

Thoughts on Google's 20% time

Posted on [March 12, 2008](#) in [Creative Thinking](#), [Innovation](#), [Software/Web development](#)

Everybody loves to think one little trick can make their organization transform into a super creative powerhouse. With the rise of Google, no single tactic comes up more in innovation circles than their concept of **20% time**. Simply put, employees get 1/5th of their time to work on projects of their own choosing.

For [the myths of innovation book](#) i spent time studying lots of concepts, models and approaches similar to 20% time, and even talked to a few Google employees about how they see the idea. What follows below hits on most of the erroneous assumptions I've heard people make about the concept.

Here's a short report:

- **Google's 20% time is more of an attitude and culture than a rule.** First, hourly time isn't tracked there, so there's no way to enforce or even know what percentage of time people are spending on side projects. But more importantly, the entire idea seems to function more as an attitude – that new projects should be spawned by whoever has the best ideas, not who is in what place in the hierarchy, and the culture is based on this fundamental belief. There seems to be way more support for the pursuit of ideas generally than in most cultures, and simply creating a 20% rule doesn't give you that culture. G-mail, AdSense & Google News are three examples of major offerings initiated by a self-motivated engineer. See Google employee [Joe Beda's blog post for one of better first persons accounts you'll find online](#).
- It's worth noting that **people at Google work very hard on their 80% time**. It's not as if every Friday is 20% day and work shuts down on all existing projects so people can do their 20% things. Google culture, much like Microsoft in the early 90s, has a very strong, competitive work ethic, and peer pressure and pride drive many people to work hard. Like many tech companies, the vibe is that, yes, if you have an idea you should follow it, but not to the detriment of other responsibilities. Time for 20%

projects is protected, but more by individuals than by managers. Managers spend little time tracking engineers ([span of control](#) is wide, with managers typically having 10 or more reports, influencing people and code more than “managing their direct reports”). I’ve heard different things from employees in different groups at Google about how this has changed as the company has grown (10k employees and counting) and perhaps the variances in their culture will continue to grow. (Read [Steve Yegge’s excellent post on software development process at Google](#)).

- **The 20% time concept isn’t new.** 3M developed a [15% time rule in the 1950s](#) with the same exact intentions and basic philosophy. Masking tape and Post-it notes are two notable products that were conceived and developed by individual engineers working without formal budgets, plans or management support. I’m sure other companies and organizations in the past have had similar attitudes about creativity ([Edison’s Menlo park](#) lab likely qualifies). For [more on 3m’s approach read this short Wired article](#). Also, the Google founders mention at their talk at [TED](#) that [Montessori school philosophy influenced their ideas on 20% time](#) (Jump to 8:50).
- Google’s culture **has a resistance, or even distrust, of hierarchy** – they often use voting, peer review, and debate to make decisions or decide which new projects and features to add. With that structure the 20% time idea makes sense as they want self-motivated creatives putting ideas in the hopper for others to review, evaluate, or contribute to, rather than waiting for executives to spend weeks making big vision documents and marketing plans, dividing things up into smaller and smaller pieces, before allowing creatives to make (creatively constrained) contributions. 20% time complements, or perhaps even depends on, what is a unique culture for a large, 10,000 person company. It’s the lack of dependence on hierarchy that empowers individuals, and this is the thing people at more conventional companies have the hardest time comprehending. 3M also had a strong maverick, anti-structure vibe that made their 15% successful. Giving people time is one thing, but it’s the **culture of the org they get that time inside** that determines how useful that time will be to the company.

20% time experiment: Atlassian, a software development shop, just announced a serious [20% time experiment](#), adopting the idea in their culture and [blogging about it as they go](#).

Disclosure: Don’t take my word for it alone – While this is based on some research, and although I have visited Google several times, I have never been a Google employee and if you

start with the links above you'll hear from more authoritative sources on Google management and culture than myself. If you know of others I should read, please leave 'em in the comments.

84 Comments below — [Add yours](#)

Share With Others

Sign Up for Berkun's Best Posts

If you sign up to receive his best posts via email, you'll get a **FREE** copy of a preview edition of **Mindfire** plus free chapters from all of his bestselling books. **Over 19,000 people have signed up.**

Your Email

Subscribe

[Privacy policy](#) enforced by my Rotweiller.

Related Posts You'll Like

[The Three Gaps of Creativity: Effort, Skill and Quality](#)

[The proof that we're all creative: losing your keys](#)

[Does "think outside the box" help? Popular creativity cliches explained](#)

[What We Can Learn From The Eiffel Tower](#)

[How Ignorance Drives Creativity](#)

84 Responses to "Thoughts on Google's 20% time"



Peter McNicholl

May 12, 2011 at 3:39 am. [Permalink](#).

What is the ownership rights of the employee that comes up with a successful idea, which gets developed and launched within the 80/20 system at Google.

Is the ownership 50/50 between them and Google? 80/20? 100% Google?