Flow: channeling happiness into productivity

Flow is a state of mind that increases productivity and optimizes economic outcomes from employee retention to improved customer experience.



December 3, 2013

When Stefan Falk was vice president of strategic business innovation at Ericsson, he applied

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the principles of flow to enhance employee commitment. The experience was so satisfactory that, when he joined Green Cargo, one of the largest transport and logistics companies in Scandinavia, he developed a corporate culture based on flow.

A year after implementing this theory, Green Cargo's profits increased substantially. Today, the book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is required reading for every manager at the company.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, also known as the father of flow, flow is a deep sense of pleasure and accomplishment that we can experience while performing any activity, work included.

IESE's Alberto Ribera and Lucía Ceja explain how to achieve flow in the technical note, "The Science Behind Flow at Work."

The benefits of flow for businesses are evident: having satisfied employees improves the work environment, increases productivity and consequently optimizes economic outcomes.

Dimensions of flow

The concept of flow emerged from the field of positive psychology.

To achieve flow, it is necessary to have a clear set of goals and to receive relevant feedback on the task that is being performed: knowing what needs to be done and its importance to the company.

Moreover, people must feel that there is a balance between the professional challenge they are facing and their abilities to overcome it.

The flow experience requires intense concentration on the activity that is being carried out, which enables actions to be performed spontaneously. We respond to increasingly difficult demands in an effective manner, without even perceiving that we are exerting a great deal of effort.

We have a sense of personal control that frees us from a fear of failure, as we perceive that we are performing the activity optimally.

We also lose track of our "social self" consisting of our job title or academic degrees, gaining mental and intuitive clarity.

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A happy employee is an efficient employee

When people experience flow, they sense that they can control their work, which improves their effectiveness and can increase a company's productivity.

In addition, at the time of maximum satisfaction, we feel happy and full of energy, and this positive mood extends beyond our workday.

Furthermore, a work environment based on the principles of flow encourages spontaneity and individual creativity: employees dare to make constructive suggestions and seek new ways of doing things to improve their effectiveness.

Conscious of these advantages, an increasing number of organizations are integrating the principles of flow into their corporate cultures, because innovation and creativity are essential for achieving success in today's world.

The ripple effect

A basic requirement for creating a flow-friendly work environment is that employees strike a balance between their skills and the work challenges they face. They need to be given flexibility so they can be proactive and organize their tasks autonomously.

It is also important that they receive opportunities for improvement, says Utho Creusen, former human resources director at the Media-Saturn Group, which operates Media Markt and other retail brands.

In very large organizations, it is best to start with senior management, as Stefan Falk did when he joined Green Cargo.

The company's directors were encouraged to negotiate quarterly agreements with their collaborators because this enabled them to set clear goals.

Every month they held a meeting to assess the progress being made, during which employees were given direct and clear feedback, one of the basic premises for experiencing flow.

When managers are convinced of the importance of flow, they encourage employees to take the initiative and turn their work into an ongoing challenge that enables them to build on their strengths. This is sure to have a ripple effect on the entire organization, say the authors.

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Three keys to experiencing flow

To integrate flow into our daily routines, we must be aware of our strengths and find ways to make the most of them by being proactive and seeking new challenges every day.

1. *Identify your strengths*. This can be achieved through self-examination, by reflecting on the strengths that make us successful, and through external analysis, whereby those close to us are encouraged to identify situations in which we use our potential to the fullest. In both cases, it is useful to compose our self-portrait in positive terms, using the information obtained.
2. *Be proactive*. Those who experience flow at work perceive their job as a calling and feel that it adds value to the world. These people are passionate about what they do and continually identify new challenges that allow them to use their abilities to the fullest. They do not merely do what is expected of them, but try to go further: they are curious and seek new responsibilities and ways to improve their work.
3. *Focus your attention*. We mold our lives according to that on which we focus our attention. We typically devote more attention to what we like, but this relationship also works in reverse: we make ourselves like that on which we focus more attention.

As such, a good strategy to increase our flow experiences is to devote energy to what we believe may enhance our development, even though it may not particularly interest us at first.

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