



INNOVATION RESEARCH
INTERCHANGE

Accelerating Value Creation

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

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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**."*

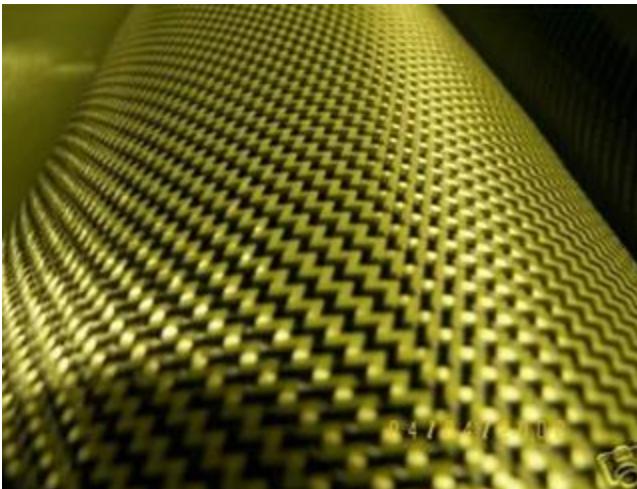
—Director of Strategic Innovation, Label and Packaging



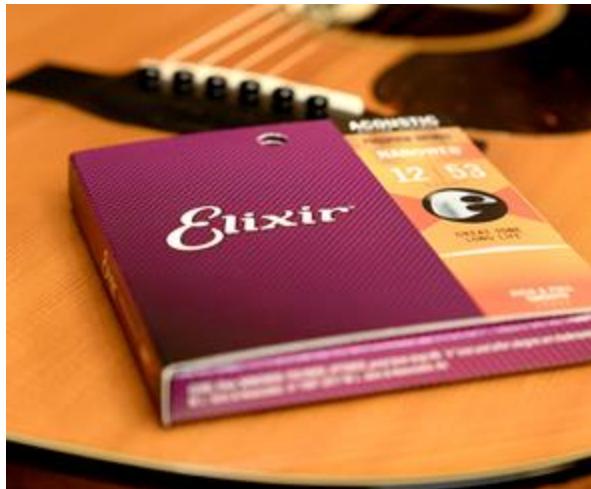
SLACK TIME aka DISCRETIONARY TIME

- 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.

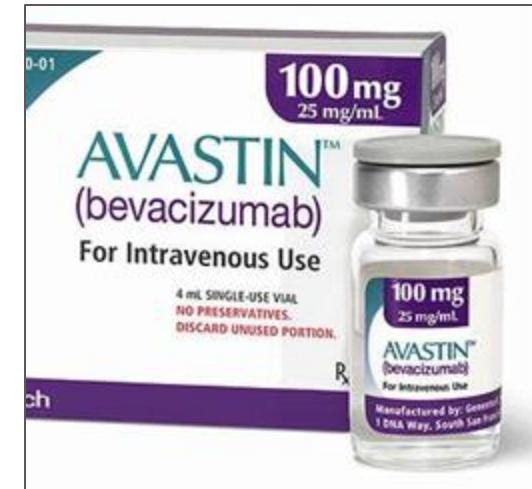
Kevlar (DuPont)



Elixir (Gore)



Avastin (Genentech)



CURRENT SLACK TIME PRACTICE

SLACK
TIME



BLACK BOX

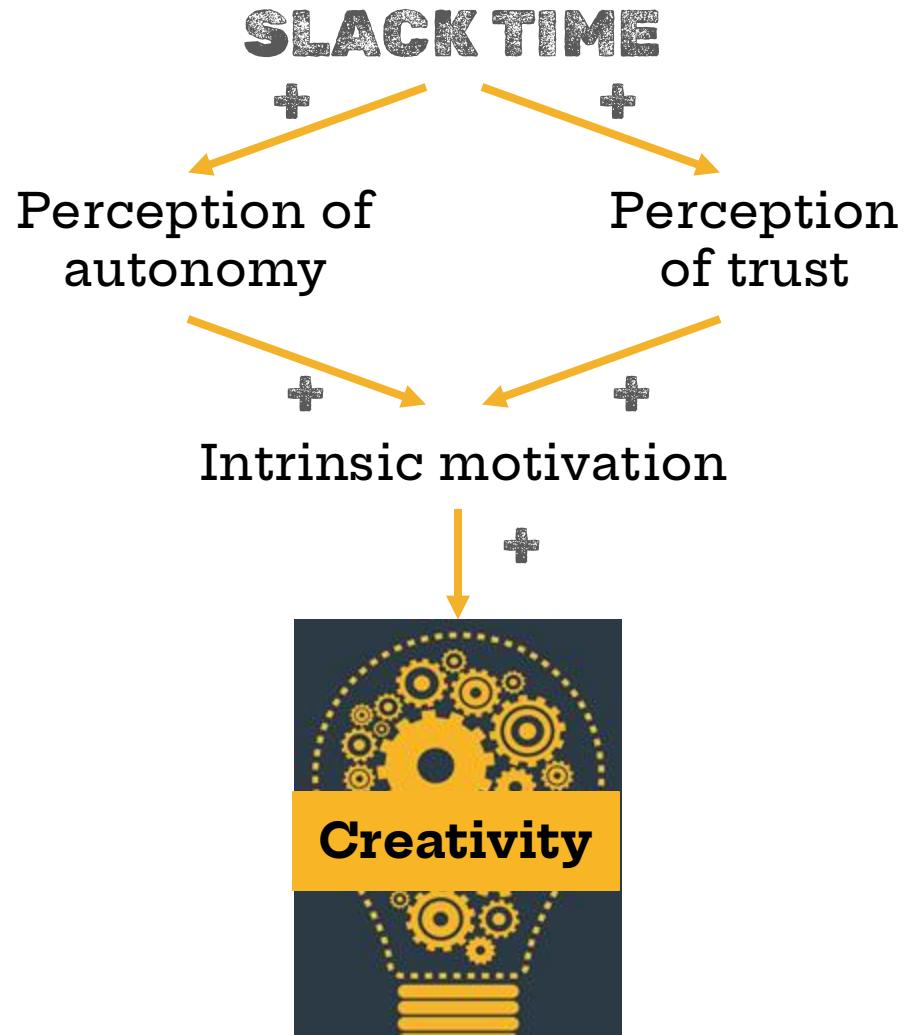
AMAZING
INNOVATION

“I’m not sure we organize it so much as we let it happen.”

—Engineering Director, Manufacturing



The Theory
(Amabile, 1996; Baer and Oldham 2006;
Halbesleben et al. 2003; Rahrovan et al. 2018;
Baldwin 2012; Hackman and Oldham 1976; Pink
2011).





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).

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?



Rhetorical or Genuine Slack Time? Temporal Attributes, Barriers, and Outcomes of Slack Time

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METHODS

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

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

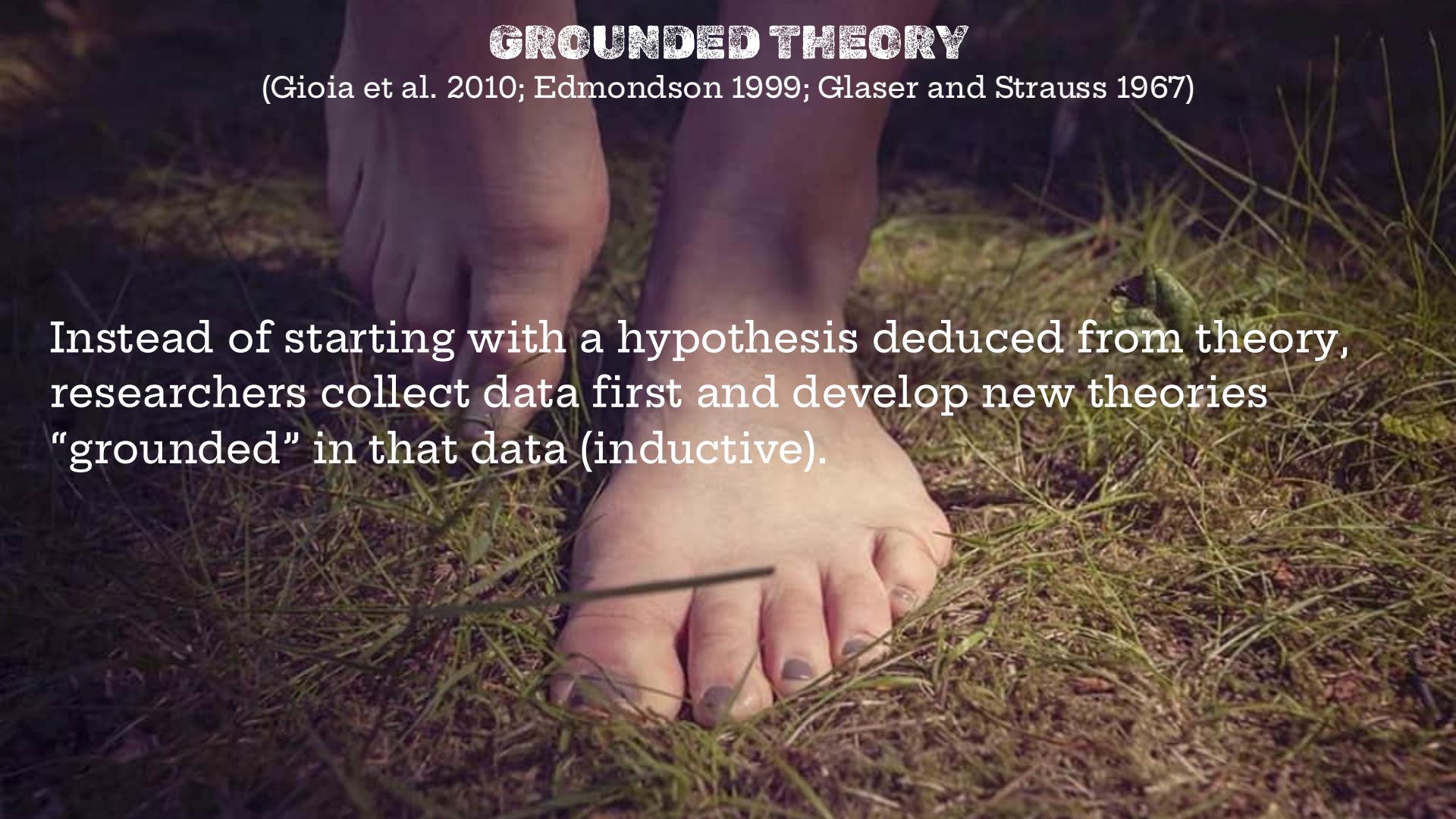
SAMPLE



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

GROUNDED 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**

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

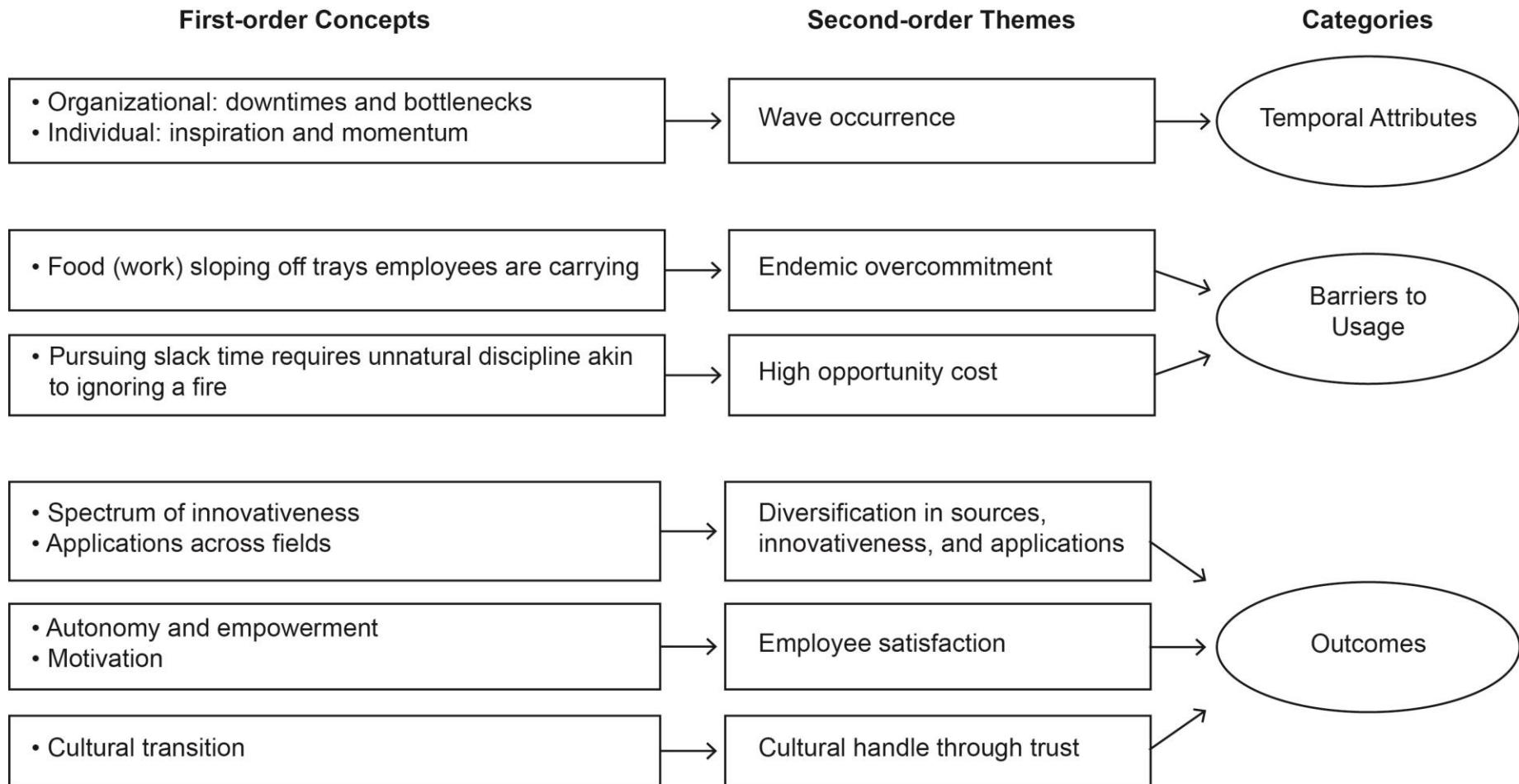
SELECTIVE CODING

- 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



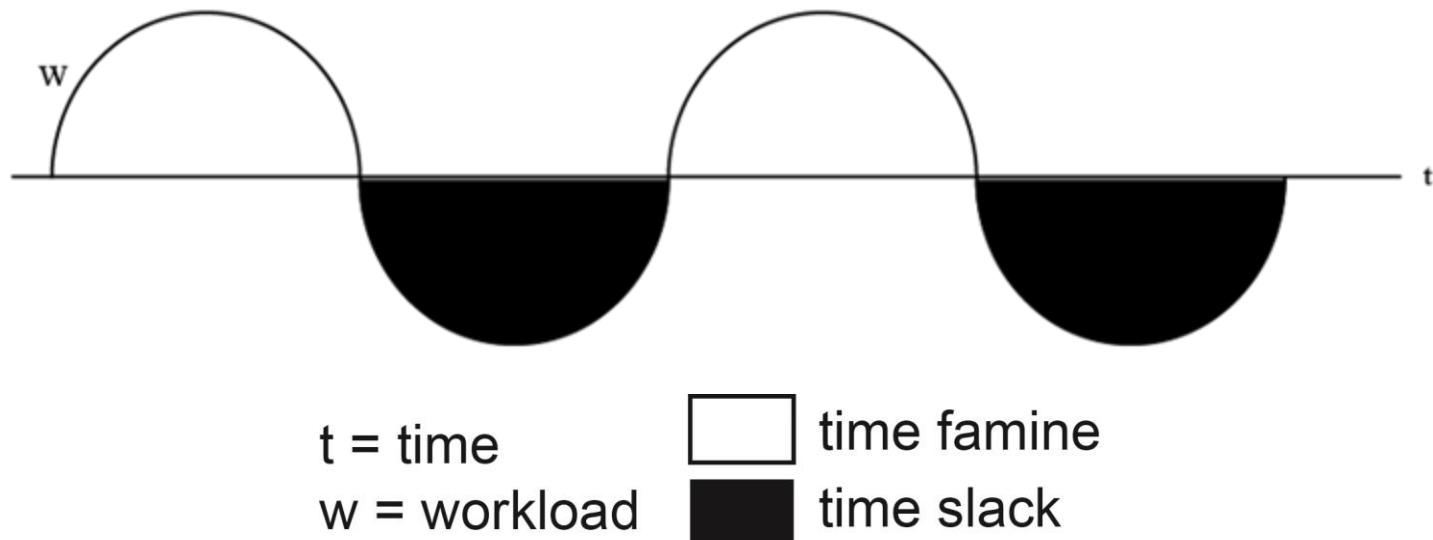


TEMPORAL ATTRIBUTES: WAVE OCCURRENCE



"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



BARRIERS TO SLACK TIME





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

ENDEMIC OVERCOMMITMENT



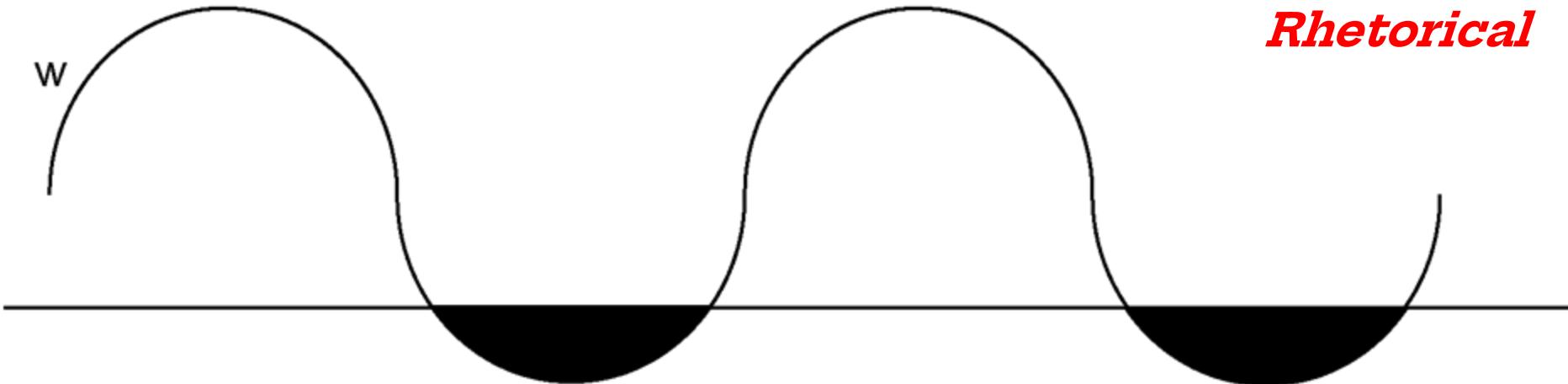
“People don't carry plates, they carry trays, and the food is sloping off the trays as it is. Until everything remains on the tray perfectly, I don't believe that it's appropriate that people follow their own creative juices.”

—Principal Scientist in Coatings, Adhesives, and Sealants

ENDEMIC OVERCOMMITMENT

EFFECT ON SLACK TIME USAGE

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



t = time

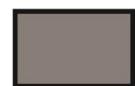
w = workload



time famine

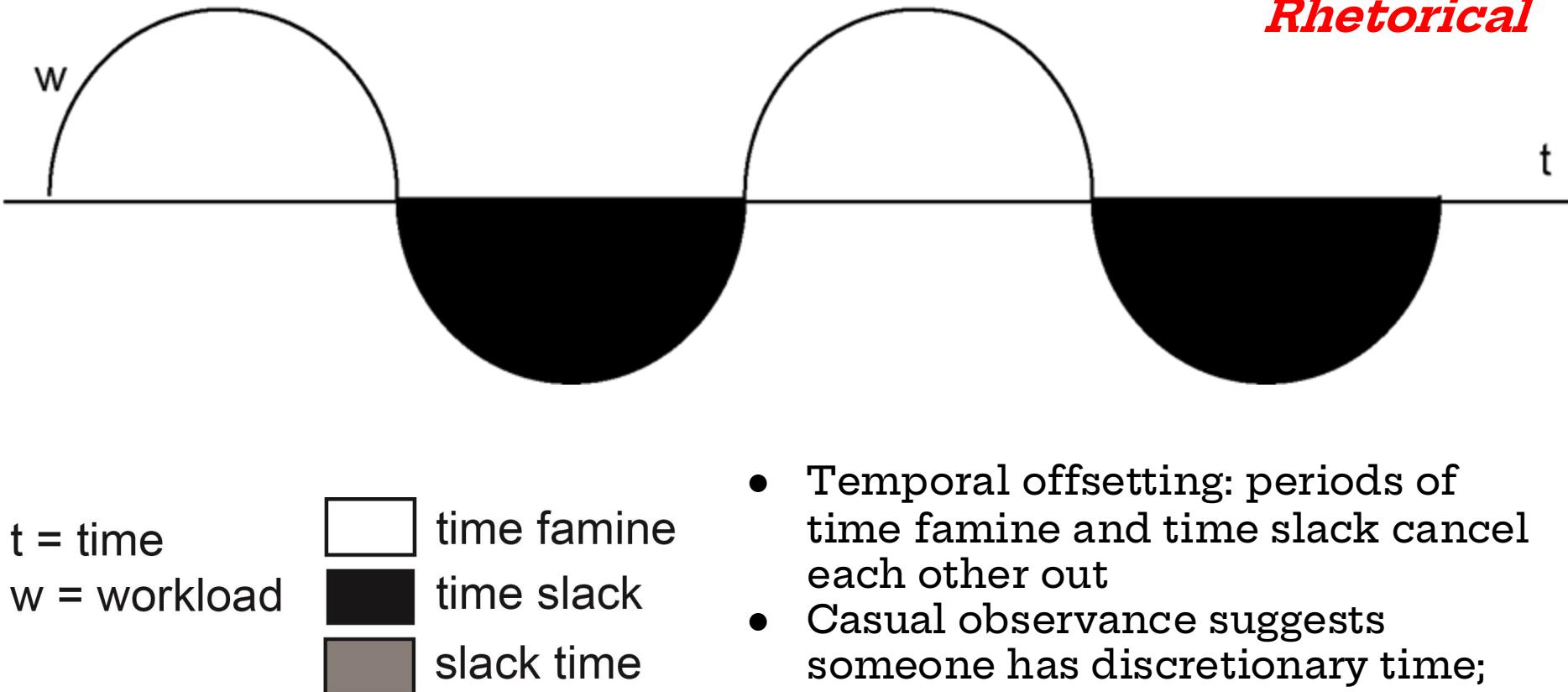


time slack

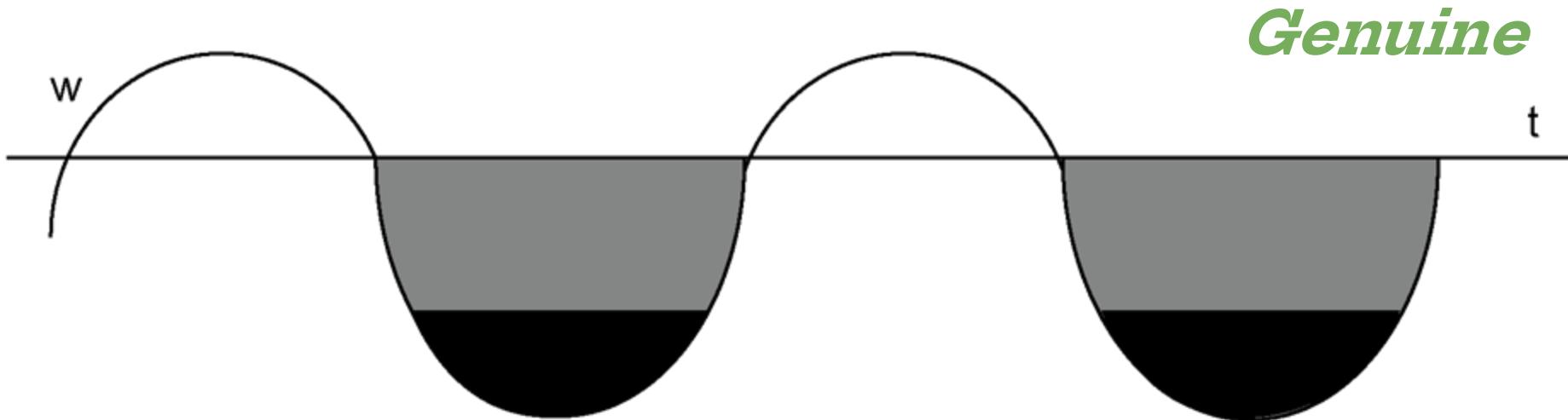


slack time

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



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



t = time

w = workload



time famine



time slack



slack time



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



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





**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



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

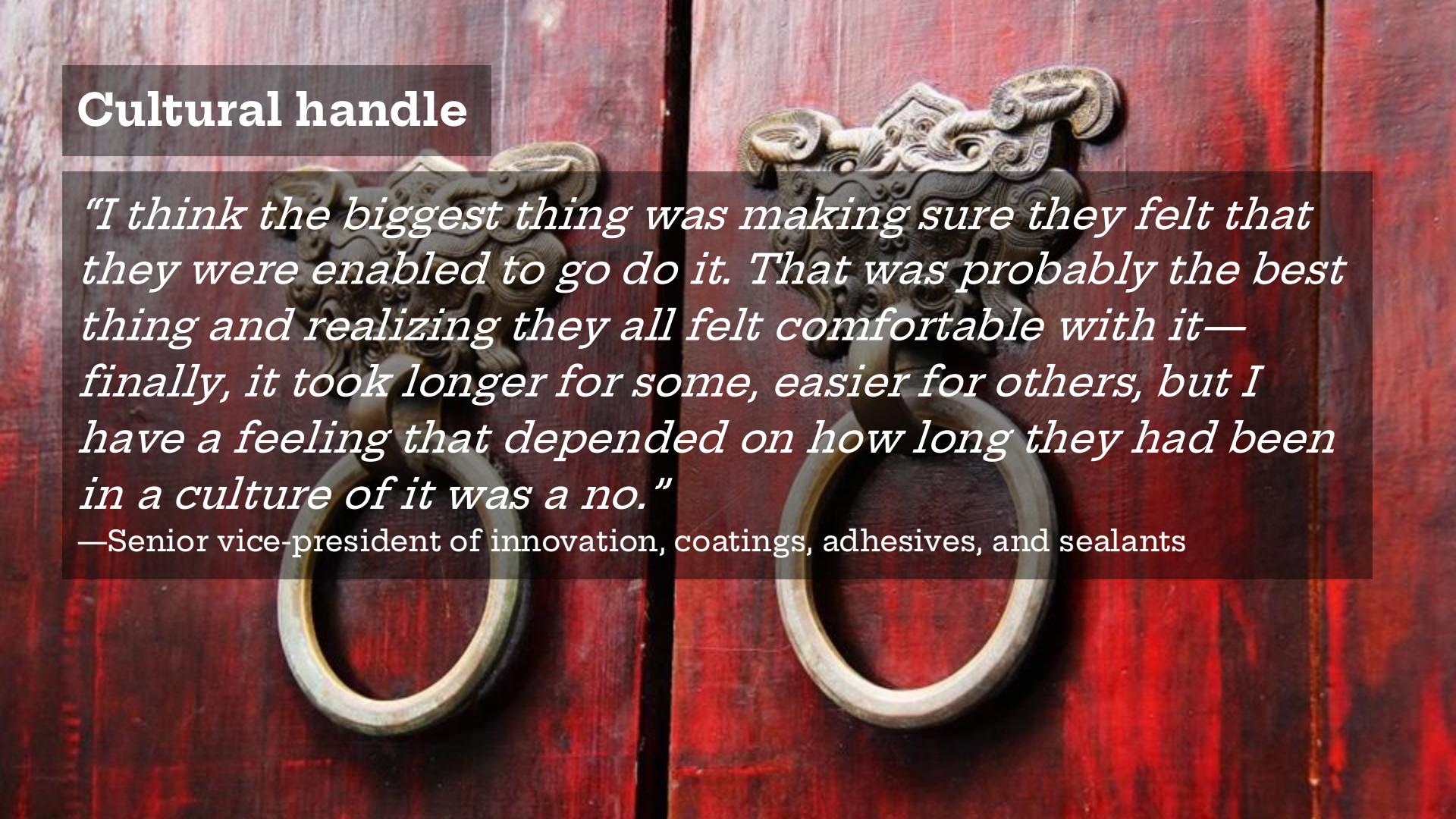




MAXIMIZE: EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Strategically allocate slack time to attract and retain key employees

Cultural handle

A close-up photograph of a traditional red wooden door. The door features a large, ornate brass handle on the left and a decorative brass pull on the right. The wood has a visible grain and some wear, particularly around the brass hardware.

"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."

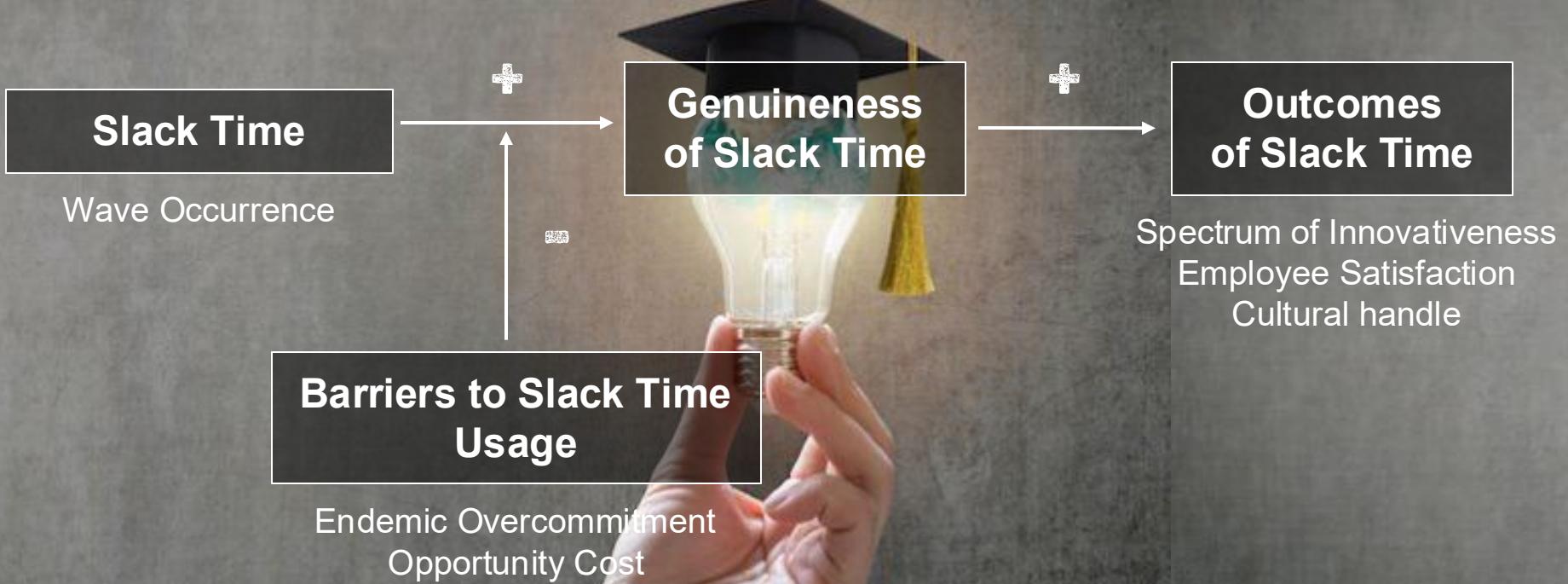
—Senior vice-president of innovation, coatings, adhesives, and sealants



MAXIMIZE: CULTURAL HANDLE

Promote work with higher chances of failure by signaling trust

THEORY



DESIGN YOUR SLACK TIME PROGRAM



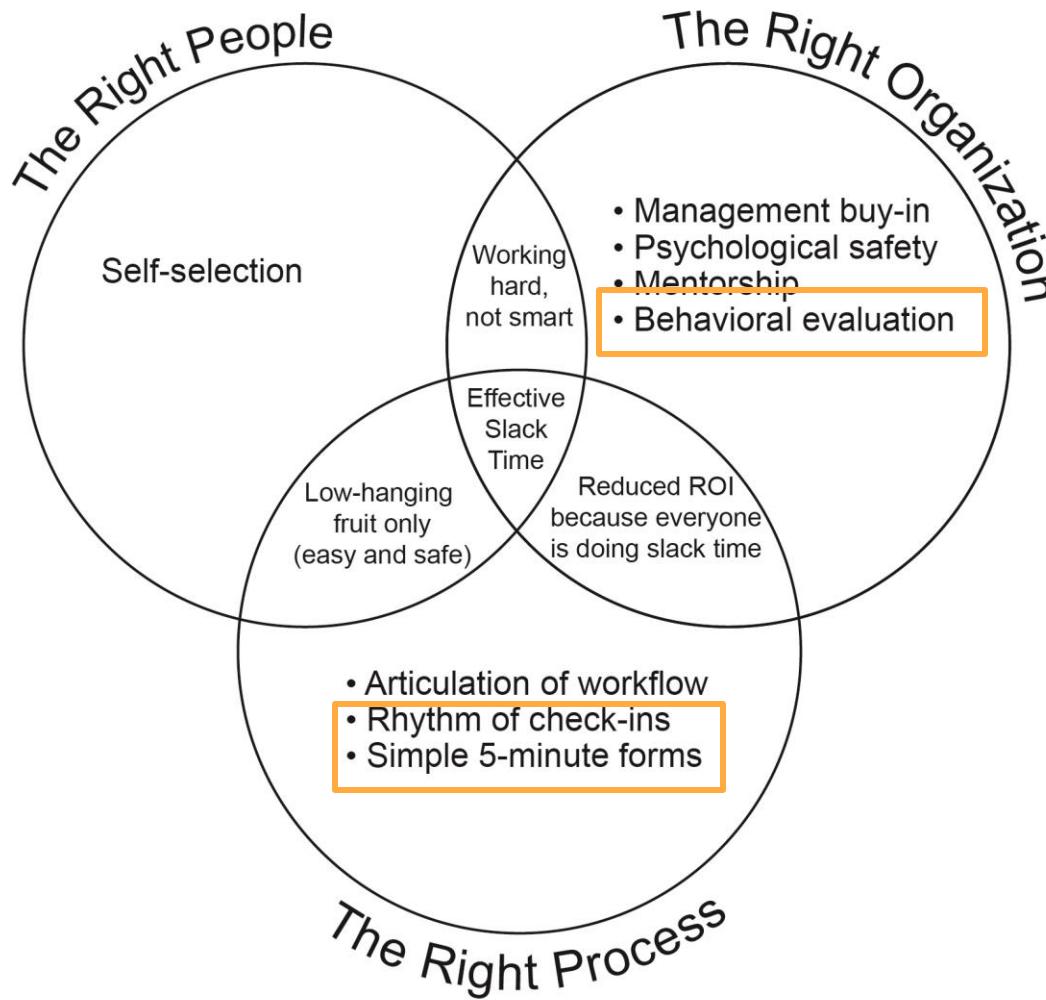


Beyond Just “Free Time”—Designing Effective and Lasting Slack Time Programs in Organizations

Heidi M. J. Bertels

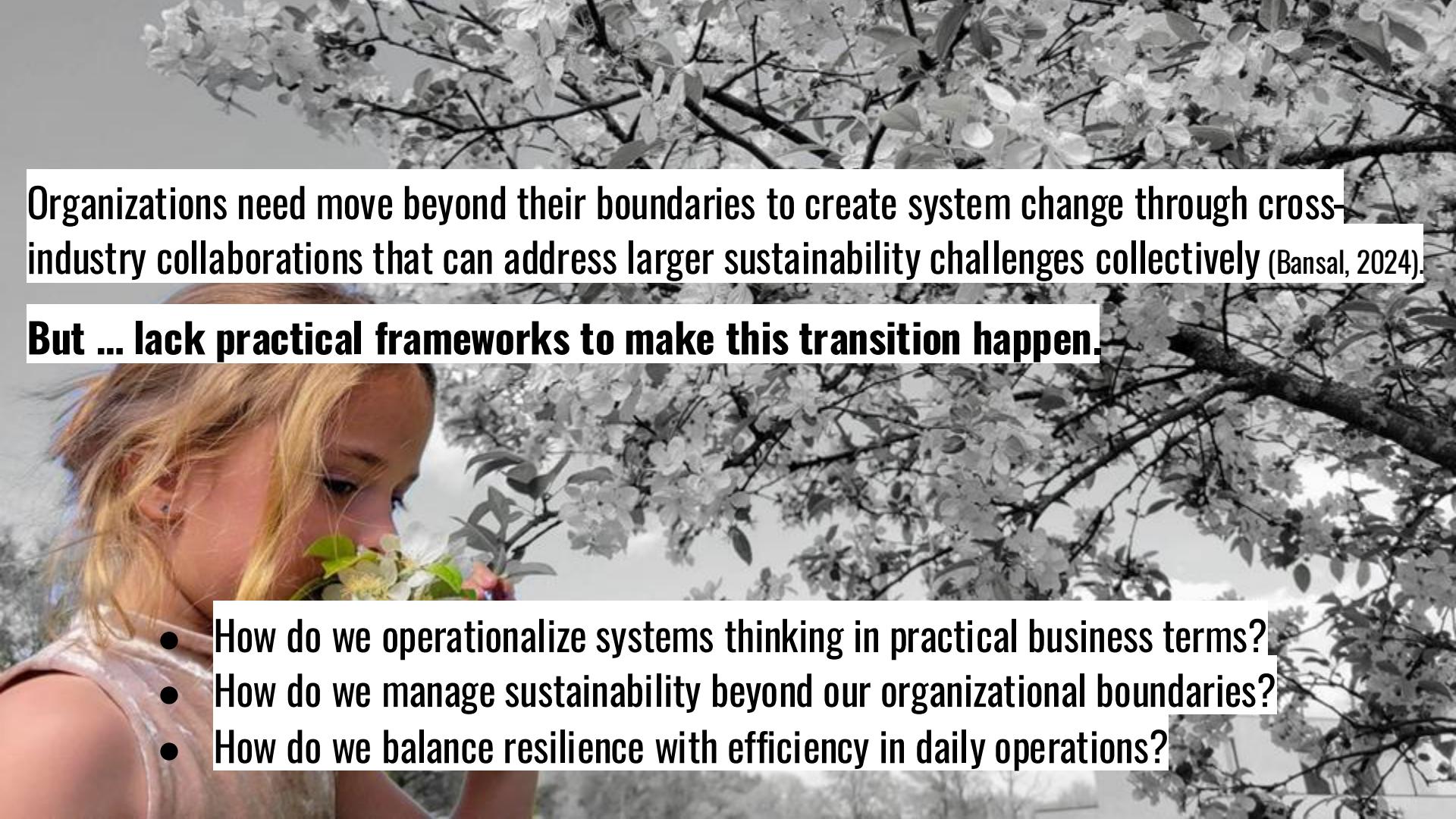
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New Research: An Action-Oriented Framework for Driving Systemic Sustainability Change Collectively.



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!