

Innovation Grant Program – Framework & Implementation Plan

A grant-funded proof-of-concept pipeline that turns 'where ideas go to die' into data-driven innovation decisions. Problem, ROI, and success criteria up front; evidence in front of the council at the end.

How to use this template

This framework turns a stalled innovation committee into a grant-funded proof-of-concept pipeline. It was built for a real mid-market organization (identifying details removed) whose innovation council had become “where ideas go to die” – proposals arrived as exciting technology with no business problem, ROI, or success criteria attached. In its first year under this framework, three grants were approved and funded. Replace the bracketed placeholders – [Organization], [annual R&D budget], committee role names – with your own, and adjust the dollar figures to your scale.

Executive summary

We propose a grant-based proof-of-concept (POC) program that empowers any employee to secure modest funding (typically \$5,000–\$10,000) to test ideas grounded in real business needs. The process requires employees to articulate the problem statement, expected value (ROI), and definitions of success up front, then gather data through a POC. Completed POCs – successful or not – are presented to the Innovation Council with evidence, enabling objective, data-driven decisions rather than gut feel.

The expected outcomes: a more engaged workforce contributing ideas, a transparent innovation pipeline, and better ROI on new technology investments.

The five-stage process

Stage 1 – Idea formulation & grant request

Who: any employee with an idea – a field employee spotting an inefficiency, a manager finding a tool that could improve a process.

What: the employee completes an Innovation Grant Request Form. The form is the point: it forces the idea to be framed as a business challenge with expected outcomes, not a technology capability in search of a problem.

Grant Request Form – field template

Field	Guidance
Project name	A short, descriptive title.
Requester (name & dept)	Who is proposing, with department or role for context.
Problem statement	What business challenge or gap are you addressing? Who is affected, and what is the impact? Focus on the <i>why</i> .
Proposed solution (POC scope)	What will you try, and how does it address the problem? Include the POC's boundaries (e.g., "test with one project team for one month").
Success criteria	2-5 specific, measurable outcomes, each with a target (e.g., "reduce processing time from 2 days to 1").
Alternatives considered	What else did you look at, and why isn't it being pursued? Shows due diligence.
Estimated deployment cost	Ballpark cost of full adoption if the POC works (licenses, hardware, training).
ROI / benefits estimate	Potential value if implemented: savings, revenue, risk reduction, hours eliminated – with a timeframe.
Requested POC budget	Amount (capped ~\$10K) with a breakdown. Small grants keep experiments lean.
POC timeline	Start and end dates, plus the target council meeting for presenting results. Most POCs should finish in 4-8 weeks.
Team & stakeholders	Project lead, core team, and the sponsoring manager or department leader.
Support / resources needed	IT support, data access, vendor training – identified early so approval can arrange it.

The form guides employees through the five W's of a proof of concept: **why** it's needed, **what** it will and won't do, **who** is involved, with **what** resources, and **when** it will be done. Provide a short guide or workshop on writing strong proposals – problem statements and success metrics over technical jargon.

Stage 2 – Proposal review & grant approval

A small, senior **Grant Approval Committee** reviews requests ad-hoc as they arrive – not waiting for the monthly council meeting. Target: a decision within two weeks of submission. Suggested makeup:

- **CIO** – program sponsor and budget owner.
- **CFO** – financial soundness, ROI logic, budget compliance.
- **IT directors** – technical feasibility and overlap with other initiatives.
- **Requester's department leader** – validates the problem is real and important, and secures department-level support.

Evaluation criteria: clarity and impact of the problem; quality of the success metrics; ROI and business case; feasibility within the proposed budget and timeline; and no duplication with work already in progress.

Outcomes: *Approved* (budget allocated from the R&D fund, possibly with conditions), *Needs clarification* (a fixable omission shouldn't kill a good idea), or *Rejected* – always with the reason communicated. A rejection with honest feedback teaches; a silent one rebuilds the "black box" the program exists to tear down.

Stage 3 – POC execution

The requester becomes the POC project lead and runs the experiment within the approved scope, budget, and timeline.

- **Scope discipline.** Stick to the boundaries defined so the POC finishes on time and on budget.
- **Measure the defined success criteria** – before-and-after data, tool reports, or a small participant survey for qualitative goals.
- **Executive attention, not micromanagement.** The sponsoring leader checks in periodically and removes roadblocks; a mid-point check keeps things on track.
- **Timeline discipline.** If the clock runs out, either request a short justified extension or conclude with the results in hand. Fail fast or succeed fast – an informal ceiling of three months from approval keeps POCs from becoming zombie projects.
- **Budget discipline.** Underruns return to the fund; foreseeable overruns get flagged to the committee before they happen.

A failed POC that yields clear insight is a successful POC. The purpose is to learn, not to guarantee implementation.

Stage 4 – Findings report & presentation

The POC lead compiles a **Findings Report** mirroring the proposal, now with actual outcomes:

Section	Contents
Project overview	Restate the problem and what the POC attempted, with duration and participants.
Execution summary	What was actually done, and any deviations from plan.
Results vs. success criteria	For each metric from the proposal: met, partially met, or not met – with the data.
Outcome evaluation	Did the solution actually solve the problem? Validated, partially validated, or invalidated.
ROI revisited	Extrapolate the observed results to a full deployment and compare against the original estimate – honestly, in both directions.
Lessons learned	Technical, process, and organizational insights – including why things didn't work and any surprise discoveries.
Recommendation	<i>Proceed to implementation, do not implement, or further work – with reasoning and alternatives.</i>

The lead then presents to the full Innovation Council: 5-10 minutes, data-focused, candid. **Both successful and unsuccessful POCs get presented.** Leadership should thank teams for well-run POCs even when the answer is no-go – knowing an approach doesn't work saves the company the money it would have wasted finding out at scale.

Stage 5 – Council decision & follow-up

With POC evidence in hand, the Innovation Council decides:

- **Green-light implementation** – commit the real budget, assign an owner, and transition into the formal project portfolio.
- **No go** – archive as a lesson learned, documented in the innovation log. This is the process succeeding, not failing: a poor investment avoided at 5% of its cost.
- **Defer / phase 2** – extend the pilot, gather more data, or compare an alternative. Whatever the call, the decision and next steps are explicit. No limbo.

Keep every POC report in a searchable knowledge base so future proposers can build on – or route around – what's already been tried.

Roles and governance

Role	Responsibility
Employees / idea submitters	Identify problems, propose ideas, execute approved POCs, report findings.
Grant Approval Committee	Triage and fund proposals on a rolling basis; steward the R&D micro-grant budget; report activity to the council.
Innovation Council	Receive POC presentations; make implementation decisions; own strategic alignment.
Program coordinator	Shepherd intake, scheduling, deadlines, and metrics – part of an existing role, not a new hire.
Finance	Track grant allocations and, post-implementation, realized ROI.
IT & departments	Provide setup, security vetting, SMEs, and pilot environments as POCs need them.

Review the program itself every 6-12 months: submission volume, proposal quality, decision speed, and POC-to-implementation conversion.

KPIs

- **Grant requests submitted** per quarter – engagement.
- **Approval rate** – a healthy filter lands roughly 50-70%.
- **Active and completed POCs** – including completed on time vs. extended.
- **Validation rate** (POCs meeting their success criteria) and **adoption rate** (POCs approved for implementation). A 20-30% adoption rate is genuinely good – the wins pay for the smart kills.
- **Time to decision** – submission to grant approval, and approval to council presentation.
- **Budget utilization** – high utilization without overspend signals a healthy pipeline.
- **Cumulative ROI of implemented projects** – projected at first, actuals as implementations mature. The headline the executive team cares about: “we invested [\$X] across [N] POCs; [M] are being implemented with [\$Y] in expected annual return.”

Implementation best practices

1. **Leadership sponsorship.** Launch loudly, with top-executive endorsement that every idea matters and every failure is a lesson.
2. **Keep the program visible.** Share both wins and smart failures by name – it recognizes participants and shows what kinds of ideas are welcome.
3. **Teach problem definition and ROI.** A short “how to pitch an idea” clinic raises proposal quality more than any form redesign.
4. **Mentor first-time innovators** so ideas from the field aren’t filtered out by paperwork skills.
5. **Guard against bias.** Structured forms, data-first presentations, and cross-functional review keep decisions on the merits – not the charisma of the presenter or the seniority of the sponsor.
6. **Leverage external research** – if someone else has already run your experiment, read their results first.
7. **Protect time for POC work** – roughly 5-10% of an active participant’s time, with their manager on board via the approval process.
8. **Recognize and reward** – annual awards for highest-impact POC, and a “most valuable learning” award for the boldest idea that didn’t pan out.
9. **Iterate on the process itself** using the KPIs; treat the program as a product.
10. **Integrate with strategic planning** – earmark part of the budget for strategic themes, and let the program fund the experiments your strategy needs.

Launch plan

1. **Finalize forms and templates** – digital form for grant requests, document template for findings reports, both easily accessible.
2. **Set up governance** – appoint the committee, brief them, and stand up simple proposal and budget tracking.
3. **Kick off with communication** – announce company-wide; roadshow at department meetings.
4. **Pilot with pre-selected ideas** – run one or two known candidates through the process first to produce early success stories and shake out friction.
5. **Operate** – accept submissions, hold rolling committee reviews, present the first POC results within a monthly cycle or two.
6. **Monitor and report** – publish the KPIs quarterly and adjust.

The framework’s premise, condensed: the goal isn’t more ideas – it’s a process guardrail that turns technology proposals into business decisions leadership can act on. Ideas stop dying in committee when they arrive with evidence.
