Slack: Getting Past Burnout, Busywork, and the Myth of Total Efficiency
by Tom DeMarco
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Subject(s): Software Project Management, Team Management

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Increase Speed and Effectiveness with Slack Time—Not Overwork

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About the Book

To most companies, efficiency means profits and growth. But what if your “efficient” company—the one with the reduced headcount and the “stretch” goals—is actually slowing down and losing money? What if your employees are burning out doing the work of two or more people, leaving them no time for planning, prioritizing, or even lunch? What if you’re losing employees faster than you can hire them? What if your super-efficient company is suddenly falling behind?

Tom DeMarco, a leading management consultant to both Fortune 500 and up-and-coming companies, has discovered a counterintuitive principle that explains why efficiency improvement can sometimes make a company slow. If your real organizational goal is to become fast (responsive and agile), then he proposes that what you need is not more efficiency but more slack.

What is “slack”? Slack is the degree of freedom in a company that allows it to change. It could be something as simple as adding an assistant to a department, letting high-priced talent spend less time at the photocopier and more time making key decisions. Slack could also appear in the way a company treats employees: instead of loading them up with overwork, a company designed with slack allows its people room to breathe, increase effectiveness, and reinvent themselves.

In thirty-three short chapters filled with creative
learning tools and charts, you and your company can learn to:

- make sense of the Efficiency/Flexibility quandary
- run directly toward risk instead of away from it
- strengthen the creative role of middle management
- make change and growth work together for even greater profits

An innovative approach that works for new- and old-economy companies alike, this revolutionary handbook will debunk commonly held assumptions about real-world management, and give you and your company a brand-new model for achieving and maintaining true effectiveness—and a healthier bottom line.

—from the cover flap

Reviews

"In times of many layoffs, shrinking staffs, vanishing 'think time,' middle-managerial heads rolling and mounting pressure to produce more faster, DeMarco's 'Slack' is worth consideration as a rather quick read for large-corporate, small-business and individual workers—there are few limits on who can get some thoughts from this one."

—Porter Anderson
CNN.com

"DeMarco offers some good ideas for making sure your organization has the requisite slack, which he defines as time during which people are zero percent busy."

—Mark Henricks
Entrepreneur magazine

"DeMarco delivers, systematically defacing the ultra-efficiency banner and constructing a new sign that says adding downtime, dream time, and other slack will make companies more resilient and more productive."

—American Way magazine

"Tom DeMarco goes after one of the most pervasive and pernicious myths of business—that humans are efficient the same way machines are. This book will change the way you manage and understand your business."

—David Weinberger
author of The Cluetrain Manifesto

"This book is the ideal tonic to the '90s craze of downsizing, restructuring, cost-cutting—all in the name of efficiency and global competition. What DeMarco shows is that the resulting costs in human capital (stress, pressure, over-commitment) may ultimately deprive an organization of the very success it seeks. DeMarco's remedy is what he calls 'slack.' Read this
“When we think of "slack," it often has a negative connotation, such as wasted time or work that goes too slowly. A "slacker" is someone who actually tries to avoid work. . . . But slack may also have a positive

—Peter Hilton
Lunatech Research
connotation -- providing flexibility in doing a project.

"Cutting out slack does lead to increased efficiency, but may also lead to frustration, such as getting messages like "all of our agents are busy servicing other customers" followed by a long wait. While we shouldn't be slackers, we all need some slack in our lives."

— Al Kaniss
Tester, DCMilitary.com

"... in an age of acceleration, in which more work is crammed into less time, knowledge workers need slack time for reinvention, creativity, and growth. . . ."

— Library Journal

"DeMarco addresses and debunks many popular myths about restructuring and downsizing with a clearer perspective of organizational improvement. Offering a pragmatic approach to helping managers see their employees as humans, and not machines, Slack provides numerous examples to back up his ideas about efficiency, flexibility, change and growth."

— Soundview Executive Book Summaries

"This book is easy and enjoyable reading. It is written for managers of all levels. . . .

"Companies are pushing their employees to work at a pace that is counterproductive: the consequences are missed schedules and unhappy employees. Taking the time and allowing for Oslack will help organizations become more effective and will allow employees to grow."

— Nancy Michniewicz
StickyMinds.com

"Tom DeMarcos book, Slack, could not have come out at a better time. . . . Who could have predicted at that time that the economy would have taken the turn it has? Right now, executives around the world are looking at balance sheets that arent very pretty, and they need to trim some expenses. The easiest unfixed expense to trim is staff/payroll. That's the hard, cold truth. Tom DeMarco wants you to read his book before you go too far in your cost cutting. . . .

"As an executive in a small business that just went through some staff changes, as well as a time of abruptly increased sales, I can positively vouch for DeMarcos premises. Read this book before you make a very costly mistake."

— Jack Covert
President, 800-CEO-READ

"Every few months, I re-read Tom DeMarco's book Slack. It's a brilliantly rationalist book arguing that maximizing the business of individual knowledge workers minimizes the effectiveness and productivity of the organization as a whole.
DeMarco reminds us that knowledge workers -- and this includes the analysts, designers, developers, and engineers -- are not fungible. Not only does each individual have their own specialties and deficits but people have task switching costs analogous to the set up costs with factory machines.

—Joshua Herzig-Marx
joshua.herzig-marx.com

"... I like its premise: To have a creative, changing workplace, you have to give up total efficiency in favor of slack. It's only when middle managers and lower-level workers have a little free time that they can respond to emerging issues or innovate. Conversely, when workers are overly busy, they can only plod along, ignoring or even missing the exciting opportunities that cross their paths. While DeMarco is targeting higher-ups with this message, there's much here that ordinary worker bees can take to heart. In a nutshell, busier isn't more efficient and energy isn't derived from exhaustion. More of these things are in our control than we may believe."

—Amy Lindgren
The St. Paul Pioneer Press

"... a great little book about understanding how to manage knowledge workers. DeMarco's expertise is in understanding how to manage software developers (he has a well-regarded book specifically on that topic, Peopleware)..."

"DeMarco proposes a core solution to move your organization from a burnout-producing factory to an effective enterprise: slack. Knowledge workers need some free time to be creative. ..."

"DeMarco's book is a quick read, at 220 paperback pages split across 33 short chapters. Highly recommended for anyone engaged in knowledge work, or managing knowledge workers. Knowledge workers of the world unite: Give us some slack!

—Richard Akerman
Science Library Pad

"... compelling. It's aimed primarily at managers of knowledge workers (e.g. designers and software developers), but could also be useful, or at least therapeutic, for folks who've been subjected to certain kinds of work cultures. ..."

"... recommendations for what to do as a manager of knowledge workers primarily around planning for change: ways of creating flexible groups that can adapt to changing circumstances, building slack into schedules to manage risk, and having trust in your team. ... DeMarco has a nice way of capturing the absurdities at the heart of some cherished workplace cultural habits simply and neatly."

—James Reffell
DesignCult
“Nearly everything Tom DeMarco writes, I think, is delightful. . . . The book is a magnificent, if contrarian, read. The final essay, on finding hay in a needlestack, is worth the price of the book all by itself!”

—Robert L. Glass
Editor/Publisher, Software Practitioner

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