Why one size fits all #slacktime is not working and what you can do about it

By Sebastian Radics

Slack Time, an often mentioned way to foster innovation and education by providing an amount of *free* time that one can use on its own and that is not fully connected with project work.

Based on a great discussion at the Agile Meetup I would like to share thoughts regarding Slack Time. Continue reading to explore ways to work with Slack Time (and ways not to work with it), the role of management and considerations for building a learning environment.

Some observations

A general use of a day of slacktime (e.g. the ShipIt day, 20% rules,…) seems to be to generous and can be misused as a workaround for management instead of really taking care to build an environment where people can flourish. Fire and forget is not working.

Some hidden questions:

- Are they really using it for meaningful topics?

- Are there free riders? (Read more: <u>Lazy team members; about social loafing and ways to prevent it in your teams</u>)

Everyone is learning differently. Some eat books, some prefer workshops, some small breakouts, some combine it… so adjusting to that needs is important.

In my opinion we should consider the individual needs and embed slacktime based on that needs. In addition there can be group sessions possible, but with a specific goal behind it.

This approach needs for sure more time from management, but is for me a highly valuable investment as it shows real interest, enables individual career building and helps on the spot.

In addition one needs to consider the maturity level of everyone.

Be aware and take care! There are people that stopped learning! And I experienced this behavior more often than I had expected.

Not really an option in todays fast changing environment and I think it needs awareness and proper leadership to work with these people and discover what is blocking them at the moment.

Often you can influence the environment and help to continue flourishing again.

Self organization needs boundaries and impulses. Teams need guidance in finding a proper way to innovate, learn and grow. I experienced not enough self organization when just providing one day slack time and just trust the team's way to coordinate it.

I think leadership has to be involved, ask challenging questions, request for results and challenge the system frequently.

Expectations for Slack Time

- Shall consider the individual needs, rather then assuming that everyone is equal.
- Not learning and innovating is not an option!
- Transparency on time spent and sharing of results is important to help everyone building trust and cross pollinate.
- Use various ways with clear goals in mind for every way.
- Reconsider the usage and inspect and adapt frequently.
- When working with #Hackathons or other ways of innovation time, take care that there are clear guidelines how to continue with started topics.
  Submarines (hidden projects) are not the way to go.
  E.g. consider pitching winners and bring it on the companies roadmap. Ensure clear cuts for at this point in time unsuccessful approaches.

What can management do about it

Management has a strong supporting role for building the environment where people can flourish. By providing space to learn and be innovative management sets the base. What should management do about it?

- **Ask for the next steps** someone would like to take. Based on that wishes, check whether the current environment fits or needs changes. Include enough space that a person can flourish, maybe with some slacktime available.
- **Decide!, including the tough decisions**. If you observe anti learning behavior, request for change. If people continue being passive, ask whether the current environment fits any longer. What change is necessary to become a continuous learner? Maybe that member needs a better fitting place to continue.
- **Push harder**. Ask frequently and show real interest. I guess it works if you lead by example. So check your own learning behavior.
- **No limits.** Sure there are financial restrictions in most environments. But make that highly visible and understandable, what the real circumstances are. To narrow budget limitations stifle learning and free thinking. I suggest a simple rule: Everyone should decide about learning steps with having the companies interests (projects, budget, needs) and own interests in balance. *Trust first!* If there are members that clearly seem to act too selfish, ask what's their decision base and for ways to balance it again.
- **Slacktime (Flourishing time, Learning time, Free thinking time) as a main attractor**. It's the century of learning. It is just too important for everyone that companies can any longer not use it as a major channel of attraction for employees. And the awareness of people gets higher, at least based on my interviewing experiences, that show that people ask more about learning possibilities.
- **Strong mentoring.** Help everyone discover next necessary topics. And be an available guide. Take your time to work with your people, frequently. Honor next steps and really see the individual contribution.
- **Check your hiring strategy**. Is it including a search for people that are interested in continuous learning or do you have to add more questions for your interviews that show it more clearly? E.g. consider:
  - Did a candidate read any books recently? And what was the outcome for his work? What is their strategy when selecting reading materials? Do they have a list of next books to eat?
  - What about trainings, conferences and certificates? Last visited? Is there a strategy behind it and can the candidate clearly differentiate between advantages of different ways?
  - What new technologies did someone observe and use? What are current trends – and whats the candidates opinion on that?
  - How will that candidate embed learning in his daily work when she joins your company?

A simple policy

I think there are 3 important points for orientation when thinking about using slacktime.

- Make the usage of slacktime/learning time/flourishing time always transparent. A group should be able to see what is going on to steer itself.
- There has to be a presentation of results. This way it is shared and fosters a learning mindset. In addition it request everyone to review and consider learnings from a meta level, what constitutes the learning even further.
- #NoLimits but orientation and a quest for balance of interests. TRUST!

Further reading

Foster innovation by creating a learning and social networking environment for your teams

Lazy team members; about social loafing and ways to prevent it in your teams