



Unlocking Employee Potential through Self-Directed Time

By Jan Hawn, Steven Gibson, and Nickie Lee

Self-directed time has yielded great advantages in the private sector. The duration of time allotted can vary, but the intention is to allow employees time to be creative and innovative.

Self-determination, or the ability to exercise autonomy, is central to health and contentment. In fact, individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness are at the heart of the American ideal. This need for autonomy also extends to the workplace. For example, a study of work settings found that businesses that offered their employees more autonomy grew at four times the rate (and had one-third the turnover) of firms that emphasized top-down control of employees.¹ To meet the challenges governments face in the years ahead, then, we need to attract the next generation of workers and realize the full potential of everyone who has chosen public service, unlocking their passion for their work. Greater autonomy for employees is one powerful way to help achieve that.

Few organizations would be willing to simply allow employees to do whatever they want, whenever they want, but even a modest amount of unstructured time can channel the considerable power of autonomy toward positive results. Self-directed time has yielded great advantages in the private sector. The duration of time allotted can vary, but the intention is to allow employees time to be creative and innovative, and the decision on how the time will be used is largely left up to the employee. Google encourages its employees to spend 20 percent of their time on identifying and working on projects they think will benefit the organization, and in

fact, one of Google's most recognizable products — Gmail — was created during self-directed time.² Similarly, Arthur Fry, a 3M employee, invented the Post-it note in the 15 percent of his time that was self-directed.

Can self-directed time work in government? Two cities — Rock Hill, South Carolina, and Bellevue, Washington — sought to answer that question. Rock Hill has a population of 69,967 and 912 full-time-equivalent (FTE) positions on its payroll, and Bellevue has 136,426 residents and 1,319 FTEs. In addition, a third city — Topeka, Kansas (with a population of 127,215 and 1,176.5 FTE) positions — attempted the experiment with one analyst.

SETTING THE STAGE

To start, the three cities borrowed an idea from Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant (the authors of *When Millennials Take Over*), a book about contemporary workplace culture, who wrote, “The real power is in giving employees permission to experiment.... Find a way to give your people some space. That is how you grow and improve: by shifting resources as things change. Yes, you might need to eliminate some activities currently done by staff to make room for the experimentation time, but find a percentage you can live with and give the employees your permission.”³

All three cities shared reservations about how self-directed time would be

perceived by the public, concerned that it might look like an imprudent use of resources. It was also a potentially significant commitment of time and resources. But the research about the value of autonomy was convincing, and failing to fully engage and realize the potential of the workforce would ultimately be far more expensive than experimenting with preventative measures. The cities decided to try allowing employees to direct 10 percent of their time to research or the development of service-delivery improvements. The time would be spent working on ideas outside of normal work functions to spur creativity and encourage ownership of ideas and projects. The cities agreed that 10 percent of the employees' time would be enough to find out if the practice had potential, but not so much that it would place an unacceptable burden on day-to-day operations.

APPLYING THE FIELD TESTS

City of Rock Hill. Rock Hill is in the Charlotte, North Carolina, metropolitan area. In addition to traditional public services, Rock Hill's employees also provide water, sewer, and electric services within and outside the city's limits.

Rock Hill focused its self-directed time on three departments: finance, human resources, and housing and neighborhood services. The city wanted to strike a balance between freedom of exploration for employees and directed efforts toward something relevant to the city's larger strategic direction. Each department assigned individuals to spend four hours a week thinking creatively about services that weren't necessarily connected to their own departments. Six staff members

from the three departments developed ideas. To help set expectations at the beginning of the trial, the assistant city manager noted that the employees involved with self-directed time and their managers were told that "failure is an option."

City of Bellevue. Bellevue is growing fast, having transformed into a major technology hub and retail center with a skyline of gleaming high-rises. Several of the largest public companies in the State of Washington are located here, and Bellevue is a regional employer with nearly 150,000 jobs, but only 136,000 residents.

Approximately 43 percent of the city's employees are from the Baby Boomer generation, and only 16 percent are Millennials. The average age of its full-time employees is 47.6, and more than 21 percent are eligible to retire in the next five years. As such, the city's ability to recruit and retain the

next generation of employees is critical, making self-directed time an idea worth exploring.

The trial started with the finance department, where all employees could participate. Unfortunately, the Great Recession had caused the city to reduce its force by approximately 10 percent in 2010, and the cuts in support services hadn't yet been reversed, so many divisions therefore found it difficult to find the time or to redeploy workload so they could participate. As a result, only 14 of approximately 50 employees chose to participate in the self-directed time experiment. Many, if not all, of the finance department's divisions were represented at varying levels within the organization.⁴

GENERATING IDEAS

City of Rock Hill. Rock Hill employees presented 12 ideas (see Exhibit 1), which were then presented to managers.

Exhibit 1: Sample Ideas from Rock Hill's Self-Directed Time Experiment

- A 5K race and a 3-on-3 basketball tournament to raise money for assistance with utility bills.
- An event to promote talents, lifestyles, experiences, crafts, etc. of different cultures within the community.
- Online payment option for hospitality tax and accommodations tax.
- An emerging leadership program for entry-level professionals within the organization to gain experience, networking opportunities, mentorships, etc.
- Police and/or fire department-sponsored run and/or bike race to promote and teach the laws and safety rules of running and biking in Rock Hill.
- A home-repair grant program that provides funding assistance for residents who lack the financial resources to address minor (\$500 or less) home improvement issues that are too small to feasibly be addressed by any of the city's existing programs.
- Enhancing the employee recognition system to address city employee survey results to have "more recognition from upper management."

The group was asked to come together as a team to take one of the initiatives, the fleet maintenance/roadside motorist initiative, a few steps closer to implementation. The premise of this idea is that hundreds of city employees are out on the streets every day, from the police, fire, public works, inspections, and other departments. Could they offer an additional service to the community while out in the field? Staff members would have to be trained to identify residents or visitors who needed roadside assistance, pull over to check on them, and connect the customer with Rock Hill's call center to coordinate a ride, a garage, a tow, or whatever service they needed. In some cases, employees might even offer the city's fleet maintenance division to assist at no charge for limited services (such as a jump start, a splash of gas, or a tire change).

More importantly, because innovation is an iterative process, the assembled team accelerated the fleet maintenance/roadside assistance idea as each member brought a different perspective to the process, including the risk involved, the implementation concerns, and the communications aspects. Throughout the process, the insights the team presented were aligned with the organization's core value of customer service.

City of Bellevue. Bellevue employees generated ideas such as establishing partnerships with other cities in a joint contract for on-call after-hours information technology help desk services and providing payroll processing and retirement processing to other smaller or mid-size agencies. Other ideas focused on process efficiencies within

An Example of Creative Thinking

The director of housing and neighborhood services saw the potential in assisting with frequent code violations in certain neighborhoods. Not all residents have access to the tools they need to maintain their properties, despite their desire to do so. The solution would be a community toolshed, which would provide residents with an opportunity to borrow certain tools, at low or no cost, for small home improvement projects. The budget initiative would purchase a limited number of pressure washers, power tools, and lawn equipment—items that might be cost-prohibitive for individuals to own, maintain, and store, but would have an impact on residents' ability to keep up the appearance of the neighborhood, providing greater community benefit to the citizens of Rock Hill. This idea has gained additional support and was included as a budget recommendation for the city's new fiscal year.

the city, including determining ways to share information across the divisions making up the finance department, identify delinquent vendors, replace paper checks with “no fee” debit cards, and improve the bank reconciliation process. Others ideas involved ways to better standardize work, such as creating onboarding tools that would help new hires get to know each other and employees of other finance divisions, implementing an “adopt a highway or intersection” program to raise revenue, and creating an audit manual.

LESSONS LEARNED

City of Rock Hill. Most employees were energized by the challenge to think beyond their normal scope and to provide input on creating and implementing a new initiative. While creativity is an individual characteristic, people work best to implement ideas as a team. As such, participating employees were even more energized when they came together to work. This may have come from a feeling that they had more of a safety net or were less vulnerable than when they worked individually. To help cultivate a culture that's conducive to freedom of thinking, some staff members worked outside their offices during their self-directed time.

By the same token, the city also experienced challenges. It was sometimes difficult for the managers to unteather and allow their employees to think freely. To help with this, city leadership made it clear that managers and others would be brought in to help as participants generated ideas. In the end, the city is compelled to challenge its entire employee population to set time aside to think creatively about ideas to better the organization.

According to Rock Hill's assistant city manager, there's a big difference between generating creative ideas and implementing creative ideas. Idea generation can come from anywhere in the organization. Implementation may require a different team that includes managers to bring additional resources to the project.

City of Bellevue. Bellevue staff attempted to balance its regular workload with self-directed time. In some cases, staff members found no more

than one hour per week for the trial. Some employees even expressed guilt over taking the time when there was so much work to do, even though they were told that the assignment was a part of their job. To help employees use their self-directed time productively, they were allowed to work outside of the office so they could avoid distractions.

Otherwise, feedback in Bellevue has been positive, and the finance department plans to continue exploring this concept. The department will encourage employees to focus on looking across departmental lines to discover new ways of delivering services.

THE CITY OF TOPEKA

Topeka's population has been relatively stable, with growth of less than 1 percent, but the government has experienced significant turnover and attrition in management and executive positions. City leadership has also established many cultural changes, including expectations for greater professionalism, radical transparency initiatives, and a renewed focus on customer service. Recruiting new employees, especially the "next generation," has therefore been a priority. Topeka faces recruitment challenges because it is near a major metropolitan area that provides competitive employment opportunities in other sectors — which makes it receptive to implementing strategies like self-directed time.

Topeka's Budget and Performance Division of the Finance Department is an entry point for motivated young employees. The management analyst position was a natural fit to test self-

directed time, as its role is to understand and improve city operations in all departments. Unfortunately, the trial occurred at a time of staff transition, so the city's experiment was limited to one analyst. This employee was excited about the opportunity, however, and was encouraged to dedicate one afternoon each week to self-directed time.

The management analyst came up with several significant ideas, mostly building on initiatives or changes that were already underway. These included continued research on a two-year budget concept; implementation of software for the city's capital improvement plan process; implementing and improving an annual fee and fine review process; and ways to improve interdepartmental communication. It is too early in the process to comment on whether these ideas will be implemented, but several are being considered.

Topeka had an advantage entering into the trial, as staff members already managed their own time, making the experiment more about granting "permission to be creative." While the management analyst was not able to dedicate a structured 10 percent of time during the week, he was able to do so intermittently throughout the week.

The trial has been positive for the city and the budget manager hopes to continue with the concept. Having more people available to participate would help with brainstorming ideas and accountability.

CONCLUSIONS

All three cities found that self-directed time requires the right mindset. Managers must trust that employees

will use the time in a creative and productive manner, but accountability can be helpful. When managers support self-directed time, employees feel that it is part of their job and feel safe in taking time to explore new ideas. Both employees and managers must understand that while not all ideas will be implemented, the time spent exploring and assessing ideas is itself a benefit.

Self-directed time is not necessarily something that every employee will take to, but a significant number will — and government leaders may find a great opportunity to unlock passion in our workforce. ■

Notes

1. Paul P. Baard, Edward L. Deci, and Richard M. Ryan, "Intrinsic Need Satisfaction: A Motivational Basis of Performance and Well-Being in Two Work Settings," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 34 (2004).
2. Jillian D'Onfro, "The Truth about Google's Famous '20% Time'," *Business Insider*, April 17, 2015.
3. Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant, *When Millennials Take Over* (IdeaPress Publishing, 2015).
4. Employees who participated in Bellevue included one assistant finance director, one business analyst in the budget office, an assistant manager and two financial analysts from the payroll division, one supervisor and two senior accounting associates from accounts payable, one business systems analyst from the business systems division, one senior financial analyst, and one senior accounting associate and three tax analysts from the tax division.

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