

Why Your Company Should Have More “Slackers”

By John Boudreau

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Should CFO’s “invest” in more free time for employees? This sounds like a recipe to create a bunch of “slackers,” but in fact the idea of optimal “slack” in a system is as fundamental to talent optimization as it is in engineering. Planned and mindful “slacking off” may help optimize your talent performance.

Do you sleep with your cell phone? [A 2010 Pew Research Center study](#) found that 65% of American adults did, and even higher numbers for younger adults. The U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health cited a [report](#) suggesting that longer working hours and overtime are higher in tough economic times, that the U.S. is among the highest in hours devoted to work, and that long hours can carry significant costs and risks. In [“Investing in People.”](#) Wayne Cascio and I offer frameworks for calculating the tangible results of improved workplace health and safety.

Janice Marturano, founder and Executive Director of the [Institute for Mindful Leadership](#) suggests that we might approach our ever-filling schedules as a [“mindful calendar practice.”](#) in which leaders examine their physical reactions to their calendar entries (tight stomach?) and create more [space to lead](#). Should you invest in programs to teach your leaders and employees to meditate and do yoga? [Medical research on mindfulness-based-stress-reduction \(MBSR\)](#) shows that taking time to meditate and attend to physical and emotional responses has measurable effects on stress-related symptoms.

It may not surprise you that California-based Google has a mindfulness program called [“Search Inside Yourself.”](#) developed by Chade-Meng Tan (who also holds the job title of Jolly Good Fellow). Perhaps more surprising is that General Mills based in the solid Midwestern city of Minneapolis, has a long-standing “Mindful Leadership” program. The [Financial Times story](#) reported that Janice Marturano initiated that program, while she was General Mills’ lead liaison to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Security and Exchange Commission negotiating the US\$10.5 billion acquisition of Pillsbury.

If this seems ethereal, perhaps a way to “retool” this in terms that hard-nosed CFO’s, engineers and the like can understand is to remember that in engineering, the word “slack” is a good thing, and is essential to system optimization and scheduling. One [study in a journal on transportation research](#) found that optimal bus scheduling required having buses slow down. It also found that buses needed to “cooperate” by sharing information. The [research on teams](#), diversity and performance shows that creating diverse teams by itself does not necessarily increase performance, but providing space for teams to build collaborative skills and develop “shared mental models” increases the chance of diversity leading to high performance. Diversity is hard work, and slack and cooperation are as important in teams as they are in bus scheduling.

Your organizations readily invest in slack for transportation, manufacturing and service. It’s worth considering whether creating more “slack” among your talent may be an equally potent way to optimize your success. Are you missing an investment opportunity in the slackers?

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