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 forward with innovation at your utility. E Source provided the forum for this important conversation, with goals of recognizing the barriers to innovation, learning new ways to address them, and facilitating a collaborative approach to innovation.

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 the Wall of Excuses. At E Design 2020, we wanted to leverage the power of group collaboration to address them and generate creative ideas to overcome them.

Creating hacks to combat barriers

Afterward, we held a Solution Hackathon working session for participants to come up with quick hacks to address excuses they hear at their utilities. E Source provided the tools and environment to effectively address key issues.

We focused on common barriers that utilities face, including topics like: “But I don’t have the budget to do that,” “The previous attempts failed,” and “We don’t think we can afford it.” In addition, the working sessions were designed to be fast-paced, with participants working together in small teams to tackle the core issues that they had identified.

Creating prototypes

During the workshop session, attendees worked in small groups to create prototypes of an energy-efficiency mobile app. The goal was to design an example of a possible solution that could address barriers and create a tangible asset to share with others.

During the workshop, attendees created prototypes that included features like:

- A tool to help users understand their energy usage and find ways to reduce it.
- A mobile app for customers to track their energy consumption and suggest energy-saving opportunities.
- A platform for utilities to share best practices and experimental ideas.

E Design 2020 members are change agents within their utilities and are eager to be at the forefront of new initiatives. As we move ahead, we want to lead the way with creative solutions that overcome barriers and move forward. But we need your help to bring these ideas to life.

How might we … ?

Teams then generated “how might we” questions to reframe the problems identified. “How might we” is a foundational question that helps teams move past the obvious and think creatively.

- How might we …?

To foster a more-innovative culture, one team thought of creating quarterly innovation contests that would tap into employees’ innovation. The goal is to encourage employees to think creatively and embrace innovation as a normal part of their everyday work.

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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. Participants are using 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, with responsibilities spanning both services to utilities. Adam has a BA in psychology from Wesleyan University and is a certified Agile Scrum product owner.

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