creativity and innovation management

Fostering Bottom-up Innovation in Organizations

Special Issue Guest Editors

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Purpose

Creativity and Innovation Management is delighted to announce a special issue on "Fostering Bottom-up Innovation in Organizations".

Innovation in general, encompassing the generation, selection, and implementation of ideas, is an indispensable asset for organizations and networks aiming for strategic rejuvenation and a competitive edge. Traditionally, organizations organize innovation top down, relying on the expertise of R&D departments or senior managers. In contrast, bottom-up innovation is the generation, evaluation/selection, and implementation of new ideas originating from lower level employees such as shop-floor employees, front line employees or blue collar workers (Renkema & Bos-Nehles, 2024). This special issue aims to further our knowledge on how ideas from the lower levels of the organization are generated and implemented. However, it aims to go further. Adopting a problematization methodology for generating research questions (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011), it aims to identify, articulate and explore underlying assumptions in extant research, so that they can be challenged and lead to the development of influential theory.

Bottom-up innovations tend to represent ideas on operational processes leading to new or significantly improved productivity, quality, and/or employee well-being and learning. Such innovations are often undervalued, as most attention and resources tend to be placed on product and/or service innovation as opposed to process innovation (Rammer, 2023). Yet, even small, incremental changes may collectively drive significant advancements in processes (Bessant, 2023). Such ideas relating to innovation in operations and supply chain management processes may stimulate product/service innovation and also impact organizational performance, contributing a significant share of a firm's revenue (Cornelius et al., 2021).

Bottom-up innovation has been studied in various forms. For instance, previous research has frequently examined continuous improvement through the lens of organizational routines (Bessant et al., 1993, Bessant & Caffyn, 1997, Bessant et al., 2001, Bessant et al., 1994). Scholars view continuous improvement as a dynamic process that integrates specific behavioral routines, which, over time, develop into organizational capabilities crucial for sustaining improvement efforts. Additionally, kaizen, a prominent form of bottom-up process innovation, has been explored using socio-technical systems theory (Glover et al., 2013, Glover et al., 2014, Glover et al., 2011, Kaye & Anderson, 1999, Van Aken et al., 2010). This perspective emphasizes the interplay between human and technological factors that contribute to the long-term success of

incremental and continuous process innovation within organizations. Other research also underscores the importance of shop-floor improvement teams in innovation (De Lange-Ros & Boer, 2001; Franken et al., 2021; Franken et al., 2024; Van Dun & Wilderom, 2021) as well as becoming a learning organization to maintain continuous improvement strategies, with a particular emphasis on collaborative knowledge-sharing to address ongoing challenges (Hines et al., 2004, Netland, 2016, Tortorella et al., 2020). Additionally, individual intrapreneurship has been coined as a term to describe employee-driven innovation and people's intra-company entrepreneurial activity (Hernández-Perlines et al., 2022).

Even if bottom-up innovation is not a novel concept as such, it is becoming more relevant and debated. Fueled by the rise and widespread adoption of digital technologies and tools (Nambisan et al., 2019, Yoo et al., 2012), including generative artificial intelligence (Grilli & Pedota, 2024), companies shift their innovation strategies from a centralized, top-down approach to a more distributed and bottom-up approach (Reineke et al., 2025, Reitzig, 2022): Increasing access to digital tools such as distributed idea evaluation (Reitzig & Sorenson, 2013), internal crowdfunding (Schweisfurth et al., 2023), idea management systems (Cornelius et al., 2021), and internal crowdsourcing (Malhotra et al., 2017a; Malhotra et al., 2017b) facilitates the integration of employees across all levels into the idea generation and selection process. Despite these developments, bottom-up innovations have led to both more and less favorable outcomes.

On one hand, bottom-up innovation offers numerous advantages. For instance, by distributing responsibilities across various levels, it enables a more effective division of work. Employees who are closer to operational challenges can leverage their hands-on experience to generate practical solutions, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement within the workforce (Schweisfurth & Dharmawan, 2019). Moreover, drawing on the diverse perspectives and knowledge of stakeholders - from front-line staff over blue-collar workers and lower-level employees - can lead to more comprehensive and innovative problem solving compared to the innovation produced by R&D departments alone (Lee & Walsh, 2016). This diversity not only enriches the idea pool but also helps organizations uncover insights that might be missed in a strictly top-down approach (Weiser et al., 2020). In addition, involving employees directly in innovation processes enables organizations and managers to gain deeper insights into employees' subjective experiences and perceptions. Such insights are essential for understanding how, when, and why process innovation and improvement approaches succeed—or fail—within specific organizational contexts (Al Hasan & Micheli, 2025).

On the other hand, the decentralized nature of bottom-up innovation can introduce significant challenges. The very process that encourages widespread idea generation may complicate coordination and implementation efforts. Without clear, centralized oversight, integrating multiple ideas into a coherent strategy can become difficult. Additionally, when innovation efforts are spread across various organizational layers, accountability can become diffuse - making it harder to pinpoint who is responsible for the success or failure of a particular initiative (Colombo et al., 2021). This challenge is compounded by the tendency for individuals to overestimate the importance of their own contributions, which can skew the evaluation process and lead to biased decision-making (Keum & See, 2017). Further, there is a risk that a more dispersed approach to (process) innovation might lead to more superficial or suboptimal outcomes, especially when workers do not follow a structured approach (Franken et al., 2024).

In the light of the increasing relevance of bottom-up innovation combined with the ongoing discussion around it benefits and drawbacks (Colombo et al., 2021), it is imperative that we gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. By examining both the advantages - such as enhanced work division and the incorporation of diverse perspectives - and the potential drawbacks, including coordination difficulties, accountability issues, and cognitive biases, we

can develop more effective strategies to harness bottom-up innovation. Ultimately, our goal is to better understand this phenomenon so that organizations can leverage its full potential while mitigating its inherent challenges.

Research focus

We invite researchers to investigate the question of how innovation and creativity emerges bottom-up in organizations, making production, operations, and supply chains more effective and efficient. This inquiry lies at the intersection of creativity and innovation management, organizational behavior and design, and production and operations management. We anticipate that the insights generated from this special issue will not only advance academic knowledge but also offer practical implications for organizations seeking to unlock the innovative potential of employees and networks working in operations, production, and manufacturing. Topics of interest for this special issue include, but are not limited to:

- *Mobilizing ideas within organizations and supply chains*: Strategies and practices for effectively gathering, refining, and implementing ideas from shop-floor and other frontline workers (including those outside the company). This may include also the examination of how organizations can identify and utilize external and internal lead users to spearhead innovation in operations and manufacturing.
- *Psychological and cultural factors influencing innovation readiness*: Study of organizational-psychological elements that promote a culture of innovation and enhance shopfloor and other frontline employees' readiness to innovate. This may include also exploring the learning mechanisms that promote and sustain shop-floor and other frontline workers' ability of learning to learn, including organizational feedback on worker ideas and tracking the long-term impact of idea implementation.
- *Outcomes of ideation at the shop floor level*: Assessment of the impact of creativity and innovation in operations and supply chain management processes on other outcomes such as operational efficiency, product quality, environmental sustainability, psychological safety and worker satisfaction.
- *Organizational resources, incentives and rewards for fostering bottom-up innovation*: Exploration of effective incentive systems and rewards programs aimed at encouraging innovation among shop-floor and other frontline workers. This may also include the functional use of resources such as generative artificial intelligence in bottom-up innovation.
- *Overcoming hurdles in innovation implementation*: Identification of common barriers to innovation implementation and strategies to overcome these challenges in operations and supply chain management settings; balancing conformity and innovation in manufacturing processes: the role of operations managers' cognitive frames.
- *Impacts of working from home and mobility on innovation*: Investigation into how remote work and mobility affects shop-floor and other frontline workers' creativity, motivation, and readiness to engage in innovative activities of shop-floor and other frontline workers; analysis of the flexibility and productivity trade-offs between the autonomy provided by working from home and maintaining structured innovation processes of shop-floor and other frontline workers.

We invite all types of empirical research papers, including quantitative, qualitative (Renkema & Bos-Nehles, 2024) and mixed-methods papers (Curado, 2017; Gurtner et al., 2024).We welcome work featuring ethnographic investigations, multiple case studies, longitudinal or archival analyses, action research (Wu et al., 2022; Coughlan & Coghlan, 2024), survey research, and all types of experiments (Sousa et al., 2014). Papers with deductive, inductive, and abductive mode of theorizing are welcome.

Submission Deadline & Review process

Submission deadline for first submission: **January 31, 2026**.

The submission must be made on the CIM website. All submissions will undergo the regular double-blind peer-review process at CIM, which will be handled by the guest editors. Please refer to the author guidelines provided at:
https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/14678691/homepage/forauthors.html

Developmental Workshops

Prior to the submission deadline, we will organize a webinar to promote the special issue in October 2025.

Furthermore, we will organize an online developmental workshop with authors: February 2026. The goal is to support authors in developing their ideas and paper drafts. The workshop will adopt a remote format to ensure broad and inclusive participation. Participation in the workshop is not a prerequisite for the acceptance of manuscripts but does not guarantee that a manuscript will be accepted into the Special Issue, either.

In the first part of the workshop, we will present the Special Issue, giving participants some guidance on the type of submissions we are looking for. After that, we will be available to answer any questions participants may have about the Special Issue. In the second part, there will be a "Paper idea feedback session", where participants can discuss their research work intended for the Special Issue with the Special Issue editors, and receive quick and constructive feedback.

If you wish to participate in the paper idea feedback session, you can register to the workshop using this link.

Participants will be required to submit three presentation slides as a PDF document during the registration process for the workshop. The three slides should address the following questions: 1) What is the paper about – title plus brief abstract? 2) What research stream does the paper contribute to and how? 3) Why is your research question meaningful and a good fit with the Special Issue?

Contact

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact one of the guest editors.

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