



Driving Innovation in the UN Workplace

Young UN input to the High-level Committee on Management

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Introduction

Established in 2016, *Young UN: Agents for Change* is across-UN, global and inclusive network working towards a shared vision of a UN that fully embodies the principles it stands for. With around 800 members in 80+ duty stations across the UN, Young UN is demonstrating its value as a non-bureaucratic space to crowdsource ideas, a platform to pilot and drive innovation and experimentation, and a bottom-up mechanism for cultural change for UN values and the SDGs. To date, Young UN has fed ideas into the three tracks of management, UN development system and peace and security reform, as well as provided other input at the request of UN senior management.

Following the collaboration with the High-level Committee on Programmes, Young UN is now providing input to the High-level Committee on Management (HLCM) on how to foster innovation in the UN workplace. The contribution is seen as a first step in a collaboration with HLCM to incentivise innovation and create a more dynamic workplace at the UN, with Young UN offering its services as a partner network and a vehicle for change.

Incentivising innovation in the UN workplace - why it matters

During this exercise inputs have been collected from across the diverse Young UN network, including members from 20 UN entities¹ in 10 duty stations². The results clearly show that an enabling workplace that incentivises innovation is an increasingly important factor for younger staff members, and would enable the UN to better attract and retain young talent.

For the UN at large, incentivising innovation is also crucial. The 2030 Agenda requires us to foster innovation internally and invest in drivers of development, productivity and technology to be successful.

The Secretary-General's ambitious reform clearly shows that the UN is undergoing a process of change, in terms of organisational mind-set and encouraging forward-thinking and innovation - the HLCM meeting being a case in point. Young UN highly appreciates all initiatives taken already and is now eager to support this change process.

¹ FAO, IFAD, ILO, ITU, OCHA, UN Environment, UN Secretariat (DESA, DM, DPA), UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNITAR, UNODC, UNOG, UNOPS, UNOV, WFP & WHO. NB: Input provided in personal capacity.

² Abidjan, Canada, Dakar, Geneva, Ghana, Maldives, New York, Paris, Rome, Vienna



Innovation at the UN - a reality check

The Young UN survey conducted throughout the network as part of this exercise showed that staff define innovation in terms of thinking outside the box, continuous experimentation, technological advancements, and a knowledge-sharing and encouraging workspace. Based on the definition, a majority of respondents - 70% - did not or only somewhat currently feel enabled to innovate in the workplace. This echoes the results of the Young UN Global Ideas Survey that was conducted in 2017. The specific barriers to innovation were identified as:

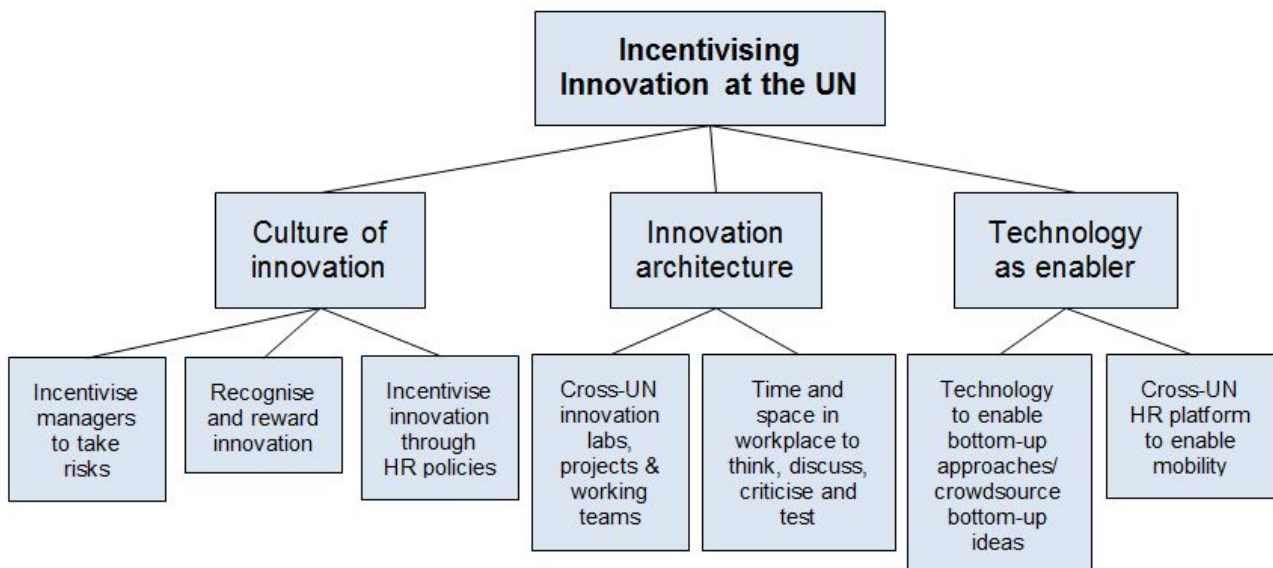
1. **Lack of management support and no encouragement of risk taking.** Instead focus on following process and keeping status quo.
2. **Layers of hierarchy hinders innovation,** as senior staff “know better”, reject new ideas and approaches, or disregard capacities of younger/lower level staff.
3. **Lack of supporting structures for innovation,** including no tools or specific time or space to innovate, inflexible policies and rigid staff rules.

Reversing the trend - incentivising innovation at the UN

First of all, **changing the culture to incentivise innovation, openness and creativity** within the organisation is crucial. This is a long term process that has already been initiated at the highest level of the organization but still needs to trickle down through the organisation. This shift can be accelerated by rewarding managers for testing new approaches, for encouraging innovative leadership by younger team members, and through instructions to managers from highest levels in the organisation. Further means include recognition of innovation through awards, HR policies that reward innovation, enable upward mobility, and include innovation as a required skill in TORs.

Second, **innovation architecture/structures need to be built** within the organisation. This includes setting up organisation wide innovation labs, projects, pilots and challenges as well as cross function/agency working teams. A complimentary innovation fund for developing new ideas and bypass bureaucracy would support these structures. In general, more dedicated time and space for criticising, discussing, thinking and brainstorming is needed in the workplace. Such enabling structures would also include crowdsourcing of bottom-up ideas, enabling younger employees to take ideas to the highest level, possibly using Young UN as a vehicle.

Lastly, **technology should be used as an enabler** of innovation. Examples may include using software that supports innovation, e.g. crowdsourcing of bottom up ideas and cross-UN HR platform to enable cross function/agency work and mobility.





Proposed Innovation 1: Adapting the Gamification Enterprise Framework to the UN

Background - what the proposed innovation could solve:

There is currently a lack of supporting incentive structures that encourage cross-functional and cross-agency based collaborations, with many teams and agencies within the organization working in silos. There are no adequate institutional mechanisms to incentivize and encourage system-wide results and the development and adoption of new skill-sets.

Proposed innovation:

Gamification enterprise framework is an approach that would incentivize system-wide results and the development and adoption of new skillsets. Gamification is the application of game design principles to the enterprise environment to encourage employees to realize business processes improvements, service efficiencies, talent development, innovative research ideas, and constructive collaboration practices. The framework that could be used is the MDA (mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics) framework. This framework:

- a) Facilitates the development of a desired skillset;
- b) Promotes a cultural change around results by rewarding positive action;
- c) Provides the tools to measure the effectiveness and success of different aspects of the skill-set development.

If applied in the UN context, this framework could identify and measure the achievement of systemwide results towards the 2030 Agenda, aggregating and compiling individual or collective achievements by department, office, agency, or at any other level. The badges could be designed at various levels of the system to encourage the desired results, for example:

- SDG badges - to contribute to the fulfillment of SDGs
- Human Rights badge - to contribute to the revitalization of Human Rights up Front initiative
- Mobility badge - to promote mobility exercises
- Mentorship badge - to be able to tap into internal capacities of the UN system

What makes your idea different from what is already being tried?

Something like this has not really been tried before at the UN.

Benefits of the suggested innovation (Pros)

- Promoting increased interdisciplinary collaboration & breaking down divisional and organizational silos
Improving staff engagement and creating a "One UN" culture through common goals
- Integrated and transversal approaches to problem-solving and policy-making
- Encouraging expertise-based team organizations and enabling staff members to obtain a broader set of skills
- Encouraging a more competency and delivery-based evaluation mechanism

Potential challenges or negative outcomes (Cons)

May require a different project-governance structure from what is currently common in the UN system including clearly defined roles for each project (assigning a sponsor, client, project manager, project members and stakeholders).

Next steps to operationalise the suggested innovation:

- Badge-based system to be rolled out in phases. A sample of Young UN members may be used as a pilot
- Development Account projects may be an opportunity to trial such an approach whereby project conditions encourage flexible and interdisciplinary teams



Implications & Impact

Potential implications for team leaders, managers, directors

The badge system provides valuable indicators for team leaders, managers and directors to channelize and drive their teams in the desired direction. It also provides a more competency and delivery-based evaluation mechanism which facilitates better matches both with candidates for recruitment and internally for building project teams based on substantive expertise, and for cross-team collaborations.

How will this innovation improve relationships with key stakeholders?

- Increase drive and motivation amongst staff
- Strengthening collaboration among different agencies
- Clients seeing value because of the integrated and transversal approaches to problem-solving and policy-making
- Easier for managers to evaluate staff performance

How will this innovation affect the productivity and performance of agencies?

Incentivizing collaboration and putting in place a competency and delivery-based evaluation mechanisms for staff would improve efficiency and effectiveness of the staff, facilitating better human capital management. It would facilitate better candidate matching to positions and better fit project teams. Better and efficient teams would improve productivity and performance across agencies.

How will this innovation impact the work environment and the performance of employees in the greater UN System?

This would enable changing the culture of the UN towards a more dynamic, competency and delivery-based talent pool where there would be evaluation mechanisms in place to reward and incentivize collaboration and proactive performance from its people.

Feasibility

Who would be needed to implement the proposal? (staff time/skills/senior support)

- Mentorship from senior management
- An inter-agency working group to discuss the details of this new evaluation mechanism
- Colleagues with IT skills to design and create the linkages between the badge system and HR platforms
- HR colleagues to offer training within agencies to use the new badge system

Financial and technical requirements

- Budget for conceptualizing and operationalizing this new evaluation mechanism
- IT skill-sets to integrate the badge system within the HR platforms
- Coordination cost among HR sectors among different agencies

Potential obstacles

- Since this would need change in basic organizational culture, it may cause initial friction. Key is to ensure that this change is implemented, facilitated and communicated well
- Existing staff members who may not interested in changing the status quo may become disgruntled and less engaged
- It would require funding, commitment from senior management and good change management practices

Full article and more information available [here](#).



Proposed Innovation 2: **Streamlining HR systems through a cross-UN platform**

Background - what the proposed innovation could solve:

Recruitment platforms in the UN system are perceived as complicated, cumbersome and outdated. From a technical point of view, this type of software can easily be shared among multiple organizations while at the same time being perfectly adaptable to individual needs. Nevertheless, an abundance of organizations in the UN system use their very own exclusive recruitment platform (for instance ILO, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNOPS, WFP, WHO). This fragmentation is highly inefficient, wasting human and financial resources by duplicating almost identical procedures. It also hampers inter-agency collaboration and is particularly annoying for applicants, who have to fill in long and tedious forms time and again.

Proposed innovation:

Introducing a common, cross-agency HR platform for recruitment and talent management.

What makes your idea different from what is already being tried?

There is no unified HR platform within the UN system and only few organizations use the same or at least similar software platforms for recruiting, training or talent management. Certain mainstreaming initiatives have recently been introduced, e.g. *OneHR*, a network of UN organizations working together to offer advisory services. Such initiatives would also greatly benefit from a UN-wide HR platform.

Benefits of the suggested innovation (Pros)

- Overarching benefits: Cost-savings, strengthened collaboration and corporate identity, improved public image and user-friendliness
- Improved talent acquisition and outreach: A unified HR platform allows to advertise job offers to a wider audience thus reaching significantly more applicants
- Cross-UN talent management: Allows the creation of a system-wide staff directory including skills and expertise, enables the use of cross-organizational rosters and significantly simplifies inter-agency mobility
- Enhanced possibilities for delivery of training: A system-wide HR platform could also incorporate or be linked to a shared training platform for online or on-site training
- High potential for further use, for instance to facilitate an UN-wide mentorship programme or to introduce a UN-wide system for performance appraisal
- Platform would also support building talent pipeline for new UN Resident Coordinator system

Potential challenges or negative outcomes (Cons)

- The budget and staff allocation for this platform could create conflicts as it would need to be organized and administered among the involved organizations
- Different organizations might have diverging requirements or expectations regarding the structure and use of such a software platform
- Aligning HR procedures will be a major undertaking involving high requirements for the software to be used and the administration of the related data

Next steps to operationalise the suggested innovation:

- Elaboration of potential software solutions and cost estimates
- Agreement on structure and financing of the new software platform
- Harmonization of practices to the extend needed (recruitment procedures and standards; possibly job families and descriptions as well as contractual modalities)
- Identification of a suitable platform, considering intended and potential future uses
- Set-up of the new platform and its integration in existing HR systems



Implications & Impact

Potential implications for team leaders, managers, directors

- A bigger pool of applicants at disposal to select suitable candidates
- Potential talent from across the system can be quickly identified
- Easier coordination for inter-agency mobility and ad hoc work teams

How will this innovation improve relationships with key stakeholders?

- Easier application procedures for both internal and external recruitment
- Increased inter-agency mobility for internal staff
- Strengthened collaboration among different agencies
- Enhanced efficiency for HR teams

How will this innovation affect the productivity and performance of agencies?

It will increase the productivity and performance of agencies, mainly by saving the resources to fund and maintain a separate HR platform, by receiving more applications from a wider talent pool and by having smoother coordination with other agencies.

How will this innovation impact the work environment and the performance of employees in the greater UN System?

The whole UN system benefits from a strengthened inter-agency mobility, a more efficient use of human and financial resources for recruitment, better talent management as well as an improved public image. Furthermore, the platform would highly facilitate cross-UN initiatives like the Resident Coordinator System that relies on nominations of candidates from across the UN system.

Feasibility

Who would be needed to implement the proposal? (staff time/skills/senior support)

- An inter-agency working group could work out the details of the platform
- IT staff (in-house or external) to design and create the platform, and transfer information from existing platforms to the new one
- HR staff to offer training within agencies to use the new platform
- Platform should be championed by senior leadership across UN entities

Financial and technical requirements

- Budget to create, operate and maintain this platform
- IT expertise to design and run the platform
- Coordination cost among HR units of different agencies

Potential obstacles

- Lack of willingness to finance such a cross-agency platform
- Resistance from HR departments due to potential extra work or unwillingness to adjust own procedures
- Complexity of data and requirements for data protection
- Potentially long process to design, implement and mainstream this platform
- Concerns from Member States & legislative bodies, who might have a different understanding of succession planning and expect all vacancies to be advertised internally & externally



Proposed Innovation 3: Young UN Innovation Platform

Background / what the proposed innovation could solve:

Currently there is a proliferation of innovation labs across the UN system from Youth Innovation Labs, UN Technology Innovation Labs, UN Biodiversity Lab, UNICEF Innovation Labs, UN Global Pulse, etc. Many of these labs' primary objective is to find external solutions (external), often sectorial, through partnerships and idea generation to accelerate the achievement of SDGs. Apart from the ongoing work on defining the innovation architecture within the UN system, there are no adequate tools and formalized processes to transform the organizational culture, mindset and behaviour to foster innovation from within (internal). There is limited space and time dedicated to encourage testing of new ideas, and it is not clear how many of the innovations developed on the labs can scale up and sustain through time.

Proposed innovation:

Establishing a UN system-wide Young UN Innovation Platform (Innovation Platform) for a two years' pilot period. The Innovation Platform acts in two ways: (1) Ideas generation: crowdsource bottom up alternative solutions to address cross-cutting issues that are most pressing locally and globally, and (2) Vetting of innovation prototypes: support the different innovation labs by identifying scale-up opportunities for solutions developed on the labs, validating solutions developed with the final recipients of those innovations, and establishing a feedback loop within the different innovation labs.

The Innovation Platform creation would be initiated by members of Young UN, providing opportunities to crowdsource bottom up ideas, bypassing bureaucracy, breaking departmental silos, enabling younger employees to drive internal change within a supported structure, and feeding relevant ideas to different innovation actors.

What makes your idea different from what is already being tried?

The Innovation Platform provides an added value connecting all those initiatives from the labs to real case scenarios, subject matter experts, potential beneficiaries and end users throughout the UN system. It provides a test ground for validation, collective thinking, bottom up innovation, and actively contributes to the continuous feedback loop from ideas conceptualization to piloting, testing, and scaling up. Importantly, it leverages the strength of its members, by connecting teams across agencies and departments, and at the same time embracing/influencing the innovation mindset and culture within the wider UN.

Benefits of the suggested innovation (Pros)

Young UN survey conducted in 2017 highlighted that the most important factor that staff members applied to work at the UN is the potential to make a difference (70%). The Innovation Platform would allow younger staff members the space, structure, time and tools to find and test unconventional solutions, improving efficiency at work, and also encouraging a knowledge-sharing culture across departments and agencies. It provides the opportunity for staff members to stimulate curiosity, growth, value creation, while strengthening employees' engagement.

Potential challenges or negative outcomes (Cons)

Involvement in the Innovation Platform would mean taking some time and resources away for the "day job" and this could potentially upset the current dynamic of working. As a risk-averse organization, the risk of resistance to change in the UN culture is high. Additionally, the challenge would be on how to retain this innovation mindset after the two years' pilot period.



Next steps to operationalise the suggested innovation:

- Establish Innovation Platform Guide to define its purpose and frame.
- Creation and development of different working groups.
- Establish processes, data collection tools to capture lessons learned from Day 1.
- Define channels and communications (e.g. how to get an agenda tabled, etc).

Implications & Impact

Potential implications for team leaders, managers, directors:

Innovation Platform connects internal and external innovations, integrating solutions within core UN processes and programmes, driving changes from the inside, and making the UN a more modern, fit for purpose organization to deliver impact.

How will this innovation improve relationships with key stakeholders?

- Connecting innovation labs to beneficiaries, end users provides bigger chances of success.
- Identifying scale up opportunities and sustainability for vetted innovations.
- Bridging intergenerational gap within the organization.
- Creating an outlet for creativity and promoting internal talents.

How will this innovation affect the productivity and performance of agencies?

Members of the Innovation Platform would learn about what works in other agencies, and be an agent of change to implement this within their own agencies, improving efficiency and effectiveness.

How will this innovation impact the work environment and the performance of employees in the greater UN System?

This would be the first step towards changing the culture of the UN towards a more dynamic, open to experimentation and failure, and an organization that is supportive of creative solutions. It is a platform that enables the development of leaders of the future, creating interdisciplinary thinkers and doers, and ultimately making a more visible impact on the work of the organization.

Feasibility

Who would be needed to implement the proposal? (staff time/skills/senior support)

- Participation in the Innovation Platform is rewarded with recognition in the performance management systems and incentive structures across the UN system.
- Flex time of up to a maximum of one day per week to work in Innovation Platform.
- Fully or partially dedicated resources to coordinate between innovation labs.
- Physical space for creative lounge.

Financial and technical requirements

- Mentorship (and championship) from senior management and field experts (including from the private sector, NGOs, academia, etc) for each working group.
- Securing unearmarked funding.

Potential obstacles

- Cultural change to mainstream innovation and creativity as part of work (support from senior management, incorporation of tools and process of innovation in departments, flex time and recognition in formal performance management systems would bring structure and formality).
- Budgetary constraints for unearmarked funding (see options on crowdsourcing of funds and collaboration with private sectors for specific projects).



Proposed Innovation 4: Policy Debugging System

Background / what the proposed innovation could solve:

Policy is the engine of every organization. Lean, well defined, and flexible policy leads to its efficiency. The UN System is composed of a massive complex body of GA resolutions, Regulations and Rules, Administrative Instructions, Information Circulars and other rulings. Owing to the policy architecture, policies are spread amongst few documents³, even though they pertain to the same subject. This often makes it very complex even for practitioners to understand and apply. Policies vary from organization to organization and even within the same organization different departments tend to interpret policies in different ways. When it comes to driving innovation within an organization, right policies in right place are crucial to enable the operations to spark, develop and scale innovations. However it may be unclear whether this is possible considering that policies were designed 20 or 30 years ago with different environment in mind, and are still frequently misunderstood as they are often unknown to most of the workforce.

Proposed innovation:

We propose a AI supported policy debugging system using an open-source approach to (1) quickly locate policies of interest and identify solutions and (2) provide feedback on the policies where operational impediments were identified.

The same way that software developers use popular online platforms such as [Github](#) to share the files of code with many developers across the globe and gather feedback and improvements, we can share (within the UN System) the text of the policies in a similar fashion. If we were to place the policies in text files and share them on Github, everyone in the UN system could submit comments to a single file or even to specific lines within the file. Comments can be submitted according to categories like "improvement", "bug", "operational impediment", "policy conflict" etc. If for example someone in procurement encounters a roadblock due to an specific issue within a policy, this person could go to the online platform and enter a "bug" for this policy and describe the reason and situation. Policy department of procurement will receive an automatic notification and could form a quick task team to review the problem, provide feedback to the person who submitted the issue and amend the policy, if needed. All this can be tracked on the platform and will be visible for others that might encounter similar issues.

The system could have an AI based conversational interface such as chat bot and/or voice bot (for full inclusiveness and accessibility, something like UN Siri) that will help users find the policies of their interest, or locate previously reported feedback within policies to find guidance fast.

What makes your idea different from what is already being tried?

Currently all the policy revisions and updates are performed by small teams in dedicated units. An open-crowdsourced approach will provide a broader analysis and vision of the policy implications and limitations as well as real case scenarios where policies are preventing innovative developments. Even more this system could result in streamlining, simplification and reduction of numerous policy layers and policy repetition and overlaps, leading to more user friendly policy architecture (potentially resulting in one policy document per subject). In addition the policy management is limited to a specific selection of experts, and so the view albeit of professional expertise, may be missing operational reality check of staff who actually need to apply the policy and so the platform would address a gap between policy making and operational execution. All this while making use of existing process and tools.

³ Regulations and Rules, SG's bulletin, Administrative Instruction, Information circulars, complemented by policy guidelines that are not policies per se.



Next steps to operationalise the suggested innovation:

- As an initial pilot, select group of policies can be placed in a private Github repository by uploading the text files of the policies to the platform.
- Provide users with account so they can start reporting their issues.
- Agree on a governance structure (e.i. what happens when someone reports an error to a policy, who is responsible to follow up on the error, who can “accept” proposed changes, how will the policy amendments be promulgated and communicated to staff at large etc..)
- Training materials - produce quick user guides, adapted to the UN context.

Implications & Impact

What potential implications will this innovation have for team leaders, managers, and Directors and on work environment and the performance of employees in UN System?

- With this system we open the policy revision works to all the different levels of the organization, bridging policies closer to the recipients of its content and establishing a direct channel for feedback and policy improvements, resulting in policy-operations alignment.
- For even further benefit of knowledge transfer beyond one single entity, the platform can be a shared resource to exchange and compare different policies within the UN system that try to address similar issues. Bringing closer the different entities working on policy and make it possible to linked and analyse what is working or not in other parts of the system, and over time align if operationally possible (e.i. One UN approach).
- This is a great opportunity not only to improve the policies but also to bring the policies closer to the UN staff. Making them more interactively accessible to everyone and providing UN staff with ownership over collectively reviewed and design policies that affect all of them.

Feasibility

Who would be needed to implement the proposal? (staff time/skills/senior support)

- Every staff member could provide feedback. OICT would prepare the training material and manage the Github accounts and develop chatbots/voicebots backed by AI.
- At the beginning we will need some resources to upload all the policies into the platform. This can be automated with the help of OICT.
- The teams that are currently working on policy development need to have “manager” privileges so they can comments on bug, proposals, link policies, merger changes, etc.

Financial and technical requirements

- One Github Pro account, if we want to make it private. Everyone else can use the free account to manage the repository.

Potential obstacles

- Resistance to new technological adoptions - clear communication strategy and buy-in from key stakeholders (e.i. Commitment of teams working on the policy development).
- Training materials ready from the launch of the system and dedicated support form OICT.