Embedded lead users - The benefits of employing users for corporate innovation

Abstract:
While most of the literature views users and producers as organizationally distinct, this paper studies users within producer firms. We define “embedded lead users” (ELUs) as employees who are lead users of their employing firm’s products or services. We argue that ELUs benefit from dual embeddedness in the user and producer domains; it shapes their cognitive structure and enables them to better absorb sticky need knowledge from the user domain. We hypothesize that ELUs are more active than regular employees in acquiring, disseminating, and utilizing market need information for corporate innovation. Using survey data from the mountaineering equipment industry (n = 149), we test and support our hypotheses. Additional robustness checks reveal that the observed effects are indeed due to lead userness rather than to affective product involvement or job satisfaction. We discuss theoretical and managerial implications, as well as directions for future research on this empirically important but hitherto under-researched phenomenon.

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