through to some of the biggest ideas that saw anyone, so Waitrose customers have a loyalty card called my Waitrose, if you are a my Waitrose customer, it gives you all the usual benefits and one of the benefit that you get is you get free premium coffee through Waitrose every single day another employee idea that came through the platform. Interestingly that was more of a big ticket idea,

took a lot of time to deliver it and a lot of incremental changes gone on to drive that, again all employee led but it seemed to become the number two coffee distributor in the UK ahead of the any well known coffee brands, ahead of star bucks, ahead of Costa, they are only behind Mc Donald's in terms of the involvement of coffee that they give out day to day. The difference being it's completely free and so you get it a loyal customer from Waitrose. So lots of little ideas and one big idea and many many more that we can't talk about of course as well the stuff that's in the public domain has really built into that cultural piece from a Waitrose perspective.

Nick Skillicorn: What I really like about that as an example is in the innovation space, we talk about the different ways that companies can do innovations and this is a good example of what is called bottom up innovation where you try and get ideas and solutions from everyone across the entire company. It's like lots of tiny little seeds growing out and some of the seeds are going to obviously nowhere but some of the seeds are going to lead to small improvements and a couple of things as you just mentioned there, actually are things that you never think about if you do it from a strategic high level sort of executive level. You get people on the ground with their insights that no one else has

Simon Hill: Exactly and it also goes back to that software question, you would risk missing this if you didn't have a centralized home for ideas, so the fact that they can be captured in the right place automated to flow through the right people but also bounced to other people if they simply find themselves in an area that means they will not be missed or they have found higher chance of not being missed across the organization. So you know something like the free coffee thing wasn't an operational efficiency idea but it was honored and it was moved to the people that could make that decisions because it was under a centralized platform that had all of the right tracking, all of the right ability to not just shove it into a drawer and forget about it or not helping to find that right choice in the business but actually put it in front of the people that could make the decisions, who have the capability in the budget and the strategic empowerment to do so and get it moving again. So that piece of the software piece that centralized home for ideas is kind of fundamental. So the whole argument of why can't I just do this with an email, why do I need some specialist tool to do that.

Nick Skillicorn: The question that I have following up from this is then is the software solution is a minimal cost but the larger cost that often scare companies away is this idea that you need to employ dozens or hundreds of more people to manage all of these new projects and especially in an example like this where there is lots of small projects that could be quite quick to implement , there's the one around the coffee seems to be a larger project ,what else is required on the ground in the company to actually get value out of these ideas.

Simon Hill: I think there are two bits in this, one is we work with a number of professional services, people right who can come in and be the extra person that puts the hand on the ground to provide the skills gaps and the resource gaps that the businesses do not have. However it's not the norm for us actually, we are able to automate this to a point where the clients we work with are big businesses, in Waitrose tens of thousands of people, Aviva a large insurance company with a global foot prints across the business, the actual innovation team or the team that stay behind this is just s few people, so they are able to gather thousands of ideas and quickly filter those down and move them to people. They already have jobs; the point isn't about creating extra work for people or

creating new roles of responsibilities in the business, people already have this written in their job description, they are just not doing it in the most efficient way. So operational people are tasked with operation efficiency with operation excellence, innovation people are talked with innovation, customer service people are tasked with customers, you know increasing the response time, increasing the customer advocacy, increasing all of these ideas that we will not normally typically classify as innovation right, so enabling people to do their jobs better which is why I said lets strive to be innovative in all parts of an organization and as a result we drive innovation, its different than having to go out and build an innovation team that will do some of those things, I am not saying that you shouldn't have innovation teams, they serve a purpose that's not as broad as the concept of being innovative that said there are other things that businesses will struggle with, and I think that there are other great resources now that exist, so one of them is great ideas and good I might just be pushing the pin one step further down the value chain because fine I have now gathered there are sorting them down to 20 ideas that look like they are feasible but I can't get business investment for them unless they can make them real and they might be technology ideas or they might need someone to go out and test them, how do I do that, well actually you do that again as part of your everyday work in life and you have suppliers that can help you with it or we have got loads of people in our eco system that can help you , we have one partner that can give a rapid prototype of a mock up of an app in 24 hours for free, you know you can get five screens, you can build it you put your idea in and they give it back in a few days so there's a lot of great tech out there that can help move you that one step further to get you towards the business case to do what you need to do without having to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on this. The whole purpose is really is one of the tools of agiiling it that is bringing in some design thinking and that's being an agile working so that we can rapidly prototype rapidly test and rapidly disqualify the majority of the ideas that are coming through and investing in ones that are going to have the greatest chance of success.

Nick Skillicorn: Yea you don't want to end up just facilitating to fold, hundred fold increasing the number of ideas being generated and then just feel like you are drowning because you don't know what to do with all of them, it's actually putting in place like you said the processes and the right set of culture to actually make, implementing and trying out and experimenting on this ideas part of the organizational culture.

Simon Hill: Which one is all the way back to that opening piece that I gave you which is very much around challenge led innovation, so psychologically there is a lot of prove to show that part of the reason that people disengage from innovation discussion all the time is that we only have a certain capacity in any topic and if we just feel like we will exhaust ourselves on it, eventually I think with innovation in businesses that has happened quite a lot , you know we try a number of different things , never we managed to give visibility enough to show that any input they have given has really gone anywhere on the whole apart from the small number of people, how come we can open up to give visibility so that people don't feel like they are just shouting into an empty box or they are given to someone else to go and become the hero. As you go forward and actually and truly co creates against real business challenges that you have got. So if you start with the concept of I have a strategic need to make this better, whatever it is whether it's better, faster, quicker, smarter in the Waitrose example, whether we really want to deliver a small number of big tickets innovation projects which is going to be the Aviva story, Aviva runs this thing called the customer cup, it is opened to all global staff from Aviva, it runs over a several month period each year and runs a little

bit like a dragon's den or a shark tank type initiative for the global audience which means there are rounds and rounds and rounds, they typically get hundreds, if not thousands of ideas but ultimately they are going to pick six and they are going to pick six and they are going to invest heavily on this six and this six are going to have a significant don't quantify it because sometimes it can be more qualitative but a significant impact on the customer experience Aviva, that started with a problem, it started with this remit of well, so we know the rules now, we know the processes and things they are going to go through, we know what you are looking for and how to and how we can get there and I kind of answered the question of what's in it for me as an individual as well, so why should I participate. In the Aviva case, it's an opportunity to see your idea all the way through to delivery and ultimately you pitch that as part of a small team to global leadership at their end of year global leader's summit and hopefully get funding for it. So the start up type initiative these are real business thing that we get adapted back into the businesses core as they go forward. You know why you want to do it; it gives you a lot of visibility as an individual or as a team. They start with a real problem they define real process and they put real money behind it and so part of the problem we have had, there's a famous case of when the Tesco another big retailer in the UK and I guess global right is the new chief executive came in one of the first things he did was to tell every member staff, to email him personally and he gave a personal email address any idea to fix Tesco. He got 140000 ideas in the first two days and there's a lot of press around this and you can read about it. So the problem was it was an email inbox, so he had to employ an army of consultants , I think it was one of our firm that that we may work for came in and spend months working through fourteen thousand ideas, trying to sort them out, trying to get some level of process out there, he didn't just start with them, he started with the problems and he would have refined that down and he could have run a number of different challenges that would have focused in, on we are looking to solve this specific area, looking ideas around this specific area, keeping people's mind focused solving the actual problem that is there and moving quickly on the net things so you don't end in this huge suggestion box of stuff you can't do anything with.

Nick Skillicorn: That's why I always like to talk to client about the fact that bottom up innovation by itself , it seems perfect in theory but if you actually want to take it to the next level, there is some top down innovation which is also useful where the executive of the company gives the people in the organization the frame within which they should be generating these ideas and essentially either explicitly saying what challenge they should develop this idea for or at least what type of prerogative or business interest the challenges the ideas should address and that helps people actually far higher quality more original ideas than if they essentially just give them a blank slate and say tell me something you think and we would see whether or not there is any value in it afterwards.

Simon Hill: Correct and you can quantify it in terms of those ideas when the Waitrose example, 52 percent more of their ideas were successful than before and part of that was driven by the ability to capture more structured and more qualified and quantified ideas against specific needs rather than just this generic pool of ideas that are impossible, even if they were great, you are going to go find the business owner who is going to have that on that plate and the budget at that particular moment in time etcetera etcetera, So yeah totally agree and I think starting with why and starting with the problem rather than so that's your kind of top down there and then engaging the bottom up to come and work on it is the kind of price you need to be focusing. the other bit though is that it's not just about ideas right, some of us are great with coming up with ideas and probably all of us

are at certain times at least in your comfort zones and you know there will be the most noisy person in the organization who may think they got an idea to every single challenge, they may well do or they don't but equally there are many of the roles to play in that kind of innovation value chain as you go forward. I gave a Tedex talk last year around the innovation archetype conversation and I have written quite a bit on that topic as you go forward and really as organizations we need to stop just looking for the creative ideas but also start to understand more about the other roles that people play, the connectors, the adaptors, the people that are challenging this ideas successfully often as an organization not see them as blockers but see them a constructive challenges sin the organizations and really start to think about how do we think and recognize the various roles that people can play to use the organizational crowd back up your point about resourcing this as well to actually drive real meaningful outcomes for us as an organization.

Nick Skillicorn: Taking what you just said though as one specific word, crowd and I want to talk a bit about crowd sourcing and as some other people will call it open innovation, it sounds like there was a good platform as you have described it now and its representative of all innovation idea management platforms and the examples you have given are about getting ideas from within the company and some companies have hundreds of thousands of people you can get ideas but what's your view on going outside of the company to get ideas and I now a lot of leadership executive people are very scared about involving people from outside of the organization in idea generation and innovation for fear of losing company's secret or having people go outside the company but what's been your experience

Simon Hill: I think it's a maturing space, it's probably more mature in the north American market than it is outside of that market but I think that it's something that is changing and adapting as it was OQ business, we position ourselves quite uniquely as being able to support everything from very very closed private team based ideation all the way up to true open innovation all under one single platform so you can spin up those communities, you can access the party crowd, you could build your own crowd whatever it might be I think that we will see a lot more of this happening as we go forward, we have a number of clients that we work with who are looking to collaborate and co create with defined crowds and I think that's the next evolution of this , you know we are not suggesting that everybody is suddenly run big open innovation grand challenges though I think there are many areas where that is applicable and there are certain sectors the water industry foe example is but a lot of budget behind open innovation as has government and space I have done , the reason I am out of it, I think you may see more of it in the corporate social responsibility world as well where it's good for brand as much as it is good for the solutions and solvers that come out the back end. I think these known communities so customer advocacy community would be what will be an area of growth, we have done some work with this for some of our clients where rather than seeing to go out to all customers, you can run, you can throw open and see who wants to come back actually and be your customer advocate around innovation who wants that voice and actually we have seen really good up take with a lot of the clients we work with who have been doing this but they do it through focus groups and other sorts of, they are okay even though they have got a value but how can you create a more asynchronous online anytime drop in drop out rather than having a kind of be on point in a focus group and then you leave, if you are on form and you have got some good insight for that session, great if you are in a noisy room because you don't get to say anything because it's just one person, you kind of missed out it spent a lot of money for not huge amounts of

value, so I see as augmenting a lot of that process with closed communities whether its partners, suppliers, SME's, universities. We do work with a lot of universities and Oxford University is a client of ours where they have done it as an offering from oxford where they allow third parties in institutions to tap into the creative minds that work at Oxford University. And so about a number of criminal social enterprises work that they have done. So a number of universities within and around the oxford area come with challenges and they get to access that student base, you can bring ideas and solutions back to that and it's been a number of great ideas, there's also a museum in oxford that one of the student was able to build them an application for bringing to life a lot of their exhibit. So there are musical instruments and sort of antiquated artifacts museum so lots of it is behind glass cases, you can't touch it because there aren't very many of them in existence anymore of these sort of old yield the world instruments and everything else. Someone built an app that meant you can bring those to life so you walk near an instrument you enable the app you blow into the microphone and it plays the instrument for you and brings it life. So lots of nice little solutions, the museum would never have got the access or the budget to do something. Oxford needs the project, and so you are marrying these two worlds to give you a great solutions to real world problems using that open innovation vehicle but in a more controlled way than just throwing it out for the whole world where people do get worried about intellectual property, I think we will get over that as a culture but generally, am I giving away a trade secrets or am I showing something the shareholders they are getting a jumpy about by running an open innovation challenge, it doesn't have to be an open, it can be open but to a defined group of people.

Nick Skillicorn: Then finally before we finish off the interview, I wanted to go back to talk about something you mentioned right back at the beginning which is the fact that companies should be innovative rather than the dirty word of innovation, what do you mean by that, it seems to be the same thing isn't it?

Simon Hill: I think if we strive for innovation, we run at that point innovation, this is where we do bring in consultants, there are many that are great at it, I am being tasked with delivering a new mortgage product by the end of q1 or I am being tasked with delivering a XY or Z, it's a point solution project, so that specific need that you have got as an organization, you are not training capability, you have not gone to leadership and really discussed we want as a cultural assets in here to be able to turn or to innovate all the time then giving management the space in the permission creating the workplace environment that facilitate all of that bringing in great technology to sort of enable that and training that as a capability across the organization rather than bringing it as a point solution for a specific project at that point in time is what I am talking about, so the best companies in the world , the ones on these list of great companies to work for and not hugely innovative companies, have I think to a certain extent crafts that be through lots of cultural investment where you would see them as being innovative and therefore innovation is a byproduct of what they deliver as an innovative company rather than other companies who just deliver point innovation. So it's a repeatable scalable thing, can you lift and shift that into other teams and just expect it to be the same absolutely not in the majority of companies.

Nick Skillicorn: In which case what I like to ask a majority of the experts before we finish off is if you have got one tip or one actionable insight on something that our listeners or our audience members can try out either this afternoon or this week to get better at this everyday innovation concept, what will you recommend they try

Simon Hill: Other than my software which I think it's a good place, there are a numbers of actually great simple tools out there, maybe this is a bit old act now but a tool that I still love is business model canvass, I will say actually go away and think about that one idea that you have got for either your own business or for something that would enhance the work life in your organization, and just rapidly test it in an hour or so running through lean business model canvass, there's loads of stuff online for it, we use it internally as a business as a good discipline for us to evaluate it, it doesn't take lot of time, just get your mindset thinking about the broader considerations around things that often organizations, we think is so fundamentally simple as cant stand why we do them but puts it into that strategic context on that strategic idea.

Nick Skillicorn: That's perfect, we are also going to get all of the links to wazoku stuff on the screen, and can you just give us a brief background as to what you can find on the wazoku website.

Simon Hill: Sure, so very much a software company, so you know go and check out our product video, and there's a couple of products up there, one is innovation pulse which is our culture of innovation benchmarking tool and certainly you know that is a standalone tool that allows us to provide a unique benchmark of organizational culture, the second is obviously an overview of our core platform, Idea spotlight, thought leadership, I have spoken a lot about everyday innovation , we have got a number of reports, the most recent of which will be coming out in the next couple of weeks as well, there's four different reports around everyday innovation and I will definitely recommend people to have a skim through those and pick up some more of the case studies and tad bits of advice that I have sort of alluded till today but going too far greater depth in those reports as well

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect, Simon it's been wonderful having you here

Simon Hill: Thanks Nick.