Your First Month

So you've decided where you put your desk. You know where the coffee machine is. You're even pretty sure you know what that one guy's name is. You're not freaking out anymore. In fact, you're ready to show up to work this morning, sharpen those pencils, turn on your computer, and then what?

This next section walks you through figuring out what to work on. You'll learn about how projects work, how cabals work, and how products get out the door at Valve.

*in the kitchen

What to Work On

Why do I need to pick my own projects?

We've heard that other companies have people allocate a percentage of their time to self-directed projects. At Valve, that percentage is 100.

Since Valve is flat, people don't join projects because they're told to. Instead, you'll decide what to work on after asking yourself the right questions (more on that later). Employees vote on projects with their feet (or desk wheels). Strong projects are ones in which people can see demonstrated value; they staff up easily. This means there are any number of internal recruiting efforts constantly under way.

If you're working here, that means you're good at your job. People are going to want you to work with them on their projects, and they'll try hard to get you to do so. But the decision is going to be up to you. (In fact, at times you're going to wish for the luxury of having just one person telling you what they think you should do, rather than hundreds.)

But how do I decide which things to work on?

Deciding what to work on can be the hardest part of your job at Valve. This is because, as you've found out by now, you were not hired to fill a specific job description. You were hired to constantly be looking around for the most valuable work you could be doing. At the end of a project, you may end up well outside what you thought was your core area of expertise.

There's no rule book for choosing a project or task at Valve. But it's useful to answer questions like these:

- Of all the projects currently under way, what's the most valuable thing I can be working on?
- Which project will have the highest direct impact on our customers? How much will the work I ship benefit them?
- Is Valve not doing something that it should be doing?
- What's interesting? What's rewarding? What leverages my individual strengths the most?

How do I find out what projects are under way?

There are lists of stuff, like current projects, but by far the best way to find out is to ask people. Anyone, really. When you do, you'll find out what's going on around the company and your peers will also find out about you. Lots of people at Valve want and need to know what you care about, what you're good at, what you're worried about, what you've got experience with, and so on. And the way to get the word out is to start telling people all of those things. So, while you're getting the lay of the land by learning about projects, you're also broadcasting your own status to a relevant group of people.

Got an idea for how Valve could change how we internally broadcast project/company status? Great. Do it. In the meantime, the chair next to anyone's desk is always open, so plant yourself in it often.

Short-term vs. long-term goals

Because we all are responsible for prioritizing our own work, and because we are conscientious and anxious to be valuable, as individuals we tend to gravitate toward projects that have a high, measurable, and predictable return for the company. So when there's a clear opportunity on the table to succeed at a near-term business goal with a clear return, we all want to take it. And, when we're faced with a problem or a threat, and it's one with a clear cost, it's hard not to address it immediately.

This sounds like a good thing, and it often is, but it has some downsides that are worth keeping in mind. Specifically, if we're not careful, these traits can cause us to race back and forth between short-term opportunities and threats, being responsive rather than proactive.

So our lack of a traditional structure comes with an important responsibility. It's up to all of us to spend effort focusing on what we think the long-term goals of the company should be.

Someone told me to (or not to) work on X. And they've been here a long time!

Well, the correct response to this is to keep thinking about whether or not your colleagues are right. Broaden the conversation. Hold on to your goals if you're convinced they're correct. Check your assumptions. Pull more people in. Listen. Don't believe that anyone holds authority over the decision you're trying to make. They don't; but they probably have valuable experience to draw from, or information/data that you don't have, or insight that's new. When considering the outcome, don't believe that anyone but you is the "stakeholder". You're it. And Valve's customers are who you're serving. Do what's right for them.

Jump on a team that's shipping!

There are lots of stories about how Gabe has made important decisions by himself, e.g., hiring the whole *Portal 1* team on the spot after only half of a meeting. Although there are examples, like that one, where this kind of decision making has been successful, it's not the norm for Valve. If it were, we'd be only as smart as Gabe or management types, and they'd make our important decisions for us. Gabe is the first to say that he can't be right nearly often enough for us to operate that way. His decisions and requests are subject to just as much scrutiny and skepticism as anyone else's. (So if he tells you to put a favorite custom knife design into *Counter-Strike*, you can just say no.)

Whatever group you're in, whether you're building Steam servers, translating support articles, or making the ten-thousandth hat for *Team Fortress 2,* this applies to you. It's crucial that you believe it, so we'll repeat it a few more times in this book.

What about all the things that I'm not getting done?

It's natural in this kind of environment to constantly feel like you're failing because for every one task you decide to work on, there will be dozens that aren't getting your attention. Trust us, this is normal. Nobody expects you to devote time to every opportunity that comes your way. Instead, we want you to learn how to choose the most important work to do.

How does Valve decide what to work on?

The same way we make other decisions: by waiting for someone to decide that it's the right thing to do, and then letting them recruit other people to work on it with them. We believe in each other to make these decisions, and this faith has proven to be well-founded over and over again.

But rather than simply trusting each other to just be smart, we also constantly test our own decisions. Whenever we move into unknown territory, our findings defy our own predictions far more often than we would like to admit. We've found it vitally important to, whenever possible, not operate by using assumptions, unproven theories, or folk wisdom.

This kind of testing takes place across our business, from game development to hiring, to selling games on Steam. Luckily, Steam is a fantastic platform for business learning. It exists to be an entertainment/service platform for our customers, and as such it also is a conduit for constant communication between us and them.

Accepted truisms about sales, marketing, regionality, seasonality, the Internet, purchasing behavior, game design, economics, and recruiting, etc., have proven wrong surprisingly often. So we have learned that when we take nearly any action, it's best to do so in a way that we can measure, predict outcomes, and analyze results.

Recruiting can be a difficult process to instrument and measure. Although we have always tried to be highly rational about how we hire people, we've found much room for improvement in our approach over the years. We have made significant strides toward bringing more predictability, measurement, and analysis to recruiting. A process that many assume must be treated only as a "soft" art because it has to do with humans, personalities, language, and nuance, actually has ample room for a healthy dose of science. We're not turning the whole thing over to robots just yet though *(see "Hiring," on page 43).*

Can I be included the next time Valve is deciding X?

Yes. There's no secret decision-making cabal. No matter what project, you're already invited. All you have to do is either (1) Start working on it, or (2) Start talking to all the people who you think might be working on it already and find out how to best be valuable. You will be welcomed— there is no approval process or red tape involved. Quite the opposite—it's your job to insert yourself wherever you think you should be.

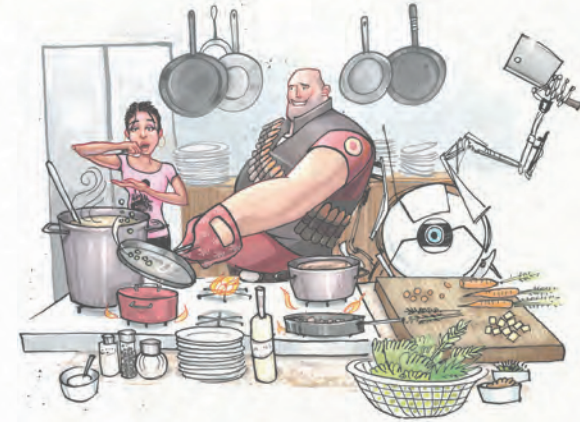# Teams, Hours, and the Office

Cabals

Fig. 2-1

Cabals are really just multidisciplinary project teams. We've self-organized into these largely temporary groups since the early days of Valve. They exist to get a product or large feature shipped. Like any other group or effort at the company, they form organically. People decide to join the group based on their own belief that the group's work is important enough for them to work on.

For reference, read the article on cabals by Ken Birdwell. It describes where cabals came from and what they meant to us early on: **http://tinyurl.com/ygam86p**.

Team leads

Often, someone will emerge as the "lead" for a project. This person's role is not a traditional managerial one. Most often, they're primarily a clearinghouse of information. They're keeping the whole project in their head at once so that people can use them as a resource to check decisions against. The leads serve the team, while acting as centers for the teams.

Structure happens

Project teams often have an internal structure that forms temporarily to suit the group's needs. Although people at Valve don't have fixed job descriptions or limitations on the scope of their responsibility, they can and often do have clarity around the definition of their "job" on any given day. They, along with their peers, effectively create a job description that fits the group's goals. That description changes as requirements change, but the temporary structure provides a shared understanding of what to expect from each other. If someone moves to a different group or a team shifts its priorities, each person can take on a completely different role according to the new requirements.

Valve is not averse to all organizational structure—it crops up in many forms all the time, temporarily. But problems show up when hierarchy or codified divisions of

labor either haven't been created by the group's members or when those structures persist for long periods of time. We believe those structures inevitably begin to serve their own needs rather than those of Valve's customers. The hierarchy will begin to reinforce its own structure by hiring people who fit its shape, adding people to fill subordinate support roles. Its members are also incented to engage in rent-seeking behaviors that take advantage of the power structure rather than focusing on simply delivering value to customers.

Hours

While people occasionally choose to push themselves to work some extra hours at times when something big is going out the door, for the most part working overtime for extended periods indicates a fundamental failure in planning or communication. If this happens at Valve, it's a sign that something needs to be reevaluated and corrected. If you're looking around wondering why people aren't in "crunch mode," the answer's pretty simple. The thing we work hardest at is hiring good people, so we want them to stick around and have a good balance between work and family and the rest of the important stuff in life.

If you find yourself working long hours, or just generally feel like that balance is out of whack, be sure to raise the