The Google Way: Give Engineers Room

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[GOOGLE](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/google_inc/index.html?inline=nyt-org) engineers are encouraged to take 20 percent of their time to work on something company-related that interests them personally. This means that if you have a great idea, you always have time to run with it.

It sounds obvious, but people work better when they’re involved in something they’re passionate about, and many cool technologies have their origins in 20 percent time, including Gmail, Google News and even the Google shuttle buses that bring people to work at the company’s headquarters in Mountain View, Calif.

If your 20 percent idea is a new product, it’s usually pretty easy to just find a few like-minded people and start coding away. But when the thing you really want to work on is to make a broad change across the whole organization, you need something new — you need a “grouplet.”

These grouplets have practically no budget, and they have no decision-making authority. What they have is a bunch of people who are committed to an idea and willing to work to convince the rest of the company to adopt it.

Google works from the bottom up. If you have a great technical idea, you don’t have your V.P. send out a memo telling everybody to use it. Instead, you take it to your fellow engineers and convince them that it’s good. Good ideas spread fast, and this approach keeps us from making technical mistakes. But it also means that the burden falls upon you to spread your idea.

OF course, the grouplets need guidance to make sure they are aligned with the company interest. Having a lot of people who are self-organizing can be powerfully positive or negative, and not every idea is a good one. To help deal with that, a number of grouplet organizers meet once a week to make sure they are not at cross-purposes.

But when you give engineers the chance to apply their passion to their company, they can do amazing things.

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