

# Why Your Office Isn't Like Google's

Most managers want to empower their workers, but reality can get in the way

by [Jack and Suzy Welch](#)

**What do you think about the Google model of HR management, with its flexible work schedules and employee empowerment?**

— Armando Castilla, Monterrey, Mexico

The first answer to your question is easy: We think Google's flexible work schedule policy, which freely permits employees to work off-site and encourages them to use one day a week to explore any kind of "what-if" project that interests them, is fine and probably harmless, if not completely predictable. After all, Google is not the first young, fast-growing, highly profitable company to tell its employees that work shouldn't feel "corporate." It's practically a Silicon Valley tradition. Likewise, it's practically a tradition for such policies to be scaled back if and when growth and profits slow. For Google, that situation seems unlikely in the near future, but longer-term we'd bet such flexibility will indeed be curtailed.

The second part of your question—about empowerment—is more complicated. Not because we don't support empowerment; everyone knows managers should give their people freedom to make decisions and take risks. But because, in our eyes, empowerment is one of those concepts (like "creative destruction" and "collaborative work teams") that, as books are written and consultants move in, gets surrounded by more hype than honesty. As an antidote, we offer three hard facts about empowerment, none of which should lessen its worth, only clarify its reality.

1) In "normal" companies, empowerment isn't doled out equally, it's earned. Obviously we're not talking here about Google, with its abnormal (although very admirable) success, and the big fat margin-of-error that success provides. We're talking about regular companies, with average growth and profitability, where, with few exceptions, managers give people the leeway to experiment with big new projects, products, and services only after they knock smaller ones out of the park. Sure, such managers often say they believe in empowerment, and they probably mean it. But general organizational discomfort with failure, not to mention the chilling discipline of delivering to budget, typically means that managers don't green-light just anyone with a plan. They green-light their stars with smart-bet ideas and strong track records. Is that wrong? It's business. Results have

consequences, and superior players earn empowerment.

2) People who are empowered to take risks and then fail more than once don't become pariahs, but they're often damaged goods. In TV, a creative team can produce several pilots between hits, and there's hardly a peep. But in most other industries, such tolerance is rare. Yes, you hear about companies where teams that fail in some innovative effort get thrown a big party, the message from the top being: "We don't punish our risk-takers, we celebrate them!" But the facts are, with every additional misstep, the empowerment glow fades, and few companies continue to empower unsuccessful risk-takers. Except, that is, to please look for work elsewhere.

3) Empowerment is less likely to happen in bigger companies, which is the opposite of how it should be. We often hear MBAs say they plan to opt out of the corporate world because big companies stifle their ideas, while small ones will "empower" them to make high-impact decisions. They've got a point. Big companies do tend to be risk-averse, keeping decisions near the top, while small ones, and in particular startups—short on resources, formality, and time—tend to unleash every brain.

How ironic! Because it would take a mighty big missed bet to bring an S&P 100 company to its knees, while one misjudged risk can destroy a million-dollar outfit. Indeed, that's why we often say that the worst thing a big company can do is manage its size. It should use it, and the best way we know for a big company to use its size is to let more people step up.

Our sense is that Google, to answer your question, is still enjoying the fruits of its innovation, and kudos to its leaders for that. In fact, kudos to every company that truly encourages its people to make decisions and take risks—especially those that are straight with their people about how empowerment really works.

Jack and Suzy look forward to your questions. You can e-mail them and view their new Web site at [welchway.com](http://welchway.com). For their PODCAST, go to [businessweek.com/search/podcasting.htm](http://businessweek.com/search/podcasting.htm)