

50 ideas in a day

Coloplast's dream team of product developers is a mix of designers, engineers, and marketing people.

Everybody is equally dedicated to the task at hand – to help people with physical disabilities achieve a better daily life.

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In the closed-down production facilities in Humlebæk, the long white corridors create an echoing empty sound when you walk them with clacking high heels. The whole production has basically been closed down and moved to China and Hungary where labour is cheaper. But if you listen carefully, you can hear the sound of new music.

Up the stairs, through corridors, and you suddenly walk into the holy of holies, where the products of the future are revealed for the first time to an engineer, tired on a Monday morning, or that woman from marketing fresh from a good night's sleep.

Some ideas end up in the bin as a broken paper aeroplane. Others take off and just keep growing.

The machines have been replaced with tall oval tables, colourful chairs and decorative bits and pieces, and in the centre of the room there is a cardboard figure of John Wayne. At the other end of the room you will find the compulsory table football game.

Three groups stand bent over tables in confidential conversations. They have sketches and unfinished product models between them. Each group is working on a new product or solution that will one day be a boon to a fellow human being.

Everything that happens in this room is confidential and Jyllands-Posten's photographer is not allowed to approach the finished drawings or loose sketches. We are told by one of the group that one of the projects is so far along that the patent application has already started. This is why there is no access for unauthorised parties.

Engineers work side by side with designers and illustrators who have been called in to get the ideas on paper as quick as they fly around the room. Some are discussing how ostomy users can get better and safer products; others are working on different product solutions, which we're not allowed to write about at this stage.

Highly motivated

"The best thing is when I get home and I feel drained and tired, and I have the feeling that *anything* is possible," says Jakob Øelund, one of the younger engineers. "When I've given input to 50 ideas, which I take to bed with me in the evening."

"But you also have to go through a frustration phase, that's just the way it is," adds his colleague, engineer Jan Thorstensen, from the other end of the table. "On the second day I'm always extremely tired. It takes several days for the idea to actually take form."

Both have taken part in projects which they have found difficult to let go of, and several of the men around the table admit that they sleep with a pen and paper under their pillow because you never know when a good idea might strike.

They have had 48-hour marathon meetings, slept in campervans together, and drunk so much coffee that the caffeine – or maybe the feeling of euphoria? – has made their hands tremble.

They have been so far gone that they sound almost high on the work and ideas. One of them explains: "You've driven yourself all the way to idea places that were completely wild and strange!"

Jakob Øelund looks for inspiration in everything from egg boxes to sweet packets and things he finds outdoors. *How does a mussel shell work – or an octopus's arm? How can a sweet manufacturer get such a low cost price that it is worth selling whole bags of sweets for a couple Danish kroner each? What can Coloplast learn from this?*

In best case scenarios, two days with the right people can do the same as three or four months' work, the colleagues say.

Another lesson is that if you want to sell your idea to management, it has to look good on paper between hundreds of other good ideas. This is why the illustrator plays an important role, they tell us and all give a respectful nod towards the man with pen and pad at the end of the table.

What is presented in the best way and is easiest to understand is usually what goes the greatest distance.