


IRI | INNOVATORS 2025 | SUMMIT

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***Maurice Holland Award Winner Address:
Rhetorical or Genuine Slack Time?
Temporal Attributes, Barriers, and
Outcomes of Slack Time***

Heidi M. J. Bertels, PhD



The background of the image is a dense collection of multi-colored lottery balls. The colors include green, yellow, pink, white, blue, and orange. Each ball has a black number printed on it. Some numbers are clearly visible, such as 7, 69, 36, 73, 26, 84, 88, 54, 86, 15, 30, 33, 5, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100. The balls are scattered across the entire frame, creating a vibrant and busy pattern.

If you were offered a choice between two lotteries, one where you could win **money** and one where you could win **time**, which one would you pick?

Is time the one truly **non-renewable** resource? (Drucker 2006)



RESOURCE-BASED THEORY: VRIO FRAMEWORK

	V VALUABLE	R RARE	I INIMITABLE	O ORGANIZED	
	NO				COMPETITIVE DISADVANTAGE
	YES	NO			COMPETITIVE PARITY
	YES	YES	NO		TEMPORARY COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
	YES	YES	YES	NO	UNUSED COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
	YES	YES	YES	YES	SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Time is a **valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable** resource for organizations.



Effective utilization of time

(Barney 1991; Barney, Wright, and Ketchen 2001).

**Sustained competitive advantage
& long term success**

*"I don't care if people spend money... don't get me wrong, if they waste money, I get a little irritated, but I would rather have them do that than waste **time**, because I can always find more money. I can't find more **time**."*

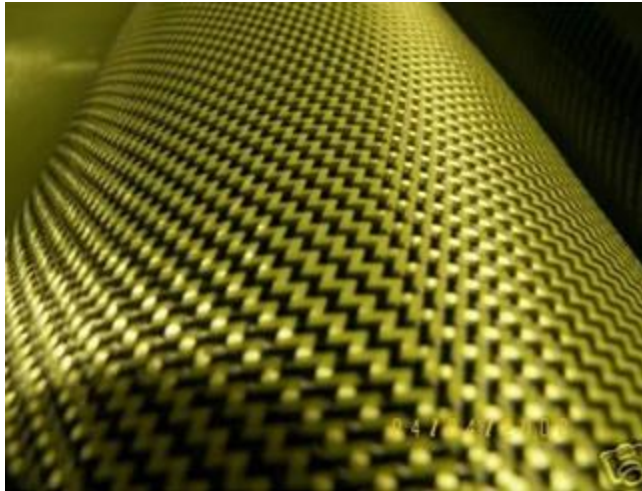
—Director of Strategic Innovation, Label and Packaging



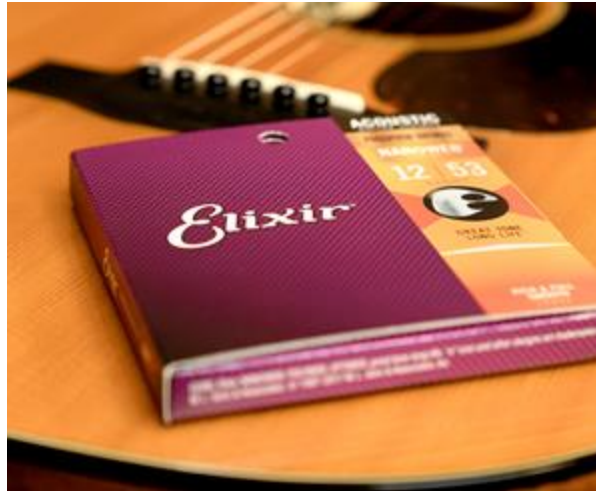
SLACK TIME aka DISCRETIONARY TIME

- Slack time is time during which employees can work on projects of their choosing (Rahrovani et al. 2018; Burkus and Oster 2012).
- Think Google's 20% time, 3M's 15% time etc.

Kevlar (DuPont)



Elixir (Gore)



Avastin (Genentech)



CURRENT SLACK TIME PRACTICE

**SLACK
TIME**



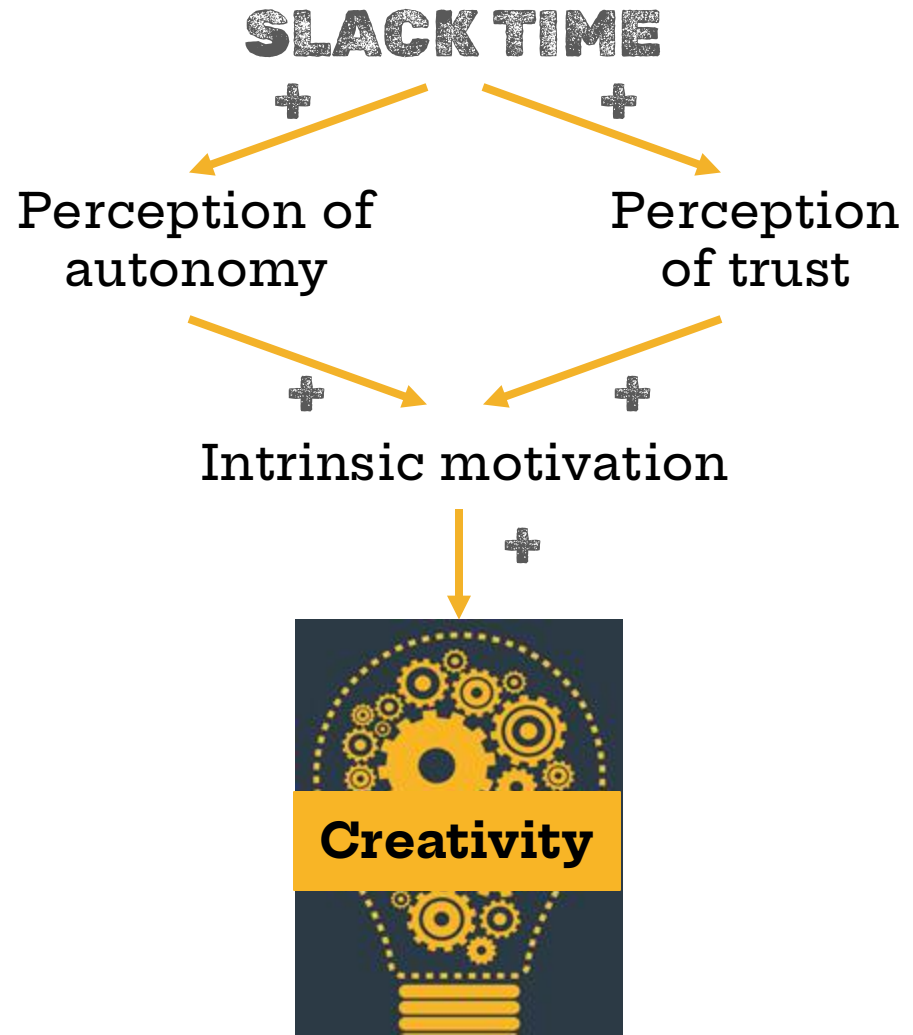
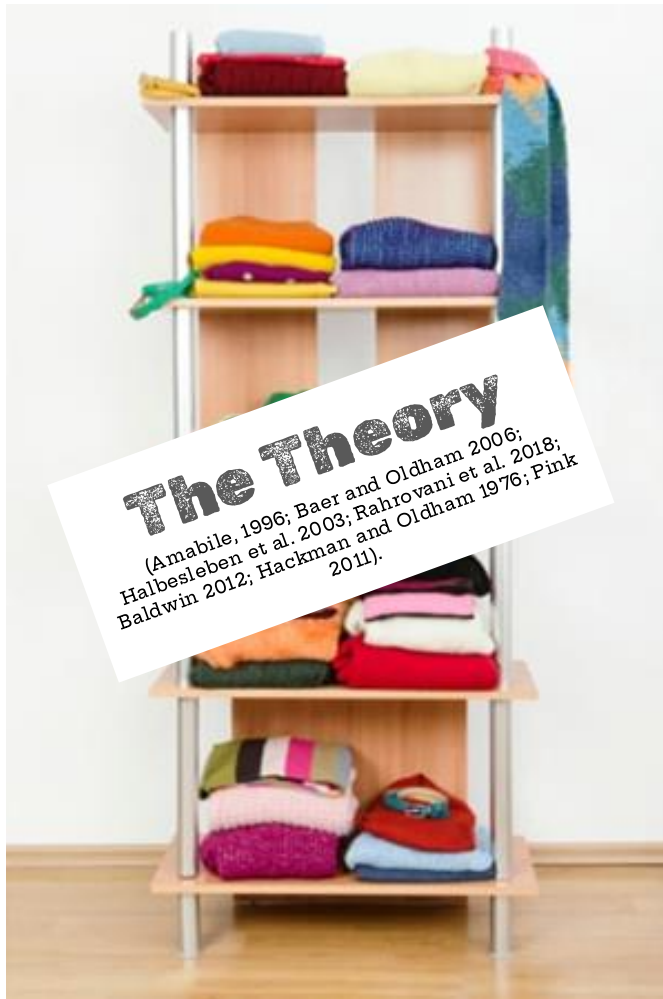
BLACK BOX



**AMAZING
INNOVATION**

"I'm not sure we organize it so much as we let it happen."

—Engineering Director, Manufacturing



SLACK TIME



- **Ambiguous** effect of slack time on innovation and creativity (Agrawal et al. 2018; Medase 2020; van Uden et al. 2017)
- Implementation has proven **challenging and expensive.**
- Some organizations have **abandoned** slack time (Rahrovani et al. 2018; Mainemelis and Ronson 2006).

Three wooden blocks with question marks are scattered on a light blue wooden surface. One block is in the top left, and two are in the bottom left and bottom center. The question marks are carved into the top face of each block.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does slack time get used in employees' day-to-day work practices?
2. When is slack time prevented from being used effectively in organizations?
3. What outcomes can organizations expect from implementing slack time initiatives?



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METHODS

A close-up photograph of a person's bare feet standing on a patch of dry, yellowish-brown grass. The person's right foot is in the foreground, with the toes pointing towards the bottom right. The left foot is slightly behind and to the left. The background is dark and out of focus, showing more grass and possibly some small plants. The overall lighting is soft, and the colors are muted, with a focus on the texture of the grass and the skin of the feet.

Grounded theory (Gioia et al. 2010; Edmondson 1999; Glaser and Strauss 1967)

A systematic methodology in qualitative research where theories are developed from data.

SAMPLE



Function	Industry	Role(s) related to slack time
Senior director of commercialization	Paint and coatings	Organizes
Research fellow	Paint and coatings	Organizes and uses
Senior vice-president of innovation	Coatings, adhesives, sealants	Allocates and uses
Principal scientist	Coatings, adhesives, sealants	Uses
Senior scientist	Energy	Uses
Director	Energy	Allocates
Senior engineer	Aerospace engineering	Uses
Director of asset innovation	Energy	Allocates and uses
Senior R&D scientist	Paint and coatings	Organizes and uses
Director of monolithic technology	Refractories	Allocates and organizes
Technology & integration lead	Aerospace engineering	Uses
Director & chief scientist	Plasma systems	Uses
Technology scout	Label and packing materials	Allocates and uses
Advanced technology manager	Manufacturing	Allocates and uses
Engineering director	Manufacturing (consumer goods)	Organizes
Director of strategic innovation	Label and packing materials	Allocates
Vice president of strategy and alliances	Print and digital documents	Allocates
Senior director of R&D strategy & portfolio management	Consumer food	Organizes
Strategic marketing manager of recycled materials	Refractories	Uses
CTO	Refractories	Organizes

GROUNDING THEORY

(Gioia et al. 2010; Edmondson 1999; Glaser and Strauss 1967)

Instead of starting with a hypothesis deduced from theory, researchers collect data first and develop new theories “grounded” in that data (inductive).



**SIMILAR TO SORTING THROUGH A MESSY CLOSET AND
CREATING A WELL-ORGANIZED SYSTEM**

The background image shows a cluttered closet. Clothes are hanging on hangers, including a red patterned top, a yellow top, and a grey jacket. On the floor, there are several cardboard boxes, some of which are open and contain more clothes. The overall scene suggests a process of sorting through or organizing a large amount of clothing.

OPEN CODING

- Empty your closet and look at each piece individually
- Label based on what it is
 - E.g., t-shirt
- In interview data, give each meaningful piece of data a label describing what it is about
 - E.g., difficult to ignore urgent customer-facing issues

AXIAL CODING



- Put all like items in a similar pile
 - E.g., t-shirts versus pants
- Group all similar items together by looking for relationships between your labels
 - E.g., issues that increase opportunity cost of slack time



SELECTIVE CODING

- Arrange your closet based on what you wear most often
- Identify the most important categories
 - The ones that keep appearing or seem central to understanding what is happening
 - They become the foundation of your theory
 - E.g., barriers to using slack time



FINDINGS



DATA STRUCTURE

First-order Concepts

Second-order Themes

Categories

- Organizational: downtimes and bottlenecks
- Individual: inspiration and momentum

Wave occurrence

Temporal Attributes

- Food (work) sloping off trays employees are carrying

Endemic overcommitment

Barriers to
Usage

- Pursuing slack time requires unnatural discipline akin to ignoring a fire

High opportunity cost

- Spectrum of innovativeness
- Applications across fields

Diversification in sources,
innovativeness, and applications

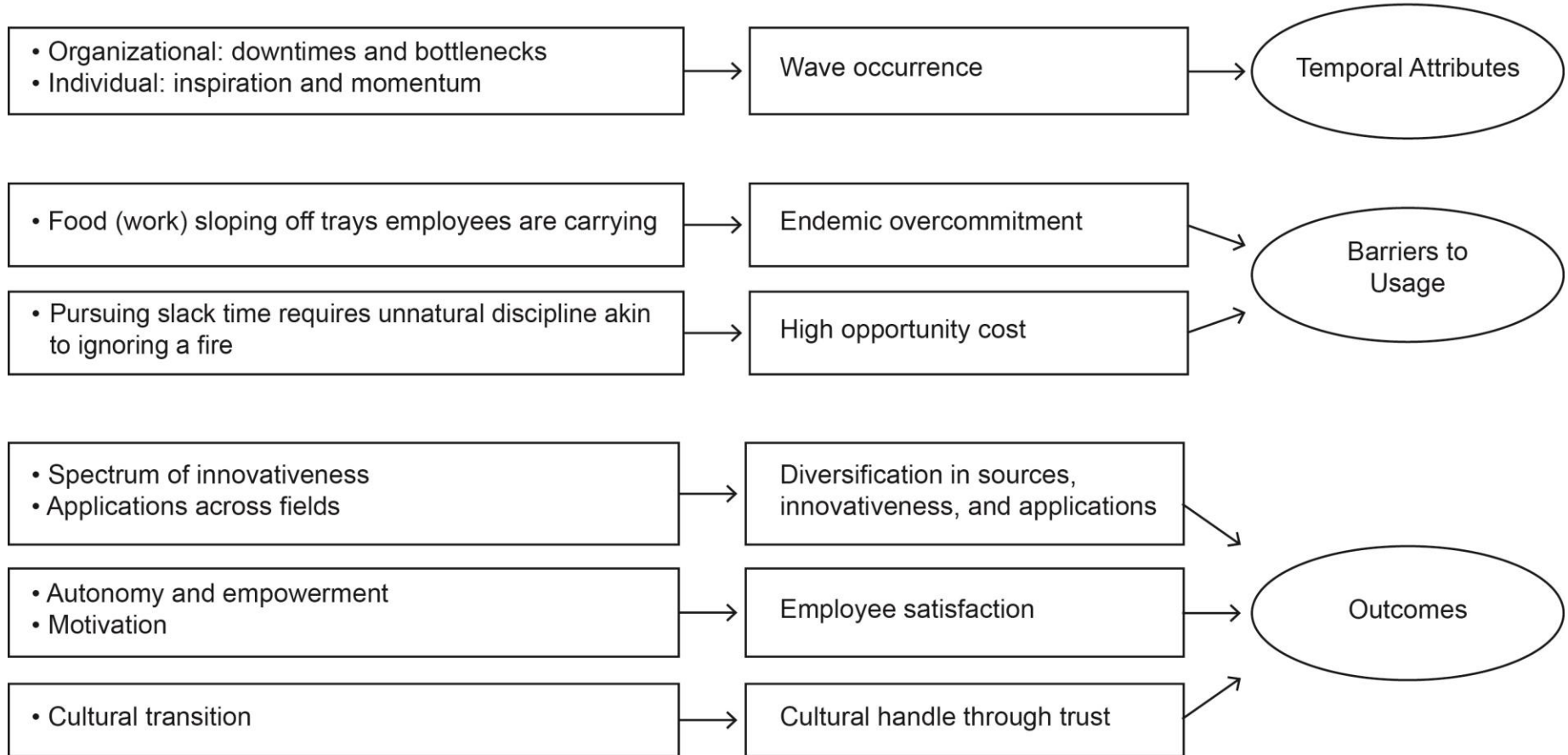
- Autonomy and empowerment
- Motivation

Employee satisfaction

Outcomes

- Cultural transition

Cultural handle through trust



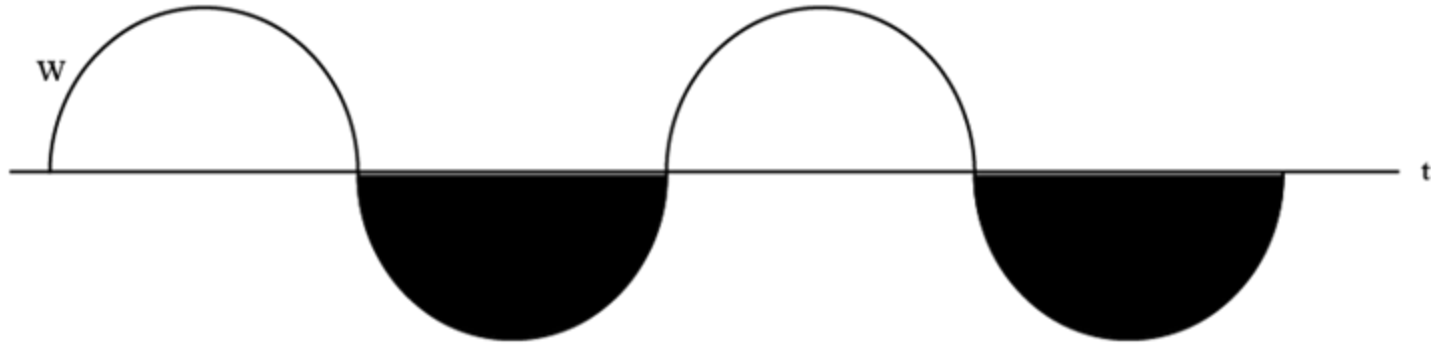


TEMPORAL ATTRIBUTES: WAVE OCCURRENCE



“I’ve seen some months where there’s more done on the innovation and some months there is less so it’s fitting in nicely, because you would expect (gestures waves) like that.”

—Senior VP of Innovation in Coatings, Adhesives, and Sealants



t = time

w = workload




time famine



time slack

BARRIERS TO SLACK TIME



A person is seen from behind, carrying a large stack of striped beach cushions. They are walking on a sandy beach towards the ocean. Several other striped beach umbrellas are visible in the background. The scene is bright and sunny.

A general overcommitment of employee
time was prevalent in the sample.

ENDEMIC OVERCOMMITMENT



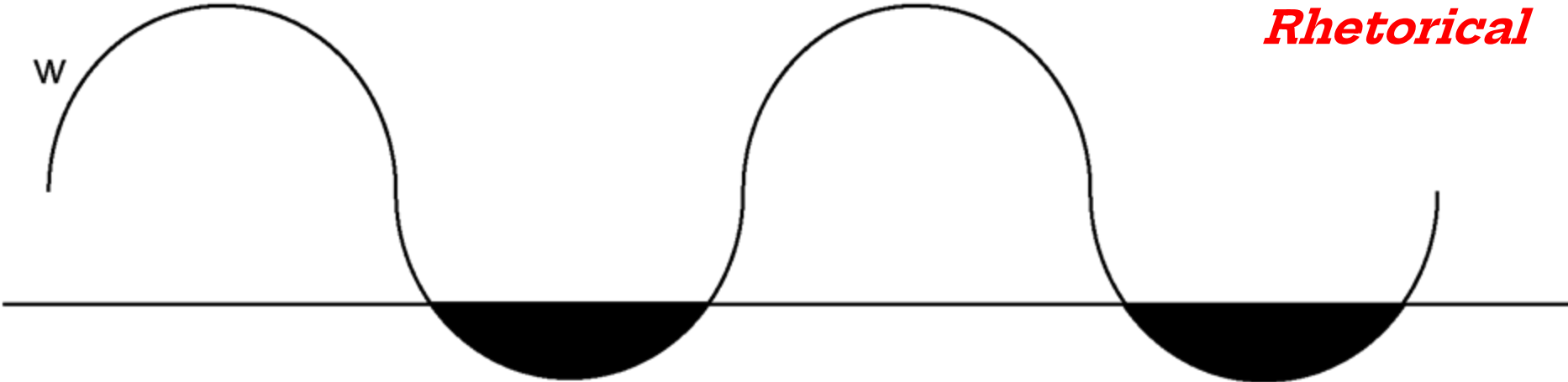
"People don't carry plates, they carry trays, and the food is sloping off the trays as it is. Until everything remains on the tray perfectly, I don't believe that it's appropriate that people follow their own creative juices."

—Principal Scientist in Coatings, Adhesives, and Sealants

ENDEMIC OVERCOMMITMENT

EFFECT ON SLACK TIME USAGE

Situation A: Overload, time shortage, >100% engagement



t = time

w = workload



time famine



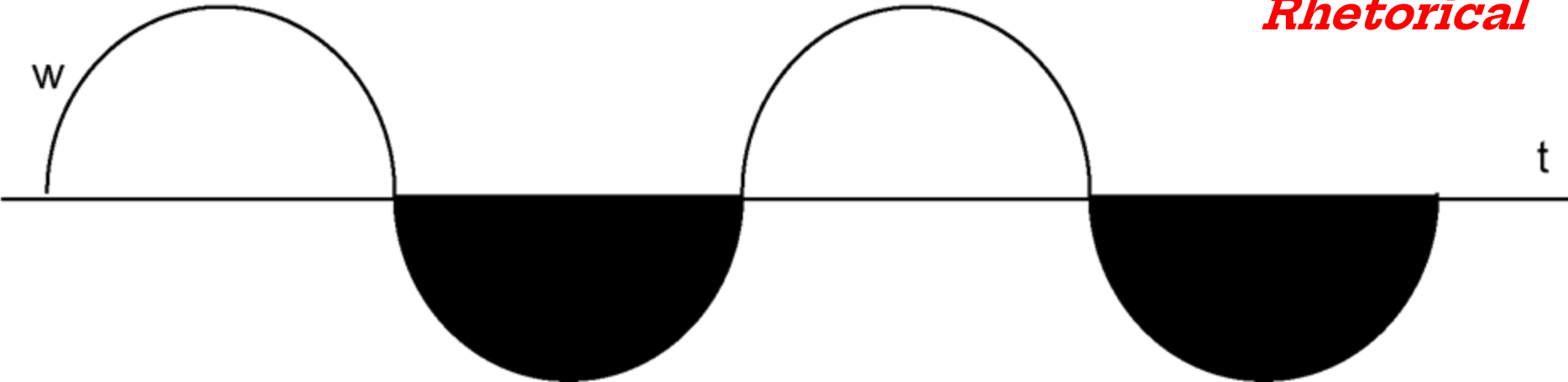
time slack



slack time

Situation B: Full-time load, time adequacy, 100% engagement

Rhetorical



t = time

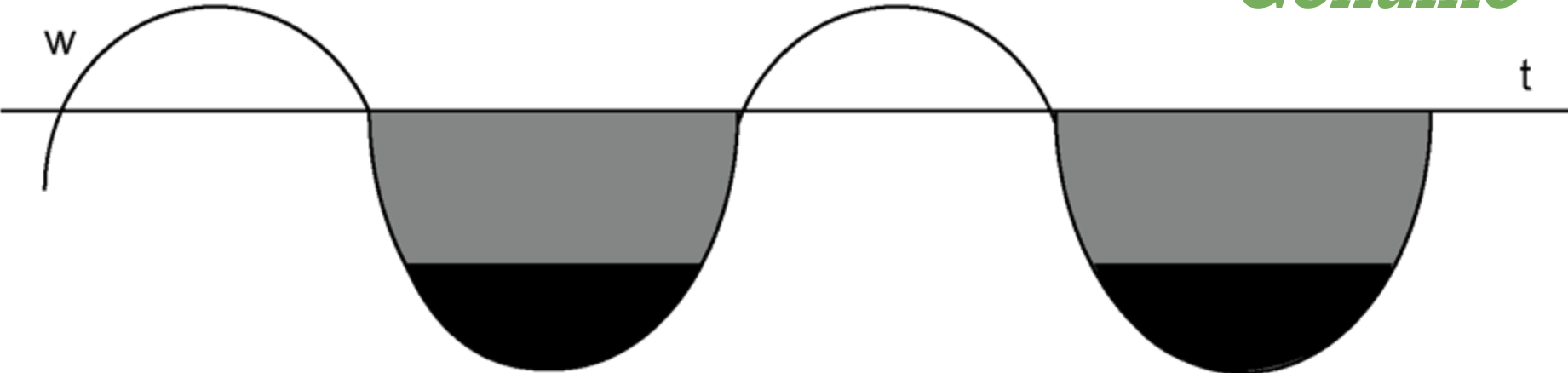
w = workload

-  time famine
-  time slack
-  slack time

- Temporal offsetting: periods of time famine and time slack cancel each other out
- Casual observance suggests someone has discretionary time; slack time “illusion.”




Situation C: Less than full-time load, slack time, <100% engagement

Genuine



t = time

w = workload

-  time famine
-  time slack
-  slack time

A red alarm clock is positioned on the left side of the image, partially obscured by a spiral-bound notebook. The notebook's cover is white and features the text 'TIME FOR ACTION' in large, bold, black capital letters. The background is a solid light purple color.

MINIMIZE ENDEMIC OVERCOMMITMENT

- Assess current state of employee commitment levels
 - >100%, 100%, <100%
 - Rhetorical or genuine slack time?
- Design roles at <100% committed so time slack > time famine (= intentionally allocate resources/budget)

BARRIERS TO SLACK TIME

A yellow metal crowd control barrier, commonly used at events or construction sites. It features a series of vertical posts connected by horizontal rails. A horizontal yellow band is stretched across the middle of the barrier, serving as a background for the text. The barrier is set against a plain, light gray background.

OPPORTUNITY COST TOO HIGH

"It's like putting out a fire. There is a lot of adrenaline produced when I do those urgent projects instead of the innovation type of projects.... so how do you really fight against that as a biological challenge?" —Advanced Technology Manager, Manufacturing



A red alarm clock is partially visible on the left side of the image. In front of it is a white spiral-bound notepad with the words "TIME FOR ACTION" written in large, bold, black capital letters. The background is a solid light purple color.

MINIMIZE: OPPORTUNITY COST

- Evaluate if participants are sufficiently isolated from urgency of core work
- Establish protection mechanism
 - E.g., “on-call” system



OUTCOMES

Diversified sources of creativity -> spectrum of innovativeness

“We were self-consciously saying that not every exploratory project will result in a new product development or a Stage Gate type project. They may be working on process improvement or a new test method or what we call a knowledge gap.”

—Research fellow, paint and coatings

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MAXIMIZE: DIVERSIFIED SOURCES

Strategically allocate slack time to employees based on their core roles and desired innovation outcomes to create a balanced early-stage innovation portfolio

Employee Satisfaction

"I think that's the personality type we tend to attract . . . people who don't want to be micromanaged. They like to have that creative freedom and ability to develop their own expertise in areas that they're interested in. It's in our best interest to let them pursue it. Because that's how we get good new ideas, and it engages the team as well, giving them that autonomy. I think that's why we have people who've been with the organization for 30 years."

—Engineering director, manufacturing



MAXIMIZE: EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

A red alarm clock is positioned on the left side of the image, partially obscured by a white spiral-bound notepad. The notepad is open, and the words "TIME FOR ACTION" are written in large, bold, black capital letters on its page. The background is a solid light purple color.

**TIME
FOR
ACTION**

Strategically allocate
slack time to attract and
retain key employees

The background of the image is a close-up of a dark red wooden door with vertical grain. Two ornate metal door knockers are mounted on the door, one on the left and one on the right. The knockers are made of a dark, possibly bronze or blackened metal, and feature intricate carvings of what appear to be mythical creatures or figures. Each knocker has a large, circular ring at the bottom for knocking. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the wood and metal.

Cultural handle

"I think the biggest thing was making sure they felt that they were enabled to go do it. That was probably the best thing and realizing they all felt comfortable with it—finally, it took longer for some, easier for others, but I have a feeling that depended on how long they had been in a culture of it was a no."

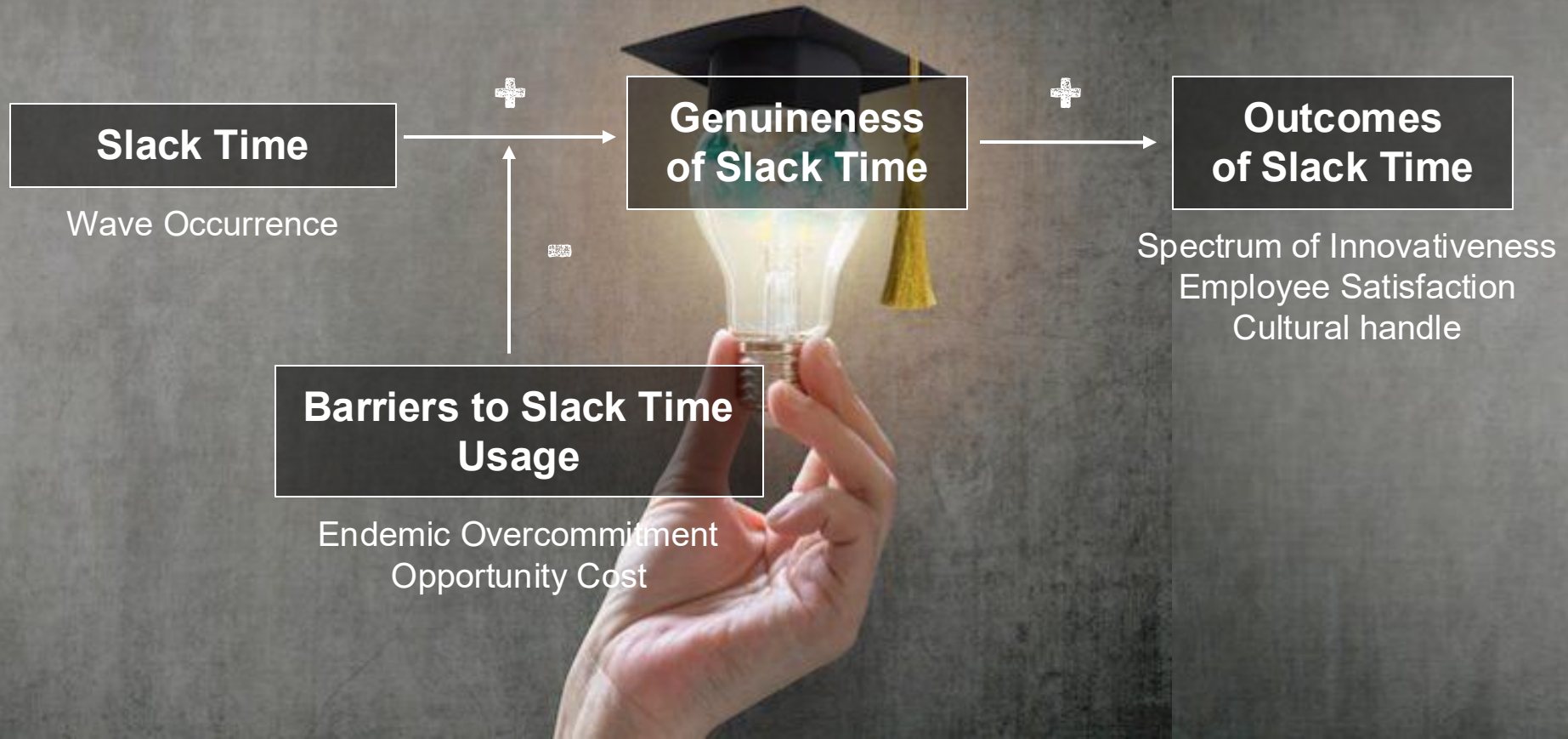
—Senior vice-president of innovation, coatings, adhesives, and sealants

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MAXIMIZE: CULTURAL HANDLE

Promote work with
higher chances of
failure by signaling
trust

THEORY



DESIGN YOUR SLACK TIME PROGRAM





Research-Technology Management

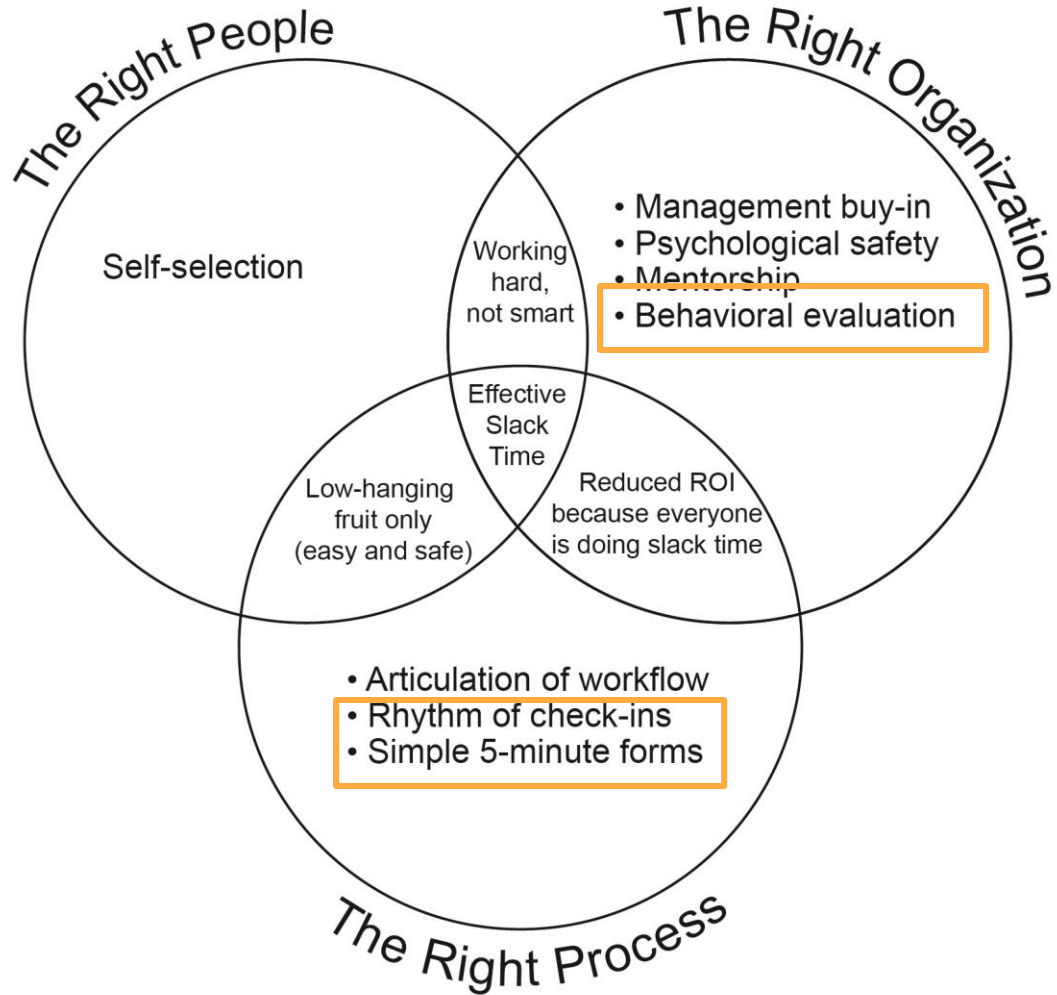
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Beyond Just “Free Time”—Designing Effective and Lasting Slack Time Programs in Organizations

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New Research:
An Action-Oriented Framework for
Driving Systemic Sustainability Change
Collectively.





Organizations need move beyond their boundaries to create system change through cross-industry collaborations that can address larger sustainability challenges collectively (Bansal, 2024).

But ... lack practical frameworks to make this transition happen.

- **How do we operationalize systems thinking in practical business terms?**
- **How do we manage sustainability beyond our organizational boundaries?**
- **How do we balance resilience with efficiency in daily operations?**



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Thank you!

