

ИНФОРМАЦИОННЫЕ ТЕХНОЛОГИИ



10.5281/zenodo.11080887

VASYUKOVA Anna

Senior Product Designer, Jiffy.com, Armenia, Yerevan

STRATEGIES FOR INNOVATIVE IDEATION: A HOLISTIC APPROACH FOR PRODUCT DESIGNERS

Abstract. This article delves into the significance of ideation within the UX design process, emphasizing its role in problem understanding and solution generation. Drawing from established methodologies like design thinking, the narrative underscores ideation's capacity to align diverse viewpoints, enhance user focus, and foster team ownership. Through a step-by-step guide, the article elucidates the organization and facilitation of effective ideation workshops, emphasizing the facilitator's pivotal role in cultivating creativity and collaboration. Highlighted are the benefits of structured ideation sessions, including improved problem-solving efficiency, risk management, and team engagement. The discourse also addresses common challenges faced in ideation and offers practical techniques to overcome them, promoting a culture of innovation and continuous learning within design teams. By providing comprehensive insights and methodologies, this article serves as a valuable resource for product designers seeking to enhance their ideation practices and drive impactful innovation.

Keywords: UX design, Ideation, idea development, Design thinking, workshop, leadership, users, problems, solutions, choice, efficiency, innovation, creativity, teamwork, interaction, collaboration, choice of ideas, choice of solutions.

Intro

Ideation is a critical but often underrated stage of any UX design process.

This phase is crucial for understanding problems deeply and generating creative solutions that truly address them. Ideation's importance lies in its ability to focus on users, bring diverse viewpoints together for more inclusive solutions, and strengthen a sense of ownership and commitment among team members.

“You ideate to transition from identifying problems to creating solutions for your users. Ideation is your chance to combine the understanding you have of the problem space and people you are designing for with your imagination to generate solution concepts. Particularly early in a design project, ideation is about pushing for a widest possible range of ideas from which you can select, not simply finding a single, best solution.” – d.school, An Introduction to Design Thinking PROCESS GUIDE [1].

The article provides a step-by-step guide on organizing and running a successful ideation workshop, developing goals, setting up a safe

environment for the teams, and choosing the proper ideation techniques to stimulate creativity and collaboration.

It also emphasizes the facilitator's role in guiding the session, from setting up to actively listening and managing the group dynamics effectively. It gives comprehensive directions that will help a UX designer organize and facilitate an ideation workshop.

Benefits of running the ideation phase

Initiating the ideation session is a critical step in the UX design process that keeps a strong focus on user needs while harnessing the power of diverse team collaboration. It sets the stage for enhanced problem-solving, innovation, and a unified project vision, directing teams toward informed decision-making.

User Focus: Makes users' needs the central focus across different teams, allowing product managers, engineers, and designers from different product lines to identify common user problems and build empathy for the existing pain points.

Community and Diversity: Ideation brings together diverse perspectives that help reduce biases and create more inclusive solutions through enhanced team collaboration. It encourages openness, creativity, and trust between team members, fostering a sense of community and strong team dynamics.

Efficiency in Problem-Solving and Risk Management: The team speeds up the problem-solving process by generating multiple ideas, allowing for rapid identification of viable solutions. A wide range of ideas also helps anticipate and mitigate potential risks early in the process.

Engagement and ownership: Participants feel more engaged and develop a greater sense of ownership over the project, because of hands-on commitment to solving the problem.

Culture of Innovation and Continuous Learning: Regular ideation sessions contribute to building a culture of innovation within an organization and maintaining a competitive edge. It also allows teams to explore new concepts in a low-pressure environment.

Clarification of Vision, Objectives, and Prioritization: Discussing a broad range of ideas helps clarify the project’s vision and objectives for all participants, clears up priorities, and gets everyone aligned on decisions made.

The Problem

From all the stages of human-centered design (HCD), ideation is almost always underrated by designers. This is paradoxical compared to how much emphasis is put on discovery and user research nowadays. Yet, with all the data, learnings, and accurately framed problems, the solutions provided can often be superficial and ineffective.

While the research process has a lot of available resources on how-tos and step-by-step applications for different methods, no similar information can be found about ideation. Indeed, there are hundreds of methods for conducting ideation; alas, they lack details on instructions and usage. This leads to the failure to conduct a properly structured ideation, often going with scattered, unstructured methods. A report from NNGroup shows that 80% of ideations conducted use unstructured discussion as their main method [2].

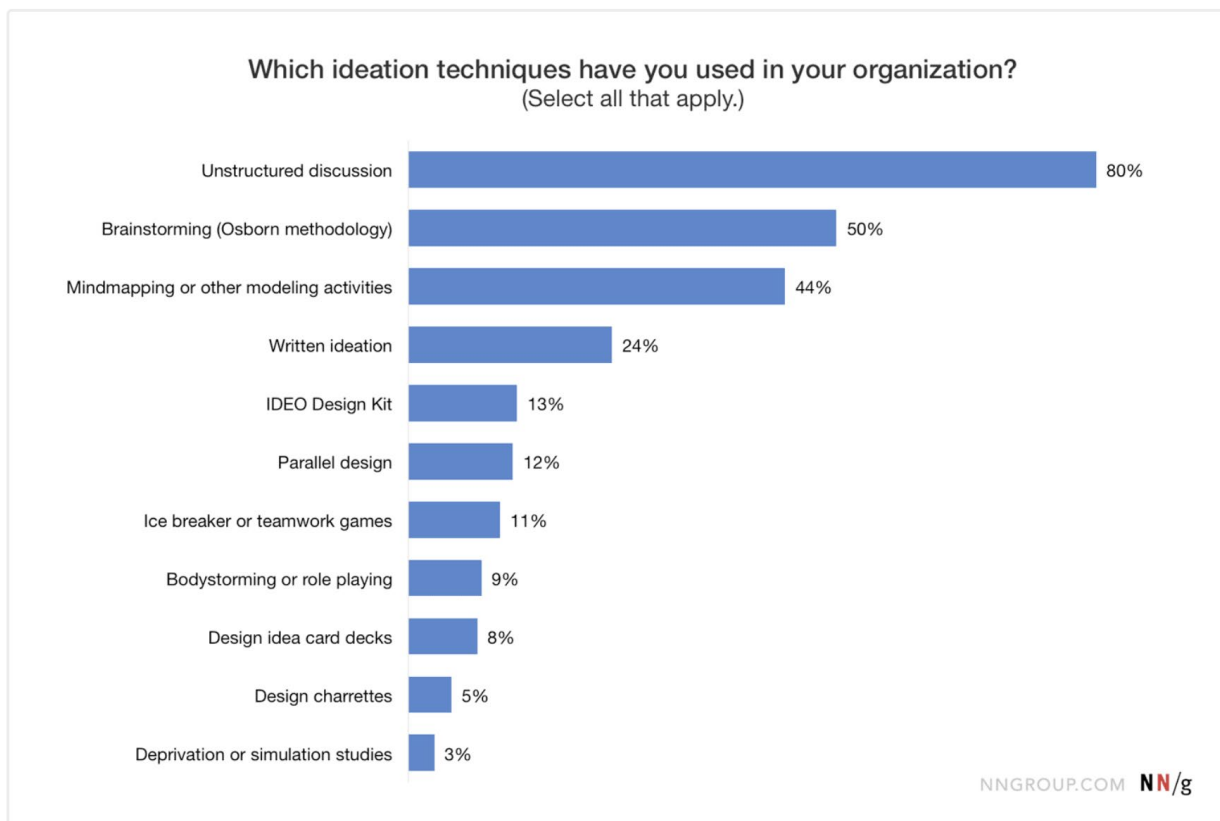


Fig. Use of Ideation Techniques in Organizations [2]

We cannot move forward and deliver any good solution without proper discovery. However, if our learnings are not incorporated into finding the best solution and the obvious solution is always

chosen instead, then we lose the value of the research and learnings. The learning from discovery will inform you, but then you need to come up with ideas on what to build based on it.

When teams come to the ideation stage, they almost always have a solution in mind, even before they start ideating. Ignoring this process can lead to missed opportunities. A typical scenario is when a UX designer is given limited time and resources to come up with a few solutions in an isolated setup, which later are further narrowed down by the personal preference of an important stakeholder. As a result, the team makes a misinformed decision, loses the advantage of innovating on diverse paths and ideas, and falls short of the shared understanding of the problem.

Often, ideation is skipped as stakeholders need a quick result and do not see value in dedicating more time to this stage.

Some of the most common reasons for not doing the ideation are:

- Stakeholders and other team members sometimes do not understand the value and outcomes and why dedicate time and resources to it.
- UX Designers are not able to talk through the value with stakeholders and team members.
- UX Designers do not have enough skills and do not know how to conduct it.
- UX Designers are trying to do it but do not have a structured approach and good outcomes.

Fortunately, there are a lot of techniques designers can use to overcome these challenges. For instance, they can prove the value to stakeholders and team members by finding and showing metrics on how beneficial running an ideation session could be in the long run, as well as informing about the negative consequences in case of skipping it. Ideation can also become a good bonding exercise for the team to improve collaboration and increase empathy. By conducting ideation, a designer can create a shared understanding of the problem among team members, making them more engaged in creating solutions, as they will now better understand the value they are creating. This can only happen if the ideation is thoroughly thought out, planned, and conducted, requiring specific organizational and facilitation skills.

How to set up and design an ideation workshop

- Define the problem;
- Specify the goal of the session;
- Choose the right techniques;
- Invite right people;
- Set up workshop rules;
- Strengthen your facilitation skills.

Here's a more detailed breakdown of each step:

Define the Problem

Before any ideation session, make sure that you have a shared understanding of problems and that there are no blocking unknowns. It's impossible to come up with a great solution without understanding the problem in detail. Before looking for ideas, your team needs a clearly defined problem to solve – a focused problem statement.

The problem statement should set the context of the problem and highlight its importance. It should also show the gap between the current and desired state.

The problem Statement should be:

- Focused on an existing problem;
- Focused on one problem only, Not include a solution;
- Short;
- Broad enough to permit creative freedom solutions;
- Narrow enough to be practicable.

“A problem well stated is half solved.” – Charles Kettering.

You could have a problem statement before bringing everyone together for ideation, or you can include a problem definition in the ideation workshop and define it with the team based on your learnings and insight. Just keep in mind that it will extend the workshop duration. In both cases, start the session by sharing the insight and learnings about the problem with your team. Share any insights related to the problem statement and make sure everyone has a chance to go through the information. Talk about the unknowns and ask clarification questions.

Pro tip: Generating How Might We questions from your Problem Statement could be a good starting point for ideation [3].

Specify the goal of the session

After defining the problem, it is time to specify the goal of the ideation session for the participants. This is a crucial step for everyone to understand the expected outcome of the session.

Based on the ideation session goal, you will be able to come up with the best possible structure, exercises, and timing. This will set the ground for understanding whether you can reach the goal within a single session or a few sessions to get the desired result.

Pro tip: when defining a goal, use the framework SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely:

“At the end of the session, we should have a planned roadmap for the upcoming two months, with clear action items for each team member”.

How to choose the right techniques

There are thousands of techniques for brainstorming and generating ideas. The biggest challenge is understanding which works better for your goals and team. It will take you more than one iteration to come up with a good set of working exercises, but fortunately, some general rules can help you understand how these techniques work and how to apply each.

1. Follow the idea-generation process that consists of two phases.

1. Divergent – at this stage we try to generate as many and as wild ideas as possible, no borders.

2. Convergent – at this one, you narrow down the paths and ideas and choose a direction you want to go.

Both are necessary for your ideation process, and you might need to go through several iterations. For the first iteration, you will generate 50 ideas in the divergent phase and then narrow those down to 20 ideas in the convergent phase. During the second iteration, you can build more ideas on top of those 20 ideas. Once you feel confident in the amount and quality of ideas, as your last step, you should again narrow them down [4].

2. Alternate individual activities with group or pair activities and put the activities in the right order.

The results from different types of ideation give us different outcomes. The science behind group creativity states that it's better to start individual brainstorming before sharing ideas and thoughts with the group. This allows less outspoken participants to share their thoughts and often takes the 'obvious' ideas out. Make everyone do each exercise alone first. Some people just need more time to think and can't do that inside the group. Starting with individual exercises and sharing before moving forward helps build on others' ideas, which is very effective and can create more unique ideas [4].

3. Choose the right exercises and place them in the right order.

To effectively navigate the ideation process, it's essential to understand the techniques and their primary objectives:

Warm-up methods: Warm-ups can significantly enhance your creative output. These opening exercises are crucial for activating your creativity and ensuring you're mentally prepared for innovation. Leveraging warm-up exercises helps your team reach its creative peak and ensures a smooth ideation process. Just as a cup of coffee kickstarts your morning, warm-ups fuel participants with creativity, enlarging their capacity to

produce ideas. **Examples:** Icebreakers, Creative Games, Sketching.

Exploration techniques: These techniques help participants dive deeper into the problem space, challenge assumptions, and explore a wide array of potential solutions. **Examples:** Mind Mapping, Define Blind Spots, Problem Framing, The 5 Whys.

Inspiration techniques: Inspiration is often overlooked in the ideation process, yet it plays a pivotal role in fostering innovative solutions. Design challenges are always different, shaped by their specific situations, places, people, and goals. Yet, even though each challenge is unique, many share common problems with ones we've seen before. This similarity opens up a rich array of potential solutions for us to investigate. By examining a wide array of designs, applications, and solutions, designers subconsciously accumulate a lot of material for inspiration. The ability to creatively link different concepts underscores the essence of innovation, ensuring that each design solution is both informed by past successes and uniquely tailored to its specific challenge. **Examples:** Competitor analysis, "Competitors, Comparable Concepts, Current Trends".

Core idea generation techniques: Core ideation techniques focus on generating a wide array of ideas to solve identified problems effectively. After understanding the problem and warming up, we can start to work toward generating ideas. The objective is to produce a vast and diverse set of concepts from which to select the most promising solutions for further development. This could be multiple techniques or a few cycles of the same technique. **Examples:** 3-12-3 Brainstorm, Crazy 8s, Brainwriting, Rapid sketching, Round Robin [5].

Prioritization tactics: Prioritization techniques in the ideation and design process are critical for focusing efforts on the most promising ideas, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and effectively. These techniques help teams assess and rank ideas based on various criteria: impact, feasibility, user value, and alignment with business goals. **Examples:** Dot Voting, Impact vs. Feasibility Matrix, Kano or RICE models, Cost-Benefit Analysis.

Closing activities: Wrapping up helps us summarize the outcomes of the ideation session and establish clear action items. Here are some steps to wrap up the ideation session: summarize key insights and ideas, assign action items, define the

next steps and timeline, document and share outcomes, and reflect on the process.

Setting up a good ideation process takes time and experimentation. Knowing the structure and goals of different techniques will help you build an effective flow for your workshop. Choose the methods based on your goals and participants.

A retrospective after the session could help to understand how methods worked for your team and iterate. The goal is to establish a structured approach that you could iterate on, incorporating a variety of techniques to enhance the ideation process.

Find an example of a well-structured ideation workshop template here: <https://www.figma.com/community/file/1334621865238362457>.

You can use it as is or make any changes based on your goals.

Invite the right people

Select people from a range of disciplines, including product management, development, UX design, marketing, customer success, sales, and anyone else who can add a fresh perspective to the process. Including team members with varied backgrounds ensures that all facets of the product and user experience are considered. Ideation sessions tend to lose effectiveness when they grow too large. A group size of more than ten people can hinder the productivity of the session, as it becomes more challenging to ensure that every participant has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully [6].

Set up workshop rules

A set of carefully thought-out rules can transform a good ideation session into a great one. The intro to these rules should be clear, inviting, and inspiring, setting the tone for what's to come. As a facilitator, make sure you present the rules before the session and follow the team to keep them during the whole session.

Everyone is creative

Everyone can contribute creative ideas, no matter their job or background. Encourage everyone to share, making it clear that all ideas are welcome and valued.

No judgement

All ideas are welcome, and there should be no criticism or negative judgment. During an ideation session, there indeed are no bad ideas.

Quantity over quality

Aim for a large quantity of ideas before focusing on quality.

Be Visual

Use sketches, screenshots, or visual aids to convey ideas when appropriate.

Build Upon Ideas

When someone presents an idea, respond with "Yes, and..." to build on or extend the idea.

Encourage wild ideas

Explore a wide range of ideas, including unconventional or "wild" ideas.

Equal Participation

Everyone has a chance to contribute. Encourage quieter participants to share their ideas. No interrupting, one person speaks at a time.

Keep Time Constraints

Time limits for ideation will let you maintain a sense of urgency and prevent overthinking.

Respect Feedback

Be open to constructive feedback and use it as an opportunity to improve ideas. Every idea is valid, and critique ideas, not people [7].

Strengthen your facilitation skills

Being a successful facilitator requires a specific set of skills that go beyond the skills of a UX designer. These skills enable facilitators to guide discussions, encourage participation, and ensure the ideation process is both productive and creative. Here is a list of tips to help you set up and run a successful ideation session.

Come Prepared: It takes a lot of effort to prepare for the ideation workshop, but this assures the success of it.

Put on facilitator mindset: When facilitating the session, you should wear the hat of facilitator and not UX designer, and your primary responsibility is not to come up with ideas but to prepare and lead the session. Be ready to adapt and focus on guiding the team effectively.

Give clear instructions: Make sure everyone understands the goal and every techniques to prevent confusion and lost time.

Listen actively: Give attention to every participant's input, ensuring all viewpoints are considered. Follow one conversation at a time principle.

Be a strong moderator when needed: Don't hesitate to direct the discussion, call on quieter participants, and keep the workshop on track. Remain neutral and focus on guiding the session rather than taking sides. Recognize and address conflicts or disagreements directly but diplomatically. Encourage open dialogue to understand different perspectives.

Deal with troublemakers: To manage disruptive behavior, address the issue diplomatically by appreciating the troublemaker's enthusiasm while ensuring everyone has a chance to speak. Consider

having smaller groups to reduce their impact or engage them with specific tasks that utilize their strengths.

Break down silos:

Collaboration among product managers, engineers, and designers across various product teams is essential for innovation. They need to have a sense of trust and community. When team members and stakeholders come together to focus on the bigger picture in a safe environment, they start to innovate.

Embrace Failure and Learn: Motivate the team to experiment with their ideas, as it's the key to discovering what works and what doesn't. Make it clear that every successful or unsuccessful experiment is valuable because it leads to new knowledge and insights. If an idea doesn't work, encourage participants to analyze why it failed, tweak, adjust, or completely pivot their approach based on what they've learned.

Balance Structure and Flexibility: While following the workshop's structured agenda, remain open to detours that might lead to innovative ideas.

Overcome egos and hierarchy: Establish a safe space where creativity is nurtured and all contributions are welcome. Remind participants that the goal is to explore ideas collaboratively rather than competitively. Introduce activities that mix participants from different levels, such as breakout groups or round-robin sharing. You can use anonymous submission of ideas. If certain individuals overshadow the discussion, carefully redirect the conversation to include others.

Prevent groupthink: Ask participants to write down their ideas individually before group exercises. This helps capture a wide range of ideas and prevents the impact of early groupthink. In large groups, the input of quieter individuals can easily be overlooked. In smaller groups, everyone has a chance to be heard. Encourage participants to voice differing perspectives or concerns about ideas being discussed and ensure that all ideas are considered and discussed further.

Shortcut Circular Discussions: When discussions become circular, redirect the conversation towards the session's goals. Reframe the problem by posing it from a different perspective to stimulate new ideas and break out of the loop. Introduce a structured decision-making framework and create an "Idea Box" for off-topic issues.

Time framing each activity will create urgency and help participants focus on the goals.

Keep the Energy Level High: Suggest engaging in activities that involve variety and movement, and ensure frequent, short breaks to allow participants to recharge. Create a supportive environment.

Time Management: Keep an eye on the clock to ensure that the session progresses a good pace without rushing.

Create an 'Idea Box': Use a dedicated space to note off-topic but potentially valuable ideas to revisit later.

Be Ready to Adapt: Stay flexible and ready to change tactics if the current approach isn't working.

A well-organized ideation process significantly improves the team dynamics and the solution development process through a collaborative, diverse, and creative environment. An established ideation workshop brings together team members from various disciplines, enhancing empathy and reducing biases, promoting a strong culture of innovation and continuous learning. It ensures exploring a broad spectrum of innovative ideas, improving problem-solving efficiency and risk management. It facilitates a clearer understanding of the project's vision, objectives, and priorities, aligning the team's efforts toward developing user-centered solutions.

Resources and snacks for the brain

1. "Methods & Tools Curated by Hyper Island." HI Toolbox, www.toolbox.hyperisland.com/.
2. "Facilitation Articles | Workshopper." www.workshopper.com, www.workshopper.com/category/facilitation.
3. "Home." Gamestorming, www.gamestorming.com/.
4. "Workshopper – the #1 Resource for Facilitators & Coaches." www.workshopper.com, www.workshopper.com/.

References

1. Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanuso. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2010.
2. The Workshop Survival Guide, Rob Fitzpatrick & Devin Hunt 2021.
3. Parker, Priya. The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters. New York, Riverhead Books, 2018.
4. Vasyukova, Anna. "Ideation Workshop for Product Teams." Figma,

www.figma.com/community/file/1334621865238362457/ideation-workshop-for-product-teams . Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

5. Hasso Plattner. *An Introduction to Design Thinking PROCESS GUIDE*. Stanford University, 2010.

6. Harley, Aurora. "Ideation in Practice: How Effective UX Teams Generate Ideas." Nielsen Norman Group, 29 Oct. 2017, www.nngroup.com/articles/ideation-in-practice/.

7. IDEO. "Design Kit." [Www.designkit.org](https://www.designkit.org), www.designkit.org/methods/how-might-we.html.

8. Apex Hatchers. "Revolutionizing Idea Generation with the 20-20-20 Technique. , 14 June

2023, www.linkedin.com/pulse/revolutionizing-idea-generation-20-20-20-technique-apexhatchers/ Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

9. "Home." Gamestorming, gamestorming.com.

10. "Inviting the Right People to Your Meetings: Making Every Second Count!" [Www.meetrics.ai](https://www.meetrics.ai), 1 Aug. 2023, www.meetrics.ai/blog-post/inviting-the-right-people-to-your-meetings-making-every-second-count. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

11. "7 Simple Rules of Brainstorming." IDEO U, www.ideo.com/blogs/inspiration/7-simple-rules-of-brainstorming.