

Creating Optimal Experiences with ‘Flow’

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Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008)¹ stresses on the fact that people feel the maximum satisfaction and pleasure not when they achieve a result easily, but more so when they need to stretch a little beyond their current comfort zone and take risk to accomplish a task that requires learning additional skills. Csikszentmihalyi calls this stage of experience, which many musicians and artists sometimes mention as the ‘zone’, as being in the flow, a stage that drives individuals to be creative and surpass their achievements. This paper attempts to bring in a basic understanding of what flow means in general and how one can apply it in one’s life as well as how organizations can take the concept of flow and leverage it with their employees in various situations.

It is not enough to be happy to have an excellent life. The point is to be happy while doing things that stretch our skills, that help us grow and fulfill our potential.

– Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Introduction

Flow is generally regarded as the state of mind in which a person doing any task is completely immersed in feelings of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the task. A ‘flow state’ is the experience of being fully engaged with what one is doing in that moment.

Flow is the result of many years of study conducted by Csikszentmihalyi. He and his associates have interviewed² more than 1,000,000 people from all over the world. They found that whether it concerned teenagers in Tokyo, steelworkers in Gary, Indiana, farmers in Northern Italy or fishermen in Korea, people report that they most often achieve a form of happiness (a state of flow) when they pursue attainable but challenging goals—at work.

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¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 1st Edition, Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

² <http://hastyreader.com/flow-psychology-mihaly-csikszentMihaly/>

Imagine for a moment that you are running a marathon or a race. Your complete concentration and attention is focused on the movements of your body, the fueling of your muscles, the breath in your lungs and the feel of the road beneath your shoes. You are living in the moment, completely absorbed in the present activity. Time seems to standstill. You do not notice whether you are tired or bleeding or panting. All you see and feel and hear are the moments in your run.

According to Csikszentmihalyi³, what you are experiencing in that moment is known as flow, a state of complete immersion in an activity. He describes the mental state of flow as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”

Why Should One Be In Flow?

Flow comes from the intense concentration around your own actions and their immediate feedback. A painter who carefully observes how straight his lines are or the accuracy of his colors or a chess player who eagerly awaits his opponent’s move, all the while planning his own, are both said to be in a constant state of flow.

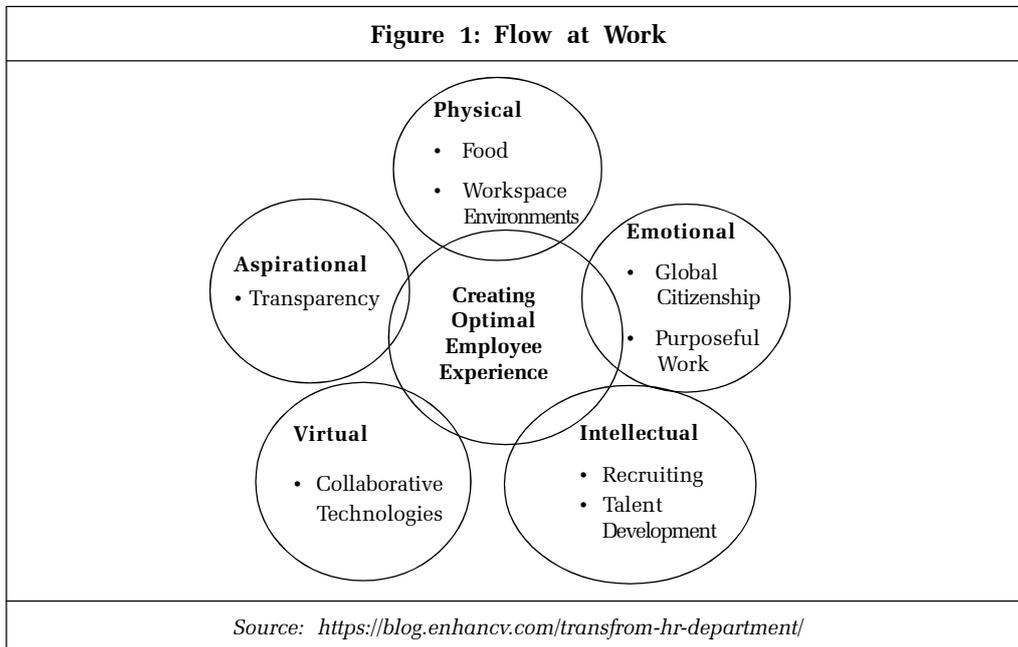
Research also shows that when one’s skill levels are known to be low and the challenge being extremely difficult, one tends to get anxious and nervous. When the skill levels are high but the challenge is simple, one tends to feel bored of the task very easily. The best way for one to constantly feel the enthusiasm and energy to continue on is when the challenge level is little higher than the skill level such that one has to stretch a bit to achieve the results, thus be in flow.

As Csikszentmihalyi⁴ puts it, “The happiest people spend much time in a state of flow, the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”

Flow teaches one how to control their inner self and gain control over their attention, mood and willpower. Also, once they experience the concept, people will be able to enter into a state of flow in situations of everyday life, even when you go through more difficult periods (such as health issues, or work problems). It helps individuals and employees become high performers (Figure 1) because they enjoy whatever they do in life and at work. Also, very importantly, flow helps restructure life, so that one’s days are not composed of merely self-repeating episodes of work, leisure and other tasks.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ <https://www.cwilsonmeloncelli.com/the-autotelic-personality-finding-happiness-in-flow/>



Skill Versus Challenge Graph of Flow

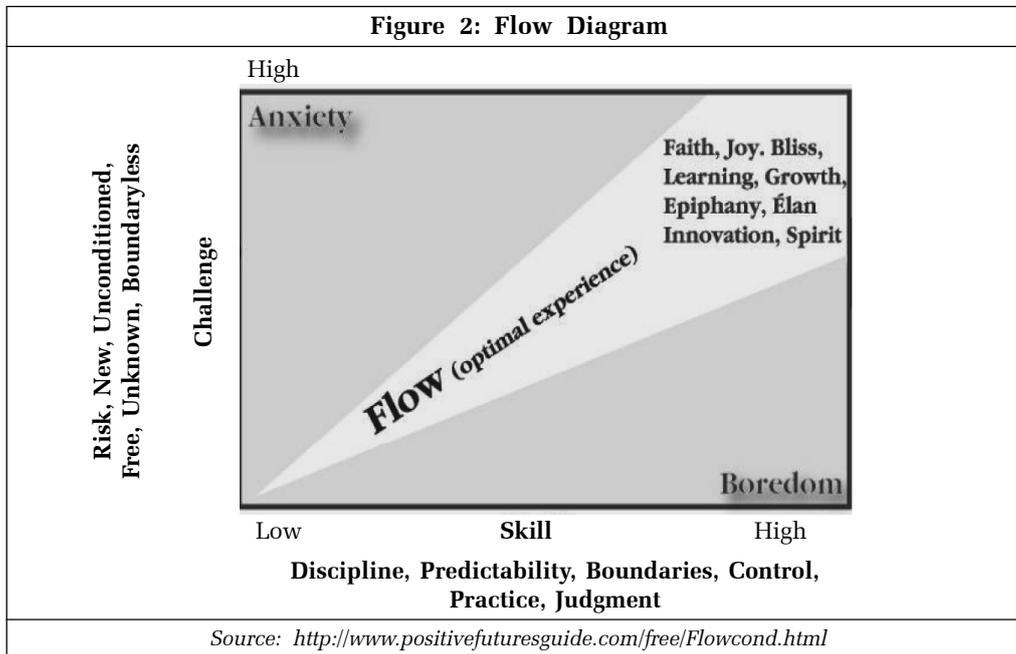
When people approach challenging physical and/or mental tasks matched with high personal skill, they not only enjoy the experience, they stretch their capabilities and increase the likelihood that they will learn or achieve new and higher skill levels and increase their self-esteem.

As the flow diagram indicates (Figure 2):

- When the challenge is too high and the skill level is too low, people get anxious and go into their fright or flight mode.
- When the challenge is low and the skill level is high, people get bored with what they are doing and maybe yawn through their work.
- When the skill level is high enough and the challenge appears within reach, people enjoy what they are doing.

Boredom has two main causes. It could be because of lack of challenge or also because of lack of feedback and not knowing whether one is improving or not. Anxiety is a psychological state that comes when one is overwhelmed by too many things at once, or if a task feels too tough to do. At this point, one cannot focus and does not feel in control of the situation.

When the challenge pulls the skill higher, most people tend to want to raise both, if for no other reason that they feel good about themselves and what they are now able to accomplish. Crawlers become walkers, who become runners.



The Feelings During Flow

The concept of flow has been defined in many ways by many philosophers, psychologists, and researchers. It is often said that when one is in flow, one experiences some or more of the following:

- A sense of playfulness and fun, of wanting to be as child-like as one can be.
- A sense of absolute control of the moment and the situation and actions.
- A feeling of letting go and being free and in the hands of the Universe.
- A deep level of concentration and highly focused attention that helps them pay attention to even the minute of details.
- An hour can pass in the blink of an eye.
- Feeling of importance in the task being performed.
- Heightened sense of awareness merging with spontaneous action in the moment.
- A feeling of being completely in full control.
- A sense of feeling lost in the activity being performed.
- Mental and emotional enjoyment of any activity just for the sake of the activity alone, even with no other objective is in sight.
- A distorted sense of time, i.e., time sometimes seems to stand still or otherwise tends to get finished fast as one is engrossed in the activity at that time.
- A sense of complete self-awareness and awareness about what is happening around.

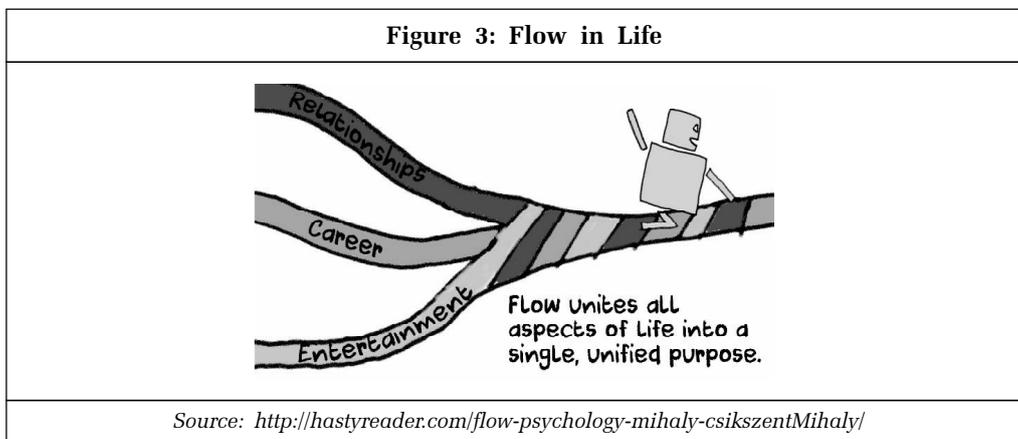
- A feeling of being completely lost in the moment sometimes, and a feeling of loss of self-consciousness and of being led automatically by unseen forces around.

When individuals are in flow, they usually have concrete goals and know what they want to achieve and how they intend achieving it. They not only feel the passion towards their goal, but also relentlessly work towards reaching it by constantly reviewing their progress, taking continuous feedback and improving their actions on the fly. In fact, being in flow is known to create a sense of a paradox of control, i.e., the individuals feel completely in control of themselves and the situation whilst also tending to feel completely out of control, with a number of various forces automatically pushing them towards their goals. When an individual is in flow, there is merging of action and awareness that leads to enhanced results.

How to Get to Being in Flow

Flow experiences can occur in different ways for different people. Some might experience flow while engaging in a sport such as skiing, tennis, soccer, dancing, or running. Others might have such an experience while engaged in an activity such as painting, drawing, or writing. The good news is that individuals or organizations can model the environment to experience the flow as often as they wish.

There are many tasks, activities, as well as thinking techniques that can guide an individual to take the first steps in getting into the flow (Figure 3). These include:



- Constantly controlling one's consciousness, i.e., at any time, to be able to bring one's focus back to the task at hand.
- The ability to focus on both the quality and the quantity of output and results created.
- Creating an environment of enjoyment for self and others at work and outside of work.

- Engaging in a number of energizing physical activities such as exercise, jogging, etc.
- Facilitating interesting and exciting work to be done.
- Leveraging the power of solitude and learning to be comfortable with self and with silence.
- The ability to inspire, motivate, and involve other people around, such as friends, peers, superiors, etc., to also participate in activities that help them feel the sense of flow.
- Being able to wonder and think about creative possibilities.
- Concentrate and focus one's attention on the task and the situation at hand.

The Components of Flow

Flow has eight major components⁵, as identified by composers, rock climbers, painters, surgeons, programmers and other people who experience it.

- Each action must have a goal, or purpose—when one does not know why they are doing something, they will lose interest somewhere along the line, or else they will start getting frustrated with the obstacles they see on their path.
- Progress has to be measured by looking for feedback—only when one knows how well they are improving or getting better with each task, do they make an effort to take up the challenge for the next task, else they will remain doing the same thing again and again until they finally feel bored.
- The challenges of the activity must not overwhelm the skill—give a first year college student a difficult research paper to read and everyone knows that they will just put it aside; the challenge given must be apt for the skill level of the individual.
- The feeling of focus and concentration on the action—one needs to concentrate and feel immersed in the task to be in flow, else the distractions around will easily pull them away from their task, so we need to find what makes it interesting for the person.
- Flow cuts off from day-to-day problems and stress sources—it is said that when we enjoy what we are doing, we do not feel the pressure or the difficulty level of the task; and this carries forward to the other tasks of the day too, thus leading a more stress free life.
- Flow gives a sense of control of your life—when we are able to achieve success in what we do we naturally feel more in control of our lives, which is what choosing tasks that help us get into flow, achieves.

⁵ <http://hastyreader.com/flow-psychology-mihaly-csikszentMihaly/>

- Flow silences inner voice, or self-consciousness—it is often heard from those who experience flow that when they are immersed in a task they love, they do not hear any voices of doubt or confusion, that they all just disappear.
- The sense of time is distorted—ever had a task which by the time it got done, surprised us that we spent so much time on it and time just flew or stood still. Well, that person just experienced flow.

References of Flow in History⁶

- Flow has been experienced throughout history and across cultures. The teachings of Buddhism and Taoism speak of a state of mind known as the “action of inaction” or “doing without doing” (*wu wei* in Taoism) that greatly resemble the idea of flow.
- Also, Hindu texts on Advaita philosophy such as *Ashtavakra Gita* and the yoga of knowledge such as *Bhagavad Gita* refer to a similar state.
- Historical sources hint that Michelangelo may have painted the ceiling of the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel while in a flow state. It is reported that he painted for days at a time, and he was so absorbed in his work that he did not even stop for food or sleep until he reached the point of passing out. After this, he would wake up refreshed and, upon starting to paint again, re-enter a state of complete absorption.
- Bruce Lee either spoke of a psychological state similar to flow or spoke about the importance of adaptability and shedding preconceptions in his book, the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. In his book, he compares the state of flow to water where he so famously says, “Be like water ... Empty your mind, be formless. Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.”

Conclusion

Flow determines that the best moments usually occur when a person’s body and/or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. It is a state of mind where one is totally absorbed in what one is doing in the optimal experience. The activities attributed to flow and the knowledge learned during flow tend to stay longer in one’s memory and can be remembered for longer periods of time. Researchers⁷ have found that flow can enhance performance in a wide variety of areas including teaching, learning, athletics and artistic creativity.

⁶ Csikszentmihalyi (2008), *op. cit.*

⁷ <http://hastyreader.com/flow-psychology-mihaly-csikszentMihaly/>

As Csikszentmihalyi⁸ says, “Getting control of life is never easy and sometimes it can definitely be painful. But in the long run, optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery— or, perhaps better, to a sense of participation in determining the content of life—that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine.”

Reaching a state of flow in your life is possibly the closest thing to achieving true happiness. For most people, it takes time and effort to build a personality that can generate flow experiences on the go. But the end result is well worth and life changing. When in flow, alienation gives way to involvement; boredom to enjoyment; helplessness to a feeling of control. This energizes individuals to perform to their best and to achieve excellence. ☉

Reference # 50J-2018-03-03-01

⁸ <https://www.cwilsonmeloncelli.com/the-autotelic-personality-finding-happiness-in-flow/>

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