HOW TO RUN A DIGITAL INNOVATION LAB

INNOVATION THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION

We constantly invest in innovation, both in internal and client driven projects. This how-to guide details the process that we recently used to create focus while exploring and innovating in a field of interest. We call this a lab. This guide offers steps that are easy to follow and designed to lead your organization through the lab process. It also describes what we've learnt from our experiments with labbing. If you use these instructions to run your own lab and learn something or find improvements, or if you just have a question, don't hesitate to contact us at hello@ustwo.com Enjoy!

WHAT IS A "LAB"?

At ustwo, a lab is simply a dedicated team exploring a specific area of interest during a defined duration in a specific place . In short, it is a structured way to innovate within your organisation. The process is designed to take place over 4–6 weeks, rather than the shorter 24h hackathon that is often used to boost ideas and create innovative prototypes.

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PREPARATIONS

To run a lab, you will need to:

- Allocate a cross-functional team that is 100% dedicated to the lab. They won't have time for other work.
- Co-locate the team. They should sit together.
- Ensure development environments are up and running. You won't have time to deal with this during the lab.
- Get whiteboards, markers, post-its, a printer, and tape.

> *Think specifically about which resources or disciplines are needed in order to make your lab a success. For example, a team of mostly developers might need access to designer to make visuals.*

> *User testing is an important step of the process. Think ahead if you need extra resources to make your prototypes consistent enough to gather valuable insights from users.*

SET THE FOUNDATION

Before you start, make sure you know what problem you want to solve – ask why, what, who, when, where, how much and how.

FORMULATE A BRIEF

The brief outlines the purpose, goal and expected outcome of the lab. It is used to align people inside and outside of the team and set expectations. It will also help you judge the ideas later on. The narrower and more focused you can make it the better. At minimum, include

- Purpose - why are you running the lab?
- Focus - what do you want the lab to explore? (And what should it **not** explore?)
- Expected outcomes - number of experiments, level of polish at the end, presentations, marketing content etc.
- Schedule - deadlines and milestones for each phase of the lab.

In our PlayLab for digital play, our brief was to focus on physical-digital interactions. The expected outcomes were to have two to three polished experiments that we could present to clients and two blog posts, all within a timeframe of six weeks.

GET ALIGNED

- Who is responsible for the process design and facilitation?
- Who is on the team, i.e the team members?
- Who are the stakeholders? (other people's input you need or people who will engage with the outcome: business, customer support, marketing etc.)
- Any constraints like tools, market, clients, hardware etc.

FORMULATE CRITERIA FOR IDEA SELECTION

Finally, decide which criteria you will use to cut ideas (unless the brief is enough) and how you will make those decisions. Assign a small council of stakeholders from your organisation that will help the lab teams evaluate ideas against the brief. Our council was made up of representatives from marketing, business and top management.

> *"Don't forget to communicate to the rest of the organisation that a lab is starting and what its purpose is. You want everyone to be engaged. For example, it's much easier to get people involved in testing later on if they know what you're up to.*

RESEARCH & STRUCTURE

In this phase you conduct research and brainstorming to create lots of embryos for possible experiments.

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH

Start by letting the team individually research the chosen field to gather inspiration for the brainstorm and to avoid re-inventing the wheel. Depending on your chosen area, the following questions can be used as pointers to what you could investigate:

- Which exciting technologies are out there and what can they do?
- Which existing user behaviours could be interesting to explore?
- Which features in existing products are inspiring and hold potential for something new?
- Which companies or potential clients can we find opportunities with?

Depending on how much time you are willing to allocate, the activities in this phase could range from desktop research to interviews, surveys, and observations in the field.

You might want to print the research so you can look at it together in a bigger group. This way you can spot unexpected connections and easily get back to it during the process.

PRESENT & STRUCTURE

The next step is to share and present the material as a group. Put up all the findings on a wall and let each person tell the group what they found and what was interesting about it. Make sure that everyone has something to jot down thoughts on while their peers are presenting. Then work together to find themes or connections and group the material to create a better overview. This is your foundation wall. Let it stay up for the length of the project so that you can return to it for inspiration or remember your initial reasoning or excitement.

BRAINSTORM IDEAS

With the foundation wall as a base, run multiple, quick and timeboxed brainstorming exercises to get a big number of idea-embryos. Try brainstorming both individually and in pairs with speedy presentation rounds in between. Choose criteria that fit your theme and that will give you ideas with a useful angle. If you have a specific target group or other constraints it can be wise to use those at this stage. Mix them with seemingly impossible or crazy criteria in order to open up creativity.

Example criteria from our PlayLab:

- Come up with the worst/most harmful play ideas for kids
- Come up with play ideas for your grandmother
- Come up with play ideas that have to be played outdoors

> *We recommend allocating at least one full day to this phase, preferably with a night to sleep on it in between. Sometimes the teams get stuck and it helps to take breaks.*

> *Start documenting your process if you plan to talk about the work inside your organisation. Part of working with culture is to tell stories of both successes and failures and if you don't document you will quickly forget what happened in the start.*

DEVELOP CONCEPTS

Time to get together and plan what you will create and how.

SELECT CONCEPTS

Vote, cluster or use any method you like to choose your final ideas. Return to the brief to confirm the ideas that support the purpose or see if something went astray somewhere in the brainstorming sessions.

FORM TEAMS AND WRITE PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Once you have a shortlist you will need to form teams around your ideas. Keep the teams small, 2–3 people max. Each mini-team now gets two days to solidify their idea. They can go about this in any way they want – paper prototyping, code, interviews – but the output should be a short description of the idea including questions, or hypotheses, to be tested with a prototype in the next stage.

> *Of course you can also form the groups first and then let them pick their idea.*

Things to include in the project description:

- What is the purpose of the experience?
- What questions should the prototype answer?
- What do you aim to build? Components & scope.
- What target group do you imagine?
- Outline potential usages, clients, and contexts for the product.

FIRST SELECTION ROUND AND FEEDBACK

When the two days are up, the project descriptions are handed in. Members of your council now get to evaluate the proposals against the brief. All teams should receive feedback on their idea and a decision needs to be made. If possible we prefer all teams to be present to hear all the feedback.

Teams whose projects are approved move on with building their prototype. The other teams either join the winning teams or go back to the drawing board to create a new proposal.

PROTOTYPE

Quickly build a simple prototype and get feedback from the council and other teams.

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

Teams now have one week to develop a prototype that can be used for early verification. Build only what you need to verify the value of an idea or prove a hypothesis as fast as possible. After the week is up, each team presents their playable prototype to each other and to the council again.

> *“At ustwo we hosted a “demo lunch” in the studio, inviting other co-workers to vote on their favourite project.*

Also let the teams create a one page presentation describing their experiment/prototype, so that you can easily communicate the different ideas to others who couldn’t attend the demo.

FEEDBACK & GREENLIGHT FOR NEXT THE STAGE

Like before, the teams and council convene to decide which of the experiments will go through to the next stage. This time around it’s not just the brief that is important but also the outcome of the early verification.

At this point, it might no longer be possible for the teams whose idea gets cancelled to start working on a new one. This is where it pays off to have decided how to handle these situations early on. The team members could either leave the lab or support the other projects that got approved.

> *“Sometimes it might not make sense to increase the team size at this point. Be aware of how you redistribute yourselves after this phase. It may be better to keep teams small to keep the speed up.*

BUILD A PRODUCT

Time for the teams to build polished products and get serious about documenting their learnings.

START BUILDING

The final phase of the lab is three to four weeks long in order for the teams to have time to build something more thorough. The teams are now expected to ramp up testing with real users, ideally from the target audience. At this point you might also want to bring on any extra resources needed to polish the product if you haven't already.

PRESENTATION AND DOCUMENTATION

Towards the end of the phase the teams need to think about packaging their products. Look at the brief again to make sure you have not missed any of the desired outcomes. We expect teams to be able to present their products from hypothesis through to validation and conclusions.

> *If you plan to write about your work, make sure to dedicate some time exclusively to doing that. We tried to finish both production and documentation at the same time and that split focus really hurt our velocity.*

CELEBRATE AND EVALUATE

Demonstrate your wonderful work and collect new knowledge

PRESENTING YOUR EXPERIMENTS

Perhaps you feel so good about them that you want to invite external stakeholders or clients, or maybe you've had painful but invaluable experiences that your whole organisation could learn from. Either way, wrap up the process by presenting your work and celebrate your effort together with your community.

A few things to think about for your presentation:

- Set up a stage and rehearse. It's well worth the time to do at least one dry run to scare away the demo monster if possible.

- Make a point of including both results, preferably backed up with data and insights around process. As stated earlier a lab is part innovation, part culture building, and sharing war stories is important.

LOOKING BACK

Once the presentations are done, it's time to run the final retrospective. This session is for those who participated in the lab including the stakeholders. It is important to allow yourselves to take a step back and evaluate the result of the labs and the process that was used.

Remember to look at both WHAT was accomplished and HOW it was accomplished:

- Put up the initial intention and desired outcomes
  - Were they fulfilled?
  - What was the plan and what really happened?
  - What parts of the process worked really well and
  - which parts could have been better?

- Evaluate the teamwork and collaboration
  - Was the brief clear?
  - Did stakeholders feel included?
  - Where did energy go up and down?

- Finally, make it clear how you will proceed with the results of the lab.
  - Will you continue working on them?
  - Should they be shared? (Of course they should.)
  - How can you use the results to support your business and who will take responsibility for making sure it happens?

Run your retrospective a few days after the end of the lab period so that the teams get some distance, but not too late. It's good to have the journey and its ups and downs fresh in mind. The retrospective is vital for people to get closure and to maintain clarity in the organisation about what the lab resulted in.

Without it, you risk the motivation of people involved and the engagement level in future labs.

DON'T FORGET TO CELEBRATE

Regardless of how something went in terms of goal fulfillment or other hard success measures, people have usually put their best into the process. A lab is an intense process and there are always things to learn, which is worth celebrating. With your new knowledge you can set new foundations and start shaping your process better for whatever you want to do next.

Now that you know how to run your own lab it's time to start planning it. We hope that at the end of your lab you will have created something that is ready to start living its own life.

LAB SCHEDULE

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIYAY!
SET THE FOUNDATION		RESEARCH AND STRUCTURE	Brainstorm	Team formation
DEVELOP CONCEPTS	Hand in pitches (selection)	PROTOTYPE		
	Hand in concepts (selection)	BUILD A PRODUCT		
			CELEBRATE AND EVALUATE	END OF THE LAB

STAY IN TOUCH

If you use this template to innovate and explore within your organisation we would love to hear about it. If you want more information about working with user-centric innovation and how we run labs at ustwo, please contact us at hello@ustwo.com