Balloon helps introverts step into the spotlight at PayScale

Written by A. Cydney Hayes

At PayScale, a Seattle-based software company whose platform allows users to access and compare compensation data, HackDay has been a quarterly tradition among the company's engineering teams for nearly 10 years. Such a stalwart event can be difficult to disrupt, but last summer, PayScale's Director of IT, John Lynch, introduced a new addition to the HackDay schedule: A pre-HackDay planning flight on Balloon.

"The intent of HackDay has really evolved over time, but basically, the catchphrase is 'grow PayScale, grow yourself,'" Lynch explained. "A few years ago, we added a HackDay advisory committee, which I'm a part of, to align everyone on the value and purpose of HackDay. Building on that, I thought running a flight beforehand would be a great way to add structure and maybe spark some ideas by brainstorming in a new way."

Several weeks before HackDay, Lynch ran two similar flights: He invited his 8-person IT team to "IT Lean Coffee and Planning" and the nearly 50-person engineering department to the broader "HackDay Brainstorm." The HackDay Brainstorm flight only asked one question,

- What do you want to hack on?

while the IT Lean Coffee (an industry nickname for agendaless meetings) flight asked three and offered Lynch a way to both discuss the upcoming HackDay with his team and connect on IT-specific topics.

- What would you like to work on for HackDay?
- What is a problem area for you right now that you would like some help on from the team?
- What do you wish you could do remotely to connect with your teammates?

Once he saw the results of the flights, Lynch quickly noticed a marked shift in the degree of engagement and creativity from participants in both groups.

"We saw people participating in a way we'd really never seen before," Lynch said. "In our regular meetings, you usually have to call on people, and they don't always know what to contribute. This gave everyone a lot more time to think about what they wanted to say, and the quality of the ideas they submitted really reflected that."

In past years, PayScale organized what Lynch called a "pitch fire," which allowed team members to pitch their preliminary HackDay project ideas to their peers in person. This time around, the pre-HackDay flights did not replace the pitch fire but rather preceded them, giving both introverts and extroverts alike the opportunity to share their ideas and get feedback in a way that complements their collaboration styles—and for the quieter team members, Lynch noted, the flights helped them realize their leadership and creative potential more than he had ever seen.

"We also saw people voting on ideas from very quiet people, and that brought in a really refreshing dynamic," Lynch explained. "A lot of people who I would consider introverts, based on what I've seen in previous meetings, had the most highly sought-after ideas. And because of the nature of HackDay, those people had to come forward, claim their ideas, and lead teams that were excited to work on those projects. Normally, those people never would have spoken up. The whole team would have missed out and not even known it."

Since early 2020, of course, HackDays have been remote events. Lynch noted that this shift diminishes the social energy—and subtracts "the waffles they get for breakfast on the second day. They really, really like waffles," Lynch jokes—that enhanced the experience of on-site HackDays in the past. Still, the PayScale team is finding new ways to connect in a post-2020 world, and Lynch said Balloon has proved to be a reliable way to do so.

"The way the team interacts on Balloon brings out a kind of engagement that feels new and different to me," Lynch said. "In the Lean Coffee flight, one of the things we surfaced was an overall team desire to just have more of an ongoing remote meeting space, somewhere people can just drop ideas or thoughts in an asynchronous, candid way. Balloon has given us a place to do that. I imagine we'll start running flights for the team much more often."

Check out John's Flight Template

Director of IT, PayScale

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