Innovators Get Creative Juices Flowing
Panel, staff recommend marketplace winners

Spirits and enthusiasm ran high as 120 groups from across the Bank put new product ideas on display and vied for a share of $3 million in start-up funds at the first Innovation Marketplace, held on Thursday in the MC Atrium.

More than 1,500 staff showed up, or linked up via videoconference, to hear about the new ideas for making the Bank more effective. Along with a panel of 23 judges, comprised of senior managers, EDs, NGOs, and private sector executives, staff cast votes for their favorite project proposals.

“A lot of the ideas have direct relevance to our clients,” said panelist Kathy Sierra, head of OCS, in between visits to the labyrinth of displays. “They really speak to some of the problems that I’ve heard about in my travels…things that we just don’t do.”

The displays, physical depictions of the projects proposed by the innovators, ranged from glossy and sleek to hand-drawn. But they all shared two common elements: A creative interest in improving the Bank’s work and a healthy competitive spirit.

“We have a lot of instruments that have served us well for a number of years, but the world has changed, and we need to think about new ways of doing business to serve our clients better,” explained one of the marketplace organizers, Mari Kuraishi, with SRMSG.

Alexander Preker, the front-man for the display on “Harnessing the Private Sector to Achieve Health Goals,” appreciated the competitive nature of the event: “It’s fantastic that the Bank is finally using a competitive mechanism within its own structure for getting new, innovative ideas out into the marketplace.”

John Roome, a manager with AFTKT, was also on hand to share his team’s proposal for briefing and debriefing missions on their way to and from the field. At present, “We don’t capture the valuable information people acquire in the field, like contacts, how to deal with difficult ministers, clients, process issues,” he said. Roome’s group is asking for $200,000 to pilot a more systematic briefing/debriefing process.

David Bontempo and Leigh Hammill, both with ESCRE, talked about their group’s idea to start a network for 11-17 staff. “We’ve been
changing from secretarial work to doing all kinds of work: budget, procurement, task management, and many other things,” Hammill commented. “[A network] hasn’t really been needed over the past, but this is a perfect time right now,” Hammill said.

Meanwhile, Nicki Marrian, an external affairs analyst with EAP, discussed her team’s pictogram project. She noted: “I think everybody’s going to win by making the connections with other people who are working on similar projects. We’re all starting to work together instead of working in isolation.”

And if a prize had been given out for the most creative title, surely it would have gone to Carol Sue Castronuovo, a staff assistant in IENES, whose display was “The Millions-of-Dollars Secret That Isn’t Secret.” Her proposal addressed what she referred to as the time staff wasted in fixing and reformatting documents after higher-level managers have had “a hand” in them.

The marketplace even managed to squeeze a keynote speech and awards ceremony into the goings-on. “As I walked around and visited the booths, I've seen already a tremendous amount of creativity…I'm thrilled beyond belief,” President Wolfensohn, the keynote speaker, remarked.

Members of the 32 teams that comprised the Adaptable Lending Team, recipient of the 1997 New Products Award, joined the president on the Atrium steps to receive their awards. Late last night, panelists gave their top five recommendations to a Decision Group—made up of managing directors and high-level managers—on which ideas to put forward for final consideration. The Decision Group will also consider the top five staff choices, which may overlap with the panel's picks. A final decision is expected by mid-June on which projects will get the nod, with work program agreements to be in place by July 1.

In case you missed it, some of the exhibits will be on display again today. For more on the Innovation Marketplace, visit http://www-int.worldbank.org/newproducts, or see May 28's article in TODAY