





**Associations can implement some version of the “20 percent time” concept as well, but only if they also are willing to build the kind of strong innovation culture that Google’s leaders have created and tend to at all times.**

a true barter economy developed on the Web as people who wanted accounts sought out those who had invitations and traded stuff for them. (I do think that some people paid money for invitations, but rarely more than a dollar or two.) Another reason that Gmail accounts are so popular is that it is a truly excellent e-mail product. All e-mail exchanges are kept together as “conversations” and “labels” can be applied to e-mails to easily organize them. Moreover, Google is providing a massive amount of storage on its Gmail accounts, now more than 2 GB per account, and that figure increases fractionally on a minute-by-minute basis. Gmail is a great example of what I now consider to be a mantra at Google: Why make something just a little bit better when you have the talent and the willingness to make it a million times better? (By the way, if you would like a Gmail account invitation, please send me an e-mail at [jeffpi2@gmail.com](mailto:jeffpi2@gmail.com). I have about 100 to distribute right now and if I start giving them away, I’ll probably receive more. If I run out, I’ll keep your name on a waiting list.)

#### **Making It Obvious**

Okay, my hyperbole notwithstanding, Google is fanatical about creating an excellent user experience. It all begins with the elegant simplicity of the main search page, which contains no instruction or direction on what to do. It is obvious. Recently, in response to user requests, Google has begun to offer the option of personalizing the home page ([www.google.com/ig](http://www.google.com/ig)) with

news, weather, and quick access to other Google services, but without sacrificing the page’s clean look. This new product is an outgrowth of the company’s “fusion” strategy, an effort to integrate various products to create new value. Another example of this strategy is the forthcoming (at the time of this article) Google Earth, which is the new name for Keyhole, the satellite imaging operation that Google acquired in October 2004. Google has already leveraged Keyhole still images in its Maps product ([maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com)) and will further integrate it with Maps and Google Local ([local.google.com](http://local.google.com)) to create a rich interface with cockpit-like controls that gives users the feeling they are flying over the earth. The lucky few who have tested it already say it is fantastic, especially what they describe as the “addictive” new feature that, once you have plotted driving directions between two points, allows you to experience driving the route. Through these and other tools it offers, Google demonstrates that it responds first and foremost to the information needs and challenges of its users.

In my precious few hours at the Googleplex in May, I felt the passion for innovation pulsating through the place. It was infectious. It resonated in the voices of the product managers with whom I spoke, not simply when talked about their particular areas of focus, but also in broader terms they used to describe the entire company. I heard them speak of freedom, collaboration, and leadership. To a person, these Googlers pointed to so-called “20 percent time” as a key ingredient of



the company's innovation effort. Put simply, 20 percent time allows Google's technical people (the vast majority of the company's employees are engineers) to spend 20 percent of their time working on new ideas large or small. Although it is not a new idea (3M has had a 15 percent rule in place for many years), it is interesting to consider just how vital this mechanism for creativity is to Google's current success. In practice, 20 percent time is less about the actual time involved, and more about challenging people to create, solve big problems, and take risks. Associations can implement some version of 20 percent time as well, but only if they also are willing to build the kind of strong innovation culture that Google's leaders developed and tend to at all times.

### **Making Mistakes**

So, yes, I am a dedicated Google fan. But I am not a sycophant. I recognize that the company has and will continue to make mistakes. Recent beta releases such as AutoLink (as part of the Google Toolbar Version 3) and Web Accelerator have caused consternation with some members of the self-appointed digerati who sometimes appear to enjoy dumping on the company each time it does something they don't like. Recent comments in the blogosphere have begun to question when Google has become too mainstream to be a true innovation leader. (Obviously, I don't agree.) So, yeah, here's a shock: Google isn't perfect, a fact confirmed by my visit. The arrangements for the shareholders meeting were unremarkable, and

some things could have been done better. Google isn't perfect and we should all be thankful for that, because if the company were striving for constant perfection, they would be far less likely to push out so many different beta versions of products we can play with and benefit from, just so they can learn from them. In the association world, we are often so busy trying to please our members (and keep the peace in the process) by being letter perfect that we forget the real-world messiness that comes with effectively serving our members and creating new value for them. We need to reorient our thinking.

I learn something new every day because of Google, partly because the search engine helps me find things I don't know and partly because the way the company itself operates deepens my own commitment to innovation and its absolute importance for organizations in the association community. As a leader in your organization, I challenge you to better understand what Google truly stands for and to internalize those lessons as much as you can. You have a great opportunity to create a more vibrant future for your organization and Google illustrates with crystal clarity precisely what is possible — if you're willing to try. ■



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