Breaking Down Barriers to Innovation

By Adam Maxwell

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Have you ever brought a new idea to your utility only to run into these responses?

• Our legacy system prevents us from doing that
• We tried that XXX years ago, and it didn't work
• But we've always done it this way
• Regulators would never approve that

If these responses sound familiar, that's because these are some of the barriers that your utility peers wrote on the Wall of Excuses at the most recent E Source E Design 2020 conference: Powering What's Next for the New Energy Consumer.

Learn more

What's on your wall of excuses?

E Source hosted over 160 utility innovators in Seattle, Washington, in early April for a conference focused on moving ... we wanted to leverage the power of group collaboration to address them and generate creative ideas to overcome them.

Attendees at the E Design 2020 conference in Seattle shared common excuses they hear when trying to innovate at their utilities.

There's no shortage of innovators in utilities, yet all too often their new ideas are squashed by cultural norms like ... a representation of their ideas and also think on the spot to incorporate new layers of complexity every 20 minutes.

During the workshop session, attendees worked in small groups to create prototypes of an energy-efficiency mobile app.

Creating hacks to combat barriers

Afterward, we held a Solution Hackathon working session for participants to come up with quick hacks to address excuses ... utilities don't think about what work is essential and that nonessential work has become an unquestioned, daily routine.

How might we …?

Teams then generated “how might we” questions to reframe the problems identified. “How might we” is a foundational ... we create a culture that celebrates trying something new? How might we build a reward structure for generating new ideas?

To foster a more-innovative culture, one team thought of creating quarterly innovation contests that would tap into ... recognition to all new ideas, including failures, and disseminating the lessons learned in order to “fail forward.”

E Design 2020 members are change agents within their utilities and are eager to be at the forefront of new initiatives ... perspective and are inspired to go home and push the innovation envelope. We're excited to see what everyone achieves!

About E Design 2020

Bill LeBlanc, E Source chief instigation agent, talks about the discomfort and rewards of design thinking—a key component of E Design 2020.

The Powering What's Next for the New Energy Consumer conference is a component of our E Design 2020 initiative. This year we're performing ethnographic market research in the SMB sector with our participating utilities. ... the design-thinking approach to come up with innovative techniques to engage this historically challenging sector. Please reach out to us today to discuss membership.

Learn more

About the author

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Adam Maxwell manages both the E Source Distributed Energy Resource Strategy Service and the E Design 2020 initiative, ... services to utilities. Adam has a BA in psychology from Wesleyan University and is a certified Agile Scrum product owner.

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