

Feature Story from Etsy's Letter Press:

Hack to the Future: A Trip Through Hack Week History with Chad

by Rebecca Miller

Let's travel back to the year 2005: Google's storied 20% time policy, which encourages engineers to set aside (you guessed it) 20% of their working time for self-directed projects, is making waves across the tech world. The program has yielded impressive results—Gmail, Google Reader, and Google Talk are just a few of the products born from 20% time—but while other tech companies eye this company-sanctioned creative space with envy, it's proving extremely difficult to actually give their engineers a full day each week to devote to their passion projects.

Enter Australian corporate wiki software company Atlassian (Ed note: you're reading this story on an Atlassian program... enjoy this brief meta-moment), who boil down the concept of 20% time into "FedEx Day," a quarterly, company-wide 24 hour creative blitz. The FedEx Day moniker was coined because participants were expected to ship by the end of the 24 hour period. FedEx Day led to such great Atlassian product improvements that JotSpot, another wiki company, held a "hackathon" just two weeks later.

Yahoo and our own Chad Dickerson entered the fray later that same year. You could say that Chad didn't choose the hack life; the hack life chose him. He describes his Hack Days at Yahoo as "these sweeping, epic, rock and roll fantasy things."

Ryan Tate takes it a step further. In his book [The 20% Doctrine: How Tinkering, Goofing Off, and Breaking the Rules at Work Drive Success in Business](#), the author describes Yahoo-era Chad as "the laid-back, freedom-loving, rabble-rousing Yahoo programmer, a sort of cross between Bill Gates and cult movie character Jeff 'The Dude' Lebowski, who turned a far-out experiment in unstructured programming into a global phenomenon... by launching a long series of Yahoo! Hack Days, and by enlisting everyone from gossip bloggers to the rock star Beck to promote them, he turned hack days into a full-fledged juggernaut." Chad's Hack Days at Yahoo were gleefully subversive, an open-to-the-public free-for-all created with the hope of injecting innovation and a ferociously creative spirit back into Yahoo's culture and product lineup.

We sat down with Chad to talk with him about the history of Hack Week at Etsy, and some of his hopes for this year's Hack Week.

TLP: Like any good hero, Etsy's Hack Week has several contrasting origin stories. Can you tell us how Hack Week got its start at Etsy?

CD: I remember we did a Hack Day in the spring of 2010. Every company I'd seen before did Hack Days that were only about Engineering and Product, but from the beginning, everyone at Etsy was included—at the time it was probably less than 100 people. I remember this clearly because someone created cocktails as one of their hacks.

TLP: Was there discussion around inviting people who weren't engineers to hack?

CD: I used to do Hack Days at Yahoo starting in 2005. And I used to talk to other people who would do Hack Days at other companies, and they would always say “how do people who aren't engineers participate?” and I would always say “well, it's just about creativity.” But at Etsy it just sort of happened organically because people here are naturally creative. So there was never a shortage of ideas, and it just happened. It was very natural.

TLP: Do you have favorite hacks that have come out of Hack Week?

CD: There was a B Corp Hack Day that was focused on how to make the company more responsible and sustainable, and a bunch of great things came out of that (check out some great coverage of this day on the [Etsy New Blog](#) and [Harvard Business Review](#)). The hacks that came out of that day emphasized the health and happiness of our community, our company and the environment and, ultimately, helped us get a better B Corp score. So that was great, because our collective efforts were applied in a very directed way, but it still had that free spirit that made it fun.

A few years ago there was a Hack Day where a bunch of people created customer support tools. And there were many things that actually helped our customers immediately- there were hacks to make the Atlas tool better, to support customers better, and specific improvements that made it

easier for people to manage convos and things like that. I think those were coolest because they took people's great ideas and made things better for actual customers.

TLP: What have you personally hacked on during Hack Week?

CD: I did this thing with [Jerry Soung](#). The premise was that people who you end up hiring at Etsy are often part of your social network, like in the broadest sense- two degrees or three degrees away from you. So we created this thing that would look at the Twitter followers and LinkedIn connections of every person in the company, and figure out who in your network would be appropriate for open jobs at Etsy. And it would do it by looking at data. If there was someone in your network who was tweeting a lot about iOS development and they liked a lot of your tweets, they might be more predisposed to want to work at Etsy. We never quite got it to work, but we did get a lot of interesting things out of it.

TLP: What do you hope gets hacked this year?

CD: We had kind of a rough summer because of the WorldPay issue. So there were a number of things we wanted to ship that are being shipped later. And we also disappointed a lot of people and caused people a lot of hassle. So this is me as a person- not as a CEO, just as a person who works at Etsy—I'd like to see some surprises that would really help sellers, people who experienced the problems this summer, feel like we're really watching out for them. There are positive and negative surprises—WorldPay was definitely a negative surprise for our community—so it would be awesome if something popped out that would make our community say “wow, I can't believe they delivered this!” Some kind of delightful surprise.

TLP: Do you have any Crazy Hack Week stories?

CD: Other people probably have crazy stories that I don't know about... but I'll speak from prior experience getting these started at other companies. I was always kind of getting in trouble (at Yahoo). It's a time to push the limits. I have some great stories about hacks at Yahoo, but I might not be able to share them here.

[Section redacted. Have a beer with Chad sometime, ask him for specifics.]

TLP: It's my first Hack Week. What advice do you have for those of us embarking on this for the first time?

CD: There's no shortage of things that could make Etsy better. Even if you don't decide to build on anything, just learning about what our customers want and need is such a big victory. The curiosity is really the thing- just thinking about what could be better.

Happy Hack Week, Etsy. Where we're hacking, we don't need roads.

