Idea Management Solutions: Build or Buy Guide

## What is the best option for your business?

Navigating the Decision

Employee ideas programs have become an essential component of successful businesses. As companies recognize the importance of harnessing the power of their employees' ideas to drive change, improve, innovate and develop a highly engaged culture, **demand for powerful idea management platforms has increased**.

With spend being scrutinized more than ever and IT teams being urged to 'do more with less', companies are focusing on getting the most value possible as quickly as they can.

The rapid expansion of low-code accessible technology like Microsoft Power Apps, means leaders face an important dilemma: do they build a solution themselves, or buy a solution from a specialist vendor? This choice is not just about the upfront costs; it's a balance of evaluating potential risks, benefits, and the overall impact on the organization's operational efficiency and innovation capability.

In this guide, we explore the complex 'build vs. buy' decision by looking at the financial, operational and impact implications of both options. Our aim is to empower IT leaders with the information they need to make a strategic choice, so they can best harness the power of employee ideas, while optimizing resources and capabilities.
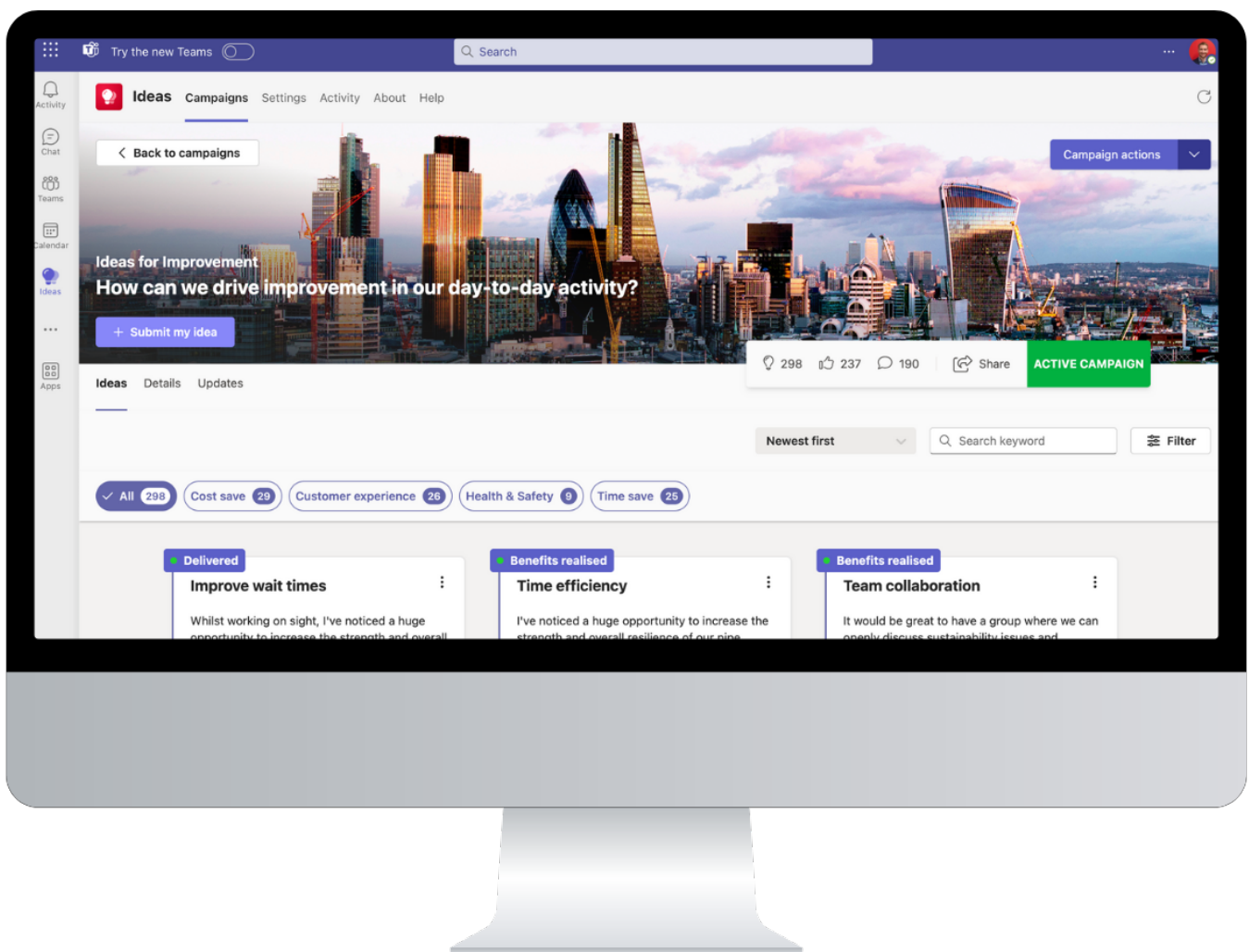
But first, let's define 'Idea Management Platform'

There are several reasons to run an employee ideas program; they help people feel heard and improve employee engagement, they give you a stream of great ideas for improvement and innovation, and they help you get buy-in to change.

Most companies already have some way of listening to their people's ideas and finding the best ones: it could be an email inbox, an excel spreadsheet, ideation days, hackathons or even a suggestion box.

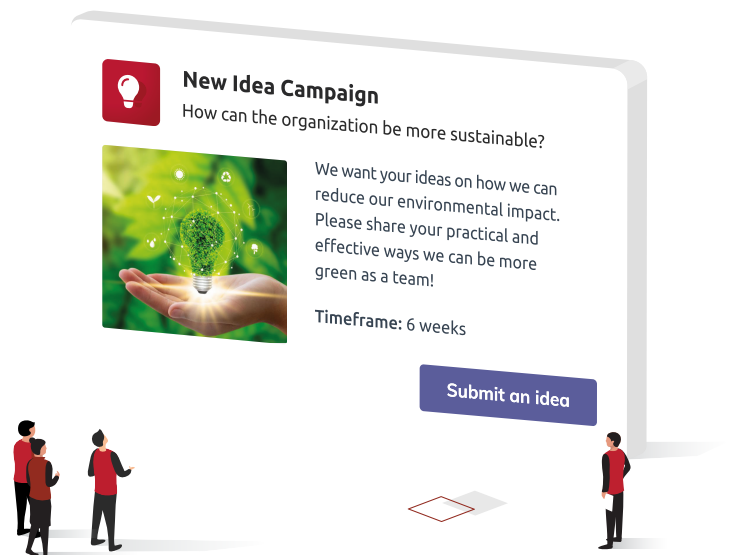**Often, these methods fall short of delivering the potential value available to the companies running them**. They might not allow organizations to ensure large scale participation, or they might not make it easy to maintain smooth communication during the idea life cycle. For example, despite their best efforts, an idea manager who's managing an email inbox will soon find themselves overwhelmed by trying to find the best ideas and respond manually.

The need for a platform to share and manage ideas at scale comes from pain points experienced by organizations when they attempt to run their own ideas programs, including;

- Low participation and low engagement
- No follow-through on ideas and a low number of ideas brought to life
- Experiencing overwhelm at managing ideas and getting them to the right people

- Time-consuming efforts to update and communicate with idea submitters
- No consistent evaluation process for ideas

These pains can result in ideas programs having a negative impact, where employees feel even more disengaged seeing their good ideas go to waste.

A specialist idea management platform offers features that encourage maximum participation and collaboration, automatically sort and process ideas, and tailor experiences according to the business' needs.

New Idea Campaign
How can the organization be more sustainable?

We want your ideas on how we can reduce our environmental impact. Please share your practical and effective ways we can be more green as a team!

Timeframe: 6 weeks

Submit an idea

In summary, Idea Management Platforms are designed to enable companies to effectively listen to, manage and bring ideas to life. Used well, they enable strategic change and growth whilst creating an environment where everyone feels heard.

Build or buy key considerations

Whether you should build a DIY solution using the tools you have available (like Microsoft Power Apps, or Service Now) or license a solution from a specialist vendor depends on your needs and situation. **Let's dive into the key considerations to make the best possible decision for your business**.

We'll cover;

- Partnership, Expertise and Support
- Costs - including predictability and total cost of ownership

- Time to value
- Functionality & user experience
- Configurability & scalability

Partnership, Expertise and Support

A Dependable, Accountable Partner

Whilst going with a solution built in-house means you're 'going it alone', engaging with a specialist vendor means having dependable, accountable expertise at your fingertips, ensuring swift and knowledgeable resolution of any issues that arise. **You'll gain a partner that's accountable for the success of the project and with you every step of the way**.

Expert Guidance

Employee idea management is a specialized arena, and without the deep, hard-won domain expertise of a specialist vendor, an in-house solution might fall short in capturing the subtleties and complexities of this niche.

Attempting to build an in-house solution without specialist knowledge is akin to climbing a mountain without a guide. A specialist vendor acts as an experienced guide, familiar with the terrain and equipped to lead you to the summit successfully.

A specialist vendor can give you guidance on things like program design, how to drive adoption, stakeholder engagement, key KPIs, and bringing ideas to life.

Support

If you go for a solution built in-house, you're on the hook for all support requests from all levels. You'll need to properly resource a support desk to deal with process queries (e.g. 'What's the process for review?'), technical queries (e.g. 'How do I rate this idea in the system?') and usage queries (e.g. 'Where's my idea in the system?'). With a specialist vendor, you're able to pass this burden on to a dedicated group of experts.

Bring the best ideas to life

Yorkshire Water was using spreadsheets and other home-grown solutions to gather ideas. They turned to Sideways 6 as a way to ensure an integrated and holistic idea management experience and increase collaboration at scale, in line with their ambitious 2030 strategy to modernize the business. They highlight the importance of working with an accountable partner:

> **"** You can have the best product in the world, but without the right people, it just doesn't work. The expertise and the support that we're getting has just felt so organised thought through and we something we simply couldn't have done without.

Mary Baldwin,
Yorkshire Water

Costs - Predictability and Total Cost of Ownership

When building your own solution, companies often think only of licensing costs and overlook the true size of the costs involved, which include (but are not limited to):
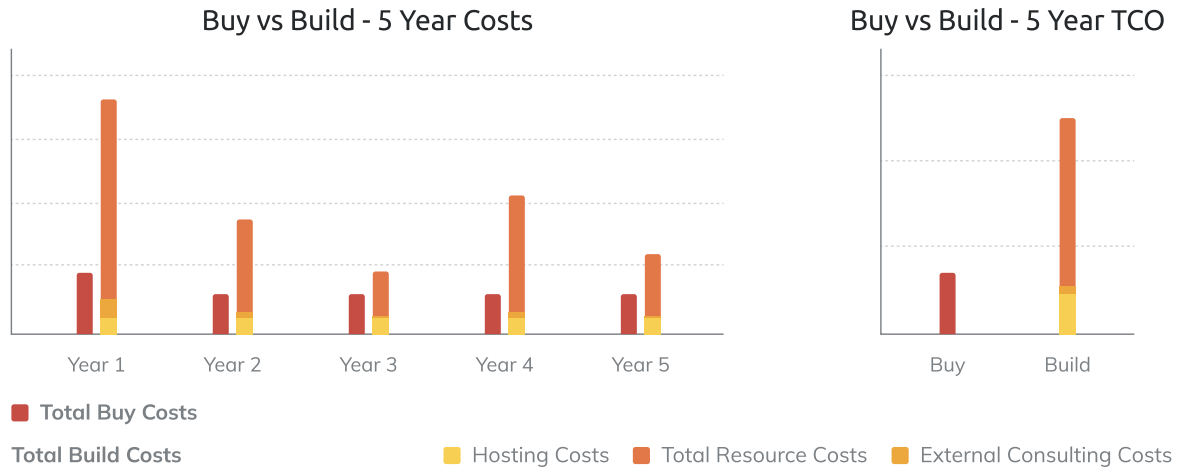
- Licensing for the no-code tools you use to build

- Internal resource to plan and design the platform

- IT resource to build the platform

- IT resource to improve the platform with new features and functionality as needs evolve

- Resource to support the platform

- Opportunity cost for your people's time - including those building, planning and managing the platform

- Opportunity cost of failed ideas programs - for those involved in building the platform, but also the negative impact to employees who lose trust in the process

- The time needed to promote engagement, manage ideas and administer the platform

Whereas when working with a specialised vendor, your costs should be transparent and consistent;

- The license fee to use the platform

- Any professional services fees

If you choose the correct vendor, all of the costs associated with risk, support and usage of the platform should also be significantly lower than if you build in-house - thanks to their expertise, product knowledge and support and guidance from the vendor.

This chart illustrates the projected cost trends for a Sideways 6 licence plus Services compared to a project built in-house from scratch.

Buy vs Build - 5 Year Costs

Buy vs Build - 5 Year TCO

- ■ Total Buy Costs
- Total Build Costs
- ■ Hosting Costs
- ■ Total Resource Costs
- ■ External Consulting Costs

Long-term costs can escalate rapidly, not just due to the initial effort and expertise required in year one, but also due to ongoing work to develop and implement new requested features, as well as hosting, security, and support expenses.

On the other hand, a SaaS-based idea management solution offers ongoing investment in new features at no additional cost, which are built by experts who understand the needs of a broad range of customers. **Companies also benefit from the predictability of a single cost that covers hosting, ongoing support, updates, and security testing**.

Time to Value
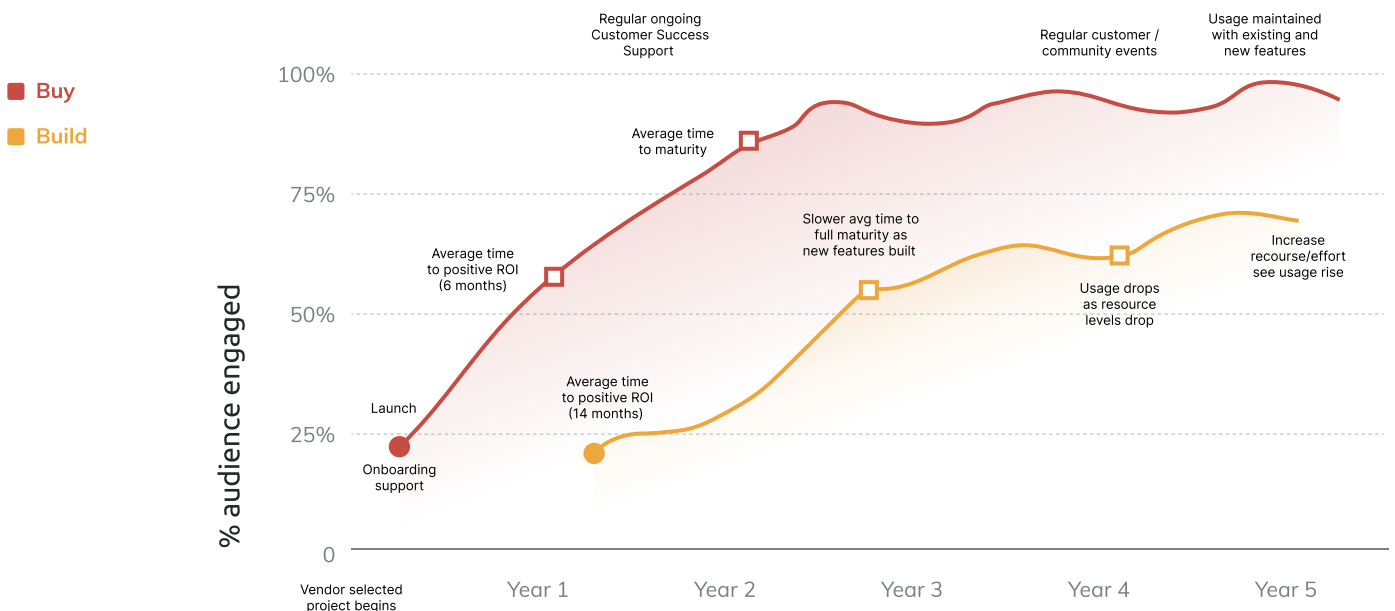
As the technology is ready to go, specialized SaaS solutions can be launched within a much shorter timeframe than solutions built in-house. This allows organizations and employees to experience the 'promised land' of value sooner.

Typically, idea management platforms can be configured, implemented, and rolled out within a month, depending on the speed at which the customer can move.

Solutions built in-house (such as those based on Power Apps) are often slowed down by internal prioritization of resource, and lack of experience in the employee ideas space, and typically take anything between 3-6 months to launch.

Because solutions built in-house are unlikely to get to feature parity with the best specialized SaaS products, the challenge doesn't end when you launch. **The time to actually realizing value (from ideas shared, people engaged and ideas brought to life) is likely to take significantly longer using a solution built in-house**.

Sideways 6 customers achieve success from launch that grows exponentially on the long term. For example Sideways 6 customers have seen a $800k ROI in just 12 weeks and up to $70m over 5 years, over 11,000 new ideas submitted within one year and a 32% increase in eNPS in 5 years.

Whilst there is a chance for built solutions to achieve these results, SaaS-based idea management platforms offer companies a predictable, significantly faster time to value, and lower risk of failure.

Taylor & Francis

Prominent academic publisher Taylor & Francis had been actively soliciting employee ideas across departments for many years. Initially, this approach proved cost effective, as they used spreadsheets for idea management. As the business grew in ambition and scope, with an imperative to modernize, they realized that this method was inefficient, with many duplicated ideas, inadvertently creating silos and stifling innovation. To address this challenge and enhance their employee idea management process, they turned to Sideways 6.

> **66** It was a painless process. I was very happy and actually surprised at how quickly it went because we launched a program in three months and immediately engaged 64% of our audience.

Michelle Rivera-Spann,
VP of Business Advancement

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Functionality and User Experience

Companies building solutions in-house miss out on the functionality and expertise that a specialist vendor can provide. In a bid to win customers and solve problems, the vendor will invest in developing features and tools that drive maximum results. They'll also miss out as the space evolves and new technology is brought to market based on insights gained from usage across multiple companies.

While solutions built in-house tend to stay static after an initial build, specialist SaaS solutions are always improving, adding new features based on the latest trends, technology (such as AI), research, and feedback from customers.

These constant updates mean companies using SaaS solutions get the newest functionality automatically without any additional cost. In contrast, companies that build their own solutions need to invest continuously to keep up with the latest innovations (if they can win the fight for IT resource!) or they might end up with an outdated product.

The user interface of specialist SaaS idea management platforms is typically designed by specialist designers who deeply understand user experience and aim to create consumer-grade UX. Solutions built in-house are often built by 'citizen developers' or IT professionals who - despite the best intentions - aren't specialist designers, leading to sub-par user interfaces.
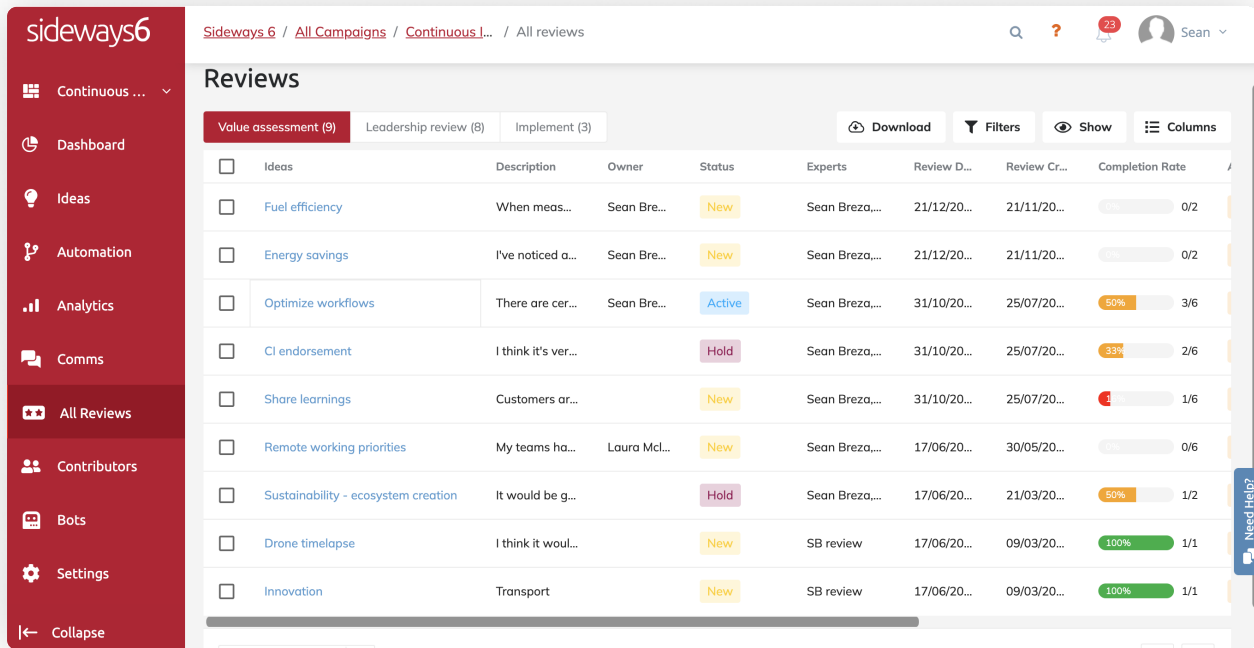
One of the keys to a successful idea management platform is how easy and enjoyable it is to use. When deciding whether to build or buy a solution, think about how you can ensure your platform will be user-friendly and appealing to encourage widespread use and get the results you want.

Configurability and Scalability

Most solutions built in-house are built for a single use. In the employee ideas space, this means that they're often built for a single 'program' (aka 'campaigns', 'challenges' or 'events'). If you want to run multiple different programs with different set ups, this becomes a challenge. Most of the time, different programs will require different set-ups, including;

- Workflow automation rules
- Fields to collect information about ideas

- Communications to be sent to idea submitters
- Expert reviews and expert review criteria

Most people who want to run employee ideas programs aren't natural born developers or IT administrators, so unless these are all configurable per-program by the average user, you risk waiting in line for IT resource every time you want to tweak your setup or launch something new.

Great specialized vendors make all of these things editable by average users in an easy-to-understand way, meaning you can scale your ideas efforts as much as you like without being bottle-necked by IT.

So, should you build or buy your employee idea platform?

It depends. The decision of whether to build or buy an idea management platform can be a complex one with lots of considerations and potential trade-offs.

Building in-house can seem appealing to reduce initial investment or to gain additional control over building something that's 'just right', but it often requires significant and unpredictable resource investment and it can take a lot longer to get to full value - if you ever get there. Ultimately, if you're looking to take employee ideas seriously, the benefits of building are typically outweighed by the costs.

At Sideways 6, we have a decade of experience in employee ideas programs and idea management software. We help companies like **Nestlé, Marks & Spencer, Balfour Beatty, DXC Technology, Mott MacDonald, and Warner Bros. Discovery** to harness the power of millions of employee ideas worldwide. It's our job to make your job as easy as possible and that's why we have invested tens of thousands of hours in designing, building, and refining a platform that delivers the maximum possible benefit from well-run ideas programs.

While there may be specific cases where building is the right choice, for the majority of organizations, evaluating and purchasing a specialized solution is the sensible decision. This allows you to focus on what your organization does best and leave us to make sure you have the best idea management platform possible.

> Connecting ideas with those people in the organization who can help turn them into reality a systematic way, goes beyond a list of things on someone's notepad. Sideways 6 software, in combination with its training, advice, and active guidance, has provided us for the first time with a way to dynamically surface and manage ideas from colleagues at all levels around the world.
>
> **Jeremy North,**
> **Taylor & Francis Managing Director**

> We were getting lots of input but in an uncontrolled fashion, in spreadsheets, and realized we didn't have the money or people to capitalize on the volume of ideas. We recognized that it needed some expert support and technology. Sideways 6 had both the tech and the people behind it to exactly exactly what we needed.
>
> **Mary Baldwin,**
> **Yorkshire Water**

> You guys have shown yourself to be a listening organization. You listen, take feedback and you respond. This is exactly what you want from a 3rd party vendor. Because of that, I've got great aspirations and expectations from Sideways 6.
>
> **FTSE 100 Retail Customer**

> Both the platform and the people at Sideways 6 make them a fantastic partner. They are fully aligned to what we want to achieve in our business objectives and their understanding of what we want to achieve really helps them to deliver the best for us.
>
> **John Rowland,**
> **Innovation Platforms Manager, Mott Macdonald**

Nestlé · M&S · Balfour Beatty · DXC TECHNOLOGY · MOTT MACDONALD · Discovery · AstraZeneca · DIAGEO · NOVA Chemicals

If you'd like to find out more about Sideways 6 and how to harness the power of employee ideas, go to **sideways6.com**.

*The assumptions in our modelling are drawn from industry data by leading providers, including Gartner along with our observations made over a decade.