

Opening strategy through 'Jamming': exploring the process

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Abstract

Jamming is a term which is increasingly common in case studies and literature, both academic and non-academic, especially where topics such as social technology, collaboration and innovation are a predominant focus. An IBM expression which represents their use of social technologies to connect actors to collaborate in an 'online conference' environment, these 'Jams' are usually focused, time-limited events surrounding a particular theme or set of topics. Jamming has also become an almost customary example presented in literature on the topic of 'open strategy', especially the IBM 'InnovationJams', which in the past have opened strategic conversation to actors across the entire organisation. Open strategy itself arises from increasing interest in the phenomenon of openness in strategy research and practice, and how this represents a paradigm shift from the more traditional, top-down role of strategic planning. In light of these developments, this short paper offers a brief overview of the Jamming concept, particularly in the context of a case study into its use in a collaborative open strategy initiative, involving IBM and a public defence organisation. It concludes with a selection of questions which could direct future research.

Keywords: Collaboration, IBM, Jamming, Open strategy, Openness, Social media, Social technology.

Introduction

The purpose of this short paper is to explore how Jamming is being used by IBM, both internally and as a marketed tool for clients, and introduce an example case where it is being used to enable some phases of the strategic planning process to become more open and participatory to a wider range of organisational actors. The case study is briefly introduced, with some preliminary data from a client InnovationJam, which involved IBM facilitating a two day event for a public defence organisation, focused on strategic ideation.

Open Strategy and Jamming

Strategy, particularly from an organisational perspective, has been typically viewed as a secretive and exclusive activity. Recent years, however, have seen various scholars and consultants take an interest in the concept of strategy being a more transparent and participatory process; this has been most commonly labelled as 'open strategy' (Chesbrough and Appleyard, 2007; Whittington et al, 2011). Ma and Seidl (2014, p.1) have highlighted open strategy research as one of the 'hot topics' of practice-based strategy research, sharing similarities to the strategy-as-practice domain in looking closely at the actions of strategists, and the activity of strategising (Whittington, 1996).

Social software use is a common theme in open strategy literature (e.g. Newstead and Lanzerotti, 2010; Haefliger et al, 2011, Stieger et al, 2012), and the term Jamming has been highlighted by Whittington et al (2011, p.535) as being an illustrative example of internal inclusion of a wider range of actors in strategy

practice. IBM use the expression to describe their internal massively parallel online conferences (Bjelland and Wood, 2008, p.32), taking the name from the concept of musicians ‘jamming’, with IBM trying to replicate the notion that these musicians demonstrate in sharing a passion to connect and create, even with people they have never met before (Bhalla, 2010). Jamming was originally introduced by IBM in the early 2000’s as a means of internal collaboration, and was successful to the degree of it subsequently being marketed for external clients, a business venture that now generates IBM over one hundred million dollars each year (Whittington, 2014). IBM boasts that its Jams are opening up tremendous possibilities in collaborative innovation (IBM, 2015), and they have been linked in similarity to the concept of crowdsourcing, with the concept of ‘idea jamming’ also explored by Howe (2009). Morrison (2009, p.1-4) defines a Jam as “a time-limited, online collaboration event, held on the web, which allows a defined group of participants to post ideas, and discuss and vote on ideas, in response to a particular challenge or issue”. Morrison emphasises that, for a Jamming event to be successful, two key components are required; a suitable internet technology platform and provision of supporting services, whilst highlighting that the following four features make a Jam an effective process:

- **Focused** around specific challenges or topics, not open-ended solicitations or ‘suggestion boxes’.
- **Specific** to the group participating, which can include both internal employees, and parties external to the organisation such as customers or suppliers.
- **Scalable** beyond the limits of physical meetings and conferences, able to accommodate hundreds of participants.
- **Time-limited** typically running over a few days to a few weeks, so they are not typically part of the everyday background of business life.

Defence Organisation InnovationJam

The case introduced in this short paper explores the use of an IBM hosted InnovationJam to facilitate an open strategy initiative for a department of a public defence organisation. Although Jamming often fits into the mould of being a form of what Zuchowski et al (2015) describe as ‘internal crowdsourcing’, meaning it only includes internal stakeholders such as employees, it can also be used as a tool to collaborate outside of organisational boundaries. In this case, IBM facilitated the InnovationJam whilst also actively contributing to conversations in the role of ‘shadow moderators’. The event was focused on the output from a previous initiative where the defence organisation openly asked employees how they could cut organisational ‘red tape’ to make their roles less restricted, and also had the aim of engaging employees in the ongoing transformation and strategic change of the organisation led by their new Chief Information Officer. The Jam was hosted on a web collaboration platform, lasted two days, involved sixty seven participants and generated ninety strategic ideas which had a combined total of two hundred and eighty seven discussion posts. Figure 1 shows a poster used to promote the Jam initiative, explaining what a Jam is, and the core values that make a Jam successful. It also highlights the structure and timeline of the Jam, through idea generating, voting, refining and prioritising, and steps towards potential implementation of ideas. The IBM shadow moderators ensured that the process followed this pre-defined structure, especially through commenting on, and suggesting potential ways of refining the strategic ideas.

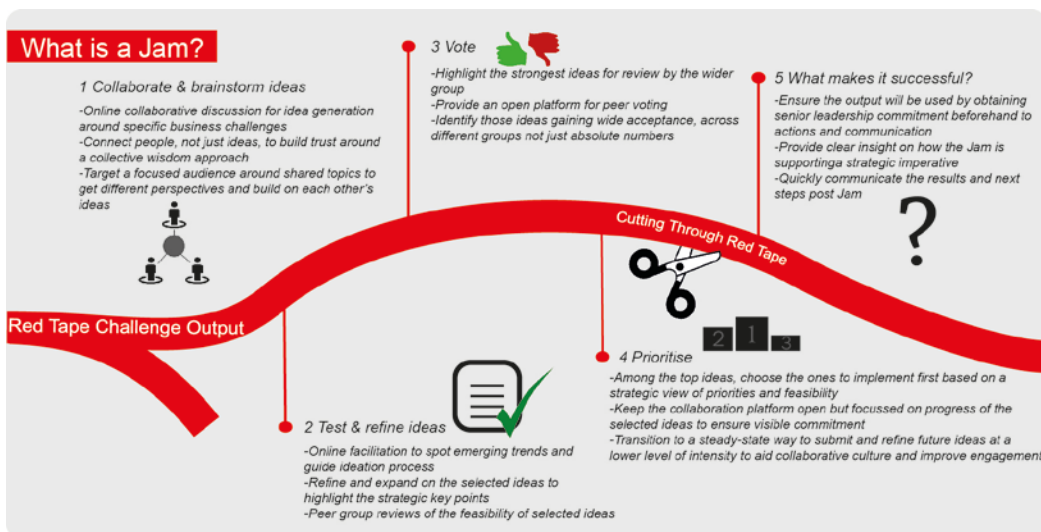


Figure 1. ‘What is a Jam?’ poster used for promoting the defence organisation Jam

Figure 2 shows the timeline of the two day InnovationJam. These statistics were monitored from midway through day one and indicate how ideas, comments and participant visits developed over the course of the event. The stats also indicate the continuation of idea generation and commenting by participants through non-working hours.

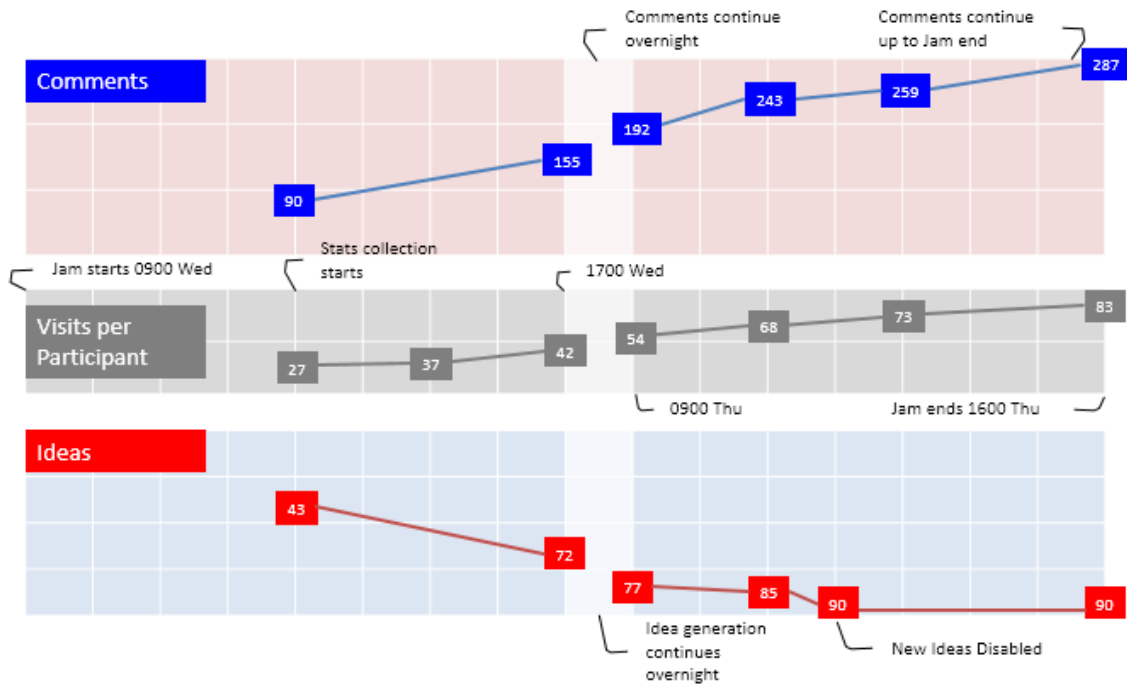


Figure 2. Defence organisation InnovationJam timeline

The analysis in table 2 uses the aforementioned features of Jamming effectiveness by Morrison (2009, p.4) and applies these in the context of the defence organisation InnovationJam. Specifically, this indicates more about; the focused purpose of the event, how it was specific to a certain group of employees, how many employees actively participated and how they chose to participate, and finally how the event was seemingly a time-limited occurrence, rather than being a more permanent feature of the organisations strategic conduct.

Features of Jamming effectiveness (Morrison, 2009, p.4)	Defence organisation InnovationJam context
'Focused'	Focused on generating specific strategic ideas based on outcomes from a previous initiative to cut organisational 'red tape'. Three main strategic themes were discussed; information capture, mobile working and electronic workflow.
'Specific'	Specific in this instance to employees in the organisation, with a particular interest in helping the organisation transform to be more professional, modern and efficient.
'Scalable'	Scalable to include a wider range of organisational actors at this ideation level of strategy. Over one hundred employees invited to participate based on the relevance of their knowledge in line with the themes of the Jam, with sixty seven employees actively participating. Ideas and comments also extended beyond typical working hours, and the platform was accessed at times that suited participating employees.
'Time-limited'	Time-limited to a two day period, with idea generation disabled mid-way through day two to allow a period of idea refinement before the Jam platform was disabled entirely.

Table 1. Features of 'Jamming effectiveness' in the context of the Defence organisation InnovationJam

Table 2, created for the purpose of this paper, offers an overview of the role of both IBM and the defence organisation in the Jam process, with some insight into planning and outcomes, including issues such as ownership and lessons and value gained going forward.

IBM	Defence organisation
<p>Role: Managed project (9 months to organise) Structured Jam, configured platform Guided on platform usage Helped develop participant questionnaires (post-event) Managed Jam Registered participants onto platform Trained moderators Had role of shadow moderators (to help guide conversations and keep the format structured and 'flowing') Analysed participation</p>	<p>Role: Fixed technical issues – platform usage from internal systems Set Jam questions (from outcome of previous event) Recruited participants Recruited moderators Analysed Jam output</p>
<p>Ownership: Owns Jam structure & method – documented on chosen Jam platform design area</p>	<p>Ownership: Owns Jam output – but (selectively) open to IBM</p>
<p>Lessons and value: Length and scale of pre-planning and organisation required IT lessons such as greater mobile connectivity needed Worth offering to other areas of the defence organisation, and to others within same sector</p>	<p>Lessons and value: Over estimation of team participation Taking ideas forward key to reaping value of the event, at least three ideas from each category under serious consideration for experimentation/further progression Plan to reuse Jamming format in the future</p>

Table 2. IBM and Defence organisation, roles, ownership and lessons and value from Jamming process

Conclusion

This short paper offers insight into how the notion of Jamming has been used to open and facilitate a collaborative strategic 'ideation forum'. Although the data presented in this overview of the case gives indication to how the Jam was planned, its purpose and how ideas were generated, there are a number of questions raised which offer interesting avenues for further research: how will the strategic ideas be used by upper management?; will the defence organisation participants have further input at an implementation and decision making level?; and is the Jamming event a temporary instance of open strategy, or rather representative of what will become a continuous aspect of the organisation's strategic conduct?. These are a selection of potential interesting research areas relating to openness in strategy practice, which have occurred through analysing preliminary data of this case study.

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Author Biographies

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