

Cases of “innovation time off” and employee-led innovation

Several companies like Google, 3M, Atlassian, and Facebook have experimented with either a given time off or hackathon formats to encourage and allow employees to pursue their own ideas for innovation during regular working hours. Some startups even went so far as to grant up to sixty percent of programmers’ worktime to self-selected project ideas, keeping only the rest to immediately billable projects for external clients. Google was one of the first companies to give one day a week “innovation time off” to work on projects of personal interest. Several products resulted from this 20 percent of employee time, including half of new launches in the second half of 2005 (Mayer, 2006). Uprating the projects initiators’ passion against doubts with respect to feasibility and strategic fit, ideas like the smart contact lenses have been pursued. The smart contact lenses continuously measure blood sugar to manage diabetes. This is an example of a product that was developed based on the personal dedication of an engineer who previously was working on the smart glasses project (Heuser, 2015; Google, 2014). In an interview, Larry Page expresses his doubt whether working for large corporations is of any personal meaning for people (Heuser, 2015). For Google employees, he wants to ensure that they experience their work at Google as being more meaningful and important than they would at other companies. He expects great business opportunities if meaningful results can be achieved.

Birkinshaw and Duke (2013) reviewed companies mainly from the UK that succeeded to integrate employee-led innovation through systematic activities and programmes. They clustered enablers of this approach into four categories, namely time out, expansive roles, competitions, and open forums. Additional formats for *time out* (respectively time off) have been demonstrated by three initiatives of UK software company Red Gate: “Coding by the sea” sent a programmer team off on a one-week trip to the coast with the mission to create a new product – a new plug-in tool named SQL Search was shipped three month later and was rapidly adopted by customers. “Down tools week” granted time off to try new things, learn new skills, work on problems, or create new products with deliberately chosen colleagues – again, innovative products resulted and the down tools week was adopted on an annual basis. “Sweat the small stuff day” was dedicated to fixing bugs and little defects in the physical office space such as cleaning up. Exemplary results included optimizations of online forms.

“*Expansive Roles* help employees to make connections, and to see the bigger picture, and these are vital ingredients in the innovation process” (Birkinshaw & Duke, 2013, 49). Employees are invited to expand their roles if their job descriptions are not overly formalized to begin with. E.g. the manufacturer of Gore-Tex fabrics is reported to hire broadly defined research and development engineers or business development leaders who initially need to find out how to align their own skills (and what they consider as being important) to the needs of the company. Other companies such as drink producer Innocent or outsourcing provider Instant Offices, but also large companies like Microsoft or Infosys experimented with informal roles and encourage advancing new business ideas without asking for formal permissions first.

Both enablers, time out and expansive roles, only work in a culture of trust that needs to be established and kept up. *Open forums* including open question-and-answer sessions, or random lunch brainstorming sessions with senior executives not only bring up new ideas, but also promote personal dedication and trust required for cultures of bottom-up values-based innovation. *Open competitions* and measures to surface employee concerns and values like the IBM ValuesJam may serve the same purpose. Red Gate created the “9 Postcards” formats asking employees to contribute e-postcards with ideas how or where to improve individual, department and company performance. Efficient processes and structures need to be complemented by encouraging bottom-up initiatives to develop new ideas.

