

Help Your Employees Find Flow

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Holacracy. Results-Only Work Environments. These new, more flexible ways of working may be a step too far for many organizations. Still, greater employee freedom can create a better sense of “flow,” which enhances engagement, retention, and performance. This can be achieved by loosening your grip on work practices — but you don’t have to let go completely: remove obstacles, set boundaries and meaningful goals, then let work take its course.



Stefan Groschupf, founder and CEO of Datameer, a big data analytics company, talked with me about how he tries to reduce negative interruptions and increase “flow.” His industry is one of the most pressured to recruit and retain top talent. He’s finding that the organization is more productive (e.g., has more leads generated in marketing or has engineers moving through projects more quickly) with active management of interruptions and engagement to enhance flow.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of the landmark Finding Flow, describes the feeling of flow this way:

Imagine that you are skiing down a slope and your full attention is focused on the movements of your body, the position of the skis, the air whistling past your face, and the snow-shrouded trees running by. There is no room in your awareness for conflicts or contradictions; you know that a distracting thought or emotion might get you buried face down in the snow. The run is so perfect that you want it to last forever.

Flow has been tied to performance by improving concentration and motivation. But when you’re constantly interrupted, it’s hard to find a state of flow. One workplace study found an average of almost 87 interruptions per day (an average of 22 external interruptions and 65 triggered by the person himself). Then, on average, it takes over 23 minutes to get back on task after an interruption, but 18% percent of the time the interrupted task isn’t revisited that day. For some, interruptions “form the genesis of the work,” so it’s hard to say that all interruptions are bad — but work design and management needs to offer the opportunity and knowledge to manage interruptions.

Groschupf’s techniques for combating interruptions and fostering flow are straightforward: allowing people to switch off email, fewer meetings, and focusing on smaller chunks of work. These strategies, however, wouldn’t be as effective if just one person made these

changes to his or her individual work. The key is that the whole organization is on board. Groschupf says that they have clear organizational goals — and that all employees know engagement and flow are important to reach those goals.

And yet the CEO is skeptical of the hype around gamification — the latest engagement fad. “What’s behind gamification? It’s flow.” He believes that if management can create an environment where employees love the experience and feel fulfilled in their jobs, then engagement, retention, and performance will follow.

He’s learned that turnover is usually not about the money. “It’s about achievement.” Games and flow are characterized by relatively short challenge-and-reward cycles. This approach is similar to the recommendations in Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer’s recent book, *The Progress Principle*, where they demonstrate that even small wins fuel motivation. Groschupf works to build those powerful little wins into the business. He’s not controlling the work, but he is setting the rules for making the work more engaging.

As a data-driven business, Datameer is always tracking results, so people can see their progress and how it fits into the rest of the organization’s work. Groschupf notes that it’s helpful being a young company – Datameer has been able to build measurable processes as it goes. He acknowledges that it would be harder to add these tools on to legacy systems. But I’ll offer that practices enabled with collaborative goal-setting tools like Work.com are one way to add some of this capability to an existing system.

The approach at Datameer is not just tool-and-metric-based. There is also a human dimension to their practice. Groschupf says, “It’s a learning process. You can’t just go to someone and say that the way we run this company is data driven. There is a human element. As you get new folks that might not be knowledgeable, it’s important to socialize them and help them understand.”

Loosen your grip on tactics like meetings and email, and focus on reducing interruptions and increasing engagement. Create shorter and more visible challenge-and-reward cycles and let employees go with the flow.