

Noncommissioned Work: Exploring the Influence of Structured Free Time on Creativity and Innovation

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We examine the growing trend whereby organizations give employees structured periods of autonomy during their work time. We call this practice *noncommissioned work time*. This article 1) establishes a definition for noncommissioned work, as well as a classification of the two observed methods of implementation, 2) explains how organizations across industry sectors and around the world are using noncommissioned work, 3) argues for why noncommissioned work enhances employee creativity, by using the available scholarly literature, 4) considers the linkage among noncommissioned work, creativity, and innovation, and, 5) discusses implications for practitioners and scholars.

To survive and thrive in the dynamic global marketplace, organizations must regularly innovate their products, services, ideas, processes, and environments.¹ Undergirding innovation are requisite antecedents, including customer intimacy, employee diversity, institutional learning, appropriate leadership, cross-organizational communications, and a focused corporate vision. Most important is that all innovation requires creativity. Any successful product introduction or program implementation depends upon individuals or teams having good ideas and pursuing those ideas beyond their initial generation.² For this reason, the importance of employee creativity in organizations has been highlighted often in management literature.³ Indeed, creativity in organizations is becoming a more prominent concern, with many industries seeking creativity revolutions.⁴ In addition, the nurturing of the creative class is currently argued as the foundation of prosperity and civilization.⁵ The issue of creativity is growing in importance because we are working in a knowledge economy, where organizations either consciously or unconsciously expect creativity as an element of their process or product.⁶ Research into the benefits of creativity has already shown links between creativity and innovation, and an organization's innovation and competitive advantage.⁷ Innovation is seen as a source of competitive advantage⁸ and creativity as the source of innovation.⁹

Amabile defines innovation as the “successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization.”¹⁰ Creativity, then, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for innovation. It serves as a starting point from which the ideas originate. In this way, “creativity is the seed of innovation.”¹¹ While a precise definition of creativity has not yet reached consensus,¹² most scholars seem to accept, as an operative definition, the idea that creativity involves the process of developing novel and useful ideas.¹³ Drazin, Glynn, and Kazanijan assert that this definition focuses on the outcome – creative output – which itself yields the question “How do you increase creative output in organizations?”¹⁴ Clearly, creative outputs are not easily obtained, as creativity often requires a considerable investment of time.¹⁵ Dewett states it differently: “Creativity, in the organizational sense [...] is not a frequently occurring phenomenon relative to the maintenance of the status quo.”¹⁶

Employees in any job and at any level of an organization have the potential for creativity, not just those jobs or people typically labeled “creatives.”¹⁷ Several scholars have stressed the influence of job characteristics and work design on employees’ creativity.¹⁸ Research into work and work context revealed several variables that affect creativity, specifically learning, motivation, self-efficacy, leadership, autonomy, and work groups.¹⁹ In general, creativity appears to flourish when organizations encourage it, when employees are motivated to pursue new ideas, and when organizations provide employees with the resources needed to experiment with these new ideas.²⁰

Despite all this research and scholarly conjecture, very little practical wisdom has managed to develop in the practitioner literature, with business creativity still considered largely a mystery.²¹ The impression left by most scholarly literature is that organizations have to be radically overhauled in order to remove traditional bureaucracy and create cultures that stimulate creativity.²² However, a growing trend in many organizations manages to leverage the creative potential of employees at all levels without requiring a radical overhaul to the organization.²³ Organizations around the globe are allowing employees periods of free time to work on whatever problem or new product they desire. These free times allow individuals to play constructively with new ideas, and appear to enhance the creativity of employees, thereby increasing innovation. We call this method *noncommissioned work*.

While scholarly literature has noted the presence of noncommissioned work time²⁴ a full exploration of this trend and a hypothesis regarding its effect on creativity has not been undertaken. This article will 1) establish a definition for noncommissioned work, as well as classify the two observed methods of implementation; 2) explain how organizations across industry sectors and around the world are using noncommissioned work; 3) argue for why noncommissioned work enhances employee creativity by using the available scholarly literature; and 4) discuss implications for practitioners and scholars.

Defining Noncommissioned Work

Influenced by the work of Pink²⁵ in practitioner literature, we chose the term noncommissioned work to define the phenomenon of giving employees free work time. We define noncommissioned work as structured periods of autonomy during which employees choose what projects to work on and how to complete such projects. While the *amount* of time given for creativity is structured, what occurs during that period is at the discretion of the employee.

Within this definition, we observe two distinct types or methods for implementing noncommissioned work in organizations.

Noncommissioned Work <i>Structured periods of autonomy during which employees choose what projects to work on and how to complete such projects</i>	
Transient <i>Autonomy given for distinct times via structured events</i>	Persistent <i>Autonomy given for a specific percentage of work time.</i>

Figure 1: Noncommissioned Work Definitions (Source: Authors' Research)

Some organizations stage structured events where employees are given autonomy for distinct periods of time (such as one day or one week). We define this method as *transient* noncommissioned work. Other organizations provide employees a certain percentage of their work time (such as 15% or 20%) as autonomous time to be used at their discretion. We define this method as *persistent* noncommissioned work. Figure 1 (above) shows the definitions.

Noncommissioned Work in Organizations

The two types of noncommissioned work are certainly not the only ways that organizations can give their employees structured periods of autonomy. They merely represent the two best-known methods that companies are currently using to enhance the creativity of their people. In this section, we present several organizations that have implemented either transient or persistent noncommissioned work time.

Perhaps the best-known example of focused noncommissioned work time is Australian software company Atlassian, undoubtedly due to Pink's²⁶ frequent coverage. Atlassian began experimenting by giving employees 24-hour periods of autonomous time every quarter to pursue projects unrelated to their job. At the end of the 24 hours, on a Friday afternoon, the company would convene and individuals would demonstrate the results of their projects. Atlassian coined the term "FedEx Days" for these events, because, as Pink puts it, "people have to deliver something overnight."²⁷ California-based biomedical company Proteus borrows Atlassian's term FedEx Day; however, they modify the idea slightly, requiring employees to apply for their autonomous day.²⁸ In October 2010, social media standout Twitter took the idea of transient noncommissioned work a step further, organizing what they called a Hack Week – an entire week set aside for engineers to pursue whatever they found interesting.²⁹

While transient methods and Atlassian's idea of a FedEx Day appear to be getting the most press currently, the method of persistent noncommissioned work has a longer history. That history began with innovator 3M. For much of its existence, 3M has allowed employees to spend fifteen

percent of their work time on projects of their own choosing.³⁰ Projects are developed and designed by employees and do not require management approval. Search engine giant Google modified this idea slightly, increasing the percentage up to twenty percent of work time.³¹ Innovative products such as Gmail, Google News and Google Translate all have their origins in this noncommissioned work time. Biotechnology firm Genentech employs a similar policy, but labels its practice “discretionary time,” limiting it to their research division.³² Intuit Canada also provides persistent noncommissioned work time but significantly reduced in comparison with 3M and Google. The company allows employees to dedicate ten percent of their time independently on special interest projects.³³ Perhaps the most interesting development in the practice of noncommissioned work time is within Atlassian who, after coining the term FedEx Day, recently moved from quarterly transient periods to persistent periods, giving employees a generous twenty percent of their work time to pursue special interest projects.³⁴

How Noncommissioned Work Influences Creativity

While the organizations mentioned above all report increases in creativity and innovation, their reports do not represent empirical evidence. As mentioned before, the extent of coverage within scholarly literature amounts to a few passing notations.³⁵ However, research into individual creativity has provided a better picture of factors influencing creative output. Some of the components of that influence can be seen in the practice of noncommissioned work. We argue that noncommissioned work positively influences creativity by increasing autonomy, reducing the salience of extrinsic rewards and increasing employees’ willingness to take risks. Figure 2 shows the proposed model of noncommissioned work time.

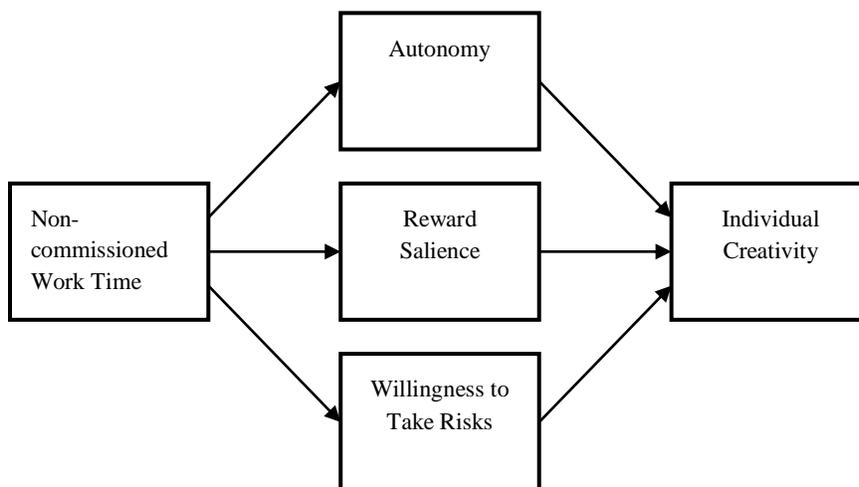


Figure 2: Proposed Model of Noncommissioned Work Time (Source: Authors’ Research)

Noncommissioned Work Increases Autonomy

The practice of giving employees structured periods of autonomy increases, by definition, employee autonomy. It is important to note that an increase in autonomy occurs only when employees are truly free to work on *any* project they desire. Freedom to set one’s schedule within a defined group of tasks is not the same as freedom to define one’s tasks. Autonomy can be described as the degree to which an employee is given substantial freedom, discretion and

independence to decide what specific procedures should be used to carry out a particular task.³⁶ The encouragement of noncommissioned work helps individuals and networks to allow hunches to persist and disperse and recombine. Noncommissioned time is an unambiguous signal to employees that they have the *right* to spend time working on unassigned tasks that they think are best for the company, even when their peers and bosses believe those hunches are wrong.³⁷

Several scholars have stated that, in order for employees to be creative, they need the freedom to experiment with ideas and explore a range of possibilities and solutions to problems.³⁸ Studies of creativity have shown that individuals produce more creative work if they perceive themselves as having a choice in how to go about producing that work.³⁹ The rationale behind this assertion is that, as employees feel a sense of ownership over their work, they will be more likely to fully engage their cognitive processes toward solving problems.⁴⁰ It is logically consistent, then, that companies such as W. L. Gore give their employees the most autonomous time and are also frequently voted the most innovative.⁴¹ Noncommissioned work provides the license to work on projects which others may not consider important.⁴²

Amabile and Gryskiewicz suggest that increasing employee autonomy allows individuals freedom from inflexible work routines and gives them the ability to pursue creative, novel ideas.⁴³ In their interview study of R&D scientists, the contextual factor mentioned most often as part of high-creativity events was that of individual freedom. Alge and colleagues explored this connection in two studies and found connection among privacy, empowerment and creative expression.⁴⁴ In one study, Amabile and colleagues asked 23 painters and/or sculptors to randomly select ten pieces of commissioned artwork and ten pieces of artwork created solely for their own pleasure.⁴⁵ The researchers presented the 460 works to a panel of art experts, from museum curators to gallery owners, to rate the creativity of the works while blinded from the knowledge of which works were commissioned and noncommissioned. The study found that the commissioned artworks were rated as significantly less creative than the noncommissioned pieces.

Considering the influence of autonomy on creativity, and the increase in autonomy created by noncommissioned work, our first proposition is as follows:

P1: Noncommissioned work will be positively related to autonomy, which is positively related to individual creativity.

Noncommissioned Work Decreases Reward Salience

It is reasonable to assume that, when employees are given noncommissioned work time, the projects they choose to work on represent projects for which they are intrinsically motivated. Additionally, since these projects are not planned for as part of normal work, they are likely not directly related to an individual's incentive compensation. Therefore, during these periods of noncommissioned work, it can be assumed that the salience of compensation, bonuses or other extrinsic rewards is reduced.

Intrinsic motivation, the desire to do something solely for the enjoyment of the task itself, is often found conducive to creativity.⁴⁶ Conversely, extrinsic motivation, the desire to do something for an external goal, is generally detrimental to creativity. Interestingly, no amount of

creative skill or domain knowledge can overcome a lack of appropriate motivation to perform an activity.⁴⁷ Several studies examine creative activities and reveal that products made by participants working for rewards are judged to be less creative than products made by participants working without the promise of reward.⁴⁸ Shin and Zhou studied Korean employees in the high-tech sector and found that intrinsic motivation partially explained their creativity.⁴⁹

Rewards appear to undermine intrinsic motivation and creativity by leading people to feel controlled by the situation, thus undermining their self-determination.⁵⁰ Additionally, some scholars theorize that rewards cause individuals' focus to switch from an interest in the task to an interest in obtaining the reward.⁵¹ This research implies that tangible, salient rewards (such as money) would produce a greater detrimental effect on creativity than verbal rewards or recognition.⁵² However, some rewards have been shown to enhance intrinsic motivation and creativity when used to confirm competence or enable individuals to pursue what they were already intrinsically motivated to achieve.⁵³

Appropriate rewards, then, require a balancing act.⁵⁴ If employees feel that their every action is tied to bonuses, they are unlikely to engage in creative behavior or explore new ideas. In contrast, if there are no rewards nor recognition for creative efforts, employees could feel that creativity is not valued by the organization. The practice of noncommissioned work provides a method for balancing rewards appropriately. Therefore our second proposition is as follows:

P2: Noncommissioned work will be negatively related to the salience of rewards, which is negatively related to individual creativity.

Noncommissioned Work Increases Willingness to Take Risks

In an increasingly volatile world, only nonlinear ideas that fall outside the bounds of tradition, orthodoxy, and precedent are likely to create new wealth.⁵⁵ Engaging in creative endeavors is therefore not without risk. However, when employees are given noncommissioned work time, the risks they face by being creative are mitigated. Risk here is defined as the extent to which uncertainty exists about whether potentially significant and/or disappointing outcomes will be realized.⁵⁶ The evolution of a creative idea involves a dynamic shift: when first generated, new ideas are often dismissed as impractical or “weird,” but these same ideas later may produce an outcome that is perceived as novel and useful.⁵⁷ Indeed, recent research even suggests that when faced with uncertainty, many experience a subtle bias against proposing their creative ideas.⁵⁸

Several scholars have implied that a link exists between perceived risk and creativity in organizations.⁵⁹ Creative efforts are typically outside the normal range of work activity and the status quo, and thereby invite risk.⁶⁰ Dewett notes that individuals engaged in creative efforts are likely mindful that their work ultimately may not be judged as creative.⁶¹ Therefore, Dewett asserts, willingness to take risks becomes an important antecedent to creativity. The willingness to take risks is defined as “willingness to take calculated risks within the scope of one’s job in an effort to produce positive job-related outcomes such that one is open to potential failure as a result.”⁶² Willingness to take risks resembles Kahn’s construct of psychological safety, wherein employees’ sense the ability to show their true selves without negative consequences.⁶³ Edmondson and Moglefo asserted that psychological safety is vital for organizational creativity because of the risk-taking and possibilities of failure inherent to the pursuit of creative ideas.⁶⁴

The number of ideas proposed by employees is likely to increase when employees perceive that they have this psychological safety and will not suffer negative consequences for proposing these new ideas.⁶⁵ The use of noncommissioned work within a corporate vision that loosely defines the direction of the organization guides creativity while suspending risks normally associated with original and unique ideas.⁶⁶

Scholars have attempted to describe the type of organizational climate that supports creativity.⁶⁷ However this climate is described, most scholars agree that a climate of creativity surely exists whenever employees are willing to take risks.⁶⁸ In a survey study of 165 R&D personnel, Dewett demonstrated the connection between willingness to take risks and employee creativity.⁶⁹ Willingness to take risks was shown to mediate the relationship between intrinsic motivation and creative outcomes. This organizational climate is important because, while employees do not need permission to generate new ideas, they will eventually need managerial approval as well as time and resources to elaborate on those new ideas.⁷⁰ The practice of noncommissioned work provides employees with a defined space, a structured period of time, during which any risks taken are separated from their consequences. Therefore, our third proposition is as follows:

P3: Noncommissioned work will be positively related to willingness to take risks, which is positively related to individual creativity.

Discussion

Implications

This research suggests some interesting implications for managers. Managers truly interested in enhancing individual creativity must allow for several antecedents: increased autonomy, reduced salience of extrinsic rewards, and employees encouraged to take risks. These three antecedents could require drastic changes to the organization's culture. Fortunately, this research also suggests that the practice of noncommissioned work time represents a relatively simple way to help create an environment where these antecedents are present, when compared to an organizational re-design. Still, the idea of giving all employees "time-off" to work on whatever they desire represents a dangerous idea in the minds of some managers. However, the two methods of noncommissioned work can also serve to more prudently guide the implementation of this practice. Consider the example of Atlassian discussed above, which first implemented quarterly day-long events (transient) and later decided to shift to twenty percent of employees' work-weeks (persistent). This demonstrated how the two types can be seen as stages, whereby managers can experiment with the transient stage and, if the desired result is produced, experiment further with persistent periods of autonomy.⁷¹

Limitations

Our research and propositions have recognizable limitations. Our proposed model of the influences of noncommissioned work on individual creativity limits itself to three overt factors. This is done for reasons of simplicity and to follow the conventional standards of measurement. Noncommissioned work could have additional important antecedents and may create substantive problems in organizations that routinely change innovation initiatives or possess characteristics that do not support innovation.⁷² Thus far, the standard approach to measurement in the

literature largely has been cross-sectional and often one-dimensional (solely measuring willingness to take risks, for example). However, several authors have commented on creativity's more longitudinal nature.⁷³ This understanding of the creative processes suggests that a longitudinal approach to measurement may be needed to adequately test creative practices such as noncommissioned work.

Conclusion

While creativity and innovation represent a growing interest to organizations seeking a competitive advantage, many organizations still consider the methods for enhancing creativity and inspiring innovation a mystery. However, many companies have begun to practice noncommissioned work. While this practice has been written about often in the practitioner literature, scholarly literature heretofore has largely ignored it. The primary intent of this article is to create a foundation for further research, establishing definitions for future use and proposing a model for additional research.

Moreover, we hope that it serves as a call to action for practitioners, encouraging them to experiment with providing employees structured periods of autonomy. We recognize that many managers and senior executives may be initially hesitant to implement such a program. After all, what if the only work produced during that free time results in failure? We believe this article makes the case for the value of those failures in context of the overall process of creativity. In this light, we conclude with an anecdotal story from Bayles and Orland's *Art & Fear*, a provocative exploration into the process of making art.⁷⁴ The authors tell the story of a ceramics class divided into two groups by their teacher. One group would be graded on how much they produced within the designated time. The other would be graded on the quality of the one work they created. At the end of the semester, it was the quantity group that produced the most quality works. Bayles and Orland conclude that "while the 'quantity' group was busy churning out piles of work – and learning from their mistakes – the 'quality' group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay".⁷⁵

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