

Work-Life Flow: How Individuals, Zappos, and Other Innovative Companies Achieve High Engagement

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Individuals, their coaches, and visionary leaders, including Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh, are aligning work and culture with the principles of flow to enrich careers, lives, and organizations. This article examines flow—an individual's state of maximum engagement—and the criteria for achieving it. It spells out methods for coaching people to achieve a state of flow at work, and then presents examples of how individuals have infused their jobs with flow. It also discusses several visionary leaders who incorporate flow states into their companies' culture, including an in-depth look at how Hsieh uses flow principles to create high engagement and deliver superior business results. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

In 2006, only 14 percent of employees around the globe were highly engaged—only 2 percent in Japan, 8 percent in China, 21 percent in the United States, and 40 percent in Mexico.¹ These statistics have since worsened with the economic meltdown. Why is this a problem? Research shows that engaged people are more likely to have lower turnover, absenteeism, and accidents. In addition, higher rates of workforce engagement are associated with higher levels of customer loyalty, profitability, sales per employee, market value, and gross return on capital.²

Lack of engagement also presents serious challenges to employees, who can find themselves disillusioned with their jobs and other aspects of their lives. Consider Jackson, a regional sales director for a medical device company, a high-potential leader on the short list of successors for a number of positions, including vice president of sales for North America West.

After several coaching sessions, which the company offers to its high potentials, Jackson confides to his coach (me) that he feels as though he is merely going through the motions at work. He often arrives home stressed and exhausted, which affects the quality and quantity of the time he spends with his wife and three children. This issue came to a head for him in a recent talk with his oldest son, Matt, who has chosen to join his school's football team. Jackson counseled Matt to “put his all” into the game and then immediately saw himself as a hypocrite, which is highly uncomfortable and intolerable for him. Now Jackson is thinking about leaving the company, finding some other job that enables *him* to “put his all” into his work and family.

In contrast, Patti is a trial lawyer who loves to compete and win. As she prepares a case for trial, she runs on all gears, fully engaged. Ideas flow. She barely notices the passage of time. At the end of a ten-hour workday, she goes home energized. She is fully present with her husband and two young sons during the family dinner, and she engages her sons in a highly animated storytime reading before bedtime.

Since age 6, Paul has been constantly building things, using whatever materials were in sight. Now a 42-year-old architect, he says that at times, “the buildings seem to draw themselves.” Sometimes Paul is so lost in his work that he forgets to take lunch. On Fridays he brings his four-year-old daughter to the office for family day, which was instituted a year ago to advance employee engagement and to encourage future architects, engineers, and construction workers.

How many Jacksons are working in your company right now, topping out—or worse, burning out—before they achieve their full potential? What do Patti and Paul have that Jackson does not? Have they magically found the right formula for balancing work and family priorities, thus achieving a state in which they experience no conflict between the professional and the personal but, instead, success and satisfaction on both fronts? Imagine what an organization full of highly engaged people like Patti and Paul could achieve.

I and others contend that what Patti and Paul have is not today's popular notion of work-life balance but rather *work-life integration*, brought about by their ability to achieve a *state of flow* in which they use their talents and live meaningful lives with purpose and passion—at work, at home with their families, and in their communities.

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The Myth of Work-Life Balance

Sixty percent of executives report working at least 50 hours per week. This does not include the additional time when they are not at work but thinking about work nevertheless. Ten percent work more than 80 hours a week. The situation is even more intense for the more than 90 percent of working women who still maintain primary responsibility for managing the household and family responsibilities at the end of their “work” day. In addition, 1.7 million people consider their jobs and work hours excessive due to the effects of globalization.³

For the great majority of these people, striking a balance between work and personal life is a myth.

The notion of work as separate from life is a relatively new paradigm that is neither healthy nor productive for business, employees, families, or communities. But rather than address the paradigm itself as problematic, we try to fix its negative effects from within the paradigm, the goal of work-life balance being one such example. In seeking the formula for the perfect way to divide our time and energy between work and life, we strive for the near impossible, and then feel guilty. We question what we are doing wrong such that “balance” continues to elude us.

The concept of work-life balance implies segmentation, that life is divided into compartments. When we see our lives and ourselves in this fashion, carved into separate parts—work, home and family, community, leisure—we experience these parts as competing for our energy and time. We are detached—disengaged—from the work that we do and the organizations we do it in, conflicted about the “choices” we feel forced to make. This is both painful and illogical.

Work-Life Integration as a Strategy for Engagement

As Einstein said, “We cannot solve a problem using the same thinking that created it.” Work is necessary for survival—it always has been. In early subsistence cultures, work was not separated from living; it enriched as well as enabled life. Even when not actively working to hunt or gather berries, people made tools and practiced rituals aimed at a better outcome for the hunt or berry-picking venture. As they did so, they sat together telling stories that built community, culture, norms, and a shared history, strengthening the bonds among them and deepening the purpose and meaning of their work and their lives as a whole.

However, farming, technological improvements in agriculture, the industrial revolution, and the

information age brought about changes in the way modern societies think, feel about, and relate to work. Productivity improved, but at what price? We still expend energy in the form of work, which ultimately feeds, clothes, and shelters us, but we have become separated from what we do, and distanced from why we do it, with the result being unnecessary stress, depleted energy, and lack of full engagement with—or, even worse, a sense of alienation from—our families, organizations, and communities, as well as from ourselves.

Work-life integration is grounded in the belief that we are whole beings who seek to use our talents and to live meaningful lives with purpose and passion—at work, at home, and at play.

But it does not have to be that way. We can change our paradigm to one of *work-life integration*. Work-life integration is grounded in the belief that we are whole beings who seek to use our talents and to live meaningful lives with purpose and passion—at work, at home, and at play. This means bringing our whole selves to work. It also means, where appropriate and beneficial, that we soften, blur, or, in some cases, eliminate the boundaries between work and other domains. Integration reduces stress, generates energy for all aspects of our lives, and brings us into a more genuine balance. As a result, we are happier, healthier, more productive, and more effective in all that we do, with benefits that extend well beyond ourselves.

Whole Self at Work

Patti and Paul, introduced earlier, bring their whole and most productive selves to work. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has been conducting research on happiness and creativity for more than 35 years, defines this as *flow*, a state in which a person experiences joy, creativity, and total involvement with life

in the present moment. This applies to any activity and thus any sphere of living, including work—and to any form of work.

Consider Allison, a landscaper, already working at 6:00 A.M., pressing the dirt firmly around the base of fresh plantings, breathing in the scent of damp earth, and noticing the beauty of the dewdrops that cling to the flower petals. After a day of physical labor, she goes home dirty, fulfilled, and ready for some mental activity—helping her teenage daughter with math homework. She is totally immersed in each activity, however different they might be, and in a state of flow that makes each enjoyable and rewarding.

A state of flow in work can also be a collective phenomenon. Consider Hannah and Mathew, who are collaborating on an article about overcoming writer's block. They play off each other in a flow of insights that they then express in a landscape of words. Anyone observing only their animated faces and body language would see two people fully engaged in the joy of play. This collective state of flow can be scaled up to encompass a team or, as some progressive business leaders have demonstrated, even an entire organization.

You too have probably experienced the state of flow when you were so completely engaged in a mental, physical, or sensory pursuit that you lost a sense of yourself as separate and apart from the activity, and time became irrelevant. Many individuals intuitively know how to be in a state of flow and build it into their work, their play, and/or their family time. Csikszentmihalyi's research and thinking on flow is compelling and has been applied in many fields of endeavor, including the world of work, where leaders and coaches are using it to enhance individual and collective engagement, performance, and fulfillment. Principles of flow have also been incorporated into the culture and work environment of a number of successful, highly admired companies such as Zappos and Patagonia (more about these later).

Exhibit 1. Characteristics of Flow

- Essence
- Passion
- Purpose and Meaning
- Identifiable Goals
- Operating Rules
- Challenge
- Timely Feedback
- Attention, Concentration, and Internal Control

Source: Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Characteristics of Flow

The work of Csikszentmihalyi and others in the field has shown that flow is not simply a happy accident or a purely subjective state but rather is characterized by a particular set of criteria or characteristics. With this understanding, individuals, coaches, and leaders can employ specific practices to achieve and support a state of flow in work and other aspects of life.

I have been using the group of characteristics shown in **Exhibit 1**, adapted from Csikszentmihalyi's flow-state criteria, in my own work of helping individuals and companies increase engagement, fulfillment, performance, and better work-life integration.

Essence. Essence is the unique pattern of attributes that makes something (or someone) fundamentally what it is and thus different from all the other somethings (or people) in the world. Every person has a unique essence or spirit, and expressing it comes so easily and is so enjoyable that people would do it even if they were not paid. Adults have learned to cover it up or subvert it, often in order to meet the expectations of others, whereas children tend to instinctively live and act from their essence, even if they can't articulate it—something that psychologist James Hillman explores in his book, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*.

One example Hillman gives is that of Yehudi Menuhin, one of the world's most distinguished

violinists. At the age of four, after attending concerts with his parents and being inspired by famous violinist and concertmaster Louis Persinger, Menuhin asked his parents for a violin and requested that Persinger be his teacher. When a family friend presented him with a toy violin, he “burst into sobs, threw it on the ground, and would have nothing to do with it.” He understood his essence, his calling, even at that age. He wanted to learn to play like Persinger, and he wanted a real violin, not a toy.⁴

Tony Hsieh, serial entrepreneur and current CEO of Zappos who was interviewed for this article, has been expressing his essence since childhood. During summer vacations, his parents required him to practice various musical instruments for four hours a day. He learned to circumvent this “distasteful” requirement by playing recordings of prior practice sessions while he spent the time reading *Boys' Life*. An advertisement in this same magazine sparked Hsieh's first entrepreneurial venture at the age of 9—becoming the country's number-one seller of earthworms. Defying convention through playful experimentation and creativity has marked his approach to life and business, and he has infused Zappos with this essence.⁵

Passion. Passion is what people feel when they activate their essence. Essence unleashes passion, which energizes a person to act, to pursue what she is here to express, to do, in a way that is unique to her. A violinist whose essence is to play music may feel passionate while playing a concerto or jazz, conducting an orchestra, composing music, listening to other artists, or teaching a young adult to play. Each activity is an expression of his essence and is thus fueled by passion.

Tim is passionate about removing underground oil tanks for a living. Why? He is an explorer at heart and is delighted to spend a day digging to unearth an empty tank and then to enter it and discover what's inside. His face lights up when he talks about his exploits.

Purpose and Meaning. To what end does a given individual employ essence and pursue passion? The flow state is not an exercise in self-indulgence. Purpose and meaning locate the individual and his life or work within a broader context, often one related to contribution and positive impact on others. For example, Paul Farmer, founder of Partners in Health, is a brilliant doctor who devotes himself to making medical treatment available to the most disenfranchised populations in the world. His essence and expertise is in understanding and treating disease from a perspective that includes both cultural anthropology and the science of medicine. His purpose is to create better social, health, and economic conditions—this imbues his work with intrinsic meaning. For others, it may not be the work, product, or service that provides meaning but rather what they do with the fruits of their labor, such as buying a home for their family or sending their children to college.

Identifiable Goals. In a state of flow, people envision short-term goals. These may exist in the context of a larger purpose or long-range goal. For a climber who has set his sights on scaling the ten most difficult rock faces in the world, the goal of today's climb is to reach the top of the cliff. Harvey, a worker in a meat processing plant, sets a daily goal for himself to cut more slices more perfectly than the day before. The daily goal to improve on his personal best—in the tradition of many Olympic athletes—helps Harvey achieve a state of flow. He focuses his attention, eliminates distractions, challenges his skills, and receives continuous feedback as to the quality and number of slices he has made.

Operating Rules. Clear operating rules govern the flow-state actions required to achieve the goal—it isn't hit or miss. There are steps to be taken, a process to follow. For example, people most often identify reading as an activity that meets flow-state criteria; some lose touch with the outside world and become totally absorbed by and in the story, to their great satisfaction. The act of reading employs a set

of rules that determine whether to move from left to right or right to left on the page or screen; how to decode letters or symbols to form meaningful words or concepts; and how to identify the end of a thought.

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Challenge. A flow-state activity presents a significant challenge in an area where the individual possesses a high level of skill—the task is neither too easy nor too difficult given the current skill set. In his seminal book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi offers the example of Joe, a welder who has been working on a railroad car assembly line for more than 30 years. Since childhood, he has been fascinated by discovering the way machines work, and he loves to fix things. By choosing to move laterally over the years, from machine to machine, rather than upward and out of the front lines, Joe has mastered every aspect of the plant's operation. He continuously takes on new challenges that keep him connected to his essence and passion, applying and growing his talents for a purpose that is meaningful to him—and one that brings significant benefits to his employer. He loves what he does, and everyone in the plant agrees that Joe's abilities contribute to keeping the plant running and make him the most valuable person there.⁶

Timely Feedback. In the course of the activity, the individual receives positive or negative feedback, which enables her to adjust behaviors as needed to achieve ultimate success. Even if the final outcome is accomplished over a long period, progress toward that end is often visible in shorter time frames. Gardening provides a good analogy. While it requires patience and time to realize the fruits of one's labor, small but visible daily changes that indicate growth is under way—a lengthening stalk, the appearance of buds—give the gardener joy, as well

as ongoing feedback about whether to modify the method of daily care.

Attention, Concentration, and Internal Control. We spend much of our time in a state of continuous interruption as multiple simultaneous and ongoing stimuli compete for our attention. As studies have shown, distractions increase stress and reduce effectiveness and productivity. In flow states, however, attention and its longer-term cousin concentration are narrowly focused on the task at hand—quite the opposite of multitasking. External stimuli go unnoticed, allowing us more control over our internal state. We act on external conditions, which are largely out of our control anyway, but focus on what is within our control. Consider a rock climber in a flow state. He has no say over the contours of the rock face but is totally attentive to and has complete control over where he puts his foot next. He has taken the externals (e.g., weather and climbing conditions) into account in his preparations for the climb, and now focuses fully on the present moment as he climbs.

Flow involves a shift in focus. Instead of struggling to control and change external conditions—the traffic, the economy, other people—we focus instead on managing our internal landscape. We are intentional about where we place our attention, the thoughts we have, and the feelings that arise.

Infusing Work With Flow

By infusing work with the conditions of flow described earlier, managers, coaches, and leaders help themselves and others achieve higher levels of engagement. Let's go back to Jackson, my coaching client introduced at the beginning of the article.

Jackson has just told me that because of the stress of work and its toll on him and his family, he is thinking about leaving his job and the company. I look at the pained expression on his face, which suggests he doesn't feel very positive about this solution

either. I ask if he would be willing to explore other possibilities. He says, "Yes."

I begin to focus on the flow-state characteristics, particularly essence and purpose, and ask Jackson the following questions:

1. Was there a time when you were doing something you really enjoyed and in which you took pride, whether in the past or present, at work or outside of work?
2. If money were not an issue, what would you do regardless of whether you were paid?
3. What in your life do you return to over and over, like an itch that just won't go away?

It doesn't take much time before Jackson is talking about how much he loves coaching kids' sports. His face has brightened; he is animated. I ask what he loves about it—what is the *essence* of what he is doing as a coach.

"It's about getting kids to discover and use abilities they never knew they had," he says. "They're not just getting better at what they already know they can do. They're discovering they can do things they didn't think were possible, at least not for them. That's the absolute best part. But there's something else. I love watching the team members bonding with each other and becoming a solid team. It's great when they start helping each other, giving advice, offering feedback and suggestions or practicing together. For that I will put up with 'helicopter parents' or standing in the rain and mud for hours."

Jackson is describing what puts him in a state of flow. He has identified his essence and recognizes the passion that flows from it. Is he there every minute? No. Just like the rock climber who spends some amount of time and energy preparing for the climb—getting equipment, driving to the site—Jackson also spends some of his time as a coach doing things that are less enjoyable, such as talking to

the “helicopter parents.” But it still provides a sense of time well invested because it is all for the sake of flow.

I ask Jackson if he could be a coach at work and see his direct reports as a team. What if his job were to help each of his direct reports discover capabilities they never knew they had, and to focus on creating an environment in which they could turn to each other for help and bond as a team? In so many words, could he invest his current work with the *purpose* and *intrinsic meaning* that has made coaching kids so satisfying for him?

Unexpectedly, Jackson pushes his chair back, stands up, and walks out of the office. I sit disconcerted, wondering if he is off to tender his resignation. A few minutes later he returns wearing a baseball cap. “I’m ready for my new job,” he announces with a big smile.

He sees that changing his perspective to thinking of himself as a coach might change everything, including the possibility that he will now come to work excited about each day. He takes out paper and pen and draws a diagram, like a coach drawing a play. His customers, he says, are on this side of the sheet, and each of his players is lined up on the other side. He starts to tick off the untapped capabilities he sees in each player. Then he draws arrows between particular players and customers, matching capabilities to customer needs. He envisions how he can work with each team member to help the person understand, develop, and apply his or her talents. I silently marvel. Here is true “super-vision,” seeing and working toward a picture of what each person could become.

Over our next few sessions, Jackson plans a series of discussions with each of his team members and the team as a whole to talk about his new approach to the role. These meetings result in goals for each person and a series of steps to achieve them.

Eighteen months later, Jackson has realized success on many levels. His team has exceeded aggressive sales goals that were 3 percent above projected industry growth. They have won new accounts. The team and the individuals within it have grown—as has Jackson. Equally important to him is that he is really enjoying the time he spends with his family, and they are responding in kind.

Not too long thereafter, Jackson is promoted to vice president of sales for North America West. He says that prior to shifting his perspective about his job, he had been working in a manner that was not “scalable” to a larger role. If he had received the promotion before this shift rather than after, he is sure that continuing to work in the old way would have led to failure in the new role—a disservice to himself, his team, and his family, as well as to his employer and customers.

Through coaching and reflection, Jackson used an experience of flow state to gain insight into his essence, passion, and purpose. He then used this new understanding to inform his thinking and to infuse the role with intrinsic meaning. The result: Jackson is engaged and working in a state of flow more often. Thoughts of leaving the company have been resolved. In addition, he returns home at the end of the day with more energy and joy.

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Coaching for Flow

For adults in the workplace, infusing work with flow-state characteristics must often begin with

Exhibit 2. Questions for Guiding Individuals to Find Their Essence

- As a child what did you love to do? What did you dream you wanted to be when you grew up?
- What are you doing when hours seem to go by like minutes?
- If money were not an issue, what would you be doing with your time and energy?
- What is the thing that you keep coming back to over and over again in your life?
- What are you doing when you are your best self, living in your own skin, most at home with who you are—and at the same time lose any feelings of self-consciousness?
- What comes easily and naturally to you?
- What do friends and family come to you for?

discovering (or recovering) their essence, passion, and purpose/meaning so that they can align *what* they do, and *how* they do it, with *who* they are. This calls for self-awareness. For some, like Jackson, a one-on-one coaching relationship provides an effective context for working through the implications, particularly when in a large or complex role that has significant impact on the organization. Others can begin the process in a workshop, onsite with their workgroup, for example, or offsite at a conference. Leaders who have themselves grappled with and resolved how to bring flow into their work can learn to coach their teams or the individuals they mentor to move down this path. Initiatives aimed at organizational transformation often begin here, with helping leaders and members find the relationship between their personal purpose and the organization's vision and purpose.

I and others who apply concepts of positive psychology and flow in our coaching and consulting have found the questions listed in **Exhibit 2** to be good ways to trigger awareness of a person's flow state, which holds the key to identifying essence and purpose.

In preparation for this work, whatever the setting, part of the coach's role is to help individuals overcome two spurious beliefs about work:

- *Work is laborious:* As Hillman and Csikszentmihalyi aptly demonstrate, one's experience of an activity or task depends largely on how the activity relates (or doesn't relate) to the individual's unique gifts (essence) and purpose. It may be true that work not infused with flow can be drudgery, onerous, draining, or stressful. But flow-state work is just the opposite, with Jackson a good example of how fundamentally the same work or role, when invested with intrinsic meaning, results in a shift in perspective and a different approach that produces a radically more positive experience (flow) and a higher level of contribution.
- *If it comes easily to me, it has little value.* This belief is more common among women, who often undervalue their natural talents. In the command-and-control leadership style of days gone by, which is still practiced in some arenas, women's natural tendencies to build relationships, collaborate, and create community were not so highly valued as they are in today's environment of knowledge workers, complex projects with a broad range of experts, and globalization. As a result, women, especially those who broke through glass ceilings, felt their natural offerings were less than adequate. As relational skills such as emotional intelligence continue to prove their value, women's natural tendencies are gaining appreciation, and women as well will learn that what comes easily and naturally is of great value.⁷

Staying in the Flow

Armed with personal awareness of the characteristics of flow and the type of activities that induce it, individuals and even groups can set out to change their approach to work, redesign or change their roles, and/or modify their work environment to facilitate flow-state characteristics.

Case: New Role

Lisa, a senior sales manager for a furniture designer, has been offered a promotion to vice president of

sales. She is not sure she wants to accept it and seeks coaching to help with the decision. She says she has lost her “mojo” and has no idea what she really wants to do. She is disturbed that this is happening at the peak of her career. When asked by the coach if she has ever had the experience of doing something and being so involved that she lost a sense of time and any awareness of herself as separate from the activity, Lisa responds, “Art. I love to make art. Any kind of art.” For the next 30 minutes, she tells stories about art classes, awards, and an encouraging teacher who became a mentor.

With the new awareness of knowing what puts her into the state of flow and a strong desire to have that as a central part of her work experience, Lisa turns down the promotion and instead negotiates a role in the textile design group for the same company. The company is glad to keep her and sees how her sales experience will help the design group develop a better understanding of the customers and markets. Lisa is happier in her new role—she is flowing and more creative, and the quality of her work is evidence that this has been a good move for everyone involved.

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Case: New Career

Essence can manifest itself in a variety of expressions. Thus, more than one type of activity, or work, can produce a state of flow. Barbara had been drawn to the nursing profession because it enabled her to help people heal. After many years, the job’s long hours and the number of patients became too stressful for her, so she left nursing. She began to do house cleaning just to generate some income and found, to her surprise, that she especially enjoyed working with “hoarders,” whose environments are

cluttered, even overwhelmed, with things because of their compulsion. Now hoarders are her specialty. She is endlessly patient and calm, helping her clients let go of old “stuff” and their out-of-control habits at the same time. She has invested this new work with meaning related to her essence—she is still helping others to heal—but now in a situation where she has more control over her time and the ability to give clients her undivided attention.

Case: Job Redesign

Amy and Susan work together in the marketing department of a health care company. They participated in one of my Work Life Flow seminars, held at a women’s leadership conference. During the seminar, Amy discovers that arranging logistics for marketing events is draining energy from her natural creative talents. Her coworker, Susan, who has the same job title and responsibilities as Amy, learns that she is happiest (in a state of flow) when she is organizing, executing, and following up on details. They discuss trading those pieces of the job each does best: Amy will do the creative thinking and Susan will plan and execute the details. After the conference they present the idea to their manager, who sees the value and agrees to the trade. Several months later, they report that each is happier *and* more productive, and the idea of trading off pieces of the job has spread to the team as a whole.

Trades can be conducted by whole teams. Each team member lists the type of work he would like to do more of and less of. After viewing the lists, team members engage in a structured, highly energetic series of trades. Managers can reserve final approval rights to ensure the project or the team’s customers are well served. In the end, all the tasks gets done but now by people who are typically more suited to and more satisfied with their daily work.

Case: A Tool for Staying in the Flow

Michael Bungay Stanier, author of the forthcoming book, *Do More Great Work: Stop the Busy-work and Start Work That Matters*, has created an

exercise called “I Am This/Not That,” a list of six to ten pairs of behaviors, the first of the pair being a behavior associated with flow, the second a behavior that indicates stress and being out of flow. For instance:

- Curious/Certain
- Clear/Overscripted
- Playful/Serious
- Encouraging/Self-Centered

Using these principles, consultants in a division of a large consultancy developed their own lists, which they reflect upon before going into a meeting with a new or current client in order to cue their behaviors during the meeting. The managing director of the division identified this as a key reason why his group was the only one to achieve stable client retention over the last year.⁸

Despite all the hoopla about multitasking, the human brain, wondrous as it is, is designed to attend to only one thing at a time. When multitasking, we are actually in a state of constant interruption, rapidly shifting attention from one thing to another.

Controlling the Environment

Despite all the hoopla about multitasking, the human brain, wondrous as it is, is designed to attend to only one thing at a time. When multitasking, we are actually in a state of constant interruption, rapidly shifting attention from one thing to another. This type of activity increases stress while decreasing effectiveness, enjoyment, and the potential to be in a state of flow.⁹ It also decreases brain functionality. In flow, it is the activity itself that puts us in a state of focused attention and concentration. Yet, constant interruption is a reality of the modern workplace and makes it difficult for flow to occur.

Both Michael and I recommend that individuals create a space and time free of interruptions where flow

is more likely to occur. Interestingly, for some people, very busy places such as a cafeteria or coffee shop work well; there is so much ambient noise that their brains put it in the background and outside the field of their attention. For flowing into imaginative, innovative, and creative states, take a walk or find a space that overlooks a beautiful vista—parks, museums, even college campuses. Any number of companies have used this principle in siting and designing their R&D centers.

Michael recommends creating two different work spaces, one for “Great Work” that encourages the flow state and the other for the more standard fare of reading e-mails, making phone calls, and the like. Some people avail themselves of flexible work policies and do challenging tasks that require concentration (e.g., analysis or report writing) at home, where the absence of distractions and interruptions preserves a state of flow, which increases their productivity as well as the quality of their work. In addition, it softens the boundaries between work and home, an important element in creating work-life integration.

Companies in the Flow

Progressive leaders have also found ways to infuse work with flow on an even grander scale, across an entire company, not only to provide a positive experience for employees but also out of a strong conviction that employees working in flow have higher engagement, which makes the business more successful.

Patagonia

Michael Croke, former CEO of Patagonia, wrote his doctoral dissertation on flow. Patagonia was the action laboratory for Croke’s management studies, and Csikszentmihalyi was the consultant. Croke implemented an annual company survey to measure the degree of meaning employees experience in their work. It includes other flow-related items such as how free employees are to use their own

judgment (sense of control), and whether corporate values and workers' personal values are aligned (intrinsic meaning).¹⁰ Crooke is credited with building Patagonia into "one of the world's most recognized, successful, and socially responsible brands."¹¹

Green Cargo

Steven Falk, former vice president of strategic business innovation at Ericsson, instituted flow-state concepts to engage remaining workers after layoffs. Impressed with the results, Falk instituted a more comprehensive flow-based culture in 2003 when he joined Green Cargo, one of Scandinavia's largest transport and logistics companies. Csikszentmihalyi's book is required reading for 150 managers as part of a six-day training program. To establish clear identifiable goals and continuous feedback, two criteria for flow-state engagement, employees and managers negotiate three-month contracts and meet for intensive feedback sessions once a month. The results: The year following implementation, government-owned Green Cargo turned a profit for the first time in its 120-year history, which the company's deputy CEO, Johan Saarm, credited largely to Falk.¹²

Replacements, Ltd.

Replacements, Ltd. in Greensboro, North Carolina, is the world's largest supplier of replacement pieces for old and new tableware and collectibles, including traditional and heirloom patterns from all over the globe. The privately held company has found numerous ways to weave the criteria of flow states into its management practices.

For example, the company's purpose provides intrinsic meaning well beyond the sales transaction. It "creates, honors, and preserves traditions by connecting customers with their most cherished memories." The company is true to this purpose in the way it treats employees as well, many of whom have emigrated from two dozen other countries. Many work hard to save for trips to their home country to see relatives and revisit the places of *their* most

cherished memories. Corporate policymakers, including Jeanine Falcon, vice president of human resources, think employees deserve more time than the typical two-week annual vacation for these visits, and so the company created a flexible program that allows employees to take extended vacations.

Feedback on short-term goals, another flow-state criteria, is reflected in the daily practice of gathering employees together to hear at least one letter from a satisfied customer.

As another example, feedback on short-term goals, another flow-state criteria, is reflected in the daily practice of gathering employees together to hear at least one letter from a satisfied customer. The effectiveness of these and other such practices in building strong employee engagement is evident from an 11.6 percent average annual turnover rate and an average employee tenure above 10 years—both significantly better than the statistics at other companies whose employees engage in similar work. In addition, Replacements, Ltd. was winner of the American Psychological Association's Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program award for 2009.¹³

Profits, Passion, and Purpose at Zappos

Zappos, the upstart online shoe and accessory retailer, has grown to a billion dollars in annual revenues in just ten years, ranking it 20th among the 2009 *Fast Company* 50. It presents a compelling case for designing flow into company culture and the way people work. Zappos, founded by Tony Hsieh (the creative nonconformist introduced earlier in the article), is Hsieh's first intentional and very personal focus on creating a culture intended to generate happiness.

Hsieh was one of the founders of LinkExchange and enjoyed the company's early days, when a handful of employees worked long hours that were intense

but felt like play, ate together, sometimes slept under their desks, and had the time of their lives. But when the company grew to 100 people, Hsieh dreaded getting out of bed and going to work. It wasn't fun anymore. It wasn't a bunch of friends working hard, having fun, and hanging out together. They sold the company to Microsoft for \$265 million.¹⁴

Hsieh need never work again. But he is a builder, a creator, who wants to do something great according to a different set of rules—this is his *essence* and what drove him to start again, this time with Zappos. As a man who manifests his passion at work, he wants to give others the opportunity to do so as well. The company's *purpose* is to deliver happiness to customers and employees through a great experience, which provides employees and their work with *intrinsic meaning*. And he wants the world to know that passion, purpose, and profits can coexist, the subject of Hsieh's upcoming book, *Delivering Happiness—A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose*, to be published in June 2010.¹⁵

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People love to work at Zappos, and the company has earned slots on a number of “best” lists, including a position in the top 25 of *Fortune Magazine's* “100 Best Companies to Work For.” Rebecca Ratner, Zappos' human resource director, calls the environment “magical,” and although she is nowhere near retirement age, she hopes “this will be the last job I ever have.”¹⁶

Customers love the online retailer as well. When Hsieh announced his deep sadness over having to

lay off employees in 2008, customers responded on his blog with such comments as “I will help all I can by ordering and spreading the great site and great deals to everyone in my contact file plus all my family and friends.”¹⁷

In an interview I conducted with Hsieh, I referred to work-life integration. Hsieh responded excitedly and talked about his idea about creating a *lifestyle company* and a *company lifestyle* where people want to “hang out with each other when they leave the office.” And what are the benefits to Zappos? “That's when the best ideas come up,” he says.¹⁸

A Culture With Flow

In his company blog, Hsieh discusses in some depth the Zappos brand and its relationship to the company's culture:

We decided a long time ago that we didn't want our brand to be just about shoes, or clothing, or even on-line retailing . . . [but] about the very best customer service and the very best customer experience. . . . Customer service shouldn't be just a department, it should be the entire company. . . . What's the best way to build a brand for the long term? In a word: culture. . . . If you get the culture right, most of the other stuff—like great customer service, . . . or passionate employees and customers—will happen naturally on its own.¹⁹

At Zappos, the culture is defined in terms of ten core values, shown in **Exhibit 3**. Management and HR policies and practices are designed to reinforce and reward behaviors that reflect these values, which further strengthens the culture. A closer examination of some of these practices and values reveals just how Hsieh and other leaders at Zappos create and sustain a work environment conducive to the state of flow (happiness) for everyone.

Hire People Who Share These Collective Values. Zappos wants to hire people whose *essence* and *purpose* resonate with the company's. Candidates for a job are screened for the required skills and experience and

Exhibit 3. The Ten Core Values of Zappos

- Deliver WOW through Service
- Embrace and Drive Change
- Create Fun and a Little Weirdness
- Be Adventurous, Creative, and Open-Minded
- Pursue Growth and Learning
- Build Open and Honest Relationships With Communication
- Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit
- Do More With Less
- Be Passionate and Determined
- Be Humble

Source: Hsieh, T. (2009, January 3). Your culture is your brand. The Zappos CEO and COO Blog. Retrieved March 9, 2010, from <http://blogs.zappos.com/blogs/ceo-and-coo-blog/2009/01/03/your-culture-is-your-brand>.

then interviewed by HR personnel, who look for a good fit between the individual and Zappos' values and culture. No match, no hire, regardless of skill or expertise.

Prepare New Employees to Act on the Values. New-hire training at Zappos is designed to immerse employees in the culture, to give them the knowledge and tools to understand and act from the ten core values, including how to deliver on the brand of outstanding customer service, whatever position they might hold in the company. All new employees learn Zappos values and core skills during a five-week training program. If the fit doesn't feel right, if the new hire doesn't feel engaged in her work at Zappos and isn't experiencing real satisfaction and fulfillment, she can avail herself of a \$2,000 payout to quit—something only 1 percent of new hires have opted to take.²⁰

Encourage People to Learn, Grow, and Embrace Change. These core values speak to the flow-state characteristic of having the opportunity to *challenge and stretch one's skills*. In their first 18 months at Zappos, employees participate in more than 200 hours of required training. Everyone hired into headquarters receives the same training as the call-center reps do. Pay increases are based on certification in any one of the company's 25 skill sets, and an employee

is free to choose which and how many to learn (in the language of flow, *the sense of control*) regardless of whether the skill set is needed in the current role. Then, when the call center or chat rooms experience a peak in volume/demand, the company benefits from having broadly trained employees who can be quickly deployed from other functions to fill the gap.

Empower Frontline Employees to Make Decisions That Delight the Customer. Employees are encouraged to take appropriate risks in order to find the best way to “deliver WOW through service.” Employees experience a *sense of control* as they *stretch their skills to meet the challenge* at hand. Shared values and the right training, rather than strict rules or management approval, inform their decisions and behavior. And immediate customer responses to their actions provide the *feedback* necessary for being in a flow state.

Encourage Creativity, Individuality, and Fun. Allowing people to express their individuality (a little weirdness), try new approaches, have a sense of play, and be open to the ideas of others encourages employees to act from their *essence and passion*. This in turn infuses the workplace with fresh ideas, which is essential for Zappos to remain creative and innovative as a business.

Reward Behaviors Aligned With Values. Living the Zappos core values accounts for 50 percent of each employee's performance review, which provides significant *feedback* about the person's efforts and helps them set *near-term behavioral goals*.

Tony Hsieh and the leaders at Zappos have created an organization that infuses work with flow. Its members find intrinsic meaning in their work; are empowered to act; stretch and build their skills; are creative; and, fundamentally, really enjoy themselves and each other, inside and outside of work.

Summary

Employees want to be engaged, companies benefit when they are, and it is neither costly nor difficult to achieve. Designing individual roles or entire companies in concert with flow states works because we are not mindless creatures who enjoy going through the motions of what we consider meaningless activities. It is both natural and enjoyable for us to set and strive for goals, to apply and challenge our skills, to look for feedback about our progress, to seek meaning in what we do, and to be involved and engaged in a life that includes work we love to do.

States of flow are the indicator of the particular types of activities that align us with who we truly are. Our challenge as individuals, leaders, and coaches is to ask the right questions, create the right environment, and provide the encouragement and support that enables us, our employees, and our clients to gain the awareness required to bring our whole selves to work.

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