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Microsoft targets 'conversation gaps' to enhance productivity and innovation

The Windows Security Test Team at Microsoft in Redmond performs some vital behind-the-scenes work that keeps many of us working safely. Microsoft Windows is used by over a billion people around the world and computer users everywhere expect Windows software to be secure and their data to be safe. The search for new and better ways of tackling this challenge led the team to explore new management approaches that use trust as a way to improve productivity and morale, and help people to do their best work.

Over the last few years, experiments around building trust have shown that high trust environments can help foster creativity and innovation, reduce the need for complex monitoring systems, and increase productivity by accelerating decision-making capabilities. In his book *"The Speed of Trust,"* Stephen MR Covey describes it as a trust dividend; an organization where "Ideas flow freely. Innovation and collaboration take place. Solutions come much faster and better, and are implemented with the understanding, buy-in, and often the excitement of others involved in the problem solving process."

the trust dividend

At Microsoft in Redmond the Windows Security Test Team decided to find out whether they could earn this trust

Being an optimistic risk taker or cooperator opens up the opportunity for great loss or great gain, neither of which might be possible without risking cooperation.

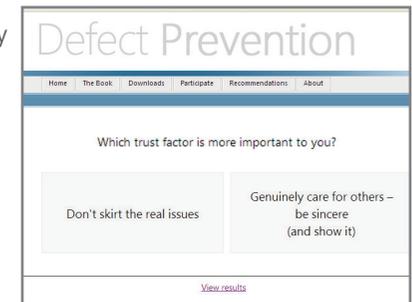
dividend. Software testing is a risk management or risk mitigation activity. Members of the team possess deep technical knowledge required for in-depth analysis of software quality. Engineers must decide on and apply different testing techniques in order to assess and improve the quality of each component in the product.

Since there is no guarantee that any specific technique will find all defects, many techniques must be applied. Individuals are more effective when they are free to



experiment with a wide variety of techniques. As Russell Hardin describes in "Trust & Trustworthiness", "Being an optimistic risk taker or cooperator opens up the opportunity for great loss or great gain, neither of which might be possible without risking cooperation."

Individuals function more effectively in an environment of high trust, high morale, freedom, and fun. As the level of trust grows on the team, many Security testers are more willing to experiment, and perhaps fail, in the deployment of new techniques, and therefore increase the likelihood of finding defects through successful techniques. This opportunity to apply a wider variety of techniques leads to earlier defect discovery and often identifying more cost effective methods that can be utilized by others.



productivity games

The team has also recognized the influence of collaborative play on trust-building and productivity, and has been looking at ways to make the more mundane elements of their work fun and engaging: competitions and games are held regularly to find unique software defects or to encourage the use of new testing techniques. The use of games is helpful in attracting voluntary effort towards some of the rudimentary tasks, encouraging the use of new techniques, and increasing the level of trust across team members. Additionally, competition and games can engage different sets of employees than traditionally volunteer for extra tasks. By leveraging some employees' desire for fun, games can motivate them to participate much more so than they otherwise would. Different kinds of games throughout the development cycle have shown this repeatedly in the team.

While we enjoy and have had great success with the productivity games, the fundamental element of success is trust.

"While we enjoy and have had great success with the productivity games, the fundamental element of success is trust. A high level of trust is the key to business

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improvement, and to job satisfaction. If people can trust that they will be treated fairly, they are more willing to take risks and innovate, and will likely enjoy their work more." says Director of Test Ross Smith.

The problem, Smith admits, is that there is no simple formula. Trust is contextual, situational, and relationship-based - and so it's important to diversify the methods used to build trust. Authenticity, predictability, integrity, and consistency are important fundamental elements, and there are many ways to demonstrate core values and increase trust.

closing conversation gaps to build trust

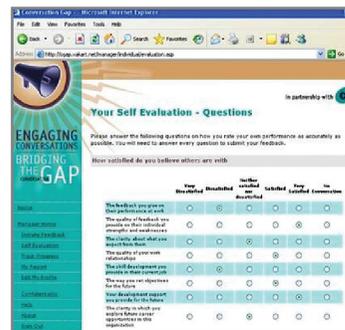
Smith was delighted when he discovered an approach that focuses on the one-to-one conversations between managers and their employees. Based on research with high-flyers at GlaxoSmithKline, Deloitte, Marriott and other top companies, this approach identifies "Conversation Gaps" (CGap) and helps managers work to close them. Career

The results have been great for me. I've had a bunch of great conversations with my manager on topics that would often fall to the wayside.

Innovation, a catalyst organization based in Oxford, UK, has created the research and related conversation tools.

The CGap research found that - on average - 4 in every 10 employees have a topic they want to raise with their manager but find they cannot, or are unwilling to. Data shows these employees are less engaged in their work, and three times more likely to leave that organization. After reading the research, one of the leaders on the Windows Security team, Brian Lounsberry, initiated a series of one-to-one meetings with his team. "When I read that most gaps are future-focused, I realized the solution was to create an agenda-free hour in which we could talk openly about people's careers. It wasn't complicated, and it made a real difference. I could visibly see their energy levels rising as we talked."

Several members of the Windows Security Test team have used the Ci Engaging



Conversations™ tool that was based on the research. "The results have been great for me." Joshua Williams shares, "I've had a bunch of great conversations with my manager on topics that would often fall to the wayside. I could tell he got my feedback through the survey, and he immediately engaged by taking more time with me, asking more questions and really showing me he welcomed open discussions. I'm much more confident in my job and my work now."

Mark Hanson, a Test Manager on the team emphasizes the importance of verbal conversations in building trust. "Since we're an email driven company, there are many times when the tone and words can be easily mistaken or misunderstood. When this happens, team members can get the wrong idea or misinterpret the intent and fill in the gaps themselves, which can lead to lower trust. Having healthy conversations - consistently - strengthens relationships."

conversation behaviors that build trust

The team spent time brainstorming to identify behaviors that influence trust, and then built a simple game to help prioritize these, for an example, see www.defectprevention.org/trust for the pair-wise voting game and the list of 139 behaviors. There are several behaviors identified by team members that were directly impacted by using the Engaging Conversations™ tool. As Smith explains, "it's always a challenge to know whether you're being successful at behaviors like 'encourage open discussion' - and having an independent process for people to respond and assess progress - was incredibly helpful in highlighting areas to improve."

the proof is in the results

Since they began the work on trust, the Windows Security Test team has seen higher retention rates, productivity increases, higher scores on employee surveys, and innovative new tools and techniques being applied across the team. The work with identifying conversation gaps and the CGap tools augmented other methods of building trust. The focus on creating a high trust environment enabled individuals to leverage a wider variety of software quality assurance techniques, thereby discovering defects earlier, saving money and improving quality. The team saw double digit gains in many of their productivity measures, improved quality, and reduced costs by distributing workload and reallocating effort. More importantly, the fun they have had with productivity games has kept team members engaged and enabled teams to work better together on shared goals.



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links

www.careerinnovation.com

www.42projects.org

www.theCgap.com

www.defectprevention.org/trust

<http://trust20.wikispaces.com/>

CNBC - *Can you be Trusted?* <http://www.cnbc.com/id/30605923>

acknowledgements

We would like to thank Ross Smith and colleagues for contributing and sharing this Microsoft story.

about Career Innovation

The Career Innovation Company (Ci) is a catalyst organisation, working with some of the world's best-known employers to help them increase business agility and gain recognition as inspiring places to work.

Our approach uses a powerful mix of fresh research insights, collaborative events and high-impact online career tools. These help organisations and individuals to understand today's dynamic workplace and develop appropriate career strategies: Building a sense of purpose, introducing new ways of working and agreeing an explicit career partnership that works well for both parties.

The result of this is an agile workplace that inspires people, enhances collaboration and delivers the right capabilities in the right place at the right time.

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