#WebCamFriday — It's A Thing!

Zone Leader John Vester talks about how use of web cams has provided a productive experience, going as far as to offer a new hash tag called #WebCamFriday.
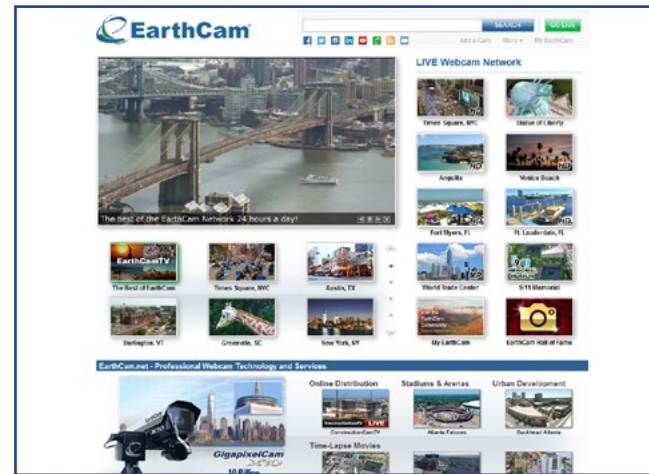*by John Vester · Mar. 02, 16 · Agile Zone*

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Acting in a Scrum Master role, I try to continually think of things that can help keep my team motivated and performing. When I consider all of the aspects that are actually within my control, there are not as many options as I would prefer. As an example, I just cannot offer a team member a 10% increase in base pay — even if this is something that could be quantified. So, I have to look for smaller alternatives which offer a positive return.

Web Cam Friday

Last summer, we were in the middle of our sprint and the weather was perfect outside. The weather was in the mid 70s with a slight breeze, blue skies and ample sunshine. While our room has a very cool design — four 60" screens on the walls, with custom artwork to match the theme of our team — it lacks window views to the outside. Since it was a Friday and the mood seems to be a bit more casual on the last working day before the weekend, I decided to replace the content of two of the four monitors in our room.

Originally, I was looking for an easy way to point a web cam outside one of the windows in our office. The goal would be to provide an illusion that we had a couple of window views to the outside. This didn't work out as well as I had hoped, since most window views do not line up to desk where I could attach a web cam. Power would also be an issue. The meeting rooms and offices that included windows weren't really an option either. Too risky to be moved or shut off.

EarthCam to the Rescue

I decided to see what web cams were publically available that I could easily connect to from our sprint room. Within a few minutes I found the EarthCam site, which provided web cams that utilized their HD camera technology. I could pick a desired camera/view and then connect. The large screen TV went from rotating information from our Bamboo and Stash servers to a live view somewhere in the world. Somewhere nice. Somewhere outside.

I picked two different web cams and the result was an instant success. Everyone on my team loved the idea of web cam Friday, which became known as #WebCamFriday.

#WebCamFriday Evolves

Just like we always learn from our sprint cycles, #WebCamFriday has also provided some learning points. The biggest challenge I faced was the reconnect timer on the EarthCam connections. I am not sure if it is an hour or 90 minutes, but the default cameras stop sending a signal and an "Are you still watching?" prompt appears after the time limit was met. This caused me to have to reconnect to the computer connected to the TV and click Yes to get the feed working again. While not a huge issue, it became an issue when I was out of the room for an extended period of time.

EarthCam has since introduced EarthCamTV, which provides a service to change connections across the web cams running on their network. This provides two benefits to our situation. First, the timeout does not occur anymore. Second, we are automatically directed to different web cams throughout the day - once or twice an hour. The randomness provides a new layer of excitement - since we never know what view is coming next.

I've also found the Sea Otter Cam at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. The camera runs from 7 am through 7 pm (PST) and provides a live stream of action around the otters on display. Since the web cam is not on the EarthCam network, there is not a timeout requiring a reconnection. Plus, feeding time is pretty fun to watch as well.

Conclusion

While I don't have a lot of options to help provide motivation to my team, I've found the #WebCamFriday brings a new perspective into our room - which has spread to other groups at the company. I've noticed that everyone seems to notice/talk about the changing views of the world and it has led to a positive reaction to my team. Since we don't track productivity down to the day or hour, I can't give hard facts on how much more productive the team has been on Friday. However, I can say that my team's overall velocity continues to grow from sprint to sprint.

Have a really great day!