

INTERVIEW

More than creating ideas

OP-Pohjola Group, Finland's largest financial services group, wanted to activate innovation work in their company. In order to do so, they asked Innotiimi to train a group of specialized innovation workshop facilitators who could then run internal innovation workshops professionally. Kirsi Saarikko, Vice President of Innovation, shares her thoughts on how the training has made a difference at OP-Pohjola.

by Jarno Poskela

Why did you decide to train innovation workshop facilitators in the first place?

Kirsi Saarikko: We wanted to get our personnel more deeply involved in innovation work and intensify cross-organizational collaboration between different functions and units. We also aimed at democratizing innovation work so that every person – independent of their organizational position – would have similar opportunities to participate in innovating. For these purposes, we wanted to have more innovation workshops and we knew we needed skilled facilitators to run them professionally. Naturally, our ultimate goal was to attract new customers and generate more profitable business. As one of our directors put it: »There have been no radical changes in the banking industry since online banking.«

What did people think about these new innovation workshop facilitators?

Kirsi Saarikko: Actually, they welcomed them in a very enthusiastic way. People really wanted to participate in these innovation workshops. I think that the main thing

was that these trainings were not just for creating ideas, but also for developing concrete solutions to our real challenges. We also facilitated innovation workshops for our partner organizations and our top management, which shows how much they were committed. We worked on a very wide range of topics, e. g. new products and services, improving processes, developing own work activities. I remember facilitating a workshop for our secretaries on how they could develop their own work. We utilize similar methods for different kinds of groups, regardless of their organizational position.

You have been running this program for three years now. What have the results been so far?

Kirsi Saarikko: Well, we have created a couple of very good new products through these workshops, such as »Group Interest Account« and »Pivo mobile wallet.« The main idea of the Group Interest Account is very simple: the more people collectively deposit money into an account, the higher the interest each participant will earn is. Furthermore, you can follow the current interest rate as well as the number of people par-

participating online at any given time. Another very positive result of the workshops is an increase in employee satisfaction. Employees feel more positive regarding their possibility to participate in innovation work. Within one year, the score increased by 0.5 points on a scale from 0 to 5. This shows that we really have succeeded in democratizing the innovation work.

How would you describe the added value of the innovation workshop facilitators?

Kirsi Saarikko: The trainings for innovation workshop facilitators that were held by Innotiimi established a solid foundation and have enabled us to set up workshops in a different way than we used to. The training was not just about creating ideas, but also about developing solutions that were many steps ahead of our current situation. We also managed to get concrete results within reasonable time limits, which brought efficiency. Without the Innotiimi trainings, we would not have been able to achieve such concrete results. Innovation workshop facilitators were quickly accepted as experts. The trained methods guided them in their work, kind of automatically, in a right way, and they were very quickly able to focus on deeper things such as how to take the participants' feelings into account or how to modify a workshop process according to previous steps.

During your work life, you have seen many kinds of trainings. What are the key differences of this facilitation training compared to earlier, similar ones?

Kirsi Saarikko: One thing is that this was a very systematic approach toward innovation workshops; first ideas, then concepts, and finally concrete solutions. This structure enabled us to create specific results and was, on the other hand, easy to learn. What's more, it uses highly versatile methods. We were able to understand natural differences in people and find appropriate tools for different kinds of individuals and groups. I also liked the fact that concept development was emphasized over ideas, since this leads to successful results in innovation workshops.

What have you personally learned about a workshop-oriented way of working?

Kirsi Saarikko: First, it is important to show participants that there are resources to put things forward when we manage to get something innovative out of workshops. Also, decision criteria on how the results will be evaluated are important to share beforehand. Second, you need to have skilled facilitators so that we really know how to run innovation workshops. Otherwise, it is just sticking post-it notes to walls. Finally, it is critical that the participants are heterogeneous enough. Not just your closest colleagues or best friends, but utilizing different functions and also doing workshops with partner organizations and customers. ●



Kirsi Saarikko is currently employed at OP-Pohjola Group in Product and Services Development as Vice President, Innovation. She believes that the best innovations are born when individual ideas are brought together and as a result of the process, something totally new is created. She cultivates this approach in her daily work. OP-Pohjola Group is the largest financial services group in Finland. It provides its customers with the best loyalty benefits and the most extensive and diversified range of banking, investment and insurance services. The Group has three business segments: Banking, Life Insurance and Wealth Management.