Embotics Cloud Management Blog

FedEx Days at Embotics® — Encouraging Innovation

by **Helen Abbott**, on Sep 23, 2015 8:00:00 AM

Once a year, every member of the Embotics engineering team gets to pick a project to work on for a few days and then present it to the team. We call these days FedEx Days. The concept of a FedEx day was started by Atlassian as an experiment to foster innovation. The name comes from the 1980's FedEx slogan: "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight."

Evidence from 3M, Google and others suggests that employees can come up with many new product features and workplace improvements if they're given some slack time to explore. Even schools are getting in on the idea.

At Embotics, we frequently come up with great ideas while developing, testing and documenting features, but we don't have time to pursue them during the course of a release. Throughout the year, we collect these ideas on a wiki page. Employees outside the engineering team are welcome to make suggestions; at our last FedEx, 25 suggestions were made by developers, testers, our support team, and our fearless leader, Mark Jamensky, who added several customer enhancement requests to the list. We decide what to work on in advance, either individually or in teams. Some of us keep our ideas to ourselves to increase the "wow" factor at the demo.
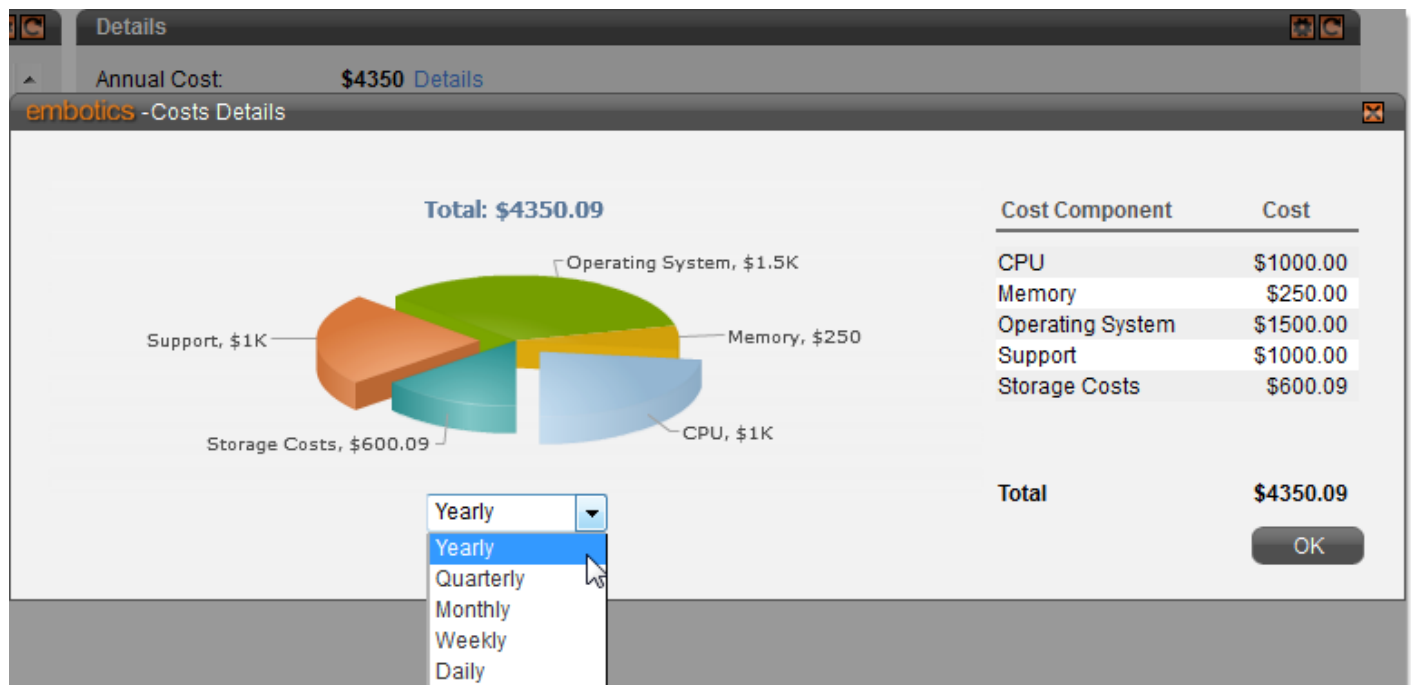
We follow a schedule like this:

- Thursday and Friday: We work as long as we want into the evening, with a food/beer run for those who are in the office.
- Weekend: If we have the energy and the full support of our spouses, we keep going like the Energizer Bunny.
- Monday until 10am: We make final touches to our demos.
- Monday 10-11am: Each individual or team gets 3-5 minutes for a demo, and then the team spends 5 minutes brainstorming on where the idea can go.
- After the demos: We hold a secret ballot vote for best-in-show. The winner gets a free lunch and bragging rights until the next FedEx day.

Since introducing the concept in 2010, many of our FedEx projects have made it into our product, vCommander™. Of the 29 projects presented in November 2014, many were implemented in the last few releases of vCommander.

We enriched the self-service experience with:

- secure SSH and VNC connections to VMs
- the ability to control which VM rightsizing recommendations Service Portal can see
- a Cost Details dialog for VMs

We made life easier for the vCommander administrator by adding:

- a Message of the Day in the Service Portal
- configuration of system properties in the vCommander console

> a more usable SMTP server integration dialog
> an Account Details dialog for troubleshooting user access and permissions issues

We improved our service catalog with:

> support for customization of AWS VMs at launch time with user data
> the ability to copy an existing service catalog entry
> the ability to expose specific ports in fenced networks

We also improved our automated testing system and our distributed build system, set up an internal forum and reorganized the vCommander user guide. Other projects improved our processes, such as an integration between our bug tracker, Bugzilla, and our version control system, Subversion. And we also created an introduction for our Video Learning Series.

FedEx days provide free time for exploring aspects of our product, our processes and our workplace. Besides product improvements and ways to improve the way we do our day-to-day work together, we come away with recharged energy levels and enthusiasm.

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