

GOING ON-LINE WITH YOUR SUGGESTION SYSTEM

BY JIM SCHWARZ - TOTAL QUALITY SYSTEMS

TELEPHONE: (+001)928-527-4054

FAX: (+001)928-527-3886

E-MAIL: JIMS@TQS-SIM.COM

WEB SITE: WWW.TQS-SIM.COM

**PRESENTED AT: IDEAS.UK CONFERENCE
NOVEMBER, 1999
YORK, U.K.**

INTRODUCTION

Current improvements in computer technology as well as staff access to computer systems in the recent years now allow many organizations to reap the benefits of a fully or partially on-line suggestion system. With staff reductions in many system offices, there often aren't the resources to continue handling the tedious data entry of forms. Added to that are the expectations of suggestion system participants of faster turn-around times on the ideas they are involved in as well as simplification of the process. Organizational management has typically become more and more results oriented and may not support older processes that are inefficient. This presentation will review the various issues with going on-line with a suggestion system. It will also discuss several different approaches to achieving that goal.

Before reviewing on-line systems, let's take a look at where our existing processes are at, since going on-line will not be successful if there are other inherent problems with our suggestion system or the software that tracks it. Problems we identify may also need to be included as key items in our on-line tracking system.

Depending on the level of support for suggestion systems and other employee involvement (EI) programs from top management, there are several barriers that face program administrators:

- Administrators and staff may have so many other responsibilities that their time is fragmented and efforts to support the suggestion system are weak. The job may be a temporary one as well or part time.
- Limited staff resulting in administrators spending too much time doing data entry and not having time to promote or manage it well.
- Difficulties in getting information out to people and coordinating the process.
- Frustrated participants having problems determining the status of their ideas.
- Lengthy evaluations and poor statistics on who currently has the idea.
- Competition among EI or quality processes (e.g., teaming, recognition, safety, continuous improvement).
- Top management not truly supporting the process (this may be due to lack of information about the impact of the EI process). This could include their difficulty with the award levels being administered.
- Lack of support from middle management and technical staff because they have different agendas and may see EI as more work with little benefit to them. They may see it as a waste of time.
- Lack of support for training of suggesters, evaluators, supervisors and so forth.
- Lack of technical support for implementing an adequate computer tracking system.
- _____
- _____
- _____

With these problems, the potential of a suggestion system is reduced and may be viewed as an unwanted irritant. If EI is reduced to the level of an unwanted irritant, no amount of effort to efficiently track the program will make the program successful. A successful EI process is one that communicates to all participants while streamlining the administrative staff's clerical nightmare and simplifies the workload of evaluators and other participants. This includes communicating to top management the information they need.

Communication, efficiency and expediency are paramount in carrying out and monitoring successful employee involvement processes, regardless of administrative emphasis or technique. This is where a well designed software system to manage a suggestion system can be important.

Please write below a list of existing problems or issues that need to be resolved with your suggestion system. Do not focus specifically on software but on any issues that need to be addressed. Then in the right column, try to identify ways software may help or fully solve the problem

Key Issues for EI Process:		
Date: _____		
	Current Problem	How Could Software Help Solve It?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

GOING ON-LINE

We hear a lot of talk about suggestion systems that have gone on-line with their process. Yet I have found the majority of the systems haven't taken the plunge. If properly set up, it saves considerable resources on data entry of ideas and allows people to directly review idea status. For systems with high levels of participation, it is the only approach that keeps the entire process from bogging down into too much paperwork. For instance, we have one customer that has 500 employees and last year received 4,000 suggestions, all with only a very part-time administrator. They just couldn't handle the volume if they weren't on-line. Let's take a look at the process so you can make a better decision if you are ready.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Reduced clerical data entry time ◆ Improved turn-around times by avoiding inter-office mail to pass paper based forms ◆ Cut down paper usage ◆ Employees can have access to their idea status on-line ◆ Information can be shared. If allowed, people can research related topics on-line to avoid duplicate effort or use other ideas as a catalyst for new ones ◆ Higher level of ownership in the process by participants ◆ Better communication to participants ◆ For large organizations, better consistency between sites on information that is tracked ◆ _____ ◆ _____ ◆ _____ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Training typically is required for users of the system ◆ Difficulty in getting access for participants who don't have a computer in their work area ◆ Management or the evaluation staff may see it as a loss of control ◆ Increased support calls on the tracking software (e.g., lost passwords) ◆ For large organizations with very independent local programs, a centrally located system may be difficult to initially implement due to different local implementations ◆ _____ ◆ _____ ◆ _____

We need to review to what level we want to go on-line with our process. We will define "on-line" as any electronic entry method link to your suggestion system database. Below are the basic operations that typically can be handled on-line. You may decide to provide some or all of them to your employees:

- ◆ Entry of a new idea by an employee. This could be them accessing software directly on-line or working with their supervisor.
- ◆ Review of idea status by an employee or their supervisor. This allows people to log into the system and check on status without having to call the system office.
- ◆ Employees, teams or supervisors querying the database to research their idea based on related topics or to search for potential duplicate ideas.

- ◆ Evaluator or assessor access to review an idea and update information based on their responsibility with an idea.
- ◆ Managers or supervisors running their personal status reports.
- ◆ Redemption of awards (for points type processes).

Now we need to identify which electronic format best suits us for going on-line (you will need to work with your information systems people to identify which approach is possible):

- ◆ **E-mail** - Electronic mail can be used to enter new ideas or update information about ideas. Typically a form will have to be designed so the information can be directly imported. Without a specific form designed for e-mail entry, a data entry person will have to selectively cut & paste the information into the software because there will be no specific order to the information. E-mail will not allow interactive access to the data (e.g., to check status, run a query or report).
- ◆ **Direct network access** - This is where a user runs a WINDOWS type software program to access the on-line system that runs on a network (e.g., LAN). For larger organizations that are geographically separated, a client/server type database is a must (e.g., Oracle or SQL server) if one central database is to be used. Client/server databases however are much more costly to develop and should be used only if necessary – this includes high security requirements, very high amounts of data or a very distributed organization). If your process is decentralized (where each site runs their own independent system) each site could have its own local on-line database. You could then roll up information to an organisational level for general reports. With this approach, the existing administration software must be updated to handle the new requirements.
- ◆ **Groupware** – Software systems such as Lotus Notes allow a similar interface for an entire organization as direct network access using client/server applications. Some groupware products may not handle data as well as standard database applications.
- ◆ **Intranet web site** - For larger organizations, that are geographically spread out, this may be the ideal situation. One central database can be accessed by anyone in the organization to enter an idea or check status. With this approach, the existing administration software may still be used for reporting and the intranet on-line system only used by submitters or evaluators.

When going on-line we recommend looking at the entire cost of the project since updating the existing system to work properly may be much more costly than creating a new one or purchasing an off-the-shelf system from an outside vendor. I recommend reviewing all of your options before plunging in.

A common concern in many organizations is that not everyone has direct access to a computer or has an e-mail account. Don't let that stop you from going on-line. Kiosks can be set up in canteens or other areas with a computer that allows people to access the on-line system software. It is also better to get some people on-line as soon as possible as it will cut your administration and data entry costs of the system. A related worry is that many people don't have the computer skills to use the system.

We have found that this concern is diminishing, since people that don't use a computer at work may have experience using one outside the workplace (e.g., home or school).

Other issues to consider are:

Who will use the system?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you want every employee to have access or limit it to supervisors or evaluators? • Which types of users access the system will determine what information is needed on entry screens for that specific user. For instance the screens submitters see will normally have different options and features that an evaluator might see. • Computers will need to be available for people that may access the system.
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People that use the system may need basic training so they feel comfortable using the software. • When performing software training, be careful to keep the course streamlined so people don't feel their time is being wasted. • The training sessions would be a good opportunity to reinforce the importance of the suggestion system and build participation.
Paper based forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You will normally want to keep paper based forms available, since some people may be alienated by a computer system and others prefer to work at home or another place on the idea. Forcing <u>everyone</u> to enter an idea via the computer may actually be detrimental since some people will quit participating. • Basic instructions for using the on-line system could be put on the back of the form.
Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passwords and other types of protection are needed to insure that people do not access the wrong information. • Employee entry screens may not include any potential access to sensitive information (another separate program specifically for administrators would only allow for those operations). This also keeps the information they see simple – avoiding time wasting questions about access to controlled areas. • Are there issues of people potentially hacking into the database files? If so, a more secure (and costly) client/server database may need to be used. • If people will be accessing the system via the internet or from home additional security will be required.
Automation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatic correspondence can be sent to participants notifying them of ideas to review, late items or that their idea has been accepted. Not every user may have e-mail so the ability to print letters may be necessary – find what format users prefer to receive correspondence. For e-mail you will need to find which e-mail system is used as well as loading a list of e-mail addresses into your system. The latter may be very difficult to

	<p>automatically load since suggestion systems are typically based on HR data and e-mail system lists are not linked to this data.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routing of ideas – When one person has finished their task we could route it immediately to the next person. Typically the next person is identified by the person who handled the idea before them.
Keep it simple	Complex entry screens will turn off most people and prompt support calls about how to use the software.
Dissidents	You may find some people may not like the system, no matter how well it is designed. We have found that these people sometimes are high level managers who infrequently use the system and may have very different ideas on how it should work. A balanced design is important. We must take into account that in most situations most people using computers are now used to how the Microsoft Windows operating system works
Making the software an idea catalyst	Setting up the software so people can research ideas based on their skill set can take the software from being a tracking and accounting system to a catalyst for new ideas.

If you decide to go on-line, be aware the pay off will not come immediately since it will take time for people to become accustomed to the new approach. Employee satisfaction normally improves since they can personally check information in the system and not have to wait for a letter to come back to them. One of our customers actually saw a measurable increase in participation each time they rolled out their new on-line system. Additionally, the time saved in administration can now be better focused on further promoting the system.

James Schwarz is Vice President of Marketing and Product Development at Total Quality Systems (TQS). He has worked for TQS since 1987, being involved in training, product development, and marketing. Before coming to TQS Mr. Schwarz worked in the semiconductor and electronics manufacturing industries. TQS provides consulting services, training as well as the very popular tracking software, SIM, used to monitor suggestion systems, quality improvement teams, customer feedback, supplier suggestion systems or recognition processes. He holds a BS in Electrical Engineering and a Masters in International Management from the American Graduate School of International Management.