



MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR WHITE SPACE

BY VINCE THOMPSON

Every manager has white space in his or her day. Successful managers take advantage of their white space and use it as a time to brainstorm new ideas or work on things outside their normal job scope.

What exactly is “white space”? White spaces are those gaps in your calendar in between meetings and other planned activities. Many managers fill that time by replying to e-mail or making phone calls. And while keeping in communication with people is certainly important, it’s not always the best use of white space. In fact, those managers who are truly successful and fulfilled use their white space to connect their personal passions with their professional goals.

For example, consider the story of Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Computers. When Jobs was in college, he took a class in calligraphy and developed a passion for the artistic style of writing. Years later, when he was helping to design the first Apple computer, he questioned why users had only one font choice, especially considering that calligraphy and other font styles were so powerful for expressing ideas. As a result, Apple computers were the first to have multiple font choices, which in turn accelerated font availability in DOS-

based computers. That’s just one example of how someone was able to connect a personal passion with something work related.

But not all white space activity has to connect to your passions or hobbies. Sometimes simply using your white space to think about things differently is enough to give your company the competitive edge it needs. In order to use your white space to create new opportunities for your company, consider the following suggestions.

1. Study the Business of Your Passion.

No matter what your hobby or passion, there’s an entire industry devoted to that one thing. So study the business of your passion and look for parallels that you can bring into your company. For example, suppose you work for a computer company, and your passion is NASCAR. If you were to study the business of NASCAR, you’d learn that NASCAR is able to take category exclusive sponsorships and cut them down to a granular level. Intrigued by that idea, you may start thinking how your company could duplicate something like that. Perhaps you come up with the idea to sell category exclusive sponsorships to computer software, utilities, and peripherals companies, where they get advertising space on your computer boxes. Not only does this idea help your company form relationships with other vendors, but it also helps increase the company’s revenue.

The goal is to take aspects of your passion or hobby and see if you can apply it to your company in any way. Use your passions to “connect

the dots” at work by uncovering new solutions to challenges and unique opportunities for growth. If you’re going to use this white space time to pursue some open-ended projects, why not focus on projects where you have some kind of a passion? The things you love and know are ultimately going to give you ideas you can act upon.

2. Network Outside of Your Industry.

Another option is to spend your white space time talking to your peers in other industries. Go to their events, trade shows, and conferences to get a feel for how the industry works and solves problems. Doing so enables you to get a completely different perspective on

how to address challenges your company is facing.

Also, develop relationships with people who are at a similar level as you are or who have a similar scope of responsibility as you do, but who work in completely different industries. So if you’re an accountant in a software company, for example, talk to accountants in manufacturing or professional services companies. Your standards and practices may be very different, but your peers have likely come up with some ideas and solutions that you can apply to your company.

3. Be Your Competitor for a Day.

Use your white space time to write your competitor’s sales pitch. This will help you understand what your competitors are saying about themselves



TEAM TIP

Keep a running list of ideas for how you might invest your “white space” time. By having several ideas at your fingertips, you can make the most productive use of your “free time” and avoid becoming bogged down in less meaningful tasks.

and what the opportunities are for your company. For example, if you worked at Dell and had to write a sales pitch for Compaq, you would ask yourself what you could say about Compaq that only applied to them. Then you'd realize the true differences between your two companies and could figure out how to capitalize on those differences.

A variation is to use your white space time to think like your customer. If you were looking for the products or services your company offers, what would be important to you? Write out a list of the top 10 things you would look for in a product or service provider. Then you can assess how well your company really meets the needs of your ideal prospect.

Make the Minutes Matter

We all have parts of our job that are not completely defined. We all also have time in our day that's unaccounted for—white space in our daily calendar that's prime for opportunity. So really look at what you're charged to do and then assess how much leeway for creativity and unconventional thinking you have.

Realize that outside of your core responsibilities there are wonderful things you can do for your company that can capitalize on who you are and what skills you have. In fact, many business success stories are of people who drew on their past and/or their interests and brought that into the business. So don't be afraid to explore your passions. Look at the business behind your passions.

Keep an eye on the business landscape, talk to other people in various industries, and be open to different perspectives. When you have time to explore non-traditional things, carve out some time to do that in the white space of your week. You may only have a couple of hours to devote to this, but those few hours can make a world of difference. ■

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