

## Assessing Sustainability of Employee Suggestion Schemes: A Case of an Organization from the United Arab Emirates

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**Abstract** The purpose of this paper is to assess the sustainability of employee suggestion scheme of three organizations based in the United Arab Emirates. A framework has been used to assess the sustainability of the suggestion schemes. Based on the analysis of the three cases, five factors to assess the sustainability of employee suggestion scheme and the three stages of sustainability are discussed. The paper presents three cases and draws conclusions about the key practices necessary to foster sustainability of employee suggestion system. Through the case studies, several issues related to the sustainability of the suggestion scheme have been identified. The paper then presents a final framework that the organizations can apply to assess their suggestion schemes and to develop potential change strategies. The study findings reveal the importance of five factors and with more cases; future research can be reveal more practices. These could be further examined in relation to specific industry.

**Keywords** *Suggestion System; Suggestion Schemes; Innovation; Creativity Management*

### 1. Introduction

There is a growing need in organizations to continuously innovate in today's competitive world. Employee Suggestion System (ESS) is one such tool that can be exploited for extracting employee creativity and it can help to enhance the innovation capability of the organizations. So, Employee Suggestion Systems (ESS) plays a pivotal role for organizations wishing to become more innovative (Buech et al., 2010). Further, Creativity is seen as the prerequisite for an organization's innovation, effectiveness and long-term survival (Bartel & Garud, 2009). Although, the corporations widely use suggestion schemes to elicit employee creativity ideas, sustaining the suggestion scheme is still a challenge. Sustainability is an issue in other types of improvement programs as well (Bateman, 2005). In fact, the suggestion systems have been around for the decades the new technology and the greater need for organizational innovation necessitates a greater utilization of the schemes to effectively motivate and capture employee creativity.

This paper presents a framework to assess the sustainability of suggestion scheme and validates the model using a case study of an organization in the UAE. The article describes the way the Sustainability Assessment Framework was developed and how it can be applied to assess the suggestion scheme sustainability. The article concludes with some practical guidelines for the use of the framework

## 2. Background and Literature Review

An Employee Suggestion System is described as a formalized mechanism that encourages employees to contribute constructive ideas for improving the organization in which they work (Milner et al., 1995). Cooley (2001) offers a simple explanation for a suggestion system. They explain, a suggestion scheme will elicit suggestions from employees, classify them, and dispatch them to the “experts” for evaluation. After this, the suggestion might be adopted, in which case the suggestion may well be rewarded. But, even if the suggestion is rejected, the employee may still be rewarded with a token gift. “Experts” are either managers or dedicated committees who evaluate the suggestions and implement the ones that work (Chaneski, 2006).

The meaning of ‘sustainability’ implies the ability to sustain and maintain a process or object at a desirable level of utility (Badiru, 2010). Simply put, ‘sustainability’ of something means persistence in time of the thing, for example, if a building is left without maintenance, the aging of materials and the aggressions of environment will make the building enter a state where it cannot sustain itself and will collapse (Garrido, 2009). Zairi & Liburd (2001, p.452) defined sustainability as, “The ability of an organization to adapt to change in the business environment to capture contemporary best practice methods and to achieve and maintain superior competitive performance”. In the context of Total Quality Management (TQM), Dale et al. (1997a, p. 395) defined sustainability as “maintaining of a process of quality improvement”.

Sustainability is dependent on multiple factors, at different levels of analysis: substantial, individual, managerial, financial, leadership, organizational, cultural, political, contextual and temporal (Bachnana et al., 2005). For the industry to become more sustainable, the responsibility of its activities should be expanded from the production site to the whole product chain (Jorgensen, 2008). Idris & Zairi (2006) explain the TQM sustainability could be viewed from the effectiveness of TQM implementation that is based on prescriptive critical factors, and effectiveness of critical factors that generate sustainable excellence. Similarly, sustaining innovation within organizations involves several coordination challenges that center on how ideas can be translated across space and time (Bartel & Garud, 2009). The continuous improvement of industrial activities with respect to product sustainability also implies the cost and time efficiency, product and process quality and effectiveness (Ron, 1998). Sustaining business excellence means good governance, profitability, reputation and sustenance (Aras & Crowther, 2010). Similarly, Presley & Meade (2010) explain the sustainability in construction industry as being more profitable and more competitive; delivering buildings and structures that provide greater satisfaction, well-being and value to customers and users; respecting and treating its stakeholders more fairly; enhancing and better protecting the natural environment; and minimizing its impact on the consumption of energy; reducing waste and avoiding pollution during the construction process. Thus, the concept of sustainability applies to all aspects of functional and operational requirements (Badiru, 2010).

Rapp and Eklund (2007), for example, studied the suggestion schemes that were operational for longer periods of time and derived the enablers that helped to keep the program live over a period of time. Although the longevity is one dimension, sustainability of a suggestion system needs to consider the achievement of the stated stakeholder goals. Some studies evaluate the effectiveness of their schemes in terms of number of suggestions received, and the number of suggestions implemented,

but the sustainability assessment is not disclosed in only these parameters because it needs to be assessed through its key success factors. Suggestion schemes are designed to achieve a number of goals for the organizations.

Organizations should have stated goals for their suggestion scheme and the success of the suggestion scheme, therefore, should be assessed against achievement of these stated goals. Thus, sustainability of a suggestion system should be positioned to ensure that:

- It adds value to the organization through tangible or intangible benefits
- Creates a conducive work environment for improved productivity
- Ensures employee well-being and increases employee job satisfaction
- Improves employee morale and thus, continues to keep its employees involved in the suggestion schemes
- Improves employees confidence and builds sense of security among its employees
- Improves work process or service
- Improves customer satisfaction

Therefore, to achieve the sustainability, certain factors do play important roles (Hasim & Salman, 2010). Rapp & Eklund (2007) explained the sustainable development of a suggestion system in terms of employee involvement. They found that following aspects contributed for the sustainability of the suggestion system:

- Situations when the employees had a personal benefit from submitting suggestions
- Campaigns emphasizing different themes encouraged employees to become more active within the suggestion system
- Employees having some of their suggestions rejected were more active in submitting suggestions than employees having most suggestions rejected or accepted
- A high monetary reward was not found favorable for submitting new suggestions, compared to lower rewards
- Increased support of group suggestions contributed to a sustained and high level of activity of the suggestion system

Further, Fadeeva (2005) stated that assessment of the networking should be done against the network's own objectives. A sustainable innovation should be proven to be of benefit to the diverse stakeholders (Johnson, 2004) and what can be regarded as 'sustainable' from the point of view of an individual organization is not necessarily sustainable from the point of view of the region and vice versa (Feedevea, 2005). So, the expectations from the system must be set in the language of those involved and should measure things on which they can have direct impact (Wood & Contracts, 2005). The TQM practices is evaluated by using parameters such as balance sheets, bottom lines, market shares, revenues and shareholder values. The dilemma is that the sustainability of TQM practices is not disclosed in these parameters (Svensson, 2006). Similarly, the mere outcomes such as quantity of suggestions received, quantity of suggestions implemented or just an increase in the bottom lines only cannot be considered as parameters to disclose sustainability. The above discussions firstly hint that the 'sustainability' should first consider the performance perspective. Second, sustainability should also imply meeting the stated objectives of the initiative. So 'sustainability' it is not just a binary state of sustaining or not sustaining. Rather, it is influenced by a number of factors. Therefore the assessment of sustainability of a suggestion scheme should encompass the critical success factors.

## Factor 1: Leadership and Work Environment

**2.1. Leadership & Work Environment**

This factor stresses on leadership and work environment for suggestion scheme. It indicates the importance of the commitment and involvement of the top leaderships and various other supportive mechanisms that impact the sustainability of the suggestion system. The existence and adoption of the leadership and organizational encouragement increase the sustainability in suggestion system. The leadership and organizational encouragement indicators include:

- Top Management Support: This indicates the commitment and the support of the top management to the suggestion scheme. The involvement and active participation of the top management in suggestion system activities have a positive impact on employees.
- Supervisor Support: This indicates the extent to which supervisors encourage their employees to make suggestions. The guidance and encouragement from the supervisors motivate the employees to make suggestions.
- Organizational Support: This indicates the provisions that the organization can make to support the suggestion scheme. A flexible organization structure, no rigid rules and participative management styles encourage employees to make suggestions.
- Communication and Networking: This indicates the communication mechanisms and opportunities for collaborating. The free flow of communication, sharing information and networking opportunities encourage employees to make suggestions.
- Support for Innovations: This implies the provision within the organizations to protect its employees from any obstructive behavior of colleagues, as a result of their suggestion. The existence of a mechanism to deal with these issues can decrease the employee fear for participating in the suggestion scheme.
- Coworker's Support: This is concerned with the support and guidance rendered by the coworker to make a suggestion. Coworker's support and guidance motivates employees to make suggestions.

**2.2. System Capability**

This factor stresses on the capability of the system. The implementation of valid ideas and existence and adoption of capability indicators improves the sustainability of the suggestion system. The capability indicators include:

- Support for Suggestion Implementation: This is concerned with the extent to which suggestions are put into actions and the support of the organization to empower employees to make implementable ideas. Empowerment helps employees to test their creativity there by increasing the chances of considering the idea for implementation.
- Feedback: This is concerned with how the organization manages to provide the feedback on its employees' suggestions. A prompt and supportive feedback keeps employees to make more suggestion and be involved in the system.
- Rewards: This implies the recognition and rewards that the organization allocates to the suggestions. Setting up a fair amount of rewards increases the employee involvement in the suggestion scheme.
- Awareness: This indicates the publicity that the organization makes with regard to its scheme. Communicating the benefits and the scheme itself can help to attract suggestions from its employees.
- Evaluation: This is concerned with the process of evaluating the suggestion. A transparent set of procedures and effective process increases the suggestions.

- **System Features:** This implies the features of the system in terms of usability and accessibility of the system. A user friendly system, with dedicated administrator and timely processing of the ideas can attract more suggestions and hence, can increase the sustainability of the suggestion system.
- **Resources:** This indicates the extent to which the organization supports its employees with resources to stimulate creative ideas. Adequate and timely availability of the resources can increase the sustainability of the suggestion system.

### 2.3. System Effectiveness

This factor emphasizes on the benefits of the suggestion system. The indicators included in this factor depict the outcomes of a suggestion system in terms of profitability, customer satisfaction, employee productivity, product quality and process improvement. These variables increase the effectiveness of the suggestion scheme. The indicators included in this factor are:

- **Customer Satisfaction:** The purpose of the suggestion system is to improve the customer satisfaction. An improvement in the customer satisfaction increases the sustainability of a suggestion system.
- **Product Quality:** One of the stated goals of the suggestion system is to improve the quality of the product or service. An improvement in product quality or service as a result of suggestion system increases the sustainability of the suggestion system.
- **Improvements in Process:** The other objective of the suggestion system is to continuously improve the organizations processes. Meeting this objective of the suggestion systems increases the sustainability of the suggestion system.
- **Employee Productivity:** This indicator implies the benefit that the organization gains in terms of employee productivity as a result of suggestion. Suggestion scheme helps improve the employee safety and satisfaction, thus, resulting in employee productivity. Suggestion scheme also improves employee commitment and sense of accountability to the organization. The other stated benefit of the suggestion system is it helps employees to perceive a sense of security. Suggestion system also helps to improve employee confidence on the organization resulting in employee productivity.
- **Profitability:** The indicator implies the cost saved or new revenue generated as a result of suggestion system.

### 2.4. Organizational Encouragement

This factor stresses on the supportive elements that exist within the organization to support the suggestion system. The existence and fostering of such elements improves the sustainability of the suggestion system. The indicators for organizational encouragement are:

- **Teamwork:** Providing an opportunity to make suggestions in groups motivates employees to make suggestions and thus, impacts the sustainability of the suggestion system.
- **Expertise:** The employees' domain knowledge and expertise increases the ability to make suggestions.
- **Training:** This implies the extent to which an organization provides trainings to stimulate creativity and to use the suggestion scheme effectively.
- **Employee participation:** This implies the extent to which employees participate in the suggestion system. Greater involvement of the employees in the suggestion system improves the sustainability in the suggestion system.

## 2.5. System Barriers

This factor implies the existence of unsupportive practices that hinder the suggestion scheme. These barriers have a negative impact on the suggestion scheme. These include job control and creating a sense of competitions among employees.

- **Job control:** Job control implies the extent to which employees are expected to follow the standard routines within their job roles. The jobs with tight time pressures and standard routines impact the creativity ability of employees and discourage employees from participating in the suggestion system.
- **Competition:** This implies making the participation in suggestion system mandatory for employees and creating an environment of competition that has a negative impact on the suggestion system. A free and voluntary environment will positively impact the suggestion system

*Table 1: Framework for Sustainability Assessment*

Factors For Suggestion System Sustainability Assessment				
Leadership and Organizational Environment	System Capability	Organizational Encouragement	System Effectiveness	System Barriers
Factor Indicators				
Top Management Support What evidence is available to demonstrate the top management support?	Support for Suggestion Implementation Demonstrate the actualization of the suggestion in your organization?	Teamwork How would you describe the team work in relation to suggestion systems?	Profitability Does your suggestion system generate new revenue or saves cost?	Job Control Describe the job environment in your organization?
Supervisory support What evidence is available to demonstrate the supervisor support to suggestion system?	System Features Describe the suggestion system features?	Training Explain the training programs that you offer to your employees in relation to suggestion systems	Employee Productivity Describe how the employee productivity is improved as a result of the suggestion system?	Competition Do your employees sense the suggestion system as a competition to test their ability in any way?
Coworker support How do you describe the work relationships among the employees in relation to suggestion systems?	Awareness How your organization creates awareness of the suggestion system?	Expertise How do you describe the employee expertise in your organization?	Product quality Does the suggestion system impact the quality of the product? Give evidence	
Organizational support What evidence is available to demonstrate the Organizational support to the suggestion system?	Feedback Explain the feedback process in your organization	Employee Participation What evidence is available to demonstrate the Employee Participation in the suggestion system	Process improvements Does the suggestion system trigger improvements in the processes? Give Examples	
Communication Explain how communications and	Rewarding Explain the reward scheme for		Customer Satisfaction Does the	



networking impacts suggestion system in your organization	suggestion system in your organization	suggestion system impacts the customer satisfaction? Give Examples
Support for Innovation What mechanism exist in your organization to protect your employees in case of disputes due to suggestion system	Evaluation Explain the evaluation procedure for suggestion system in your organization	
	Resources Explain the resource availability suggestion system in your organization	

This paper uses the framework described above to present three case studies of using suggestion schemes in the UAE. The next section describes the methodology used for collecting data for compiling these case studies. This section is followed by the section containing the three cases.

### 3. Methodology

This research used a survey instrument to elicit the views of suggestion scheme users and experts. The survey instrument was created based on the critical success factors summarized in Table A1. The survey instrument was pilot tested among 29 users of the suggestion system prior to applying for full data collection. After the minor modifications to the questionnaire were made, the main data was collected. About 333 responses were received. After removing the data with missing values only 306 cases were considered for the final analysis. A total of 72 participants were with 30 years of work experience, while other 137 participants work experience varied from 20 to 30 years and 97 participants had work experience up to 10 years. The numbers of female participants were 57 and men were 249. The social research software SPSS was used to statistically analyze the data. Internal consistency of questionnaire scale was computed using Cronbach's Alpha method that yielded a value of .92, which can be considered as a good value. The Factor Analysis was used to describe the variability among the indicators. The Factor Analysis was conducted on 32 variable which were mounted on a 5 point likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). When conducting Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), it is important to decide how many factors should be included and to select the rotation method for rotating the initial factor solution to a final solution that could be more reality interpreted (Fabrigar et al., 1999). As such, in this research, the researcher decided to force the number of factors to 5 and chose the "varimax" rotation method to conduct the exploratory factor analysis. The initial framework was developed based on the results of the first part of the analysis. During the second stage, a case study method was adopted. Semi structured interviews were used to collect the data.

### 4. Case Studies

#### 4.1. Organization A

Organization A is a large scale organization with over – number of employees and suggestion scheme is into existent for 30 years.

The preliminary framework is applied to assess the sustainability of the suggestion system in Organization A. The data was collected by interviewing the key member of the suggestion system and by collecting other forms of evidence such as written documentation including a suggestion system manual, visit to the website, news archives, information on the annual celebrations, mission statement etc. The section below discusses each of the factors in the framework.

The Organization A described that the top management support for suggestion system is very visible in the organization. The top management of the organization directly involves awarding the best suggestions twice a year and takes keen interest to view the presentations of all awarded employees. The top leadership has a stated vision for their system. The top management receives monthly reports providing the statistics of their suggestion system. It reviews the report to note the performance of individual departments and takes keen interest to set targets and provides guidance to improve the employee involvement. The leadership of the organization also empowers the middle management and takes them into confidence and ensures that suggestion system is not a threat to their authority.

Organization A demonstrated that their suggestion system receives great attention from their supervisors. The supervisor is responsible for reviewing employee ideas and providing employees with input and assistance in refining the ideas. He is also recognized for his contributions and the supervisor has been given full support and confidence from the senior management that he should evaluate the suggestion based on set criteria. Moreover, he is empowered to fix the award for the suggestions received. Supervisors are in a way held responsible for not only receiving the suggestion from their employees but also for implementing the suggestions. Interestingly, the supervisors are given Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with respect to the suggestion system. The KPIs are annually reviewed and new targets are set as required. When their subordinates are awarded suggestions, the supervisor and their line manager too are recognized. It is therefore, in the best interest of the supervisor to support and encourage the suggestion system in every possible way.

The Organization A explained that it has a very supportive culture towards the suggestion system and as such it hosts bi-annual events to honor the winning suggestions. It is thus, bred into the system that a suggestion system is one of the vital parts of each department. Employee suggestions are centrally stored and are accessible to all other departments. Organization A also supports if an implemented suggestion needs to be replicated in other departments. Moreover, employees can collaborate and discuss their ideas and produce their suggestions. They are given authority to test their suggestion before submitting into the system. The immediate supervisor also encourages his or her employees to make suggestions and provides support where required to review the suggestion etc. Employees can also avail the support of the central suggestion system team should they need any help in this regard. Employees are free to communicate with cross departments for any support. The main organizational support comes from the benefit that the system is decentralized giving the authority in their departments to review and honor every employee as required and the department is also given the support of a financial assistance to evaluate and suggest appropriate rewards and if required the departments can obtain the help of the central committee to evaluate the suggestion and fix appropriate rewards. Organization A also gives clear guidelines to its employees illustrating what would be considered as a valid suggestion. They state suggestions are considered as not valid if they have:

- Reported a problem without a solution
- A repeated/duplicated idea
- A complaint/grievance
- Suggestions not entered/registered in the online system within one month of implementation.



Organization A has further established authorities such as supervisors, unit heads and heads of departments who encourage participation and supporting culture that motivates employees towards making the suggestion in their work area. Moreover the organization nourishes creativity of its employees through conducting creativity stimulation workshops.

Organization A explains that it has department and divisional level formal meetings. The organization has an active website detailing the status of the suggestion system regularly. The in-house monthly newsletter describes the suggestion system activities. Although the suggestion system is not the core business of the organization, employees do get opportunities to collaborate with outside network as they participate at national and international level conferences. Employees are encouraged to submit their ideas at local and international competitions. The organization has flexible organizational structure where employees can reach out to any colleagues for sharing and jointly making contributions to the suggestion system.

Some of the information communicated through the website for example includes:

- Number of suggestions received on that day
- External links to other organizations
- News features

Organization A notes that employees clearly perceive the organization's support for innovation since it is the culture of the organization to make active suggestions to improve their work environment and get recognized for their ideas. Employees are also provided support to improve their creativity skills through the various workshops conducted to stimulate creativity. Organization A also ensures its support to employees to reduce the disputes among employees as a result of their colleagues' suggestions. The system is decentralized; therefore the first level of assessment happens at the supervisor level giving less chance for many disputes to occur.

Organization A explained that the high value suggestions are usually the result of working within groups and submitting ideas as a team. Unless the suggestions are simple, they often require opinion and guidance of their colleagues who may otherwise be affected by the implementation. The employees therefore support each other on their individual ideas and seek the support of their colleagues. The suggestion system has an option to include either their co-workers names or their colleagues or supervisors from other departments.

Organization A hosts annual awards to reward their employees. It has established reward types based on the value of the suggestion. There are also annual awarding ceremonies to recognize the best suggestions and the different categories of awards include:

- Best Employee & Best Supervisor Award
- Best Lady Employee & Supervisor Award
- Special Category Award for the Most Active National Employee
- 100% Employee Participation Award
- Areas achieving 100% employee participation in a year will be recognized during Annual Awards Presentation. Employee participation is calculated based on the awarded suggestions in a year
- President & CEO's Special Award
- President & CEO to recognize individuals who have participated in various competitions.

### Support for Suggestion Implementation

It is explained that the organization achieves its set target on suggestion implementations. The implementation rate is usually 100% unless a suggestion requires adjustment due to external factors and in such cases a suggestion may be delayed for implementation. The targets are periodically reviewed for departments. All suggestions are stored in central databases and other departments can also choose ideas for implementation that are useful or beneficial.

It is explained that the organization has an online suggestion system with complete suggestion tracking mechanism. Employees can track the progress of their suggestion at any time. Since the supervisors are the first line of evaluators, they provide direct feedback. As the supervisor is also partly responsible in achieving their suggestion targets, every employee is likely to get supportive and encouraging feedback. In case the employee is unhappy with the feedback he or she still has a right to make their suggestion directly to the central system. It is also said that unsuccessful suggestions are not treated as “rejected” but shown with a status that “Not feasible at this time” to keep their employees motivated. The system once in 14 days will automatically remind all the users (employees, supervisors and evaluators) if there is any suggestions’ pending for implementation in their “In & Out Trays”. The supervisor also has an option provided in the system to remind evaluators to enter comments for the distributed suggestions.

Organization A explained that it has a set and established evaluation process. Once a suggestion is submitted, it is carefully scrutinized by a relevant supervisor and then circulated to the concerned departments for their comments. If the suggestion has some merit then it is considered for implementation. Supervisor evaluates the suggestion and submits to the area representative who in turn gets the approval of the Head of the Department. If the suggestion award is less than \$ 137 the approved suggestions will be submitted to System Office for award. But if the award is more than \$137, the same needs to be discussed in the review meeting. The Review Team meets twice every four weeks. If the suggestion is deemed not acceptable, then the concerned Supervisor/ Area Representative will refer back to the same to the employee, by detailing reasons for not accepting the suggestion. The system administration is divided in to 28 areas and each area is represented by an area representative. Area Representative is a member of the Suggestion System Review Team. The Review Team consists of System Chairman, System Superintendent, 28 Area Representatives and three advisors representing Engineering, Finance and Safety. The Review Team meet on Tuesdays on the third & fourth week of every month to discuss suggestions nominated for high value awards. The Suggestion System Review Team decides the merits of the suggestion and vote for an appropriate award. The decision of the Review Team is final.

Organization A states employees can enter suggestions directly in the computer and forward to their respective supervisors for further processing. The organization further has dedicated administrators and established set of rules and procedures in place to receive, evaluate and reward the suggestions. The system is administered by the Quality Assurance department. The program rules and policies are set by the suggestion system review team chaired by Manager, Quality Assurance & Continuous Improvement. The support of the administrative team is always rendered when any employee needs support for making their suggestions. The website of the organization has hosted a website dedicated to suggestion system that has listed a section on frequently asked questions. It also has an online guide for making the suggestions. Employees have the facility to log into the system as and when required and they can make suggestions from anywhere at any time. Employees can also use the paper based system to make the suggestion. Organization A explained that employees should make a suggestion by providing a complete solution to it.

Organization A explained that awareness is an important element in their system. They explained that their system has been running successfully for about 30 years. The organization has its promotional events that include annual celebration for the system, and minimum two pages of update on monthly newsletter about the system and the departmental level campaigns. The organization recalls that when it had put up a promotional campaign for 5 days it had received about 6000 suggestions.

Organization A states that employees can avail resources as required by requesting the same to their supervisors. Supervisors are empowered to make decisions to a certain extent and to support the employees with resources. Each department is further assigned a financial analyst to calculate and see if the resources and awards allocated are within the budget.

Organization A, first of all reports its revenues earned as a result of suggestion system annually in the formal gatherings. Moreover, employee rewards are calculated based on how much money it generates as a result of the employees suggestion. The performance of the organization can be described as 100% implemented suggestions per department. The target settings for the departments are annually revised or different set of targets are set to keep the employees motivated towards the system. Above all, it is interesting to note that the organization's suggestion system does not necessarily expect the suggestion to aim at generating new revenues or at cost savings but rather to keep employees motivated and bring about positive behavioral aspects to the workplace. Overall, the organization's suggestion system has been running successfully for over 30 years and has created a benchmark for other organizations. The organization annually participates in Ideas Arabia conference and reports its annual earnings. Annual earnings are also published on the company's website.

#### Employee Productivity

Organization A explains that it largely relies upon multi-cultural and expat population. Their prime motivation stems from their ability to be involved in the organization and to raise their concerns. Suggestion systems largely meet its employee's goals as they are able to raise their viewpoint not only with respect to their jobs but can make suggestion for improving any aspect of the organization. This opportunity keeps them motivated and influences their sense of accountability. Moreover, the employees are required to submit their suggestion to their supervisors who in turn would also be recognized along with their subordinate. As such a greater participation is always ensured. Supervisors are not allowed to make suggestions relating to their subordinates work area rather supervisors have a different system to make their suggestion at their levels.

Interestingly, as noted above, the organization doesn't necessarily expect their employees to make suggestions for cost savings or generating new revenues. Most of the suggestions received by the employees relate to work area. The main focus of the company itself is safety and it greatly focuses on receiving such suggestion from the employees and ensures that they are implemented.

Furthermore, no suggestion is rejected, but if it is not feasible for implementation at the given point in time it is reserved for future use. It is also stated that, the suggestions that have been already implemented have helped the company improve on its process and significantly reduce environmental impact on the surroundings.

Organization A explains that one of the objectives of their system is to recognize their employees for their talents and improve their creativity. This set goal has made employees to participate in the suggestion system. The 100% participation indicates a general level of improvement in employee confidence level with the organization.

The message of the CEO of the organization states that their people are any organizations greatest assets. Their employee's creativity has resulted in enhancing the processes significantly. All suggestions that are submitted are made visible to all departments. A suggestion implemented in one organization can also be implemented by other departments if it finds it useful in their department. Therefore, there is always a scope for improvement and revise its services and offerings. Organization A further illustrates that one of the objectives of the system is to encourage a culture of continuous improvement.

Organization A does not specifically make note of suggestions that would directly impact the customer's satisfaction. Mostly, the suggestion indirectly impacts the satisfaction as a result of improved processes or product quality. However, it was noted that products go through revisions and as such the organization is able to meet the product requirement of the customer generally. As an example, it was illustrated that, the employees over a period of time even suggest improvements to the equipment that they use and as such their suppliers are able to revise the specifications of their machinery.

The organization has made it mandatory that each department must have a certain percentage of implemented suggestions per year. This way it ensures that the departmental processes and procedures go through a continual improvement which in turn can impact the product quality. The CEO's message with regard to the productivity of the organization states that, "Over the course of their tenure, A's production capacity has expanded from approximately 150,000 metric tons a year to more than one million tons a year. Today, A has 1,573 reduction cells - that's 4.35 times as many reduction cells as at our company's inception; yet we produce 6.7 times aluminum each year. This is attributable to the value added by our people, whose innovative abilities and dedicated efforts enable continuous improvement."

Organization A explains that everyone in the organization is eligible to participate in the system. Moreover, the line authority may not make suggestions that fall under the domain of their subordinates and the supervisors have dedicated domain areas to make their suggestions pertaining to their roles and responsibilities. Although often it is a very thin line that constitutes part of the job responsibility and a creative opportunity, they are considered as suggestions as long as they are beneficial in some way. Suggestions are not accepted or implemented only because they generate revenue or can save cost but suggestions are encouraged to improve every aspect of employees' work life such as safety to job satisfaction, commitment, accountability, and confidence and job behaviors. The culture of suggestion making can be said to be deep rooted and at any point in time there about 92 suggestions per day when about 500 employees are present at work. The number of suggestions received is displayed online and visible to everyone. The CEO of the organization in his message states that, "As repeatedly demonstrated by the System, the involvement of all our employees is imperative for the success of our organization."

Organization A explained that employees can make their suggestions in teams and the rewards would be extended to the entire team. It is noted that when the suggestions come from teams they generally have a higher value. The support for team work is further illustrated in a message of the top leadership that states that, "Building a healthy workplace environment is one of the keys to success in any business. Accordingly, the rewards programme within the Fire & Security Department is designed to develop a spirit of teamwork amongst A's Fire & Security personnel, by encouraging them to contribute to a set of initiatives that are aligned to the department's strategic objectives."

Organization A demonstrated that the organization has established training program to train their employees to use the suggestion systems. Trainings are also provided to furnish employees creative skills. Workshops of this kind are a routine practice. It is noted on their website that the organization

invests substantially in training and development initiatives designed to provide employees with the skills required to perform their tasks effectively while facilitating personal growth. On average, each employee underwent 4.2 man-days of training in 2011.

Organization A emphasizes that unless otherwise suggestions are administrative, most of the suggestions that are received in the system often are technical. These technical suggestions are indeed the outcome of knowledge and know-how of domain area. It is also stated that employees often make suggestion with respect to improvising their supplier's services or products. Often, these ideas are taken by their suppliers and rectified at their end. It is also echoed in the messages of the top leadership as they state, "The continuing success of the System is due to our talented employees, whose knowledge, skill, passion and dedication A truly values. Lots of people ask why our Employee Suggestion System is so successful. For me, the answer is simple: it's because of our people we believe in them and value their knowledge across the spectrum, from employees and supervisors to area representatives and area management. It's also because the System has become an integral part of our organization; and I am proud to say that 160,000 suggested improvements have been made during the last nine years alone!"

Organization A has also won international awards for their top class suggestions which the leadership attributes to their technical know- how.

Organization A describes that employees enjoy job autonomy and can check the workability of their suggestion at department level prior to submitting for an award. As such, they receive support from their supervisors to action the suggestion. Since line authorities are accountable for the working of the suggestion system, employees enjoy freedom to propose changes to their task routines. It is so obvious that employees even make suggestions to upgrade or better the service of the third party machinery and their party vendors take them into consideration and better their products. Unless a solution is provided, it will not be considered as a valid suggestion. Such a requirement empowers its employees to think out of the box and think on their own ideas and does not necessarily bind them to tasks routines. The message of the CEO further evidences the empowerment practice and states that "We know that our organizations continued success is dependent on our employees being involved and engaged in the business. We have demonstrated that people who are empowered enjoy an enriched work experience and consistently give of their best - which in turn leads to improvements in quality, safety, cost, environment, through-put and customer service. Indeed, the A Suggestion System plays a key role in positioning our company as a leader in every aspect of our operations and helps us maintain a competitive edge in the marketplace."

### Competition

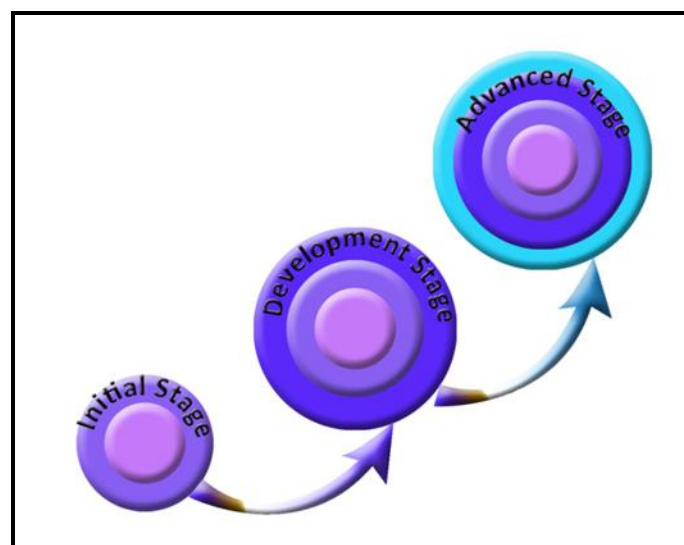
Organization A explained that suggestion making is a voluntary practice in the organizations. It is not a mandatory requirement. However, the competitive spirit gets built up as fellow colleagues or departments are seen receiving rewards but this works as a positive force rather than the negative. As illustrated in the case study discussion, the organization A evidenced each of the sustainability assessment factors. This framework thus creates a base for assessing their suggestion schemes. Experts can use their judgment around these factors to evaluate their existence and the factors that have weak existence or influence should be pulled up for improved effectiveness of the suggestion scheme.

## 5. Discussion and Analysis

As noted in the above case study organization A illustrated the existence of each of the factors. It demonstrated the practices and evidences that organization put in place to boost the effectiveness of the system. These include:

- ✓ Top management's direct involvement in programs, such as, best suggestions award, review of suggestion system performance report, involvement in making the suggestions related to their work and setting up a vision and mission for suggestion system and an "audit system" to monitor system activities.
- ✓ Making the supervisor responsible for reviewing employee ideas and providing their subordinates with input and assistance in refining the ideas; recognizing the supervisor for his contributions.
- ✓ Centrally storing the suggestions and fostering a supportive organization culture and giving clear suggestion guidelines and awareness to formulate suggestions.
- ✓ Sharing information regarding the suggestion scheme through an in-house monthly newsletter and encouraging staff to participate at national and international level conferences and setting up an active website detailing the status of the suggestion scheme regularly.
- ✓ Provision to dissolve any disputes among employees and the support to forward their suggestions fearlessly.
- ✓ Facilitating collaboration and options to upload colleagues' suggestions.
- ✓ Providing encouraging feedback and setting up realistic deadlines for processing the suggestions.
- ✓ Setting up financial and other rewards.
- ✓ A skilled evaluation team, evaluation criteria and prompt evaluation of the suggestions.
- ✓ Establishing a brand name for suggestion systems and conducting promotional campaigns.
- ✓ An efficient system to elicit ideas with user friendly features.
- ✓ Availability of financial resources and procedure to seek resource support.
- ✓ Provision to submit ideas in teams and making the scheme open to all for participation
- ✓ Flexibility in working environment, innovation supportive practices and job autonomy.
- ✓ Avoiding the feeling among employees that they are judged for their performance through completion.

So, an organization must cross check the existence of practices associated with each of these factors as stated in the Table 2. An improvement road map can then be produced by identifying the factors that does not have any evidence aligned and organization can then prepare a plan to improve the existence of such necessary factors.



**Figure 1:** Sustainability Stages



The initial stage means that there is no or very little evidence for demonstration of the existence of practices associated with that indicator. At this stage it is also possible that each indicator exhibits adverse practices. The developmental stage demonstrates that there is adequate evidence of the existence of supporting practices; however, these could be further developed for improvements. The advance stage implies that there are various good practices in the organization to demonstrate the influence of the indicators on the suggestion system. The final refined framework is as below:

## 6. Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to develop a framework that can be used to assess the sustainability of the suggestion system of an organization. After a thorough review of the relevant literature, a number of success criteria and success factors were found. Based on these the data was collected from suggestion scheme experts to identify the associated practices to nurture the system and a framework was proposed. The framework was validated through a case study and the key practices associated with each factor are discussed.

The validation conducted on our framework is only limited to one case study. In terms of further work, there is ample scope for validation of the developed framework using a greater number of case studies. Similarly, the validation of such a model could draw on case studies of different sizes and complexities and from different industrial sectors. This may generate interesting results in terms of developing sustainability stages and add to the body of knowledge in this very important area of sustaining the suggestion schemes in the organization.

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