

## PRODUCTS

# Promoting innovation in workplace

As the work environment continues to evolve tremendously, companies are increasingly embracing innovation to come up with new products and services or diversify their businesses. Whereas most companies still handle innovation behind closed doors, with only a few workers having access, this trend is steadily changing as employee-driven innovations gain traction.

Often regarded as a bottom-up activity, this form of innovation occurs outside formal job descriptions, with staff taking time from what they are officially paid to do, thereby fostering a culture where people work closely to improve the company's performance. Creativity is something that should be cherished as it leads to innovative ideas for solving business challenges.

Worldwide, examples abound of companies that have fully leveraged on employee-led innovations as a strategy to spur growth. At the global motor manufacturer Toyota, for instance, a "Creative Ideas Suggestive System" was created in 1951 and to date, 40 million ideas have been contributed by employees at all levels. While not every



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idea is adopted, at times there has been a 98 per cent implementation rate. Back home, the government is determined to promote the country's competitiveness as an investment destination and the cost of power will be a critical factor for the energy-intensive industries

the country hopes to host. It is against this backdrop that five years ago, power generator KenGen embarked on an innovation journey: KenGen Annual G2G Innovation Seminar envisaged promoting innovation that creates value. The main objective was to encourage employees to embrace and embed innovation into the company's operations by coming up with innovative ideas relating to new business models, new revenue generation and cost-cutting measures.

Since 2012, more than 500 innovation ideas have been submitted, with 98 undergoing implementation. This has resulted in revenue generation and cost savings amounting to Sh1 billion in the last financial year. This year's annual Good to Great (G2G) Innovation Conference, the fifth edition, came to a close on July 7 at Naivasha's Enashipai Resort & Spa.

Over the years, this innovation seminar has been the launch pad for brilliant ideas revolving around the options available to not only improve electricity generation but also harness other improvements in technological advances

and providing services. The event stands out in the KenGen calendar, not as an innovation day, but a year's culmination of the company's conscious drive to embrace innovation as a culture. This is a legacy I am proud to leave behind as I pass on the baton to the next chief executive later this year.

### Success

Among the ideas being implemented is generating power using brine. This project is expected to provide an additional 10+ MW using waste heat being reinjected into the earth, in addition to the extraction of commercial minerals from brine such as silica, lithium and other rare minerals that are used commercially in skincare products, batteries and industrial chemicals.

KenGen's and other companies' success stories are a testament to the fact that organisations must start with employee innovation programmes in order to build the full innovation ecosystem. In other words, organisations simply cannot scale up innovation outside their turf until they start from within. According to a recent study by the United States-

based *Independent Agent (IA)* magazine, some 80 per cent of an organisation's improvement potential lies in bottom-up ideas, with the people enjoying having a say in the actionable goals of the company. This is buttressed by the fact that the employees are the most valuable asset that any organisation has. Consequently, it doesn't make sense to rely only on a few employees to come up with new products and services.

Thanks to collaborative technologies, most organisations now understand that a continual stream of ideas is a vital resource for improvement and innovation. Ultimately, such innovation is strongly associated with workplace cultures and jobs in which employees and teams are empowered to take control of the way they work.

An innovative workplace culture is characterised by an enabling management that is open to experimentation and failure – in other words a culture based on trust between the leadership and the workers.

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