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HEAD: Harnessing the Power of the Idea Generation

DECK: EllisDon introduces *Uprising*, a crowdsourcing platform for the construction industry

BYLINE: Barb Feldman

“Though crowdsourcing has proven wildly successful in other industries, it is still a largely untapped resource in the construction sector,” said Chris Zakrajsek, EllisDon’s web and social media manager. With *Uprising*, its newest construction-specific online crowdsourcing platform, EllisDon is taking the suggestion box global and revolutionizing how the construction industry comes up with new solutions for some of its biggest challenges. It is inviting engineers, project managers, superintendents and other construction professionals to become part of “The Idea Generation,” challenging them to find solutions for problems that vex the industry – problems that might best be solved through global collaboration.

EllisDon was founded in 1951 by brothers Don and David Ellis Smith in London, Ontario. Today based in Mississauga, Ontario, the company now employs approximately 1,400 people and has offices across Canada and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and revenues of more than \$2.6 billion annually. The company offers construction and project management services as well as a growing range of construction services in risk management, sustainability and technology, building information modeling and facilities management. Three times in the 13-year history of its national workplace studies, Aon Hewitt has named the employee-owned company its #1 Employer in Canada.

Always innovative, EllisDon was the first Canadian contractor to fully computerize its accounting and cost systems, and in 1990 was the first construction company to establish a research and development department dedicated solely to the science of building. Since 2008 the company

has used Twitter to share employee stories and for recruitment. Around that same time, president Geoff Smith began using “Geoff’s Blog” to “think out loud” about some of the industry’s challenges, extending an invitation to the blog’s readers “to talk, to build relationships, opportunities, and knowledge with as many people in as many different places as we can. To put everything on the table, and see what we can build together.”

EllisDon’s corporate website has attracted visitors from Canada, the U.S., Ireland, India, the U.K., Saudi Arabia, Argentina, the Philippines and the UAE. Social media and email marketing brought 15,000 people to the *Uprising* site, and 300 joined its online community. Members were encouraged to vote for their favourite ideas, post comments and add their own experience to the “collective intelligence of the crowd.” Most of the 41 idea submissions came from inside Canada, about two-thirds of which came from outside the company.

SUBHEAD: Crowdsourcing: Strength in numbers

“Our ultimate goal will be to have about 5,000 people in our community – if you have a crowd of 5,000, you have enough expertise to fix practically any problem,” said Zakrajsek, referring to the findings outlined by James Surowiecki in his 2004 book *The Wisdom of Crowds*.

The first *Uprising* challenge of about a year ago went out to EllisDon employees only. One of the suggestions it elicited has evolved into a Wikipedia-style “lessons learned” website that can be fully filtered for any of the company’s projects.

“A job in Halifax can gain the experience of what we’ve done on a similar-style job in Vancouver,” said Phil Jones, engineering manager at EllisDon. One lesson learned could save the company ten thousand dollars, or a million, he says, adding, “It’s also a good way to allow

concerns across the company to be addressed quite specifically.” The industry-wide challenge in 2012 grew out of this initial success.

Crowdsourcing’s open call format and large potential network can elicit solutions from experts or amateurs. Users may be motivated by cash or prizes, social contact, recognition or the deep satisfaction of sharing a good idea and seeing it improve the way things are done. The top solution for five of *Uprising*’s last challenges had the potential to win its creator \$5,000 if it was judged to be viable, feasible and desirable. These open challenges, which ran from early-September to December 2012, were “How to Drive Greater Energy Efficiency at Work,” “Improving Material Salvage at the Workplace,” “Improving Concrete Moisture Management,” “How to Achieve 95% Waste Diversion” and “What Keeps You Up At Night?”

“‘What keeps you up at night?’ – in other words, ‘What is the problem we don’t know that we have?’ – was too wide open,” said Zakrajsek, who concedes that *Uprising* itself is being refined as it evolves, and she elaborated on one particular lesson learned: “In crowdsourcing, the better you build your solution box, the more defined the parameters, the better your results are.” The new challenges will be run singly and sequentially, each running for about six weeks. “And when we roll out again in a couple of months, we’ll really bolster the community features,” she added. “The first idea is good, but it’s the commenting that further refines the idea down to something really golden.”

SUBHEAD: Collective thinking crucial to industry innovation

The pace of innovation in the construction industry is accelerating; at the same time, the industry is also being called on to lower its impact on the environment, observes Jones. “One of the next challenges we want to deal with is noise mitigation,” a critical issue for building,

especially as cities become denser and building spaces become smaller. Could the kind of noise-cancelling technologies used in headphones be applied to the construction industry, for example? “People can find ways to innovate existing technologies into something that’s quite tangential,” explained Jones.

All departments across the country are being asked what they’d like to see solved, with the hope of getting everyone’s input. “Some of the best ideas come from the carpenters and other workers onsite just because they’re the hands-on to these things. They’re usually the ones who end up saying ‘You know what would make this better?’ That’s what we’re trying to capture.” It’s also about building momentum, he says, “and as we progress, there’ll probably be a lot more detail, and a lot more tough questions.”

“Every day, engineers, project managers, superintendents and other construction professionals face similar challenges in the field; every day, someone, somewhere, engineers a brilliant new solution,” said Zakrajsek. “What if you could tap into the collective knowledge of professionals beyond your immediate reach? We believe that we can change the industry for the better by working together.”

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Sidebar:

HEAD: A Portal for Bright Ideas: *How to salvage site materials without negatively affecting the bottom line or schedule?*

At present, waste materials on construction sites are broken into smaller pieces on each floor’s limited laydown/staging area, put into moveable garbage bins, taken down the service elevator to the loading dock, then offloaded into a sole 20 yard roll-off bin. The bin is taken offsite, where the waste is sorted manually with equipment that cannot recover small pieces of debris. But

EllisDon's accelerated-schedule tenant improvement project requires 95% waste diversion to meet LEED standards. How to achieve that with little or no time or onsite space for sorting?

For his winning proposal on waste diversion, Bob Izsak suggested a system of colour-coded disposal bags to be used onsite for each type of waste. The highly detailed proposal dealt thoughtfully with the possible design, manufacture, use, storage footprint and transport of such bags. It included their ideal dimensions and locations onsite, suggested scheduling solutions for delivery of empty bags and removal of full ones – all the way through to handling at third-party recycling facilities – and a rough cost estimate for the entire program and various schedules for implementation that also took into consideration and adapted a suggestion made by another submitter.

For the full proposal, see https://na5.brightidea.com/ct/ct_a_view_idea.bix?c=C39D856A-F149-4007-ADA5-39DA2B482C49&idea_id={092C1DB4-EA22-42FA-86A9-A1F54D6047DD}

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