

How tapping into **collective intelligence** promotes employee engagement at Covéa

Based on an interview with **Mithra SARRAFI**, MD human resources and internal communications, and director of the Covéa Campus.

What role do leaders play in facilitating collective intelligence? How can they ensure that the intelligence produces initiatives that all employees will embrace? These are just two of the questions we put to Mithra Sarrafi, head of Covéa's university, who organizes regular collaborative workshops.

BIOGRAPHY



Mithra Sarrafi has a degree in engineering from the Institut National des Sciences Appliquées de Lyon. She spent eight years at Accenture as an IT consultant and then as an advisor on assignments centering on change management. Sarrafi has been at Covéa (which includes the GMF, MAAF and MMA brands) since 2005, where she is director of the group's corporate university, Covéa Campus.

As head of the Covéa Campus, Mithra Sarrafi leads a team with a collective intelligence mindset that aims to boost the sense of corporate pride felt by Covéa's 22,000 employees. Covéa Campus uses real and virtual communities (via the Corus social network) as a rallying point for volunteers to devise and test crosscutting initiatives for all Covéa's brands. Sarrafi is ideally placed to observe how collective intelligence forms and how group decisions are implemented.

Collective intelligence as an aid to decision-making

"We can distinguish two types of decisions where collective intelligence plays a key role," says Sarrafi. "Strategic decisions taken by a leader to set out the vision: the why. And operational decisions: the how." Leveraging collective intelligence does not have the same goal in the two cases. For strategic decisions, collective intelligence serves mainly to ensure the best possible representation of the environment so that an informed decision can be taken. For

example, a leader who is open to ideas from his or her employees, partners and competitors will have a broader and more accurate outlook in a given situation. Because, as Sarrafi explains, "There is no such thing as a single reality; it's like a mirror ball, and the decision-maker just has to try to discover as many facets as possible of the reality." In contrast, for operational decisions, the group's input is not so much about making the right decision as helping the collective own an idea and thus stimulating engagement by involving it in the process. ...

... What kind of leadership can reduce the risk of “group think”?

In both the above scenarios, if the collective intelligence is manipulative, it will not achieve any results (if everyone is asked his or her opinion but the leaders ignore the responses). And the same is true if the intelligence is poorly implemented: everyone will go along with the dominant view, i.e., agree with the person who is most at ease in the group or who has official authority. Managers play a decisive role in avoiding these pitfalls, and they must demonstrate the following qualities:

- **Sincerity:** “If you are concerned about other people and you really want to understand them, you will make the collective thinking more effective”, argues Sarrafi.
- **Trust:** “We make sure that all participants in the Covéa Campus communities can express themselves freely. We organ-

- **Simplicity:** Managers must speak in simple terms so that everyone can understand the essence of their ideas, appropriate them and want to propagate them.

These ingredients as a whole create the conditions for dialogue and, ultimately, encourage individuals to invest themselves personally in implementing the collective decision.

Collective intelligence, if properly harnessed, facilitates ownership of decisions

«I am wary of the term ‘poor decision’», says Sarrafi. “Does it mean it’s a poor decision that has been made collectively, but which the entire group sticks to? Or is it an excellent decision made by a single leader but that will never be executed because nobody feels involved?” Leveraging collective intelligence can be

2015, an MMA team in charge of disaster management was having difficulties processing mail. The manager decided to introduce procedures to address the problem but they were a total failure. Later, a volunteer from the Nantes team who was taking part in a Covéa Campus workshop suggested using collective problem-solving that would involve all employees. A solution eventually emerged, which was substantially similar to the manager’s idea, and it worked well this time. It’s all about collective ownership – and the subsequent engagement – rather than whether it’s a good or bad decision.”

Numerous examples of this strong commitment have been generated by the collective workshops since Campus Covéa was launched in early 2015. “In Reims, the staff in a call center who take calls from prospective customers are testing a joint-management model. It is based on Isaac Geetz’s research into liberated companies, with participative management and decentralized responsibilities so everyone can take the decisions he or she deems appropriate. Similarly, in Strasbourg, a twenty-person team in purchasing is trialing the use of a virtual window for keeping in visual contact with employees scattered across France.” It was the volunteers at Covéa Campus who came up with both these proposals, which they then set about testing in real conditions. Whether the decisions are right or wrong, only time will tell, but they have at least one virtue: they foster strong team commitment!

“If you are concerned about other people and you really want to understand them, you will make the collective thinking more effective”

ize physical workshops so that everyone can get to know each other before using digital. And we strive to give everyone the opportunity to speak.”

- **Kindness:** Use the “I” form rather than the impersonal “they” to ensure that everyone can express him or herself sincerely. And managers must respect everyone’s ideas and welcome them with kindness.

a lengthy process and may sometimes seem ineffective, because (for example) the group makes a number of mistakes before reaching the right decision. Nevertheless, it has the great merit of building commitment, which is perhaps its main strength. This is all the more so if the company is agile, when it will be to correct erroneous decisions itself. Sarrafi cites the following examples: “In Nantes in

Covéa Campus

Covéa Campus is one of the structures helping to speed up Covéa’s transformation towards a “single enterprise”. The corporate university, which is staffed by a dedicated team, draws on Corus, an internal social network with 16,000 active members and 533 communities. During the first year of the Covéa Campus (created in early 2015), 360 people took part in monthly collaborative workshops based on three discussion topics:

- Covéa: What is its greatest strength and how is it unique?
- Covéa: What is the right kind of management for the digital age?
- Covéa: How can we improve the way we work together?