



# Flop Balls & OPEX Reduction in Teams

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**Company Case Study:** Akamai Technologies, Inc

**Author:** Aaron Charlwood, Director of Network Standards

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Flow Circus sent several flop balls to me; I split them between my local documentation team in Cambridge and a remote training team in Krakow. These two teams often work cooperatively -- think of the documentation team as writing textbooks, and the training team as developing lessons based on those textbooks.

These two teams need to trust each other and build rapport in order to work together effectively. Building trust happens as you get to know people better, learn what you have in common, and have shared experiences. Experiences where you build skills or solve problems together are especially helpful in this regard. Complimentary teams don't always have specific work-related skills in common, so skill toys provide a common learning path that teams can share.

Flop balls have a relatively shallow learning curve initially. Basic tricks like flipping the ball over on the back of one's hand are relatively easy to master with a few minutes of practice. This early success and near-universal ability to perform the trick can give practitioners the ability to build skills together. Success breeds success, and the universal appeal of simple skill toys that require no special physical or mental traits creates an inclusive environment. Finding activities that are inclusive of all team members is a constant challenge that is easily met by flop balls.

Skill toys like flop balls can also bridge geographic divides through friendly competition. My teams build rapport across geographies by playing games together. We also use videoconferencing to communicate: adding the visual aspect preserves non-verbal language cues such as body language and facial expressions. This is immensely beneficial to teams that don't share a common native tongue. Since these teams are already familiar with video, flop ball tricks can be recorded and sent to teams in other geographies to instigate friendly competition.

Teams in today's internet-connected world also communicate through messaging platforms that incorporate emojis into their communication. My teams have several emojis that they commonly use to convey inside jokes, which build team identity. Printing these emojis on customized flop balls creates a lightweight, inexpensive, team-specific way to reward colleagues for a job well done -- and this helps remind them of positive circumstances and contributes to higher morale. Rewards like this also create incentives to encourage other team members to step up their game, so to speak.

Skill toys have a key place in the office environment. They provide a forum for impromptu interaction with curious coworkers. Spontaneous interactions, sparked by flop balls, have kindled casual relationships between coworkers, expanding the size of workplace social networks. These social networks are incredibly valuable to my teams, who rely heavily on subject matter experts (SMEs) to help a writers and trainers understand complex technical concepts well enough so that they can develop effective documentation and training. Finding the right SME is easy when one has a large social network, and it's nearly impossible when one doesn't know who to start talking to.

I asked my technical writing team if they had any situations where they were struggling to document something and they were able to remove their roadblocks quickly because of a casual interaction with someone. I also asked them how long it would have taken to figure out the answer if they didn't leverage this social connection. The local technical writing team of four writers saves about two hours per week because of the social networks they have built through casual interaction that only occurred because of a catalyst like a flop ball, juggling balls, or, in some cases, an inviting and comfortable couch. From an operational expense (OPEX) perspective, two hours per week represents about \$80 in OPEX for my company. This works out to over \$4k annually of OPEX reduction just for a team of four -- or, \$1000 per employee.

Inexpensive catalyzing agents like flop balls pay for themselves rapidly in OPEX savings. Broken down in terms of an ROI, here are the benefits of flop balls.

Quantitative effects:

- ~2 hours/week FTE time saved (multiply by the expense per hour for an employee to calculate OPEX reduction)

Qualitative effects:

- Larger social networks = quicker problem resolution
- More trust; more rapport = faster, higher quality collaboration
- Encourages teambuilding through shared skill building experience
- Use as a reward inspires higher achievement

For a complete ROI calculation, compare the costs of purchasing flop balls to the quantitative and qualitative effects of flop balls in the workplace!

Aaron Charlwood  
Director of Network Standards  
Akamai Technologies, Inc

# Contact Information

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Flow Circus, Inc.

Paul Miller, CEO

919-964-3569

[paul@flowcircus.com](mailto:paul@flowcircus.com)

[www.FlowCircus.com](http://www.FlowCircus.com).