Why the Camp is the most efficient training format

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Can you imagine your whole company closing up shop for four days, locking up in a hotel somewhere, and diligently avoiding talking about day-to-day business? We keep doing that, year after year. It is the most efficient training I have ever had!

We organise in small groups, pick a technology we are interested in, and hack away. This can be developing a self-driving toy car, building a machine to pour beer, developing a baby diaper with smartphone app, etc. We completely immerse in this project chosen by ourselves. For me, personally, this is the most concise learning possible. Focusing on a specific topic for several days, with like-minded people, conveys a depth of understanding that I cannot gain otherwise.

On the last day, every project does a presentation for the rest of the company in an open space format. Us being Zühlke, we ask tough questions at these presentations: Why did you choose this technology for the project? What did you learn? What were unexpected challenges?

self-driving toy car

This format makes it very personal for us, but the entire approach is a condensed version of our regular job:

- How do we set up a project, so we can begin to earn value as quickly as possible?
- How do we manage ourselves, so that all levels of skill participate, learn, and contribute?
- How do we manage our backlog, so that we have something demonstrable after four days ?
- How do we approach our technical challenges, so that we can actually tackle some of the unexpected glitches during this short time span?
- How do we document and present our results, so that everyone else can see and understand what we have done?

The format also lets us learn a lot about the new technology we choose. We understand how it can be wielded efficiently, and where its difficulties lie. Because we really dive in, as a team, we gain a collective expertise that is extremely valuable to us (and our customers) going forward. The camp teams often form lasting personal bonds as well, which is particularly valuable with new employees – or interns.

One of the latter, Hector Trevino Amaro, travelled from Indianapolis to Eschborn to

intern at Zühlke. His first days on the job were on our Camp this year. These are his words:

Hours before my first day at Zuehlke Camp, 7.020 kilometers from home, with little-to-no experience in the German language, I pondered constantly what my upcoming first days at Zuehlke would offer me. With no prior work experience in an office setting, this week at Camp would be my first step onto the working world. I was not sure what to feel, both excitement and nervousness circled my thoughts in constant motion and before I knew it, my first day began. What I saw and experienced at Camp shattered all expectations I had in the most positive of ways. Every person I interacted with was at their most welcoming and personal wherever I went, at no point did I ever feel uncomfortable or displaced. We split into small groups based around a technology we were interested in, in my case I was a part of the HoloLens project and our plan was to make a Tower Defense game from scratch.

Tower Defense game

Every second I was in that room working with my team, I`ve learned something new. We started out with planning the game; everyone could speak up and provide ideas on how the game should work, look, and be divided to accommodate both new employees/interns and experienced Zuehlke employees. All ideas were taken into account and at the end of the planning session, we all unanimously agreed on all decisions regarding the functionality of the game and the division of the work. Each fragment of the work was divided and given to an individual to achieve maximum efficiency while also offering each person challenges to overcome. Not only did I learn many facets of Unity and C# scripting , I also learned how to

work as a group so collaborations run smoothly, something that I have not had an opportunity to experience yet in college. Communication was and is the key to succeeding, and we had a lot of it, whether it was project related or onto more personal topics, being in that room with my teammates was most importantly always fun.

After the game was completed and all our individual parts came together, came the presentation part of Camp. That is when I realized how helpful it not only is to present your project, but to let others try it out and give feedback to the team. One of our problems was that the game was not the most user friendly; users would click on "Play Game" before they clicked on "Setup" which would result in a lot of confusion among users and the game not working properly. Using the feedback, we learned of different ways we could have made the game clearer and more accessible to users and as Camp came to a close, I realized just how much material I had learned. Something that could have taken a college course months to teach took less than a week to teach at Camp. The fact that it was such a positive experience in a both personal and professional environment where help was always available, brought forth a lot of self-motivation and a large desire to learn topics for our respective projects.