

Creating an Inclusive Environment for Innovation

Centre for Facilitation | Global Food Security – UK Research Council

“From the start of this project we felt you understood what we were trying to achieve. Your creative approach and the fact that you shared our commitment to inclusion made it much easier to radically rethink the sandpit format.”

Keys to Success

1. Close Collaboration with the Client to identify the barriers to inclusion within the existing format.
2. Openness to exploring unique ways of approaching the event to maximize participation for all
3. Use of digital tools to support the bridging period between the two parts of the event

Can we make a 5 Day Event more inclusive?

The UK Research Council has been using the Sandpit/Innovation Lab format for over 10 years as a method to generate dynamic and far reaching interdisciplinary research proposals. It is a competitive environment and the usual format is a residential setting over 5 very long challenging days.

The Global Food Security team wanted to generate new collaborative innovative research proposals to tackle the challenge of the UK Food System. The target group would be more junior researchers and the team was concerned that the standard format for this type of event would exclude many talented people.

The team worked with us to design a “Split Format” with a 3 day event, followed by a 10 day break and a further 2 days. Over the planning period our facilitators worked in very close collaboration with the Global Food Security team and together we challenged every process to see what we could adjust so that everyone could participate to their full potential.

How did the approach make a difference?

The big difference was that several participants were able to apply for this type of funding competition because of the adjustments to the timetable and the willingness to find ways around barriers to participation. This included people with young children and other caring responsibilities.

The break between the two halves of the event had benefits for the generation of creative ideas. The space provided an opportunity for more introverted thinkers to reflect and review the ideas that started to emerge on the shared digital pin board we had created for the team.

The final assessment of the ideas was very positive and £1.8m funding was provided for 3 projects that offered an innovative approach. Being able to encourage a ‘business unusual’ way of thinking about the food system for researchers at an earlier stage of their careers was a real strength of this sandpit.

What did our facilitators do to make a difference?

The challenge for our team was how to take a radical innovative approach to an existing format, whilst maintaining the integrity of the Sandpit/Innovation Lab concept.

We listened carefully to the requirements of the team and kept a focus on what was possible to adapt and make more inclusive. Our creative thinking was stretched and the project was a rich learning experience which has further developed our thinking about how to create an intensive but relaxing innovation environment, with a focus on both the process and the people.

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