7DAYS BUSINESS

SNAPPY IDEA?
A Google staff member exits a photo booth at one of the firm's workplace events

California dreaming?

Should your firm copy Silicon Valley to better harness your creativity?

By Mark Summers

Given that we live in era where many of us spend our time updating blogs, editing Instagram pictures, and offering pithy observations on our Twitter feeds, it's little surprise that more and more people are describing themselves as 'creative' types.

In fact, a study conducted by Photoshop creator Adobe last year found that six out of 10 of those polled classed themselves as 'someone who creates'. We presume they didn't mean 'panic' and 'resentment'…

But if we feel we are getting more creative, how much of that is actually reflected in our working lives? Silicon Valley giants such as Google and facebook have famously help foster a particularly Californian brand of easygoing workplace.

Search giant Google even created '20 per cent' time for employees - a full day a week when its engineers can work on a pet project of their choice.

So should firms of more modest means be following their lead and stripping away deadlines, management meetings and office hierarchy?

One man who has spent more time than most considering such ideas is Dr Babis Mainemelis, a visiting professor at the London Business School, who is a regular visitor to the institution's Dubai campus to share his thoughts on his expert subject of 'organisational behaviour'. He told 7DAYS during a recent trip to the emirate that when he started his research 15 years ago it was not "not really a hot topic".

But given the interest in creative workplaces sparked by our Californian cousins, it's now firmly part of the mainstream.

We're not kidding ourselves when we call ourselves creative, Mainemelis said.

"The transition to being a knowledge economy has been extremely important because it has replaced the need of doing manual, routine work, with work that requires people's brains," he explains.

Today's "faster and more fierce" competition helps too, he adds, as firms realise "what you do today can be obsolete tomorrow and this creates, internally, the need to innovate and adapt."

So firms looking to harness their employees' bright ideas should simply set-up an in-house cafe and throw some flexi-time around, right?

Not so fast, says Dr Mainemelis.

"Many people think that because it is very fashionable now they can simply try to turn their company into Google which clearly is not the case with many. You just can't do that," he warns. Facebook famously has signs reading 'move fast and break stuff' on the walls of its HQ - but that's not such a good idea if you are a running an airline or a nuclear power station…

Above all, Mainemelis says, managers need to show good judgment. Even Google doesn't give all of their employees time to do their own thing.

"Such schemes are going to be a disaster unless you have a very high degree of trust. So basically as a manager, when you say to someone 'you can take a day or half a day and work on anything that you like, away from control' this is on the condition that the employee will work on something that will eventually make a value-added contribution to the company," he says. The boss has to see some kind of product at the end of the blue-sky brainstorming, and the employee should have the right to the odd failure without being judged harshly.

Managers need to give their employees "a high degree of autonomy and freedom - and tolerate error and mistakes," he says.

But - says Mainemelis - for all the talk of workplace barber shops, office babysitters, and doing what you want - the office of tomorrow is founded on a very old idea - trust.

"Things like free time and fancy cafeterias and all these playful things work well once you know you have people that are not only talented - but will not take advantage. They will truly try to use free time to create ideas."

TEAR DOWN THOSE BARRIERS

Dr Babis Mainemelis on how to improve your firm

YOU CAN STILL HAVE RULES
"It is a question of knowing how much innovation you need, how much creativity you need, and then giving freedom and resources to people within these limits."

DON'T CLOCK WATCH
"It is a marvel what these people have created in California - you don't have the monitor who has to go and work out who is in the office and who is working. Because the manager knows that even if a person is not in the office on a given day, this person is at home and still producing something. To me that is the real success of these companies - they have made work more playful, but mutual trust is very important."

'LESS IS MORE'
"Many people think to make their group or department more creative they have to add more things. And I always say that for the most part you have to remove things. You have to make things simpler and less bureaucratic. Leave some open spaces, and people will fill them with ideas.

OVERCOME YOUR FEARS
"Probably the last thing for more traditional managers to abandon is the idea of time and space - that an employee must be present in the office, that they must work eight, nine, 10 hours. But no matter how many doubts people might have about playfulness or about a more democratic workplace - they cannot deny the results. Look at Apple, look at Google…"

PIONEER: Apple co-founder Steve Jobs changed how we work