The traditional method for innovation is to first find the needs of the users and then return to the company to create innovations within a team of colleagues. But why not involve the users in the innovation process?

However, you cannot ask just any user to be creative. The vast majority of users will only be able to explain where they have problems with your product, what their specific needs are, and what functions they use.

You need to find lead users. Lead users are characterized by creatively using your or competitive products. You might be able to find users who already design their own applications for your device, system, or web page. You might be able to find users who have already found their own workarounds for their needs with your product. You also might be able to find users who write blogs about how you or the competition could improve the products.

The steps for lead user innovation are as follows:

1. Find lead users
2. Prepare for a lead user workshop
3. Run the workshop
4. Document your results and process the output

The sections to follow provide tangible approaches to creating successful user experience innovations with your lead users.

Intellectual Property and Secrecy Concerns

Many companies are concerned about workshops being held with end users due to intellectual property rights and secrecy issues. Such concerns can, however, be solved by agreeing with the users before the workshop and by using nondisclosure agreements. Creating those agreements may require that you involve your legal department to prepare the necessary documents.
Step 1: Find Lead Users

Lead users can be found in several ways. You may already know a few of them from your company’s complaint hotline. Or you can find them via the Internet by looking for people who have created their own small improvements to your product. Or you will find them by looking through the logs of official e-mail to your company.

You can also use an agency to find suitable lead users, and you can even ask a professional facilitator with user experience background to do your preparations and to run the workshop. This may be a good idea, at least the first time, for learning the tricks, but it will also be more expensive.

Instead of seeing these users as menace to your company who spam your in-boxes and hotlines, invite them for a creative workshop. These people will in many cases take two days out of their calendar just to be with you—for free! Of course, you should give them compensation if they need to stay in a hotel, and so on, but otherwise these customers usually come almost free of charge, and it is very wise to use their insights and creativity.

Anecdote

At Nokia, we ran an innovation project for physically challenged people. Initially we were unaware of the problems that some people with disabilities had using mobile devices. We were also unaware of how much these people actually relied on their mobile devices. The mobile device was often their main communication tool to the outside world—for chatting, socializing, finding their way around, requesting assistance, and so on.

We invited a group of 11 lead users for a workshop, together with our cross-functional team of industrial designers, user interaction experts, software developers, mechanical engineers, and so on. Not only were the lead users all involved in developing their own solutions for mobile devices, but they were also characterized by all being physically challenged.

The workshop was a true eye-opening experience. Finding accommodation in Copenhagen for blind people and people in wheelchairs was in itself a huge challenge. Finding a restaurant that could accommodate wheelchairs and where hearing-impaired people would not be disturbed by the acoustics was another huge challenge. I personally spent more than one week just making the practical arrangements for this workshop. I was forced directly into the problems that people with physical challenges have. And that in itself was extremely inspiring for me.

We had sign-language translators in the room for the two hearing-impaired people. During breaks, those members used their mobile devices to communicate with their friends through video calls. The member without arms would eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with his feet. The blind member typed on his mobile device to take notes and write down ideas. The workshop not only produced a large number of concrete ideas, but it also revealed many specific user needs for these target user groups.