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SPARK-IT – SETI

There are numerous groups around the world who are engaged in SETI – the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence – analysing signals from outer space looking for tell-tale signs of intelligent life.

Most of the SETI programs in existence today, including those at UC Berkeley build large computers that analyze that data from their telescope in real time. None of these computers look very deeply at the data because they are limited by the amount of computer power available for data analysis. To tease out the weakest signals, a great amount of computer power is necessary. It would take a monstrous supercomputer to get the job done. SETI programs could never afford to build or buy that computing power

The Berkley team asked themselves What if they scaled - up the number of computers involved and used LOTS of small computers, all working simultaneously on different parts of the analysis? But where could the SETI team possibly find thousands of computers they'd need to analyze the data continuously streaming from their telescope?

The UC Berkeley SETI team discovered that there are already thousands of computers that might be available for use. Most of these computers sit around most of the time with screensavers flying across their screens accomplishing absolutely nothing and wasting electricity to boot.

They set up a scheme to borrow your computer when you aren't using it to help them "...search out new life and new civilizations." They did this with a screen saver that takes a chunk of data from the telescope over the Internet, analyzes that data, and then report the results back to them.

So, are there problems that you face that could respond to simply scaling-up your current approach?

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SPARK-IT – GRAMEEN PHONE



The Grameen Phone Company is the largest cellular phone company in South Asia. The company recognised that for many poor people in Bangladesh, access to a telephone was beyond their means.

In the rural areas of Bangladesh there was a tradition of letter writers who, for a small fee, would write the letters that the people dictated. Building on this tradition, but **replacing** the pen with a mobile phone, Grameen launched the Village Phone Program. Putting cellular phones into the hands of very poor women who operate it as a business. These micro entrepreneurs buy the phone with a loan from the Grameen Bank and then sell the use of it on a per call basis. The solution worked so well that it's now being used to bring telecom networks to many parts of Africa.



Are you being held back by assumptions about the tools or methods you use at work? Think about what isn't doing the job you need it to. What could be replaced in order to create a solution to a problem or inefficiency?

SPARK-IT – IVORY SOAP



In 1878 Proctor and Gamble had finally developed a high-quality soap at an affordable price, called simply ‘White Soap’ it was instantly popular. A few months later a factory error made a major impact on this new product. A workman accidentally left a mixing machine running over his lunch break and came back to find that a large quantity of air had been mixed into the soap. Not wanting the mistake to be discovered he poured the soap into the moulds and the soap was produced as normal.

The mistake was discovered and Proctor and Gamble were angry at this quality lapse in such a popular new product. They had to **try a different attitude** when letters began flooding in asking for more of “the soap that floats”. The problem became a selling point, the soap was renamed Ivory and went on to become a major product line.

Is there something you produce that is popular with customers but less popular with those who have to produce it? What changes could you suggest so that you learn to love that product and make it work for everybody?

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SPARK-IT – CHEWING GUM

An exiled Mexican general, living in New York in 1845 introduced inventor Thomas Adams to a substance that many Mexicans habitually chewed called chicle. Adams was uncertain as to exactly what this strange substance was, but observing that it resembled rubber he began to experiment with chicle as a rubber substitute.

Unsuccessful attempts to make toys, masks and rain-boots out of this material led to a tired and discouraged Thomas Adams popping a piece of the substance into his mouth. He immediately saw that this substance, if flavoured, could be **put to another use**. Shortly afterwards he opened the worlds first chewing gum factory.

What, or who, in your workplace is under-utilized? How could you change things so that potential, and/or talent is recognised and applied?

