

# GROW WITH THE

# FLOW

Great professionals turn work into a game and express themselves through performance, says Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow*

By Nathan Jaye, CFA

Work provides us with our best opportunity to excel, according to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Although many people would choose leisure over work, “work is the activity that most resembles a game,” notes the distinguished professor of psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University, who is also founder and co-director of Claremont’s Quality of Life Research Center (QLRC). For people with professional careers, achieving excellence is about learning how to use the “flow” approach in their work and get into a game-playing mentality. In this interview, Csikszentmihalyi discusses how the concepts of responsibility, engagement, and intrinsic motivation (performing for internal rather than external reasons) are shaping the future.

#### **What are the results of flow in the workplace?**

I’ve focused a lot on education and sports; what we learn there also seems to carry over into the corporate world. The CEO of a large Korean company asked me to visit him in Seoul. I talked to his team, and he showed me the past 25 years of books. About 10 years before my visit, suddenly the profits shot up. He pointed to this and said, “This is where we introduced flow-based management in our company. Since then, we made US\$6.5 billion more than we anticipated.”

So it works for them. There’s another company called Green Cargo AB. They are a Swedish transport and logistics company. They were state-owned and had been losing money for their entire 120-year history but were a strategically important part of the Swedish economy. After 120 years, they established a flow-based management system. Two years later, they made their first profit.

#### **What is a flow-based management system?**

One part is how managers relate to their teams. A simple question is, “What does it mean to be responsible for people?” Take the case of Green Cargo, for instance. They set up a trial program—everyone in a supervisory position would receive daily reports from three to four people who worked under them. This was throughout the company. So the CEO chose three or four people, and each one of them chose three or four others, all the way down to the lowest level of the pyramid. The idea is that we are responsible for making those who work for us feel they are accomplishing something, that they are doing well and that they are enjoying their work.

As part of the test, managers received 5 to 10 daily reports from employees—what they were doing and how they were feeling—at moments when a randomly timed pager would go off. They

would report how creative they felt, how concentrated they were, how challenged they were in that moment.

At first, some of the managers at Green Cargo thought this was an imposition; they didn't have time to waste on this. But the CEO insisted that this is actually a managerial responsibility, to ensure that your people are enjoying what they do and that they are doing their best.

### **How do you execute this responsibility?**

If your employee doesn't enjoy his or her work—if they feel anxious or feel bored—your job as a manager is to try to find the reasons. As the manager, your task is to ask yourself, "What can I do to improve this particular person?" If a person reports that he works better on his own and likes to set his own goals instead of working on a team he is currently on, you may say to the person, "We think you may prefer to do another position. It's the same level. It's a horizontal move. Let's see if you feel better doing that."

For another person, perhaps you say, "Well, you seem to really like to work with people." If the person confirms this, then you say, "We may have a job in sales (or in some other part of the company where dealing with people is very important). We need people there. Would you be interested?" We are all happiest when we can do what we are best suited to do.

### **What happened at Green Cargo?**

After a year or two, the number of absentees, the number of people leaving the company, the time having to hire new people and train them—all of that dropped. The profitability of the company went up. As I said, after 120 years, Green Cargo was actually making a profit.

This is one method to encourage responsibility. This can change a lot in an organization, when people arrive in the morning energized and excited about work and leave in the evening feeling they have done a good job. With a varied workforce, you have such a full spectrum of skills and temperaments. You want to optimize people's performance. So you try to match them with the various positions in the company. Then employees also feel the organization cares about them.

### **People usually look forward to leisure, but you've found that the workplace is where we perform optimally.**

Our species is selected for surviving—or doing well—in a particular environment. Many people while working feel they are doing some task better than most other people could do it. You might be a better electrician, a better truck driver, a better nurse in a hospital, for example.

Essentially, you feel, "I am somebody who has certain abilities and who shines when I'm working." This doesn't happen so much at home. It doesn't happen in the neighborhood or when we're on vacation. But at work, when you are doing well, people can recognize you're doing a really good job.

### **Does it relate to the structure of work, where we have challenges and goals and certain rules?**

Yes. At work, you know how much you sold or how well you performed. At home, it's much less clear what you are accomplishing. You may be interacting with children or with your partner, but there isn't an easy set of metrics, or perhaps not such clear goals. At work, we know what we have to do. We do it and people recognize it. At home, it's in a sense more undetermined, more unscripted.

Work is the activity that most resembles a game—more than the rest of life does. In a game, you know what you have to do. You operate with certain rules, with clear goals, and everything around you is reinforcing the game. It's very clear. You can figure out, "Did I do well or not?" Work is like a good game, whereas at home, you don't usually have the rules and near-term goals. You have long-term goals of investing and setting money aside for your children and education, but you may not have the moment-by-moment goals that make a game interesting or your job interesting.

### **What's your own process for getting into flow?**

I've learned to do things I enjoy. But I try not to be monomaniacal about flow in my life. I realize what I like about my job and what I'm good at—I try to do those things. When I do them, I enjoy them. I love to look at the output of computers that have been analyzing the data I input. I have ideas of what the results should be, so once I have the data, I can see immediately where my ideas were right and where I was wrong. That's immediate feedback. That's good. I can say, "Okay. Now, I know."

That is my growth process. My knowledge grows. My skills keep growing, slowly. My research is very much like a flow space. It's like exploring some new place where nobody else has been.

### **You've been very intrinsically motivated in your work.**

Oh yeah—I am about 15 years post-retirement, but I have been working every day just because I like to.

### **Is intrinsic motivation being recognized in the workplace?**

I think so, because there's no reason that it shouldn't be. Some people have described their motivation when working what may seem like menial jobs. But once they explain why they enjoy it, you realize they were able to design their job to their own specifications, even though nobody else may have noticed. Others just noticed that these people were performing well—but not why. The "why" was what they developed on their own.

### **What's an example of this?**

There was a *Good Morning America* episode featuring flow. They opened with an interview of a guy working in a delicatessen in Manhattan. His job was to prepare lox and bagels. The guy explained that he gets up at four in the

morning; by five or five-thirty he gets to work. The first thing he does is go to the freezer. He takes four or five huge salmons that were put there before he arrived by the buyers who go to the fish market. Then he says, "Okay. I'll take the first salmon. I drop it on the counter. Then I lift it and drop it again until I develop



a three-dimensional x-ray of how this fish is made inside."

He knows where the bones are and where the muscles are. He has trained himself to know, by seeing the shimmer on the scales of the fish after it hits the table and by the sound it makes. He knows how far the spine of the fish is from the surface, from the skin, and how dense the bones are. And every fish is different. Then he starts filleting the fish, with the goal of doing it the fastest, with the least effort possible, making the thinnest slices that he can make, and not leaving anything on the bone (throwing out the least amount of excess fish). Those are his four goals, on every cut.

This is something this guy developed. Nobody taught him, but he taught himself this method after a few years on the job and not liking it. Now he says when he goes home at the end of the day, he knows that no one else could have done what he has done. He's made the best lox and bagel sandwich that could be made.

That's what is interesting in a job. The feeling you are doing something uniquely good or uniquely personal. It's a reflection of you—no one else could have done it. There are people who will experience your work and benefit from it—like eating that lox and bagel sandwich. The person eating says, "Wow. This is really a good sandwich." Even though you don't know them and they don't know you, you feel that you made it possible.

### **Can organizations operationalize intrinsic rewards?**

The general principle is to find out what your people like to do. Then you give them an opportunity to do that, within the goals of your organization. That's simply allowing their intrinsic motivation to become profitable for the organization.

Most people would jump at the opportunity to do what they're really good at, and they would perform better and maybe even make more money, which often brings in more revenue for the company. What's essential is that you get to know your workers. You have to know what they're good at and what they're not good at. Then you have to discover how each person's skills can be connected to the challenges of your company. It may be that you don't need

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more salespeople. Then people with those skills should be encouraged to find a job elsewhere.

I don't believe in gimmicks. Some companies try all kinds of gimmicks to make employees more motivated, like showing a movie every week in a big theater inside the company. Everyone can go watch the movie and then have a snack and dessert afterward. But these things are not really getting at intrinsic motivation. It's more like adding leisure to work. It's like saying, "Okay. Now you will be happy with the unsatisfying work."

### **Why isn't flow intrinsic to organizations?**

It's historical. When the Industrial Revolution started, it allowed people just barely getting by to have a dependable working place. But it was a working place that was horribly destructive of any enjoyment of work. Before the Industrial period, many people enjoyed the work they did, even though it was hard work.

The Industrial Revolution created more profitable ways of making a living, but in the long run it was more depressing. You had to do the same thing mechanically, over and over again. You had all kinds of riots in the first half of the 19th century, when the Luddites destroyed the machinery in the cotton and woolen mills in England. It was a rebellion against being treated as part of the machinery, which is what the worker had become.

As time went on, it was clear that workers who were treated as part of the machinery weren't going to be very loyal to the company. If organizations wanted to earn the loyalty of their workers, they had to make conditions better for them. At first, they tried having free tea hour once a month, or having a nicer lunch room. That was okay for a while, but then they realized that the workers also needed to grow. They needed a feeling of autonomy.

### **So autonomy can lead to greater engagement?**

I found that even people on the assembly line—there were some people who were really excited about it. That's because they had developed their own set of goals, their own skills, and monitored their own feedback. They had the feeling that they were in control. That's what makes it exciting.

We love to do what we're good at. It's the expression of ourselves. We express ourselves through our performance.

Dante, who wrote *The Divine Comedy*, also wrote another book called *De Monarchia*. There's one passage that really blew me away. It was something like, "Every living thing enjoys that which it can do best. When you do that thing, you express who you are. You are living the fullest of who you are."

It's a passage on how good government depends on allowing workers of the state to do what they do best, not just forcing them to do whatever. This is old knowledge. It's just that it has to be rediscovered and reinterpreted occasionally in ways that are fitting for the time.

### What has your Quality of Life Research Center been up to?

We've been doing several studies on workplace issues. We're finishing a multiyear study on mentoring in occupations like medicine, accounting, law, and other professional groups. My colleague, Professor Jeanne Nakamura, has been leading the mentoring study. She published a book [co-authored by David Shernoff] called *Good Mentoring* in 2009. This is a whole new study on top of that.

She is also working with an organization in the Bay Area. They have yearly prizes for people in retirement who use the skills they have developed in their working careers to do something socially beneficial. That's a beautiful project.

### You attended a lecture by Carl Jung. What was he like?

I didn't meet him. I was in the audience in a big auditorium in Geneva. I didn't even know who he was. I didn't have any money for the movies, so I went to a free talk about flying saucers at the university. I said, "Flying saucers. That sounds fun." Jung came to the podium, and it was completely different from what I expected.

This was a period in Europe when there were many UFO sightings. Thousands of people were reporting seeing flying saucers. Jung explained that people were imagining seeing flying saucers. It was a projection of the archetype of the mandala, which is the Hindu symbol for the unity of the cosmos, and it kind of looks like a saucer. He was saying that World War II had deprived Europe of a feeling of meaning and purpose and unity of mankind.

Jung spoke to many things that bothered me about the disillusionment and disintegration of society. This resonated with me. I started reading his books. I was quite influenced by him for a while. I think that's why I became a psychologist, because of having read his books.

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