

Employee Autonomy: A Little Freedom Goes a Long Way

Turn them loose. Get the management layers off their backs, the bureaucratic shackles off their feet, and the functional barriers out of their way.^a

Jack Welch Jr., the former CEO and chairman of General Electric, knew how to get the most out of his employees; he was an ardent believer in giving them clear goals and the freedom to excel according to their own rules.

He's not alone. There's a growing consensus that organizations benefit when they give employees more autonomy in their jobs. Consider these methods:

"So long as it fits in with managing the workload, flexibility is okay. It's not that old-school thought of, 'You have to be at your work (place) to be at work.'"

—Edweana Wenkart, Tsuki Communications, on telecommuting.^e

- **Side projects:** Google understands that employees are more productive and engaged when projects stir their passions, so Googlers can spend some of their time on projects of their own invention. The results include Gmail, Google News, and dozens of Labs features.^b
- **Hackfests:** Pizza + beer + programmers = inspired coding.

From startups to Facebook, companies find that sponsoring all-night programming sessions is a cheap way to develop new products (and camaraderie) in a flash.

- **Flex time and telecommuting:** Employees who can come in late, leave early, or work from home are more likely to stay with a company that helps them balance their work and home lives.
- **Predictability:** Ironically, freedom even comes from structure. When job roles are clearly defined, employees can succeed without concern for overstepping boundaries. For example, at American Express, it's company practice that junior managers bear individual leadership, middle managers execute policy, and vice presidents lead strategic initiatives.^c

"If leaders create the right environment and engage in the right behaviors, employees will give their best to the organization," says author David Witt. "This leads to a greater sense of excitement and passion at work that leads to better customer service."^d Clear goals need to be matched to a structure that facilitates goal attainment.

Quick Summary

- Companies are increasingly exploring alternatives to rigid rules and bureaucratic structures in order to keep valued employees and increase their productivity.
- These measures often align with harnessing employees' passions, giving them flexible work schedules, or more clearly defining their roles.

FYI: Google employees are expected to spend up to 20% of their time on self-led projects that combine their skills and passions.

