

WHAT IF...

You encouraged your Creatives to work on their own projects?

Google has a well-known policy of requiring its Creatives to spend 20% of their time at work on projects of their own. This doesn't mean doing outside work on company time, but instead means doing something good for Google, something outside the norm, something original.

Of course, Google is not the only major company to do this, nor the first. 3M started its "15% time" policy in the early 20th century as it produced consumer goods. Genetech, a biotech firm, encourages its researchers to pursue their own initiatives.

The obvious, and most direct, benefit to your company comes when your employees work on their own projects and someone comes up with a great new product. The classic story is the invention of Post-Its, and Google likes to tell how Gmail came about in the same way. You just might get something really great if you let your Creatives be creative beyond the boundaries of their normal work.

You can get better employees out of the deal, too. Personal projects allow them to flex their creative muscles and learn new things that could open new avenues for your firm. You want your Creatives to be creative, and allowing them to take their own initiative will lead them to be better performers for you. Do you really want a bunch of employees who wait around to be told what to do???

The effect on your employees can be pretty dramatic. The opportunity to work on independent projects is a great recruiting tool. It shows you trust your employees, demonstrates a culture of autonomy that will be appealing to the best Creatives, and sets you apart from other employers. It's great for retention, too, as it contributes to a positive environment where people are happy to work. It won't solve all your talent management problems, but it can be a very positive factor.

Sure, you should have some oversight, not just to make sure people aren't goofing off, but also to grab onto a good idea as it's emerging. Figure out what kind of arrangement you want to have with your Creatives, make sure everyone understands it from the time they're hired, and then try it out. Yes, small firms might feel like they don't have the capacity for this, but in the long run, it might be the most productive thing you do.