

# The Right Digital Tools Help Remote Teams Innovate

Wim Biemans (University of Groningen)

Avinash Malshe (University of St. Thomas)

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Remote teams face unique challenges when developing new innovations. Our research identified the best practices for leveraging digital tools to address these challenges.

The rise of digitalization has enabled employees to work from home (WFH), fostering a healthier work-life balance. Evidence suggests that as more companies adopt WFH policies, organizations with flexible work arrangements tend to outperform their less adaptable counterparts. This shift has led to a substantial increase in virtual meetings and reliance on various digital tools, such as video conferencing platforms, instant messaging apps, and collaboration software, to navigate the hybrid work environment. However, the impact of this widespread reliance on digital tools for WFH on innovation remains unclear.

Our study of 32 B2B companies suggests that digital tools can indeed be a conduit for innovating remotely, and revealed how to get the best results. While we focused on the marketing and sales function, our findings can help all kinds of teams learn how to collaborate creatively even if their members work from their homes.

## Does Remote Work Dampen Innovation?

Two prevailing perspectives attempt to explain how digital tools influence innovation, with prior research highlighting both positive and negative effects.

On one hand, some scholars argue that remote work reduces informal interactions, such as spontaneous "watercooler" conversations, which are often crucial for fostering innovation. Studies suggest that digital tools can create a sense of isolation, diminish interpersonal trust, and hinder creativity, ultimately leading to fewer

new product ideas.

Other experts say that the belief that innovation suffers in an online environment is a "common misconception." They argue that hybrid work settings offer opportunities for innovation to thrive, as digital tools can facilitate informal social interactions, build trust, and promote team cohesion. Moreover, WFH arrangements may enhance group creativity and lead to high-quality ideas.

Taken together, the evidence on how digital tools affect innovation remains inconclusive. As a result, organizations often have a hard time using digital tools the right way to spur innovation from teams whose members all work from home.

## Using Digital Tools to Create New Ideas

We aim to address this gap in understanding by examining how firms utilize digital tools for ideation, or creating new ideas, an essential sub-stage of the innovation process. This focus is rooted in prior research emphasizing that "creating new ideas is fundamental to firms, serving as the starting point for innovation endeavors."

Furthermore, since marketing and sales are two critical functions that significantly contribute to innovation ideation—and are known to leverage digital tools to enhance interactions in business-to-business (B2B) contexts—we delved into how these functions specifically employ digital tools during the ideation process.

The central research question guiding this study is: *How do marketing and sales personnel use digital tools during the process of innovation ideation?*

## What We Studied

Because so little research has focused on how digital tools impact innovation ideation, we adopted a



qualitative research approach to explore the phenomenon in depth. Specifically, we conducted interviews with 32 marketing professionals and 21 sales professionals from 32 B2B companies to examine how they use digital tools during the innovation ideation process.

Our marketing informants held positions such as Marketing Manager, Head of Regional Marketing, Brand Marketer, and Marketing and Communication Manager. Meanwhile, our sales informants occupied roles like Key Account Manager, Sales Manager, Sales Representative, and Region Director Sales. The companies in our sample represent a diverse range of European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Hungary, and the Netherlands), industries (including agricultural machinery, climate control, industrial lighting, industrial packaging, steel processing, construction, technological components, food and beverage, pharmaceuticals, and fast-moving consumer goods), and firm sizes (ranging from 15 to 140,000 employees).

To qualify for the study, companies had to be product manufacturers, operate in B2B markets, maintain distinct marketing and sales departments, regularly develop new products or services, and actively use digital tools for innovation ideation.

## What We Found

Our study found that the ideation process includes three distinct stages—idea generation, assessment, and development. Each stage is characterized by specific objectives and activities, reflecting its unique role within the innovation funnel. Marketing and sales personnel primarily relied on four digital tools during these three stages: email, video conferencing, collaboration platforms, and chat applications.

Below we summarize what our interviews revealed about the digital tools used for each stage, the challenges they might bring, and best practices that teams can use to get the most benefit from them.

### Idea Generation Stage

This phase encourages divergent thinking – multiple approaches and sources – to generate many new product ideas. The primary digital tools used during this phase are video conference, live chat, and email.

#### Key Challenges

- Difficult to achieve the informal atmosphere that is required for a free flow of ideas
- Limited visual and auditory cues (body language)
- Participants are hesitant to speak up and contribute during online meetings.
- Participants are less focused and involved because of multitasking.

#### Best Practices

- Create psychological safety and opportunities for all relevant employees to contribute.
- Allocate some time at the start of a remote brainstorming session to break the ice and get participants to relax.
- Use humor to stimulate an informal atmosphere, make people feel comfortable, and build team identity.
- Use live chats and anonymous polling to encourage contributions.
- Send out brainstorm topics and objectives in advance and ask participants to bring their top three ideas to the online session.
- Create small breakout rooms to encourage natural conversations and build trust.
- Encourage introverted participants to submit ideas by phone or email after the online session.

### Idea Assessment Phase

In this stage, teams use convergent thinking to assess ideas systematically and iteratively, often using a set of predetermined criteria, weights, and decision-making rules. The key tools in this stage are collaboration platforms supported by email and chat messages.

#### Key Challenges

- Problems in tracking, monitoring and managing contributions because of multiple tools or wrong use of tools
- Reduced sense of urgency and speed of idea assessment
- Difficult to physically demonstrate complex new product designs
- Lack of direct contact reduces engagement and enthusiasm for ideas

#### Best Practices

- Employ a mix of digital tools to capture opinions

from a range of employees.

- Communicate which tools should be used for what to manage discussions and improve transparency and traceability of discussion flows.
- Use digital tools that facilitate detailed presentations and feedback, and create visual impact.
- Use one collaboration platform to capture discussions, increase transparency, and distill and communicate major insights.
- Ask people to assess ideas individually, before organizing group discussions, to avoid groupthink.
- Combine digital messages with invitations for phone calls to discuss ideas in more detail.

## Idea Development Stage

This stage involves constant interaction, both within the innovation team and with target customers, to refine and convert the remaining ideas into more concrete form. This stage uses a balanced mix of asynchronous and synchronous digital tools: primary tools such as collaboration platforms and videoconferencing and calls, supported by email, chat messages and live chats.

## Key Challenges

- Absence of clear guidelines about which tools to use for which purpose
- Contributions get lost in a clutter of tools and message chains.
- Task-oriented online meetings leave no room for informal ad-hoc discussions.
- Participants are less involved during video conferences because of multitasking.
- Lack of digital trust between participants

## Best Practices

- Synthesize and analyze all information and insights to improve ideas and test their underlying assumptions.
- Streamline discussions by using a limited number of digital tools and establish clear norms about how to use them.
- Use collaboration platform to integrate insights and monitor idea development.
- Use email to request and provide specific information.

- Use video conference/calls for in-depth discussions of complex issues.
- Create sufficient opportunities for informal interactions and to discuss unscheduled topics.
- Have team leaders send regular emails to provide updates to all participants and ask for additional input.
- Supplement digital meetings with in-person one-on-ones to build trust.

## Takeaways

In short, our research defines key challenges that remote teams encounter during innovation ideation in marketing and sales settings, and provides strategies for leveraging digital tools to address these challenges through best practices. In addition, here are some other important factors that all kinds of innovation teams should consider.

## Strategic Use of Digital Tools

Managers must determine when to use digital tools as substitutes for, or in conjunction with, physical interactions. They should also carefully select an appropriate mix of synchronous and asynchronous digital tools tailored to the specific needs of each ideation stage.

## Addressing Transition Challenges

As firms increasingly shift from co-located to virtual work environments, they must proactively address the unique challenges posed by digital tools in the idea generation, assessment, and development stages.

## Building a Supportive Organizational Ecosystem

To maximize the potential of digital tools for innovation ideation, organizations should focus on strengthening four key infrastructures:

- *Technological Infrastructure* -- Ensure employees have access to reliable technology and software, along with high-quality internet connections. These resources should be readily available not only at the workplace and home but also for salespeople on the move.
- *Organizational Infrastructure* -- Cultivate a digital collaboration culture that enhances virtual team performance. This includes appointing tool-specific channel advocates, fostering informal conversations, monitoring employee well-being, and promoting measures to support digital collaboration.

- *Team Infrastructure* -- Build cohesive teams through comprehensive digital onboarding, regular check-ins, and digital supervisor support. Establish clear norms for using digital tools and foster trust and psychological safety through structured activities and procedures.
- *Individual Digital Literacy* -- Develop and promote digital literacy among employees. Best practices include defining acceptable response times, ensuring all messages are addressed, banning multitasking and distractions during online meetings, and emphasizing professional etiquette.

## Conclusion

Our findings can help managers of all kinds of teams understand how to use digital tools effectively for innovation ideation in hybrid work environments. By offering detailed insights and actionable recommendations, we go beyond generic advice like "ideation should always be done in person," which overlooks the complexities and nuances of hybrid work contexts.

By implementing these strategies, firms can overcome the challenges associated with digital tools and hybrid work environments, enabling teams to generate, assess, and develop ideas effectively. A well-integrated approach to digital tool usage ensures that innovation ideation thrives, even in the evolving landscape of hybrid work.

## Explore the Research

[How marketing and sales use digital tools for innovation ideation](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S001985012400172X)

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S001985012400172X>) *Industrial Marketing Management*, November 2024