

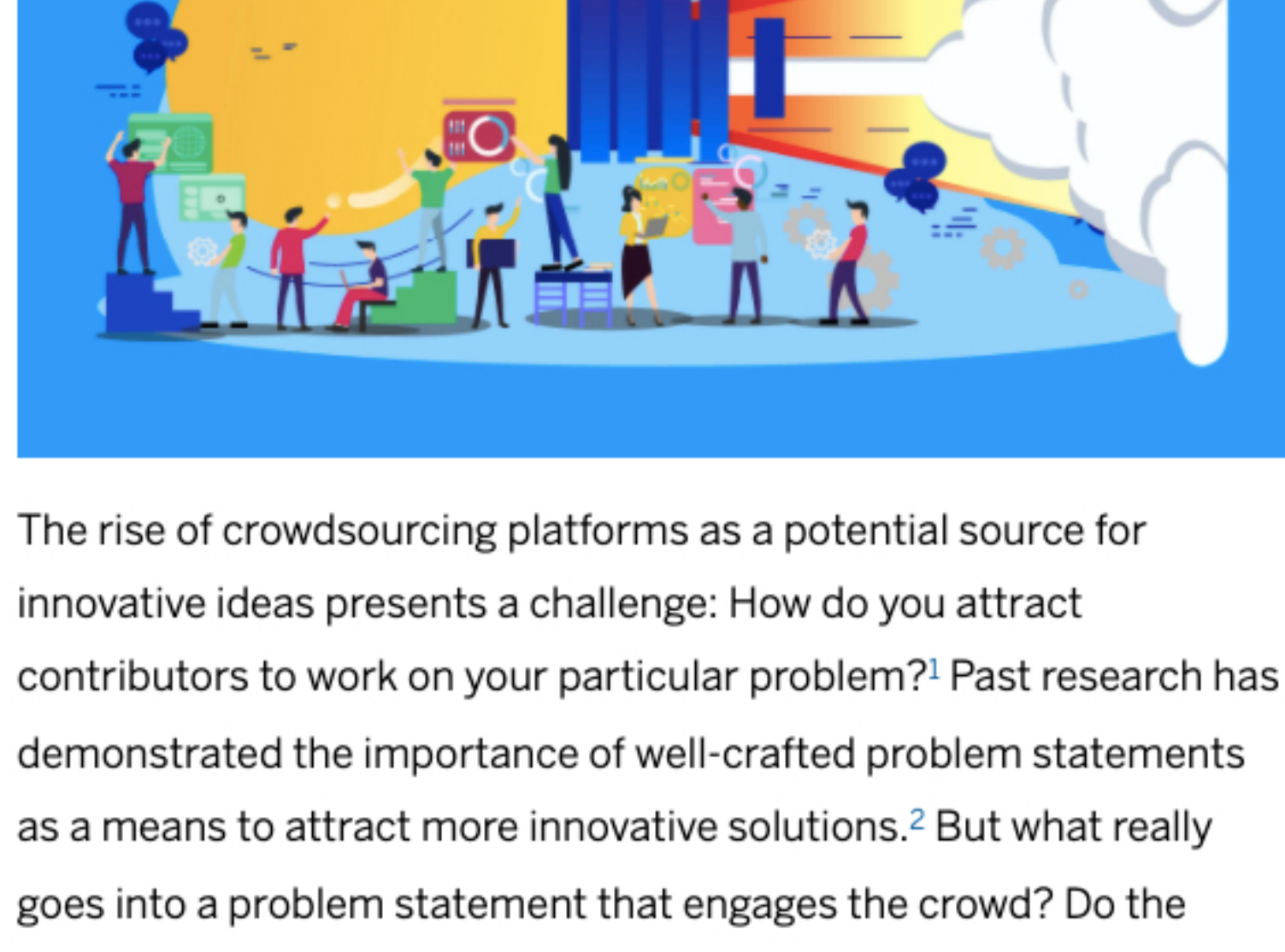
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Get More Ideas From the Crowd

These five techniques for writing problem statements can improve results from crowdsourced challenges.

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The rise of crowdsourcing platforms as a potential source for innovative ideas presents a challenge: How do you attract contributors to work on your particular problem? Past research has demonstrated the importance of well-crafted problem statements as a means to attract more innovative solutions.¹ But what really goes into a problem statement that engages the crowd? Do the statements that attract a large number of proposed ideas share common elements?

Our research sought to answer these questions by unpacking problem statements, word by word, to identify the characteristics that attract the most idea submissions. Our analysis points to guidelines for managers tapping crowdsourcing sites on do's and don'ts when writing a problem statement meant to attract solutions from creative freelancers.

We used data from Eyeka, an online crowdsourcing platform focused on creative projects. Our findings are based on an analysis of 362 unique problem statements posted by 85 companies between 2016 and 2018. The statements sought ideas for marketing and social media campaigns, solutions to complex issues, proposals for products, and recommendations for entering new markets. The average number of responses received for each statement was 88; the highest number received was 370 and the lowest was five. We found that those receiving an above-average number of submissions shared some common elements — and we also identified four approaches to avoid when presenting a challenge to the crowd.

Five Ways to Engage Creatives

Our research found that the problem statements that attracted an above-average number of proposals used one or more of the following five techniques to pique freelancers' interest and engage them with the problem.

Personalize the problem. Statements that address freelancers as "you" and explicitly ask them to solve the problem as if they were the customer are very effective in attracting more ideas.

For example, a company wanted to invent a new coffee drink. "We are sure you've known these moments in the afternoons when you just need to take a break from sleepiness, stress, or anxiety," the statement noted. It described the coffee shop environment and referred to the opportunity to "enjoy some sweet time all by yourself or maybe sharing this moment with your friends." And it concluded with a direct appeal: "We'd like to invent a new range of cold and sweet, ready-to-drink, milk-based coffee that people will love. Can you help?"

Challenge solvers to surpass the status quo. Writing a problem statement that explicitly asks for ideas that improve on existing choices generates more submissions. Words that focus on contrasts and comparisons encourage freelancers to evaluate their ideas against a baseline.

For example, a toothbrush company wanted ideas for a premium manual toothbrush "that brings something totally new to the experience of brushing teeth." The statement emphasized the challenge, pointing out that "all manual toothbrushes look the same and seem to offer similar benefits" and that electric toothbrushes are more "exciting" but also cost much more. "This needs to change!" it stated, encouraging freelancers to consider the contrasts between electric and manual brushes.

Explain what customers need. Problem statements that emphasize customers' needs drive more idea submissions. Statements that give detailed information about customers' actions and emotions when consuming a product or service help submitters focus on suggestions for improving their experiences.

Nestlé's KitKat unit repeated the word "break" seven times in its 145-word problem statement that sought marketing help. It conveyed how busy and stressed customers can benefit from small, fluid breaks throughout the day: "KitKat can help during these situations to take a break, snap out of it, and avoid all the drama. Can you help us tell a funny and relatable story based on this idea?"

Ask engaging questions. Questions trigger a desire to respond — a mental reflex called *intrinsic elaboration* that prompts us to focus on attempts to answer a query.³ Our analysis found that posing questions increases the number of ideas submitted.

"When you think of beer advertising, what do you see?" began the problem statement of Tuborg, a Danish brand that asked contributors to design a cliché-free advertising poster about friends gathering over drinks. The statement posed other questions — such as, "How do people really have fun today?" — to direct contributors' creativity.

Highlight tensions to be resolved. Statements that focus on dueling or inherently contradictory aspects of a problem receive a large number of submissions. The difficulty of the problem, as expressed by the tension and paradox, appears to stimulate creative individuals and increase their desire to solve the problem: Resolving a paradox requires a fresh perspective and a new idea.⁴

An alcoholic beverage maker's statement highlights this approach. It explained that the company wanted to "invent a new non-alcoholic brewed refreshing beverage for times and occasions where alcohol isn't desired." A beer company interested in creating a new alcohol-free beverage? A conflict like the beverage maker's — between what it currently brews and what it wants to make in the future — draws attention and demands a resolution.

Our findings indicate that there's a sizable opportunity for managers using crowdsourcing platforms to improve their results. The elements of personalizing the problem, challenging submitters to surpass the status quo, and posing engaging questions were each present in just 1 in 5 problem statements that we studied. Slightly more than one-third of the problem statements explained what customers needed. The most popular technique — highlighting tensions and contradictions — was present in half of the problem statements.

At the same time, we found that idea submissions decreased when a problem statement had too many of these elements. The problem statements that yielded the most submissions used two or three of the elements, characterizing a problem as interesting and challenging but not too complex to solve — factors that should bolster confidence.⁵

Using more than three of the techniques increases the complexity of the problem statement and results in fewer contributions. Perhaps freelancers see combinations of four or five elements as too challenging. Alternatively, more elements may create the perception that the problem statement is too specific — that it does not give freelancers flexibility in the problem-solving process.

Four Techniques to Avoid

Our study also uncovered four approaches to writing problem statements that appear to deter creative freelancers.

Going negative. While framing a customer need as an explicit customer pain point may seem like a direct way of describing a problem, using particularly negative terms significantly reduces the number of idea submissions. Why? Negative terms highlight risks and obstacles, but they may also dampen the enthusiasm needed to motivate freelancers to solve the problem.

An example of going dark comes from a brand of dandruff shampoo, whose problem statement read, "The teenage years are tough on guys. Your body is acting out in almost every way possible; talking to girls is a minefield! ... To top it off, there are the crushingly awkward conversations your parents expect to have with you about everything."

This statement received just 30 submissions (or 66% fewer than average). While the statement ends with a call to "create a fun and unexpected video that shows how teenage guys manage to avoid awkward conversations with their parents about dandruff," much of the preceding text invokes memories of adolescent angst. Pivoting from that mindset to generating fun ideas may be a difficult challenge to overcome.

Specifying a particular market. Problem statements that specify a target market receive significantly fewer idea submissions. This may be because focusing on a specific market implicitly limits the pool of creative freelancers to those who are confident that they have the relevant knowledge. Freelancers can also perceive this kind of statement as a "closed problem" that implies a narrowly defined solution set.

A global beer brand's problem statement, which received just 28 responses, illustrates this. Its request could apply broadly: Bring us captivating ideas to make consumers want to drink our beer during meals. But the context for this problem emphasized one target market: China. The word appeared four times, and other phrases also referred to the country. If a creative freelancer were not knowledgeable about or interested in China, then this problem statement would likely not resonate.

Describing customers too narrowly. Emphasizing customer personas has an effect directly opposite that of personalization. Where the latter puts a freelancer in a customer's shoes, including very specific descriptions of customer types risks distancing freelancers from the problem at hand.

For example, a problem statement from a global beverage manufacturer seeking ideas for a marketing campaign started with Tracey, a typical 20-year-old "always connected to her friends on the phone." It described where Tracey was, what time of day it was, the weather, and how she felt, and noted that "she'd like refreshment." This problem statement attracted 36% fewer submissions than average. If a creative freelancer does not identify with this customer persona for any reason (based on age, gender, occupation, or behavior), then the problem may not be sufficiently relatable to motivate them to engage with it.

Freelancers anonymous. Many companies want to use creative freelancers without exposing their brand. But the data shows that when companies did not reveal themselves or their brand — as in 22% of the problem statements we analyzed — they received significantly fewer idea submissions. Trust and transparency are important in all relationships, including between a company and the creative freelancers who are being asked to help solve a pressing business problem. We recommend saying who you are.

Crowdsourcing platforms provide a ready source of fresh ideas, from a talent pool that is free of the biases and preconceived notions that may constrain innovation within your own company. Composing a strategic, well-articulated problem statement is an important first step in successfully tapping creative freelancers, by increasing their confidence that they have the knowledge and skills to solve the problem.

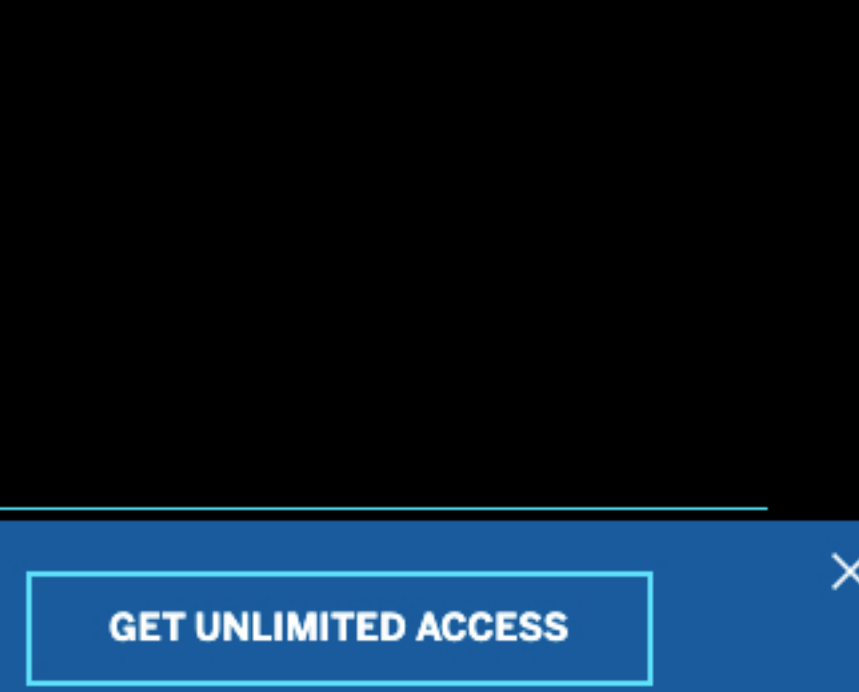
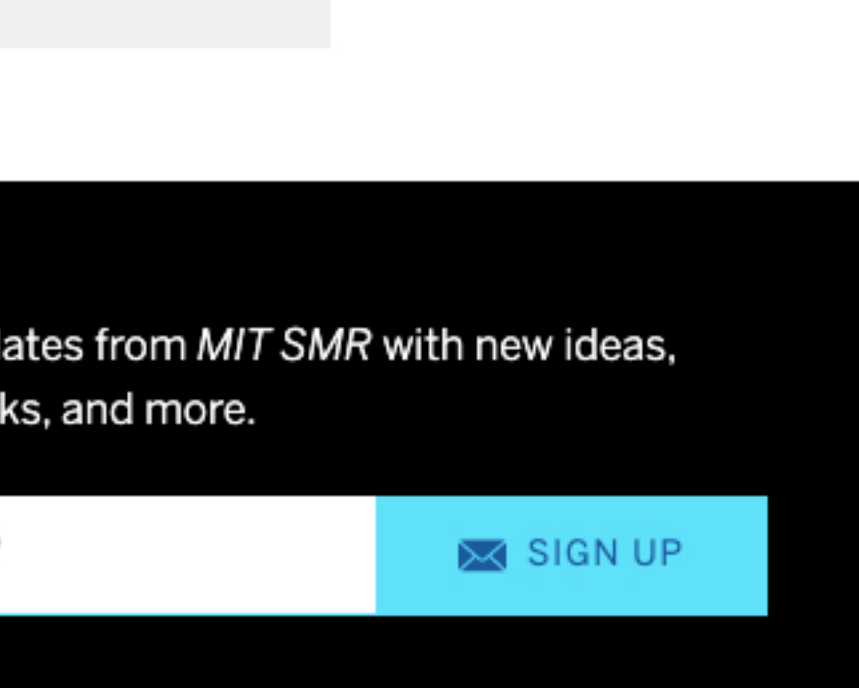
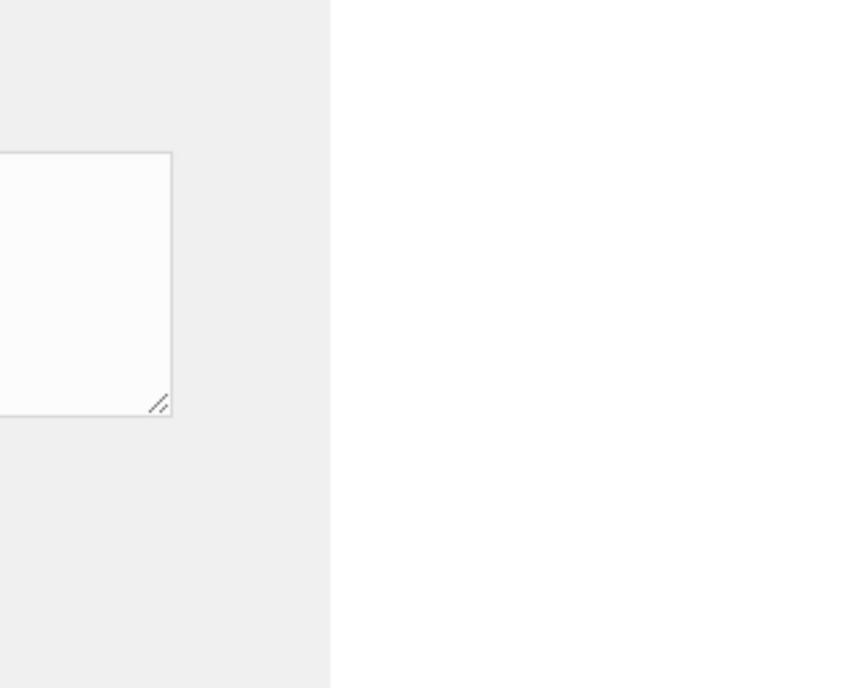
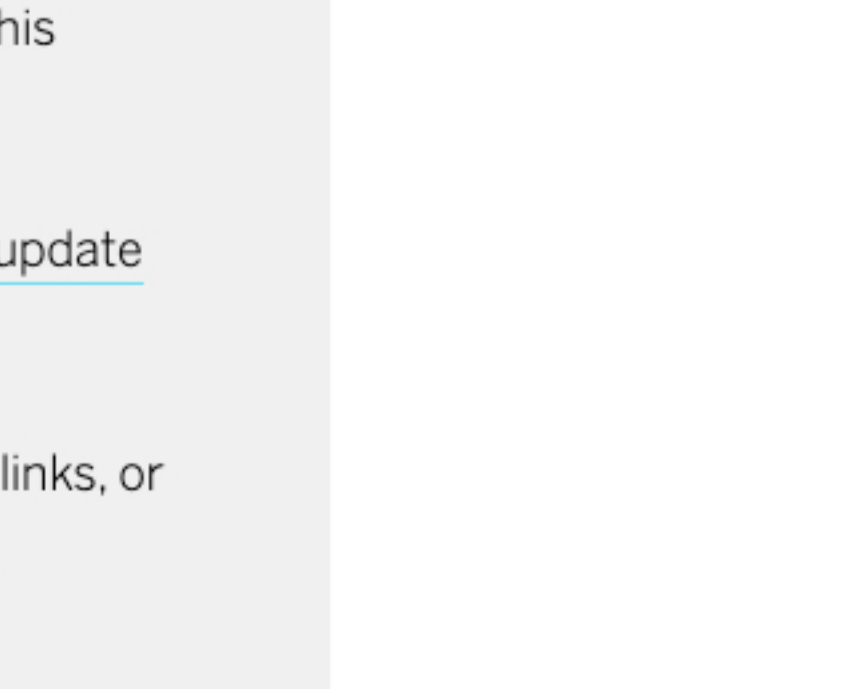
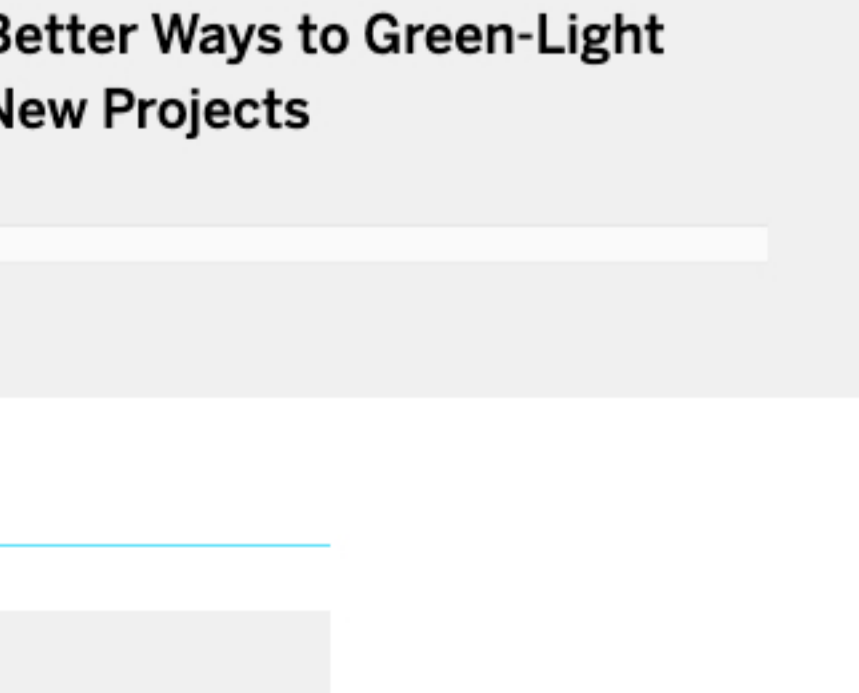
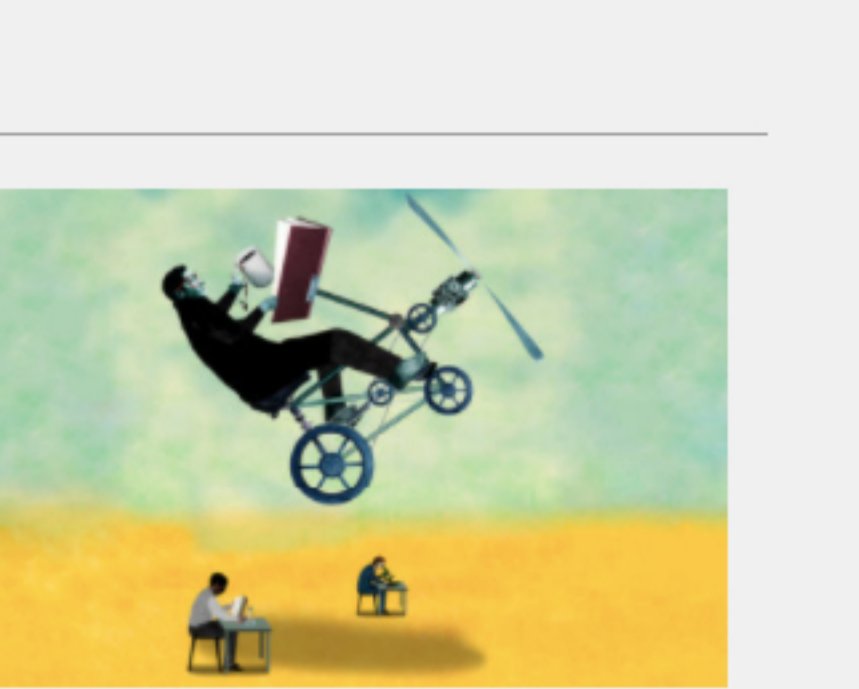
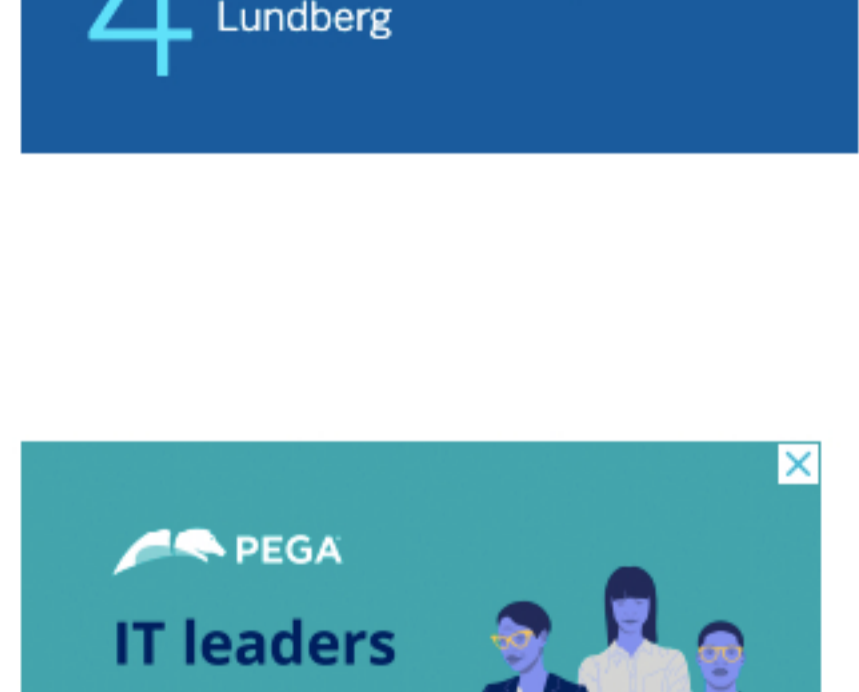
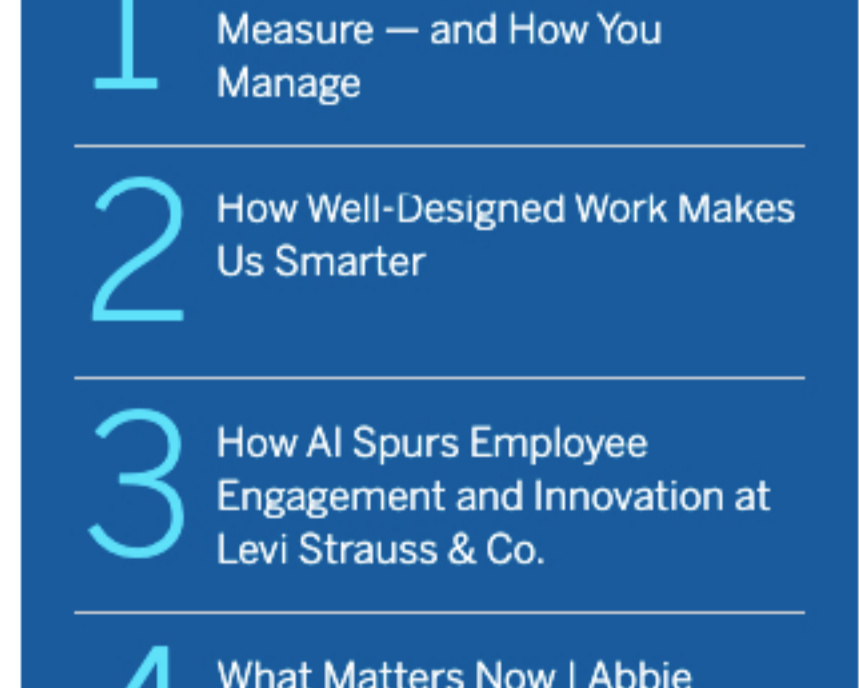
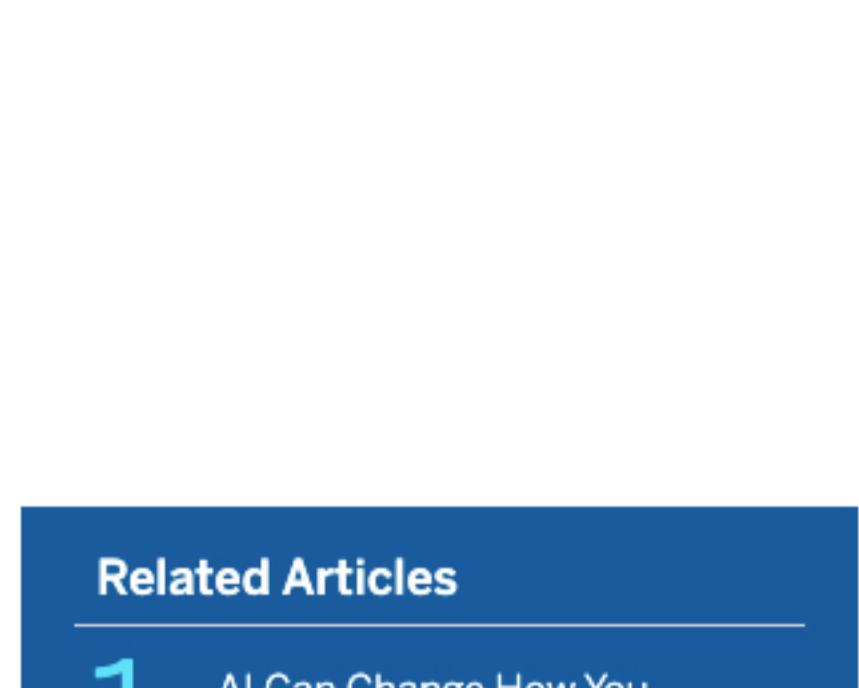
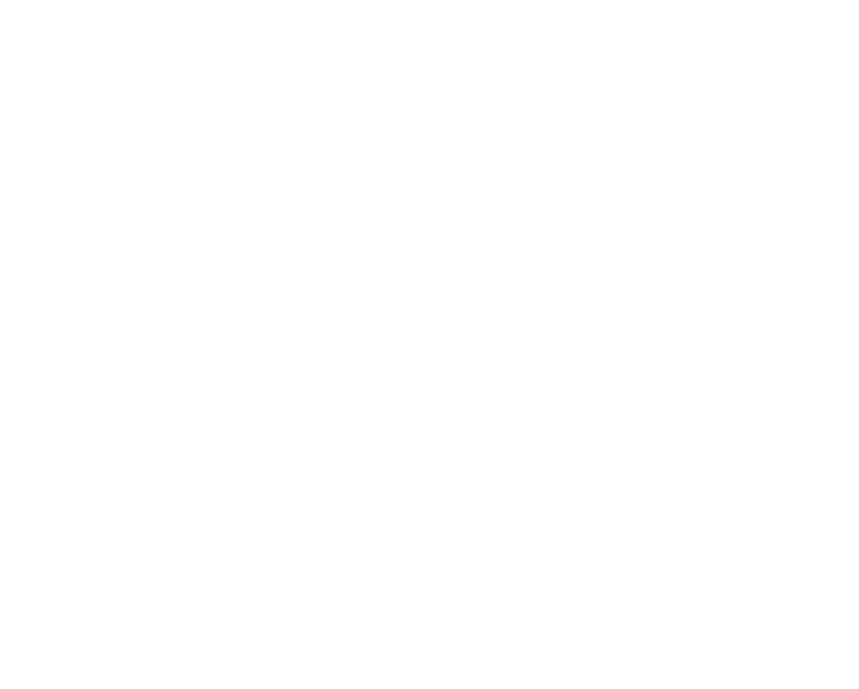
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