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Work Smart, Live Healthy

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About This Book

Web design is more than a job. It's a passion. However, keeping up with the immense pace at which the web industry is moving can feel quite intimidating at times. There's always something new to catch up on, an urgent deadline requiring you to pull yet another all-nighter, or clients requesting support when you're on vacation. Even if you are passionate about all of those things, your energy isn't inexhaustible. Stress or even a burnout can strike all of us someday. With this eBook, we want to raise awareness for those aspects of our industry which (unfortunately) are not frequently talked about. It's not about frameworks, code or scripts for a change – today it's about you.

We want to inspire you to take two steps back, and re-think your current practices. It's important to be aware what kind of role work plays in your life. This eBook focuses on practical tips and strategies to foster a balanced lifestyle, but we also want to take those moments into account when things get tougher as usual by addressing a topic which is still often a taboo: mental health. Consider this eBook as a permission to let go a little, to step away from the web from time to time, so that you can tackle the job you love with more energy and provide more room for fresh ideas. Even if you may feel like everything is going smoothly for you (which is fantastic!), there are still a good number of valuable eye-openers in here which will prove to be useful to everyone who is a part of this fast-moving industry.

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Maximize Your Creative Energy

BY ANN HOLM 🍷

What does knowledge of the brain and personality have to do with creative work? As a lifelong brain geek, I have taken on the mission to help others tap the secrets of the brain to uncover personal potential. Not surprisingly, everyone can benefit from at least some knowledge in this area.

In fact, I've found that people who work in the creative industry in particular seem to be interested in this topic because many of them work alone and have to manage their energy, distractions and time to complete a project, while staying flexible and in the moment to capture the unforeseen creative gems that emerge seemingly out of nowhere.

Everyone who's taken a shower has an idea. It's the person who gets out of the shower, dries off and does something about it who makes a difference.

– Nolan Bushnell, video-game visionary and Atari founder

Oftentimes we have habits that seem to work, so we are unaware that there might be better, more brain-efficient ways to do things. Other times, we feel exhausted and stretched, so our creativity suffers. In this article, I'll share some facts and insight on brain functionality, as well as tips on how to get the most out of your creative

energy. Some of these suggestions might be very different from what you are doing right now.

Multitasking: A Rapid Way To Deplete Brain Energy

Like many web designers and developers, you might work in a small business or even as a single entity. This means you need to master and implement several skills:

- your creative work,
- your networking tasks,
- your administrative tasks.

While this makes you versatile, it can also lead to multitasking or plate-spinning. What is the most effective way to perform all of your roles, while still maximizing creativity?

In the old days, before computers, smartphones, social media and the like, interrupting someone's train of thought was verboten — and for good reason. The brain is not meant to multitask. In fact, multitasking is a myth. Multitasking is actually task-switching, and it is among the most rapid ways to deplete brain energy. Every time you perform a task, the most energy-hungry area of your brain, the prefrontal cortex, has to recruit a different collection of brain cells to carry out the task you are trying to accomplish. You use different brain networks to work on projects, to respond to a phone call, and to check email and social media.

John Medina, author of *Brain Rules*¹, tells the story of his son trying to write a paper for school with 11 other applications running, including two instant-messaging screens! Every time he switches his attention, his brain has to engage, disengage and reengage somewhere else. Studies show that a person who is interrupted takes 50% longer to complete a task and makes 50% more errors in the process.

Here are a few tips to avoid the pitfalls of task-switching:

- **Work uninterrupted for a designated period of time.**
Brain research shows that 25 minutes is approximately the amount of time it takes to “get on a roll.” Set a timer if necessary. Do only that one important task during that time.
- **Check email and social media at designated times.**
Email and social media notifications not only create those task-switching scenarios, but can result in a protracted diversion from your intended work.
- **Minimize distraction with internal and external management.**

1. <http://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Principles-Surviving-Thriving/dp/0979777720>

Manage Distractions With Internal And External Management

Distractions can be managed either internally or externally. Internal management requires additional brain energy, sometimes a considerable amount of it. It's a form of willpower. A classic example is the individual who is trying to lose weight but keeps all kinds of tempting food in the house. The old saying "out of sight, out of mind" is instructive here.

I am a business owner myself. I coach, blog, maintain a website and develop curricula for leadership-development workshops. I use social media, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. By far, my biggest distraction was Facebook on my iPhone. I have a personal page in addition to my business page, and I found it way too easy to check my latest push notifications. So, I deleted the app from my phone. Now I wasn't one click away from another diversion.

There are many ways to manage distractions externally so that the brain doesn't get exhausted in the process. In my college days, I taped myself to a chair to finish term papers, thus eliminating the possibility of wandering off to chat with a friend. Nowadays, I ask myself, how can I make a distraction so difficult to execute that I don't even consider doing it?

A young client used the following strategy to externally manage his biggest distraction:

The biggest distraction of my life is my phone. I had a large project due, so I decided to try your suggestion. I

took the phone out of my pocket, shut it off, put the cover on backward, and placed it on a high shelf. Amazingly, I got everything done, and I got it done fast.

Distractions are best managed by eliminating them from your immediate environment – or by making them so difficult to execute that you don't even consider them.

Here are a few tips on externally managing distractions:

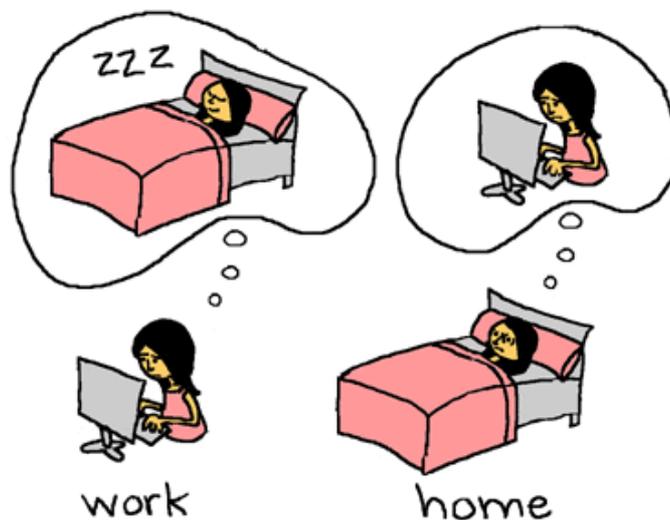
- **Turn off your phone or place it in another room.**
- **If you have to take calls, disable Internet access on your phone.**

Some phones have a “do not disturb” function that only allows calls from a list of defined numbers (such as emergency numbers) to minimize disruption to your workflow.

Sleep Well To Uncover Your Potential

“Sleep while you're dead“ was my philosophy for years. I was a dedicated night owl, often denying that I needed much sleep at all. In truth, only 10% of the population do their best work at night, and few people can get by on less than 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night, night after night.

It is possible that the creative industry has a slightly higher percentage of night owls or those who can get by on very little sleep. However, the chances are high that most people need the same amount of sleep in order to function optimally. Many of us keep going at night because we are too tired to put ourselves to bed.



Our brains need time to calm down, so try to stop working several hours before going to bed. (Image credit: [kroszk@²](#))

Recently, I attended a seminar titled “The Ever-Changing Brain.” I was struck by the impact of sleep deprivation on every aspect of our lives. John Preston, Psy.D, wasn’t talking about simply doing time in bed. He was talking about the deeply restorative sleep that affects our ability to regulate our emotions, solve problems and think creatively. Sleep researchers say that, in the absence of slow-wave sleep, our pain threshold decreases and our cognition and focus are reduced. Depression is a long-term consequence of poor sleep quality.

Sleep behavior is largely a result of sleeping habits. Even a few small adjustments can have a profound affect on sleep quality:

². <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kroszka/4122223330>

- **Exercise regularly throughout the day.**
However, avoid exercising close to bedtime or it will have the opposite effect.
- **Avoid caffeine, alcohol and sleeping pills.**
These substances interfere with restorative sleep, especially when you consume them close to bedtime. Sleeping pills can affect your sleep patterns long term.
- **Trend towards calmer evenings.**
Your brain needs time to calm down. Stop working several hours before going to bed, and fill those hours with calm and relaxing activities.
- **Avoid blue light at least an hour before bed.**
The blue light of computer screens and bright sources of light affect our sleep. Avoid them at least an hour before bed. Additionally, you can manage the light of your computer screen with the [f.lux³](#) app.
- **Sleep in a cool room and ventilate before going to bed.**
Sufficient oxygen supply is important for your brain to recover from a hard day of work.

Eat Well And Exercise To Maximize Your Potential

My great Aunt Marian grew up on a diet of fatty meat, dumplings and potatoes. Vegetables were usually cucum-

³ <http://justgetflux.com/research.html>

bers doused in bacon grease. She smoked for 80 years and loved her scotch. She broke every health rule and yet lived with a clear mind until she died in her mid-90s.

Aunt Marian was lucky and probably genetically exceptional. Current brain research suggests that most of us probably couldn't pull this off. Although we're more aware of the benefits of eating healthy and exercising than we have been in the past, the stresses of the modern world and the increasing pace and pressure of our lives affect us more than we might think. Traveling to conferences and clients adds another layer of stress to our lives. We know now that small yet measurable brain declines already happen in a person's late-20s.



*Don't underestimate healthy nutrition. Your brain will thank you.
(Image credit: [Ted Eytan](https://www.flickr.com/photos/taedc/10689767154)⁴)*

4. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/taedc/10689767154>

Anxiety is common in developed countries, and the lifetime risk for severe depression is 20%. A hundred years ago, the risk was 1%. Because many creatives work on projects that they're passionate about, they often don't realize how much stress they're putting themselves through and the negative effects this can have on their bodies. Burn-out often occurs after a phase of idealistic passion for something.

Stress is caused not only by the number of tasks we have to complete, but also by emotional events in our lives. This could be the death of a beloved one, a divorce or break-up, or tensions in our family or social circle. We have to acknowledge that our brain needs additional capacity for us to emotionally deal with these problems.

In short, we have to take care of our brains in order to get many years of creative output:

- **Keep weight within the normal range.**

Excess weight, a poor lifestyle and a lack of sleep set off the inflammatory process.

- **Reduce or eliminate sugar.**

Evidence is emerging that sugar is a significant cause of inflammation. Inflammation is system-wide. Therefore, if you feel unwell after eating something, then your whole body, including your brain, could be affected. Keep this in mind when attending conferences and meetings, where unhealthy food is often easily obtainable. Investing some time and money in eating healthy could result in a better creative output later on.

- **Supply your body with omega-3 fatty acids.**
Many supplements don't work. However, the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil have been proven to benefit the brain.
- **Exercise regularly.**
Exercise improves blood flow to the brain. Exercise not only will bring about creativity in the moment, but will benefit the brain in the long run.
- **Build and maintain relationships and interests outside of work.**
This is important to avoiding depression and burn-out.
- **Don't underestimate the effects of emotional events.**
If an emotional event happens in your life, take some extra time out so that your brain is able to effectively deal with it. For example, go for a walk outside or a bike ride or meet up with people who can help you through this situation.

A Real-Life Example

Recently, a client confessed to me that she was staying up well past 1:00 and 2:00 am because she was a night owl. When I asked her what she was doing at that hour, she said she was "researching" various topics on the Internet. As we discussed this further, she conceded that she was really just surfing the web and couldn't fall asleep any sooner. I explained that when we get very tired, we lose some of our willpower to move away from what we are doing and head off for a good night's rest. She agreed to

try an earlier bedtime and to turn off her computer screen at least 30 minutes before that. I further suggested she use the Sleep Cycle⁵ app to get solid data on her sleeping patterns. Ten days later, I received this email:

I've been using the Sleep Cycle app most nights since we talked and I'm shocked. I knew that I often didn't get as much sleep as I should, but I hadn't realized just how bad it was. If the last week and a half is any indication – and I have no reason to think it's an anomaly – I rarely get eight hours' sleep on a weeknight. I hadn't realized just how much time I'm wasting online before I go to sleep on a regular basis. This is a huge thing to work on. Thank you for this wake-up call.

Several months later, she continues to report better sleep and better results in her work. It's not that she doesn't do any more night benders, but she is more aware of her need for sleep and how it affects her work.

Conclusion

No matter what a person's career is, we are all first and foremost human, and we have evolved with a certain physiology that is not altogether compatible with modern life. Our ancestors walked up to 20 kilometers a day and focused on one thing at a time. We woke with the sun, slept when it was dark and ate the available natural food. Our lives today are vastly different from the conditions

5. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/sleep-cycle-alarm-clock/id320606217?mt=8>

that mapped our ancestral brains, and yet modern living has not significantly changed our basic neural framework.

The main take-away is to be open-minded about how you might be compromising your own success and productivity by relying on habits that run counter to how we are wired to live and thrive. Experiment with some of the principles described in this article and see whether a few small changes make a big difference in your overall productivity.

OTHER RESOURCES

- [“5 Tips for the Healthy Frequent Traveller⁶,”](#) Rachel Andrew
- [“Dealing With Stress and Depression⁷”](#) (podcast), Liz Elcoate and Sean Johnson, The Freelance Web
Tune in from minute 23:00.
- [“How I Have Lost Over 100 Pounds and Don’t Know How⁸,”](#) Dion Almaer
Mozilla developer Dion Almaer outlines how changing his habits of eating, exercise and sleep expanded his mindset and transformed his entire life.

6. <http://rachelandrew.co.uk/archives/2014/03/24/5-tips-for-the-healthy-frequent-traveller/>

7. <http://www.thefreelanceweb.com/ep36-dealing-with-stress-depression/>

8. <https://medium.com/what-i-learned-today/how-i-have-lost-over-100-pounds-and-dont-know-how-d5da698ee2ba>

- *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School*⁹, John Medina
- *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*¹⁰, John J. Ratey
- F.lux¹¹
The website for this app includes research on the effects of blue light on sleep.
- Sleep Cycle alarm clock¹² (iPhone app) 🍏

9. <http://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Principles-Surviving-Thriving/dp/0979777720>

10. <http://www.amazon.com/Spark-Revolutionary-Science-Exercise-Brain/dp/0316113514>

11. <http://justgetflux.com/research.html>

12. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/sleep-cycle-alarm-clock/id320606217?mt=8>

Feeling Stuck? Design What You Don't Know

BY ALEXANDER CHARCHAR 🍷

Where is it?! It has to be here somewhere. It used to be so easy. What happened? Somewhere, somewhere, somewhere. That idea is somewhere. It's here, it has to be. This is where I've always found it. But there's nothing. The only shapes I find here are well worn and boring, dints still obvious even with fresh paint. Oh so boring. So boring and so often used because they're just "fine." Too easily used. Too easily reached for and offered up as if they were new again.

Didn't this use to be easy? Didn't fresh ideas arrive without being asked for? Why did I have to wait until the last moment to even notice, wait until moments before these old dented ideas have to be presented?

Wasn't this a passion? Wasn't this a calling? Wasn't this something I sprung from bed every morning to race to the studio to do?

Now it's none of these things. Now it's different. Now it's quiet with muted color. Now it's something I just do. No, it's worse. Now it's a job. It's not my work, it's my job.

It's a job, and the ideas don't arrive like they used to. I keep designing what I know. I'm stuck.

What Stuck Is Really Like For A Designer

Sound familiar? We often think about being stuck as not having anywhere to move. But for a designer, this is what stuck really looks like. It's emptiness followed by panic, days before a concept or first proof is due.

It's reaching for old familiar ideas, ones used far too often simply because they're reliable, even if they make for boring shapes. Whatever solutions might be offered up to the client's problems are often interchangeable. Client names and logos could be swapped and the difference would be indistinguishable.



Being stuck means no movement, and no movement means that the creative waters of our minds grow stagnant. (Image credits¹³)

¹³. <https://unsplash.com/>

Without being creatively stretched, our skills take little time to silently atrophy. Before long, memories of excitement become all too distant. The misguided hope that the next project will be better starts to kick in, but the same situation is repeatedly found, so the same solutions are repeatedly used.

Luckily, this can be solved with the most boring and obvious of things.

What Causes A Designer To Feel Stuck?

The longer we work, the bigger our box of tricks gets. We start to learn what will work for a client almost every time, what most clients don't like, what most clients are fine with.

When desperate, we rely on those tricks in place of exploration and research, just to get the work finished and out the door. But before long, we are relying on them too heavily, then perhaps completely, rendering our creative legs useless as we find height atop of our empty little tricks. Alternatively, such stagnation may settle over us because of arrogance. We might allow our ego to fill up the space in our brains left for new knowledge and consider ourselves full.

We might think that we're done with our education because we've graduated, won an award, gained some recognition or simply found a job. We forget how our skills developed in the first place — within a storm of unknown outcomes and a thousand wrong solutions. We forget that we need to understand and challenge our lim-

its, that learning means being willing to be wrong and to try again, over and over.

We stop learning; we get bored. We fall into a rut and get stuck. What we need in our work is a little novelty. No tricks, no work made up of shortcuts alone and no ego – no, none of these – we just need some curiosity.

Want To Get Moving? Design What You Don't Know

Writers are often given the advice to “write what you know.” Weaker wordsmiths would consider this justification to simply write what’s in their head. Their ego will suggest that they already have within them what’s needed for the next great novel.

Smarter writers, the ones who take their craft seriously, understand that to write what they know means to know many things, and to know many things means to deliberately subject themselves to a barrage of experiences. It means visiting the country in which a short story is set to understand the culture found there, not just relying on weak memories or a few Google searches. It means calling the local pharmacy to ask a few questions about how certain drugs work in the body if it’s central to how a main character dies.

It’s to put yourself in unknown places and routines so that you can find new sources from which to draw inspiration. The advice should almost be “write what you don’t know.”

I’ve always been amazed by the similarities between writing and design. They’ve often felt like two sides of

the same card to me, and the advice for one often translates well to the other. So, what of the advice to write what one knows? What good is this for the designer?

Design what you don't know.

A blatant copy, but it makes our point well. Design what you don't know. Find your limits, push them with education and experience, and perhaps avoid that burnout and stagnated-career feeling.

Seek Out Your Limits, Know Them, List Them

Do you know what your limits are? Do you know what you don't know? Do you have them in front of you? It's not enough to have a vague idea of what you're not comfortable doing. You have to make a list, to plan your education and your efforts.

A list: That's our not-so-obvious obvious solution.

Such a list can provide an enjoyable stability and direction. It'll stop you from stumbling through ignorance, wildly throwing your arms out hoping to clutch some knowledge to keep from falling again.

Go wild. This is your fantasy list; this is all the things you ever wanted to learn about your profession. Leave nothing out, include big and small, and cover the whole gamut. Write fast and with passion.

Patterns will emerge, little groupings and relationships. You'll see what little classes you can structure for yourself, and you will play both student and teacher. You'll be lucky for it – being both will make you better at both. Add to it every time something comes up during a

project that you avoid because it confuses you, anything that makes you genuinely nervous to think about. Be specific. “Make website responsive” isn’t specific, but “How do I target specific resolutions?” is.

The benefit of getting granular isn’t just that it helps you avoid easily stumbled-upon distraction, but that it gives you things to test and to develop a very short feedback loop around. It lets you test-break-repeat. We have to seek out the difficult and uncomfortable if we wish to grow. This is what has to be on our list – not the things we know how to do well already; there’s little to learn in practicing such things repeatedly.

In practice, concepts are defined, given shape, can even be manipulated, all while being tested. Don’t fall too hard into the trap of reading without doing, of adding items to the list without ever crossing them off. Make sure as soon as you have even the roughest idea of how something might work that you start trying to make it do so.

You have to do things, even when you do them poorly – especially when you do them poorly. Like those well-considered writers who know their stories well because they’ve lived them, because they’ve focused on what they don’t know so that they could write about such things like it was old knowledge – like them, we need to focus on designing what we don’t know, what we don’t understand.

Push Your Limits To Never Feel Stuck Again

All it takes is one thing from our list to lift a project from dull to interesting. Just one tiny thing. The first project you do might only benefit from your learning one small thing, but the second will be improved by what you learned previously and the new task that you'll tackle for it.

One new thing per project. Some might consider it selfish to use clients' projects as a means to give yourself an education, but I think it's a perfect testing ground. It will give your daylight hours more meaning, something to bounce out of bed for.

Personal projects are a great place to learn, too, but the energy available to us outside of our normal office hours is fleeting. If you're to work on client work anyway, why not derive more benefit from it than just a bit of money?

Cross off the items on your list as often as you can, as quickly as you can, with as much fury and energy as you can muster. It might not feel like much, learning one small thing at a time, but it'll add up quickly, and it'll give you a fun little challenge to solve every day. It's a wonderful thing to experience.

Joyous Ignorance And Worlds Of Possibility

When we're learning something new, we feel as if a world of possibility has opened before us. We're wonderfully ignorant of any boundaries. But as we learn more,

we make that world smaller. No wonder we can sometimes feel uninspired and stuck.

We rely too easily on what we've learned that we don't add to our mental "need to learn" list. But it's in lists that we can escape that stuck feeling and once again expand the world of opportunities. Exploring this list gives us new glasses through which to see the world before us, enabling us to open new doors and gain new experiences. Boredom has never been found when exploring exciting new worlds.

This is all a bit circular. It sounds as though I'm suggesting that shortcuts, which is really knowledge well known and experienced, aren't to be trusted, and so what you should do is focus on what you don't know until it's... well, a shortcut.

The truth is that nothing is wrong with shortcuts. It shows experience and knowledge. The problem occurs when one relies on the same set of shortcuts, the same set of tricks, never adding to their set of skills. For whatever reason, once our skills reach the point at which they are no longer challenged by our clients' requests, we tend to let them stay where they are.

Few clients are sophisticated enough to know how complex our work can be, so they ask for simple solutions. Our human-natured desire to find the easiest path gives our ego the excuse it needs to simply let these sleeping dogs lie. Why try harder? But before long, the ego that granted us the easy path starts to gripe when we walk down it too often. Somewhere in the pit of our souls, it begins to cry havoc that we aren't being used for worthy problems.

Vibrant Waters Of The Creative Mind

The waters of the mind stagnate when no new currents of knowledge pass through them. The silt, which is movement made visible, falls to the bottom when undisturbed. The waters sit still and before long are rendered lifeless.

Only through knowledge and new experiences will the waters once again come alive, allowing a vibrant crop of new species, new ideas, to grow and call your mind home. It's only through the introduction of new ideas that our mind can transform from stagnant pots of water into vibrant ecosystems.

This requires work, a constant and caring tending – not great movements once a week, nor month, nor year, through hollow and meaningless retreats, self-development programs or committees or, worse, the occasional reading of a how-to article, quickly forgotten.

No, only through gentle stirrings daily will the waters of your mind remain lively and fruitful.

How does this work start? The short version is easy enough:

- List everything you want and need to learn.
- Read just enough to start experimenting with these listed curiosities.
- Always find a place in your current project to apply a new experiment.

Write your list, tend to it regularly, and the waters will never go still. If you're lucky, you might never find your-

self stuck and bored, browsing your library of those faded
and dented shapes. 🐼

Be A Better Designer By Eating An Elephant

BY ALEXANDER CHARCHAR 🍷

I can't imagine any other industry in which so much change happens so quickly. If you stop paying attention for a week, it can feel like you've not been listening for a year. There's so much to learn.

Falling behind is easy, too. We might be in the middle of a major project, so we put off learning about this new-fangled thing called Sass or Node.js or even quickly experimenting with the new Bootstrap or Foundation that everyone is raving about. Before we know it, we have these elephants of missing knowledge wandering around our minds, reminding us of what we should know and do but haven't found the time for.

Even just *looking* at beautiful work and seeing what new technique we could use ourselves can seem like too big a task when we're swamped with projects. So, we tell ourselves we'll come back to it later. But later never shows up. The guilt definitely does, but not that elusive deadline of later.

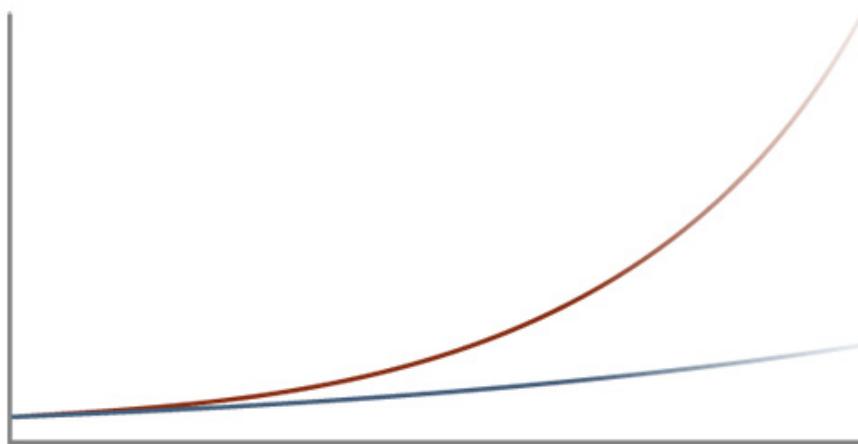
We feel guilty because we know something out there could help us become a better designer or developer and we're not paying attention to it. Luckily, we can change this and start to catch up on what we've been missing out on.

Eating Elephants To Get Things Done

I always liked the productivity quip about how to start and finish a huge project: You do it the same way you eat an elephant, one bite at a time.

I'm not suggesting we go out and eat endangered animals, but what if we did just one small thing a day to expand our knowledge and skill set – and not just for a week or only on weekends, but every day, for 30 days straight? Would we catch up on that knowledge and experience we're missing?

This challenge of stacking knowledge daily will enable you not only to learn 30 things, but to learn 30 things that will increase in complexity and fit together as a whole new branch of working knowledge for you.



I'm sure you remember this kind of graph from finance class in high school when you would discuss compound interest. Knowledge is no different: A little bit every day adds up quickly. Actively stacking up your knowledge daily will help you stay on the red path.

How does that sound? Want to give it a go? It's only 30 days, and it could alter the path of your career, even if slightly.

Pick A Challenge

Pick the right challenge, something that will keep you curious and excited for 30 days, something you'd be happy to chew on slowly. But the challenge should be able to be comfortably broken down into easy pieces, small bites.

Suppose you're a web designer who wants to learn the CSS processor Sass. No shame in that; I'll bet, like me, you've been very busy. But the prospect of learning Sass is kind of huge, isn't it? What if we did it in the same way that we'd metaphorically eat an elephant?

Your day-one task might be to learn how to install Ruby and Sass locally. You can't just be reading, though. That's not learning — that's memorizing. You have to do it as you go, downloading the installation files or loading the terminal.

Day two might be learning about and actually writing variables. Day three might be nesting. Days four through six might be setting up your files as partials. And then importing. And then mixins. Then, day seven could be inheritance. You might find that, once you've planned these days out, you have enough work for only 15 days, so maybe you'll jump into learning Bourbon, Foundation or Bootstrap?

That all sounds like a lot to take on, especially if the names all sound intimidating. Biting them off one at a time would make things a lot easier. Downloading and in-

stalling a file might not seem like much, but tack that on to learning the basics over the next few days and you've started to develop a new skill.

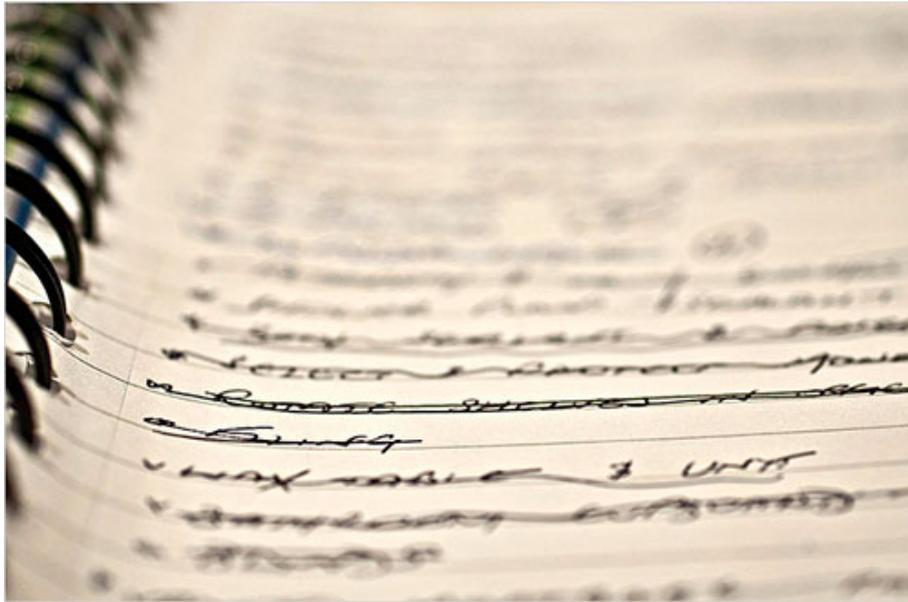
But this isn't about being perfect. You don't need to build a beautiful website, or even a functional one. You just have to learn a collection of techniques and stay on track. To do so, to maintain focus, you need a plan.

Plan Your Bites And Prepare As Best You Can

You know what they say about the best laid plans of mice and men. So, avoid setting specific daily goals. Stumbling on day one would put you a day behind from the very start. A lacklustre performance for the following 29 days would then be almost certain. Rather than planning based on days, I'd suggest mapping your progress, which is really just a fancy way of saying "write a checklist" or even "keep a bucket."

A Sass-loving designer would benefit from having an ordered list of, say, 45 to 60 things to learn and do. Some days, they'll wake up and not get as much done as they'd like. Other days, they'll work hard and everything will flow, and they'll get two days' worth of work done.

The other option is what I call a bucket. The bucket for my latest challenge was one of those nasty yellow "internal mail" envelopes, filled with topics I could write about. No need to be fancy about it: A list cut up into strips and then put into an envelope is all you need.



Having a map to work to in these situations, an ordered list, will make the process easier. You will simply have no concern about slipping ahead or falling behind. (Image source¹⁴)

But why 45 to 60 topics and tasks if it's a 30-day challenge? The bucket method makes things truly random, right up to the last day. Well, depending on the challenge, randomness might be exactly what you need. It worked well for me when doing my writing challenge.

Or, if you're working with the map, it means you'll focus more on the journey than on the destination. You'll know well that you're not going to finish everything in the 30 days, so you're more likely to focus on what needs to get done day to day. You'll also have leftovers, which will be perfect to keep you busy learning once the 30 days are up.

¹⁴. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/90675395@N00/4327328037/>

But where to find these small tasks? That depends entirely on the challenge you're undertaking. Don't overthink at this stage. You could spend far too much time worrying about learning the right thing that you'll end up not learning anything at all.

For our Sass student, it could be as easy as going through introductory articles, both official ones and on blogs, or a series of classes on YouTube, or something structured like [Lynda](http://www.lynda.com)¹⁵ or curated like [Gibbon](http://www.gibbon.co)¹⁶, [Oozled](http://oozled.com/)¹⁷ or [HackDesign](https://hackdesign.org/lessons)¹⁸.

Set Time Goals, Limitations And Accountability

In *The Creative Habit*, Twyla Tharp talks about her morning gym routine. Her goal each morning isn't to make it to the gym, but simply to get into a taxi. Once she's done that, all she has to do to reach her morning goal is tell the driver to head towards the gym. Once there, she'll exercise. What else is there to do? But her winning moment is getting into the taxi.

It seems to run counter to what was mentioned above about not setting goals for tasks, however, goals for start and finish times set us up for success. The real "work" is often simply showing up.

15. <http://www.lynda.com>

16. <http://www.gibbon.co>

17. <http://oozled.com/>

18. <https://hackdesign.org/lessons>

During my last challenge, dragging my foggy head from a warm and loving bed to my cold, sunless office proved to be a bigger challenge than I had anticipated. While the writing eventually became a natural part of my morning, getting to the desk did not.

Focusing on the seemingly insignificant goal of waking up and stumbling a few feet so that I could start typing meant that I had approached my task that day with a fresh accomplishment resting comfortably in memory.

Pressure is relieved before an initial effort is made, and with that first win comes the momentum to keep going. In these kinds of time goals you'll find limitations and accountability. If your goal is to do two hours of work between 5:00 and 7:00 am, then your limit is 7:00.

Having a frequent finish time means that you'll know how to ration out your effort, and your mind will appreciate the daily rest point that finishing provides. Once this kind of routine is established, you'll be surprised by how easily you find the energy to keep working, often longer than you thought you would be able to, right up to the last minute.

Friends and followers will come to expect an outcome at the same time daily. Tweeting is simple, but throwing out a tweet at the same time every day sets up expectations for others. Getting a response, even if barely an occasional one, can keep you motivated for days.



In his [quick talk at TED¹⁹](https://embed-ssl.ted.com/talks/matt_cutts_try_something_new_for_30_days.html), Google's Matt Cutts gives his take on how to learn or do something you've always wanted to in 30 days.

Go!

You're excited. You have your plan of attack; you have your small goals; and you're ready to get to work and start chewing. Day one arrives and perhaps you wake before dawn, or you're up when only the owls are about. Either way, you're ready to work. On that first day and the few that follow, excitement isn't hard to find. But with it comes a coating of struggle.

A part of you will ask why you're bothering. You'll wonder what benefit could possibly be derived from this silly little game you're playing. Ignore such miserable thoughts. They'll probably arrive whether you like it or not. And for the first few days you'll find yourself fre-

¹⁹. https://embed-ssl.ted.com/talks/matt_cutts_try_something_new_for_30_days.html

quently battling your internal resistance. This scares many, but it's natural.

Chances are you're doing something challenging, something you've never done before, in parts so small that they won't seem to matter. The lizard in your brain will tell you that surfing TV or the Internet would be easier. But that will go away. For me, it always goes around day 10. I hope it's sooner for you, but by day 10 I find that things have become incredibly automatic and the resistance has almost completely disappeared.

However, not long after this, things get too easy. You might even end up setting your own little time traps. For my latest writing challenge, I gave myself up to two hours to do the work, but near day 20 I realized that I could write a piece in less than a quarter of that, and so I would leave it until that was all the time I had left. I'd still wake up on time to be at my desk, but I would mindlessly surf and read. What a wonderful signifier of development leftover time is, but one that I embraced poorly.

Time would be much better spent being reinvested in skill development. You could get dramatic returns by pouring this time into increasingly difficult tasks, and your framework of knowledge would be the richer for it. I'd suggest aiming for discomfort instead of finishing quickly.

In a 30-day challenge, defining your daily problems is up to you, so make sure to revise your plan every day. Look at the task you did that day and adjust for the following days. Was it too hard? Then maybe simplify tomorrow's expectations. Was it too easy? Spice it up some-

how. Write more words, write more code, further develop a design.

You don't develop when you practice what you're already good at. Aim to finish with excitement, but not exhaustion.

It's 30 Days Of Achievement, Not Just Knowledge

You've spent 30 days working on a challenge, but not so that the skills you develop become automatic, but to show yourself what you can achieve in a tiny window. You've found an hour or two a day and have probably lost nothing because of it. Just keep going.

From day 31, don't think of what you're doing as a challenge. It's simply how you work. It's how you plan your time, and it's how you grow your knowledge. Don't make the mistake I've made too many times and expect that once the 30 days are out the door, perfect autonomy will walk into the room.

Before you hit day 31, plan out what you'll do next. Continue following the map or emptying the bucket, but top it up with another 30 or 50 items, and just keep working. Review frequently, as you would during the 30 days, keep your schedule, and ensure that you're enjoying the right kind of challenge.

Perhaps this is the biggest gift of the 30 days: not the skills you acquire or any habit you set out to establish, but rather the realization that you can find the time, that you can learn something every day, and that planning your education is important.



A few years ago, Karen X. Cheng posted a time-lapse video of herself learning to dance²⁰, a wonderful reminder of how far you can go with daily effort. She went on to cofound Giveit100²¹, a website that lets you follow others as they go through their own daily development, as well as keep track of your own challenge.

Conclusion

Learning something daily is not hard. Some amazing websites will help you do it; they'll give you some random, small, independent piece of knowledge that's great to talk about over coffee but that won't stack. And that is what's valuable: stackable knowledge. You can start stacking with such a small number of days — just 30 of them.

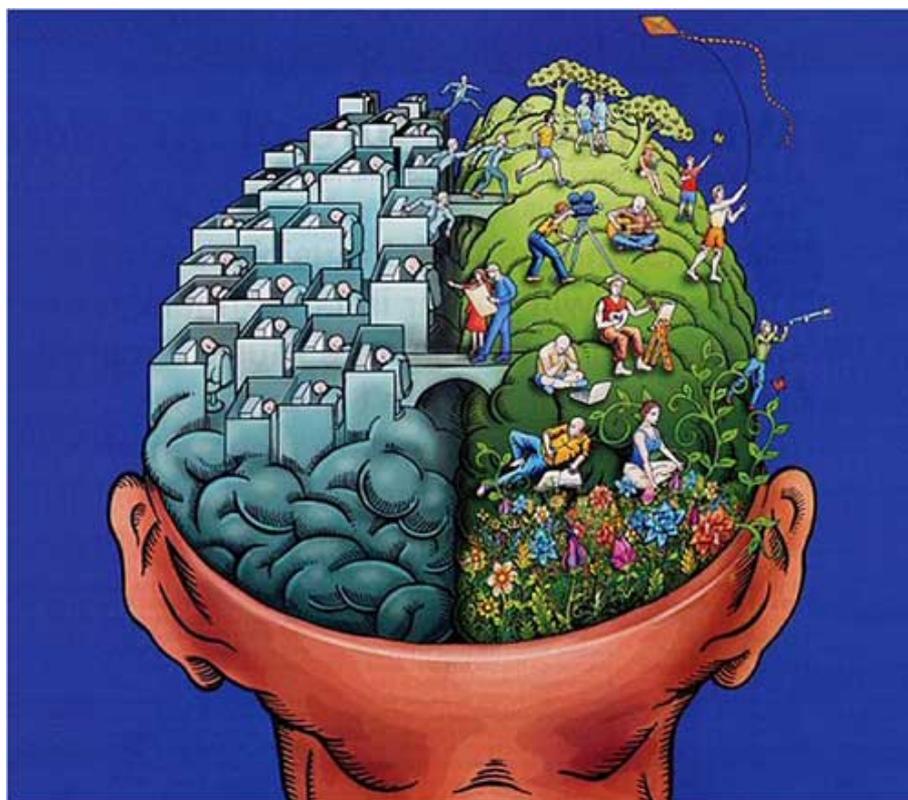
30 days. That's all it takes to learn a skill that could change your career.

You might be able to develop your skills to keep up with, and then break ahead of, the pack. You might be able to charge more because you can offer more or offer

²⁰. <http://www.youtube.com/embed/daC2EPUh22w>

²¹. <http://www.giveit100.com>

better. You could learn to better tell the stories of your clients, to produce work that is more sustainable or even delightful. With time, you could become an authority to whom others in your field, both students and professionals, call on for help in becoming more skilled and knowledgeable themselves. Instead of simply meeting standards and expectations, you could be setting them.



In all of these are opportunities for happiness, both professional and personal. (Image source²²)

You could challenge yourself in ways you can't imagine, pushing the edge of your knowledge and experience, finding new avenues previously hidden. Your work could

²². <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tza/3214197147/>

become increasingly meaningful because of it, as every month or year finds you working at increasingly complex and sophisticated problems. You could, in ways both small and large, shape an industry that I'm willing to bet you love. All that, just because you worked on it an hour or two a day, one bite at a time.

The process is so simple. This is all you're doing:

1. Pick a topic.
2. Break it down into parts.
3. Map out or randomize those parts.
4. Show up daily, at the same time, and get to work.
5. Review progress, and make sure you're being challenged just enough, adjusting as you go.
6. Do it for 30 days.

Easy, isn't it?

That's how you take your daily bite. Soon, you'll realize you've consumed an elephant-sized body of knowledge. You just have to show up and take action. Most of the people who read this article and like what they've learned will forget it all within a couple of hours or days. Or even minutes.

But not *you*. You're going to work, and when you do, when you do this silly little challenge thing for 30 days, you'll find yourself ahead of most of the people you know. Do it for 60 or 90 days or every single day for the rest of your career and you'll be in a league of your own.

Pick your topic. Take action.

What's Your Challenge?

What's that thing you've been wanting to achieve?

What's that thing you've been wanting to learn?

- **Always wanted to learn how to design your own font?** Try a letter a day. Start small by copying a font you love.
- **Need more experience with branding?** Design one logo per day, or one brand per month. The first day could be research, the second could be brainstorming, the third sketching, all the way through to a polished style guide.
- **Want to learn photography?** What if you started by learning what a single setting on the camera does? Then, work your way through to composition, style and post-production?
- **Want to learn to write?** Grab any number of amazing books on writing, and read one rule or lesson per day. Then, write as many examples using that lesson as you can in an hour.
- **Want to learn a programming language?** Learn and practice one command per day, with the aim of building a small working prototype.

Whatever you decide to do, don't put it off. Start next Monday. Don't wait a month or three or start first thing next year. Start next week, maybe the week after if you

have to work on your list of tasks. Just start. As soon as you can.

RESOURCES

- Get one of those compound interest and investment charts that shows how just a small bit every day adds up.
- “Five Years of 100 Days²³,” Michael Beirut
Design legend Michael Beirut gives his students at Yale a 100-day design challenge. The results range from brilliant to hilarious. One of my favorites is Ely Kim’s “Boombbox”²⁴ dance challenge.
- 100/100/100²⁵, Zak Klauck
Klauck undertook this challenge as part of Michael Beirut’s course at Yale. He designed a poster a day based on a short phrase or word, in only one minute.
- “Design Something Every Day!²⁶,” Jad Limcaco, Smashing Magazine
In 2009, Limcaco interviewed a few designers and illustrators who were doing year-long challenges to make something every day.

A lot of learning and inspiration can be found in what’s been written about design and development sprints in the last couple of years:

²³. <http://designobserver.com/feature/five-years-of-100-days/24678>

²⁴. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2DLNLTjvM>

²⁵. <http://100100100.org/>

²⁶. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/12/22/design-something-every-day/>

- [“Off To The Races: Getting Started With Design Sprints²⁷,”](#) Alok Jain, Smashing Magazine
- [“The Product Design Sprint: A Five-Day Recipe for Startups²⁸,”](#) Jake Knapp, Google Ventures
- [“Design Sprints For Developers²⁹,”](#) Nadya Direkova, Google Developers Blog
- [“The Product Design Sprint³⁰,”](#) Galen Frechette, Thoughtbot 

27. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/08/20/getting-started-with-design-sprints/>

28. <http://www.gv.com/lib/the-product-design-sprint-a-five-day-recipe-for-startups>

29. <http://googledevelopers.blogspot.com.au/2014/07/design-sprints-for-developers.html>

30. <http://robots.thoughtbot.com/the-product-design-sprint>

Dealing With Workaholism On Web Teams

BY YIANNIS KONSTANTAKOPOULOS 🍷

Workaholism is often confused with hard work. Some people who work on the Web seem not only to disregard its dangers, but to actively promote it. They see it as a badge of honor – but is it really? On the contrary, it’s a serious issue that can damage Web teams.

Before we get started, let’s make one thing clear³¹: A “workaholic” is someone who is addicted³² to work, someone who is out of balance and out of control. Their addiction can make them work for 12, 14 or even more hours a day, every day. No weekends, no vacations, just work. Soon, they neglect their family, friends, health, sometimes damaging them all irrevocably.

In contrast, people who simply “work hard” do not expose themselves to such dangers. Putting in a few extra hours to meet a critical deadline doesn’t usually result in workaholism, provided that those sprints are rare and justified.

31. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201203/workaholism-and-the-myth-hard-work>

32. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-workaholics/201112/understanding-the-dynamics-workaholism>

On Good Web Teams

Running a modern Web business can be demanding. As a result, some business owners stretch their employees as far as they can. What they fail to realize is that working 40 hours per week is enough. Any more and both the employees and the business could be harmed³³, startups included.

Productivity depends *not only* on working hours, but on intensity of work³⁴. Here's a magic equation:

$$\textit{work accomplished} = \textit{time spent} \times \textit{intensity of focus}$$

Pushing people to work more hours is a *superficial* solution, not a *viable* one.

Good teams, winning teams, are fragile ecosystems. Members communicate with each other through different media (face to face, instant messages, email, project management software), and the communication is often asynchronous (thus, accommodating both early birds and night owls, as well as people in other time zones). Once a team finds its pace, that rhythm must be protected.

Members of this fragile ecosystem are connected by invisible bonds of respect and care. Teams are made up of humans. You can see this in action on a sports team: When an opponent attacks a member of the team, the rest rush to protect their teammate. That's team spirit.

33. <http://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/why-working-more-than-40-hours-a-week-is-useless.html>

34. <http://calnewport.com/blog/2007/07/26/the-straight-a-gospels-pseudo-work-does-not-equal-work/>

Workaholics have a much more extreme approach to work. They work far more than 40 hours per week, they disrupt the rhythm of the team, and they disregard the invisible bonds of care and respect. Just *one* of them is enough to damage the health of a good team.

How Does Someone Become A Workaholic?

Think of the movies that feature a lonely computer programmer, coding non-stop day and night. The character is familiar. But can computers themselves stimulate workaholism? They are, after all, absorbing and entertaining at once. Losing control seems to be a greater danger for us than for other professionals. However, a job can't turn someone into a workaholic³⁵. Workaholics tend to be rigid, perfectionist and born achievers.

Workaholics have a characteristic that distinguishes them from people who just love their work: personal insecurity³⁶. Personal insecurity is associated with neuroticism, another inherent characteristic of workaholics, according to the study "Personality Correlates of Workaholism³⁷" (PDF). Peter E. Mudrack, in his chapter "Understanding Workaholism: The Case for Behavioral Tendencies³⁸" for the book *Research Companion to Working Time*

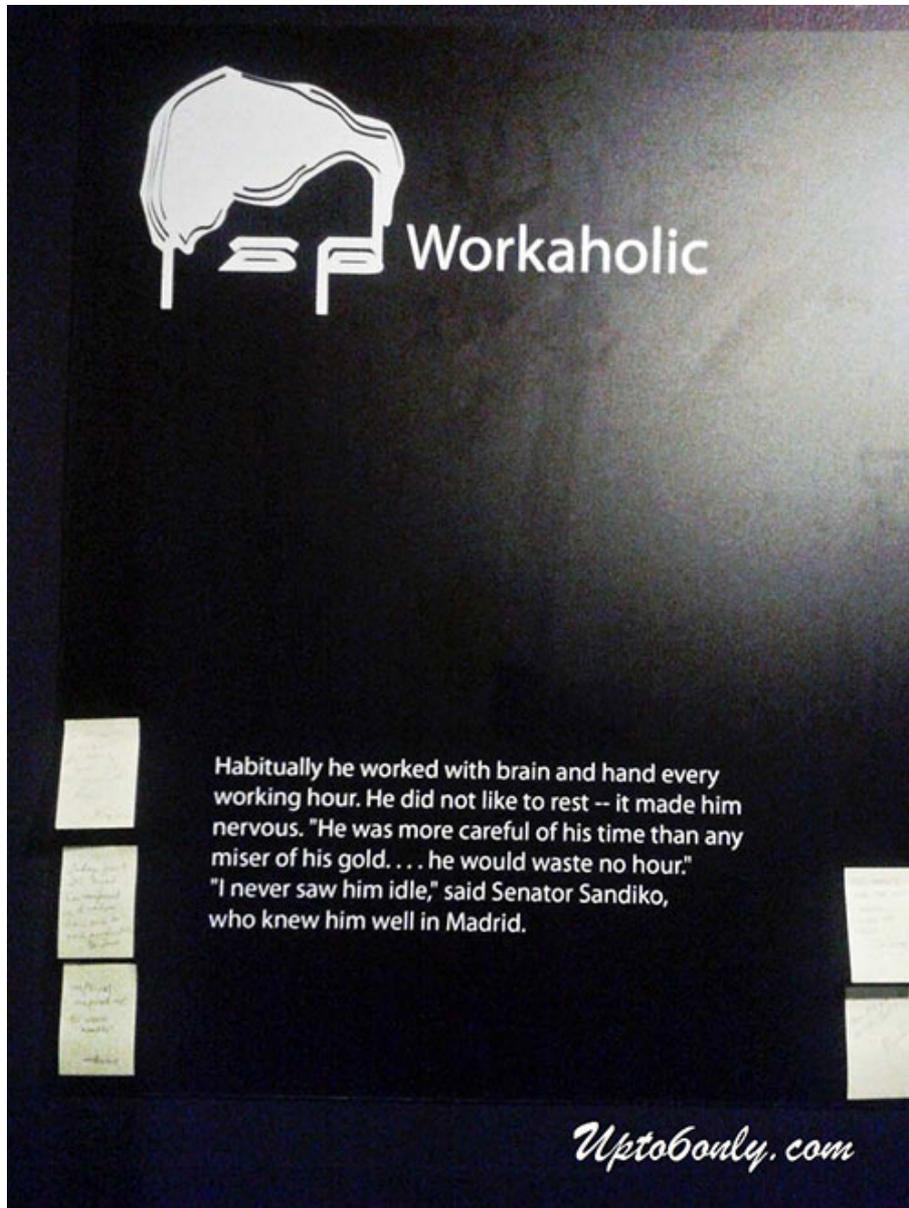
35. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200605/field-guide-the-workaholic>

36. <http://www.careercast.com/career-news/truth-about-workaholics>

37. <http://folk.uib.no/psspm/documents/B-M-P-2006.pdf>

38. [http://books.google.com/books?id=nqWvpJ3WKSQC&lpg=PA108&ots=eb4hc0Wca4&dq=Mudrack,+E.+\(2006\).+Understanding+workaholism&lr=&pg=PA108&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=nqWvpJ3WKSQC&lpg=PA108&ots=eb4hc0Wca4&dq=Mudrack,+E.+(2006).+Understanding+workaholism&lr=&pg=PA108&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)

and *Work Addiction*, connects workaholism to feelings of low self-worth and insecurity.



“He would waste no hour.” (Image: [Iana Peralta](#)³⁹)

³⁹. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/upto6only/>

Insecurity comes in many guises: low self-esteem, antagonism, authoritarianism, severe fear of failure, perfectionism. The actions of workaholics express an urgent need to prove to themselves and to others that they're better than everyone else in the room. Deep down, they hurt. Some feel like a failure in their personal life and use their job to escape from a bad relationship or to make up for an absence in their personal life⁴⁰.

Sometimes people become workaholics for less complicated reasons. A big loan or a personal debt are tangible problems. If someone is in desperate need of money, they'll work as much as they can to get it. Supporting a large family is also a huge burden. Such situations are oppressive and make some people abandon their principles and become workaholics.

In some ways, workaholism is a symptom of modern society. We live in a culture where productivity is paramount and the boundaries between leisure and work are no longer clear⁴¹. We're raising a generation of people who not only love their work but put it at the center of their lives. The entrepreneurial lifestyle is held up as the model of how to work on the Web. Slowly, gradually, we are changing our fundamental values and criteria for success.

⁴⁰. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/jobs/21career.html?_r=0

⁴¹. <http://samvak.tripod.com/leisure.html>

ARE YOU A WORKAHOLIC?

Most workaholics wouldn't admit that they're one to themselves, let alone to anyone else. If you're worried that you might be one, ask yourself a few simple questions:

- “Do I work far more than 40 hours per week?”
- “Do I feel a continual urge to prove that I'm the best among my colleagues?”
- “Do I recognize signs of intense insecurity in myself about work?”
- “Are my personal and work lives balanced?”

There's even an online quiz⁴² that could help you. It's simple and short.

You could bury your head in the sand and pretend that everything is OK. But if you suspect that you're a workaholic, then doing something about it is critical. And if you still think workaholism is cool, please keep on reading.

The Attractiveness Of Workaholics

Yes, some employers love workaholics. But why are workaholics so appealing?

- They work longer hours than the rest of the team.
- They don't mind taking work home.

⁴². <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2011/05/living/workaholic.test/>

- Outworking everyone else makes them seem like they care. Always taking on responsibility and being at work all of the time make them look valuable. And carrying on under any circumstance makes them a fighter.

They know what employers want, and they're eager to give it.

Let's take a look at two archetypal workaholics.

1. THE COMMITTED LEAD PROGRAMMER

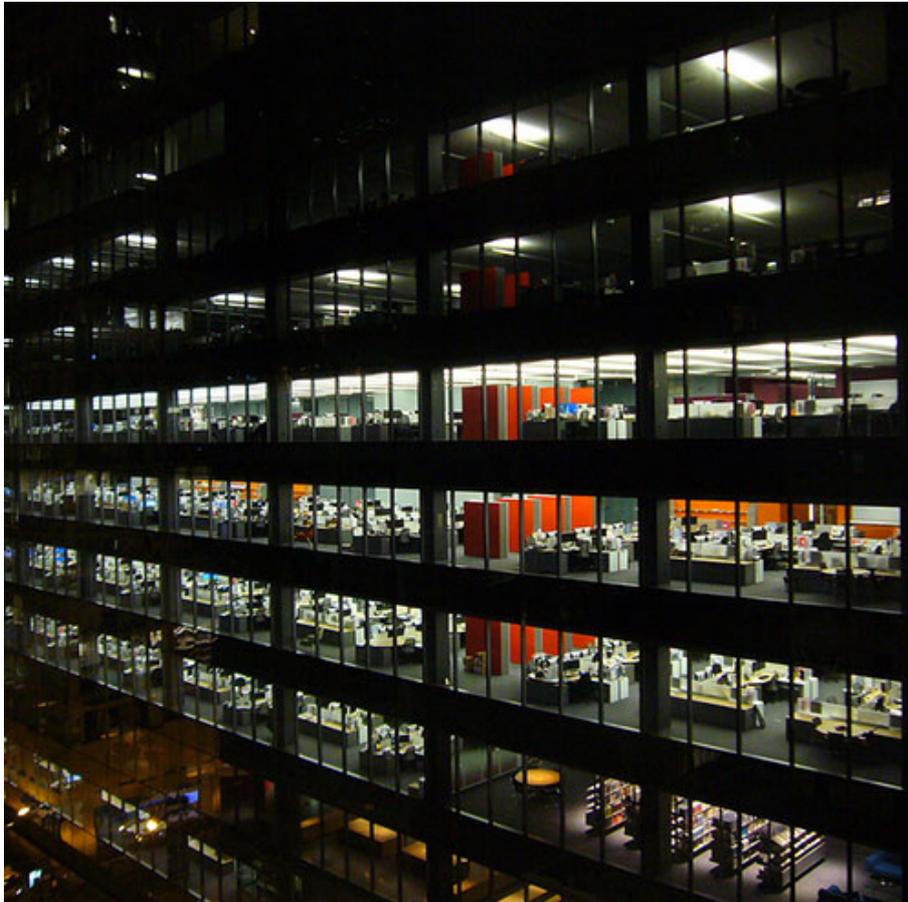
Upon conducting extensive research, an experienced lead programmer comes up with a number of different database implementations to apply to a Web project. He decides to test each one thoroughly to find the best one. This doesn't impinge on anyone's time except his own. He decides to take the job home and works day and night to accomplish the task. He knows it won't be easy, but he's committed. All he wants is to be appreciated for his dedication and work.

Pretty compelling, right? A meticulous Web worker who sacrifices his personal time to advance the project.

2. THE PROJECT MANAGER WITH METTLE

In a casual company meeting, a project manager promises stakeholders a sophisticated implementation of a service on an incredibly tight schedule. He's not afraid to take responsibility for the project, and he promises to check every single aspect of it personally. If that requires him to push the team as far as he can, then so be it.

Stakeholders leave the meeting impressed by his loyalty and determination. At last, they have found someone they can count on.



“Office hours” are sometimes relative. (Image: Florian Boyd⁴³)

The characters above are just a couple of the types of workaholics in our industry. There are many: the superstar designer who’s willing to present multiple design directions; the perfectionist developer who insists on flaw-

⁴³ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fboyd/3793181882/>

less code, even sacrificing his summer vacations. The list goes on.

Such people look much more attractive than their coworkers who stick to eight-hour workdays. They have charisma, they work hard, and they should be praised, if not promoted.

The Fake Glow Of Workaholism

The glow of this perfectionism is false. These practices are only temporarily fruitful, and they can eventually result in disaster. The reason is that workaholism is a shortsighted strategy, one that encourages people to express the worst parts of their personality.

Why is it shortsighted? Because the committed programmer cited above is unconsciously hurting his team's spirit. As Scott Berkun notes⁴⁴:

Simply outworking other people can have a negative effect on others: that 5× improvement may create a -2× impact on everyone else: if the star demoralizes others and goes out of his way to embarrass them with his talent, morale and productivity are sure to drop.

Furthermore, even the most productive employees can't keep working with such intensity for long. They will eventually wear out, as will their ability to think clearly. They will no longer be able to contribute to the team or make sound decisions. A successful team needs steady

⁴⁴. <http://scottberkun.com/essays/47-teams-and-stars/>

performance from its members more than heroic efforts. A member who temporarily outworks the rest of the team soon becomes an obstacle because they can't work as part of the team, despite their best intentions.

And why does workaholism lead people to show the dark side of their personality? Let's return to our second character type. The project manager who would do anything to keep his promise will end up creating too much tension by pushing the team members to their limit. Even if he pushes himself more, he will not inspire anyone; he will merely be a foolish dictator – not a member of the team, but an opponent.

When a team struggles to cope with an impossible project and infighting occurs, the incredible pressure will reduce the overall quality of the work. In such an environment, the manager could very easily get someone out of their way by derailing them, as Shanley explains⁴⁵:

Any disagreement or critique is transformed into a symptom of pathology on the part of the dissenter. Managers may imply that the individual is unstable, emotionally disturbed, or has a mental disorder. Commonly, this includes overtly stating or implying that the dissenter is “too emotional,” should “take some time off,” “has an anger problem,” is “hostile,” is “overly aggressive,” “takes things too seriously/personally” or “has a problem with authority.”

⁴⁵. <https://medium.com/about-work/65d4740f7a2f>

In the best case scenario, the workaholic will end up exhausted, needing weeks or even months to recover. In the worst case scenario, the team will derail and the members will be dispirited.

Workaholic Companies

Too many workaholic companies are out there, and it's pretty easy for an employer to create one. All the employer has to do is push people to work beyond their limit and punish the ones who don't. Big companies such as McKinsey have sought out such people⁴⁶, according to CNN.

Workaholic companies are machines that burn people out. They don't care about creating teams. They exploit the enthusiasm of young people and dry them up. One indicator of a workaholic company is that its contractors rarely stay with it for more than a few years.

There are other ways to identify workaholic companies. A few people proudly call themselves workaholics, but most people don't boast about it, and spotting one from the outside can be hard. However, they can be identified. Before entering a new work environment, search for the "local heroes" – the people who urge everyone else to work more, who can't have a good laugh during working hours or who constantly talk about "the good of the company." Can you find the individuals who, beyond a doubt, elicit unpleasant feelings from the rest of the team? They are the ones to watch out for.

46. http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1993/11/01/78550/index.htm

Go on. Don't be afraid to ask straight questions of potential employers during interviews. They may respond vaguely, but try to get crystal clear answers. Some employers expect you to be as dedicated as them, to put yourself in their shoes. Or they will tell you that the company is now your home and that you should do whatever it takes to make it thrive. If you hear these words, run away!

Remember that you work for money, but money alone is not enough. A job is also about being satisfied⁴⁷, which comes from an effective management style, good use of the team's various skills and a pleasant atmosphere. A workaholic company needs you more than you need it. You deserve better.

Working With Workaholics

An environment where workaholism is the norm soon gets frustrating. You will quickly find yourself with two choices: follow the others or stand your ground and work according to your own conscience.

The first option is an admission of defeat. You're saying, "I won't try to change the situation here because, if I do so, my job will be at risk." While no one would blame you for taking this route, you will wither day by day, dying a slow death.

The second option brings its own problems. You must be prepared to fight for your right to work normally. Re-

⁴⁷. <http://www.cvrDallas.com/hughes-view.html>

main calm, patient and diligent, while questioning everything. You could raise the following questions:

- How is performance measured?
- Why are deadlines so harsh?
- Who is ultimately responsible, and what happens when things go wrong?
- What are the procedures for making complaints?
- What is the past and future of the company?

If you do find yourself in a workaholic company, the first thing to do is keep sane and keep working. Try to find out why things have gone wrong. Ask questions in front of others so that they feel empowered to ask questions, too. Workaholism affects everyone, but not everyone feels free to speak up. If you never talk about it, no one will help you.

If the culture of the company as a whole promotes workaholism, then your employer might not be happy with you for pointing it out. Your employer might think that someone who works eight hours a day doesn't work enough and will tempt others to work less. It's not going to be easy, but it is worth the effort. If you can demonstrate that workaholism is destructive, then you'll gradually change the culture of the company, a huge win.

Fighting Workaholism

Modern businesses need *strong teams*, not *overworked individuals*. They need healthy environments, with people who care as much for their teammates as they do for their products.

Fighting workaholism is not easy, but it *can* be done. How?

- Be eager to reject workaholism. Every. Single. Day.
- Learn to recognize workaholics.
- Avoid workaholic companies. You won't regret it.
- If you are at a workaholic company now, end your workday at a reasonable time, or suffer the consequences.
- Spread the word.

Employers are responsible for workaholism, but if Web workers reject workaholic companies, then those employers would have to change their ways.

Perhaps you're saying, "What if I'm the employer?"

It's simple, really. By now, you must have realized that promoting workaholism won't take you far. So, stand up, leave your desk and see if any workaholics are destroying your fragile ecosystem. Help them to bring balance back to their life. And if that doesn't work, then do as the smart folks say: fire the workaholic⁴⁸! 🐼

⁴⁸. <http://37signals.com/svn/posts/902-fire-the-workaholics>

When 24/7/365 Fails: Turning Off Work On Weekends

BY ROBERT BOWEN 🍷

The Web has continued evolving since its inception, as have those who have devoted their professional lives to working in and around this massive communication tool. We have had to roll with the changes, and like with any major environmental shifts, we have had to adapt. During this shifting of our online existences, something quite interesting happened... interesting in a somewhat frustrating manner. The expectations of the client base, our colleagues and even our friends have risen to new, unreasonable heights.

Though this is not an isolated instance of schedule disrespect, we do understand that not every potential client or colleague is going to hold on to these extremely elevated expectations, so this post is directed only at those who do. Do not misunderstand, there is nothing wrong with having expectations about a profession, but when you allow those unchecked presumptions to take you to a disrespectful place, then a line is being crossed. One that we hope to clearly draw in the sand, for any and all of those who share in this frustration, with this article today.

What's the Crux?

Basically, at the forefront of this disrespect is the issue of time. After all, timing is everything. And it further seems, that when it comes to time, it is always on the verge of running out on everyone. From somewhere, came this overwhelming sense of urgency that seems to have tightly gripped so many people and it is not letting up. And for some reason, they expect this sense of urgency to be completely contagious. For everyone to pick up on this pressing sense and let it push them into action as well. Which is understandable for sure, but it is not entirely fair.

It also makes assumptions that further disrespects these professionals and their other clients. It assumes that they can devote all of their attention and time to you and your project. Which just further implies an importance that your project has over any and all else. Which it does. To you. But can you reasonably expect the same from everyone who operates off or online, who has their services offered to millions of members of the public? One would not think so, but it happens. For some reason our time, no matter the professional arena in which we hang our hat, is considered 100% theirs once a contract is in place or the agreements are made and the work begins.

Suddenly like doctors who are on call, no matter the day or the hour, seemingly with no consideration given to our schedules whatsoever, we are expected to be available and at the ready whenever the client needs us. Our websites and e-mails are treated as virtual help desks that we should be manning 24/7/365. Twenty four hours a day, seven days a week for three hundred and sixty five days a

year. No interruptions or distractions are allowed. Life, which typically has a tendency of getting in the way, is not permitted to do so for the actively, online business professional. How is that reasonable?



Sometimes it is necessary to pull yourself away from work and just take a break. (Image credit: [Petra Fritz](#)⁴⁹)

Once upon a time, there were those of us playing this business game who believed that it was completely unnecessary and unreasonable for us to take our work home with us. We've surely had times, when it was not easy to let the work stay behind as we clocked out, but it was not a constant element of our jobs. And there were those of us who believed that was just the way this game would play out. But we were apparently mistaken. It seems that to some members of the public, we have apparently con-

⁴⁹. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/andoline/4175661027/in/photostream/>

nected dots which have led to a misunderstanding of our accessibility. What some might even label as a reluctance to understand rather than a simple misunderstanding.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE WEEKENDS GONE?

Time was, people would have a solid work week, which was commonly a day or two shorter than the full seven day cycle that filled our calendars. They would put in their forty plus hours squeezed into about five days and take two for themselves. It was not only welcomed, it became expected. But then something began to change. The landscape shifted, and those expectations were no longer extended to all fields of business. Including those whose business was largely, if not all, based online. Suddenly, these weekends were no longer sacred.

We were not allowed to be away or out of reach, not for a day, so certainly not for two. But why? Is this simply a reflection of the way that our 'jobs' are viewed by those outside of the field looking in? Is this a lack of respect, or is it something less sinister than that? Is it a personal thing that we need to cope with on our own? Is it a matter of self-organization and saying 'no' to people having such high expectations? Truth be told, it is almost certainly not any one answer, but more a combination of them. After all, we are dealing with a large segment of the world populous, so generally there is not just one route to the heart of this issue.

How Did We Get Here?

So just exactly how did we end up here? Maybe if we can understand how this came about, we can effectively combat these misconceptions that have led to this place of unrealistic expectations. This would make things go smoother for both the clients and the professionals involved in the project. When everyone comes to the table with reasonable expectations, there are fewer surprises to upset the flow and raise the stress level of the project. This is the best environment to work in, but we find a much more hostile one currently in its place. One that was wrought from a handful of contributors.

OOPS, OUR BAD!

First off, we should admit up front, that a portion of this blame could (and probably should) fall on our shoulders. So before we go pointing any fingers elsewhere, we should point the first one at ourselves. For years, many business professionals have been flocking to the Web and writing about the lengthy, dedicated schedules that we tend to keep, and how many long hours are involved in our choices of profession. Especially if our work centers around the Web. Perhaps this information has been completely misconstrued and misinterpreted into an endless accessibility.

Add the fact that many of us professionals get to work from home to that, and people surmise that means we are never far from our base of operations. This further leads down the road to people expecting us to always be check-

ing in. After all, we are never going to be far from home, right? At least, not for any significant length of time.

THE MOBILE WEB!

Another factor that helped bring about this landscape is the mobile Web and the near unlimited connectivity it offers. Given that a number of us have our businesses online, we are all expected to carry the Web with us any and everywhere we go. Thus eliminating any excuse for us to ever be out of reach. So many mobile devices bringing the Web into a more portable hand-held format was a game changer for many reasons, but this one was perhaps unforeseen by many in the online community.

Suddenly this Web trend exploded and connectivity not only became more accessible and common. It became an expectation. Especially for those working in the digital online realms, as we are seen to always be sort of ahead of the game when it comes to the digital media that shapes the Internet.

RODNEY DANGERFIELD SYNDROME

Sometimes, however, these unrealistic expectations stem from a fundamental lack of respect for the work that we do, particularly for those working from home or in any sort of creative field. Plain and simple, just like Dangerfield repeatedly lamented, we get no respect! There are always going to be people outside our field who cannot understand how much focus and finesse goes into our work, and as a result they undervalue our contributions.

Not only that, but there are those who underestimate the length of time it takes for the creative process to run its course. They think that we can just easily crank out the design, the code, the article, whatever the work is, with little to no effort. Therefore they tend to rush the project by setting unreasonable deadlines, essentially undercutting the effectiveness of the project.

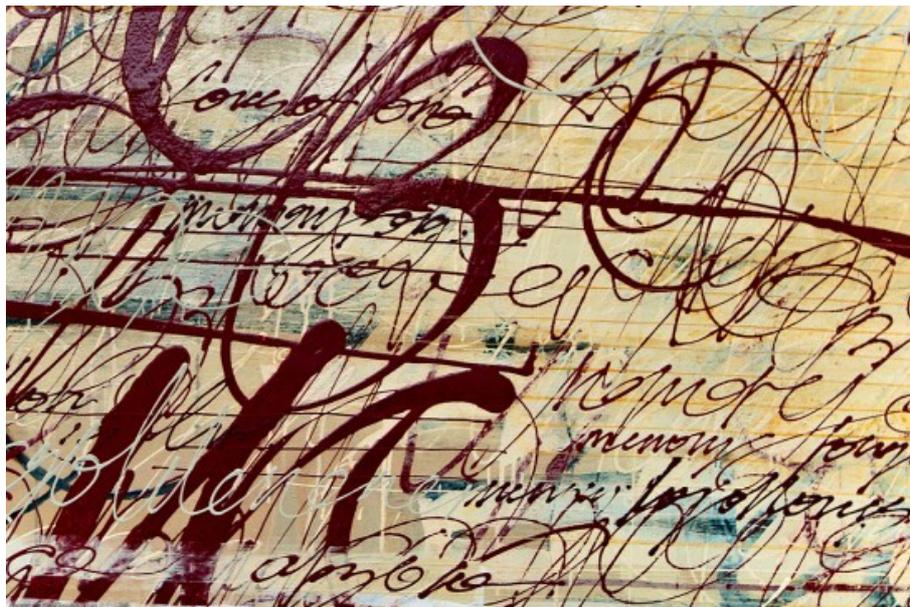
THE WEAKENED ECONOMY

Another factor that could possibly offer insight into these expectations coming in way above reason is the decline in the global economy. Overall, the standard value of money worldwide has seen better days, and this has left many people needing to make their money stretch. This has seemed to leave them expecting more for their money. This could also put them in a less than trusting mood when they begin dealing with a faceless online professional who is virtually anonymous to them. They see little recourse should something go wrong, given that there is no physical source to travel to and personally take on. So they get a little nervous which can cause them to be excessively hands on. Unfortunately, their nerves do not get any better if they find that they cannot reach us when they need to.

CUSTOMER PRIVILEGE

The last road that led to this place we are going to look at here is one created by the corporate shot-callers of the past, and exacerbated by an entitled nature that many have adopted. Customer privilege. Or rather, the cus-

tomers is always right, gone horribly, horribly wrong! Businesses around the globe sold consumers everywhere this bill of goods, and they ran with it. Believing that – no matter the context or situation – they are always right, and always deserving of our fullest attention whenever they feel they require it. The idea of other clients or projects requiring time does not work for them, because it is not their concern. They are priority number one in their eyes, and they do not understand that we do not share this outlook, because once upon a time, businesses everywhere, told them they were.



You don't have to work every single day. It's important to have side projects that are not directly related to work. This free time will help you broaden your horizon and bundle your energy for upcoming projects.

(Image credit: [See-ming Lee](#)⁵⁰)

50. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/seeminglee/3990573818/in/photostream/>

How Do We Proceed?

Now that we have got here, what can we do to alter this course? The road is already paved and everyone has been steered to this place, so what can we do now to reset this bar? Well, hopefully we can find some common ground of understanding and right this course as a team of professionals and clients. Going forward with a full comprehension of how we got to this place and why it is a bad place to be, we can start repairing these breaches that for too long have been a damaging bump in the business road.

THE UNDER IS OVER

For starters, we have to agree to stop underestimating one another. This happens on both sides of the fence, so we as the professionals have some work to do in this area as well. We often underestimate our clients and their ability to fully grasp our concepts and ideas, so we try to work *around* them rather than work *with* them. So from both ends of the business relationship the underestimation has to end in order for some of these breaches to be corrected and the disrespect to stop. We both need to realize that it certainly takes two to tango in this case. Without the company, the client would be lost holding on to a concept that they cannot implement. And without the client, the business would have no work to finance their operation. It is a symbiotic relationship indeed.

PLAY IT PASSIVE

There are times when we have to realize that things will not change unless we force them to from our end. And this does not have to be handled in any abrupt manner that could potentially strain the relationship, in fact it can be handled quite passively. Just by simply ignoring these messages until we are back in the office (even if we never truly left it). Essentially, we can just set a schedule that allows us to take time off from urgent client calls – and also stick to it. Don't allow the client or their concerns to encroach on our time 'off'. The time we need to reset and unwind so that our creative outputs remain fresh and freely flowing.

This is not to say that we do not work on certain days, just that we put off getting back to people during those times. For instance, by simply explaining to your clients that you are willing to dedicate your weekend to your family and your personal life, they will respect you even more for your firm decisions.

OFFER OTHER OUTLETS

Another thing that can be done to help alleviate some of these unreasonable access expectations is to let the clients know up front that through your standard contact information you have a 24 to 48 hour rate of return. This way if they tend to be the nervous type of client they expect to wait, and do not go forward with the idea that we are somehow always waiting at the other end of the proverbial line. This way they will not immediately assume the worst when they find themselves agitatedly lin-

gering in anticipation. Then you can offer them other channels to reach you in the case of emergencies. This can not only give them an added layer of peace of mind, but it can further let you know if what they need is truly urgent and needs to be addressed as soon as possible. If the contact comes through the emergency channels then you know *notto* put it off.



*Take the opportunity to put your feet up during the weekend and enjoy a cup of coffee or tea with an old friend.
(Image and design credit: [Julia May](#)⁵¹)*

VIRTUE TAKES THE CAKE

Patience, what seems to be a long forgotten virtue, needs to be revived in a big way. Losing our cool, especially in a professional environment is not the way to successfully achieve our ends. Generally, this actually actively works against you, essentially getting in your way. Patience is

⁵¹. <http://www.photointerview.ru/>

the way to understanding, and as we said before, understanding is important for bringing about this change. So we need to be more patient with one another and not allow everything in our lives to be chaotically run by this oft-times unnecessary sense of urgency. This applies not just to clients, but to all of us – colleagues, partners, and maybe even friends.

Learn to shut off work, learn to switch off your cell phone and learn *not* to check e-mails on Sundays. Also, learn to communicate your working routine to your co-workers, partners and clients. Feel free to get creative and explore your imagination on your own during weekends, but don't let the work become an urgent tyranny that determines the way you live. We have to remember that there are times when we need to think about important things which are not related to work at all. Be it education, self-organization, personal interests, attending conferences, visiting exhibitions, recreation or time with your family. Planting the patient seed with each of our interactions will slowly help us achieve this goal.

CONTRACTUAL CLAUSES

One thing that a number of professionals insist on using is a contract to guard against any unrealistic expectations or diversions from being introduced at any stage in the project, but especially in the latter stages where most alterations being asked for are usually game changers that will additionally add undue stress and extra hours of work. Therefore you can use this tool to your advantage to guard against such things. By including a section that

guarantees any and all changes made will be allowed at least 5 to 7 hours (during workdays) to fully process and digest before any implementation will begin, can help to ensure that the client is fully thinking things through before turning anything over to you. They will know that no matter what they need done, time will have to be allotted and allowed before it can be enacted, so they may consider all of their changes more carefully.

FORGET THE CHEST, PUT YOUR CARDS ON THE TABLE

The last thing that we can do on our ends to try and help keep the expectations in a more reasonable place, is to no longer play our cards close to the chest where no one knows what we are going for. Instead, we need to lay our cards out on the table so that there is little to no guesswork left up. If we are open and up front from the start as to our routines and expectations, then that can set a precedent for clients, colleagues and friends to follow in suit. Open dialog is going to be one of our greatest weapons as we try to change this direction and fix this course we are on.

In Conclusion

We are living in the age of instant gratification and unparalleled connectivity, and that has effected our expectations with regards to communication and business. And we are all going to have to adjust and work together in order to prevent the impacts of this age from straining our professional relationships. Hopefully we can work to-

gether to get to a place where the expectation levels are set at a much more reasonable height.

FURTHER READING

- “[How to Explain to Clients That They Are Wrong⁵²](#)” is a post that will help with client relationships, as it tells you how to tactfully approach various situations.
- “[Is John the Client Dense, or Are You Just Failing Him?⁵³](#)” is another Smashing Magazine article that can help us learn more about client relationships. 🐣

52. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/12/10/how-to-explain-to-clients-that-they-are-wrong/>

53. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/02/19/is-john-the-client-dense-or-are-you-failing-him/>

Fostering Healthy Non-Professional Relationships

BY JEREMY GIRARD 🍷

As Web designers and developers, we invest a lot of time and effort in nurturing professional relationships, including those with clients, prospective clients, coworkers, peers and others in the industry.

Unfortunately, while many Web professionals work hard to make these work-related relationships as strong as possible, they often neglect their non-professional relationships, including those with family and friends and even with themselves and their own health and well-being.

I began thinking about this article after reading about a fellow Web designer who was going through a divorce. Divorce rates are depressingly high anyway, so this sad scenario is not unique to the Web industry, but I do think that Web professionals, and IT workers in general, often struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, and their relationships often suffer because of that struggle.

In this article, I will offer some of the ways that I have found helpful in my own life and career to foster healthy non-professional relationships and personal well-being.



As an industry, we are keenly focused on solving problems, yet some of the most important problems we face are the ones away from our computer screens.

Am I Qualified To Write This Article?

When I first began thinking about this article, I was actually very hesitant to write it. I did not want to come across as sanctimonious, nor did I want to present myself as something I am not. The reality is that I am not an expert on relationships, human psychology, or mental or physical health. I questioned whether I was, indeed, qualified to write this article.

What I do have is experience with working hard to maintain a balance between my work life and my life away from the office. I have personally struggled with this balance for years. Along the way, I've made my share of mistakes and I've learned many of the lessons contained in this article the hard way – through my own experiences and failures. If any of the tips that I can share will help even one of my colleagues to better manage

their work-life balance, then, qualified or not, I will have been happy to share my experience.

Avoid The Workaholic Mentality

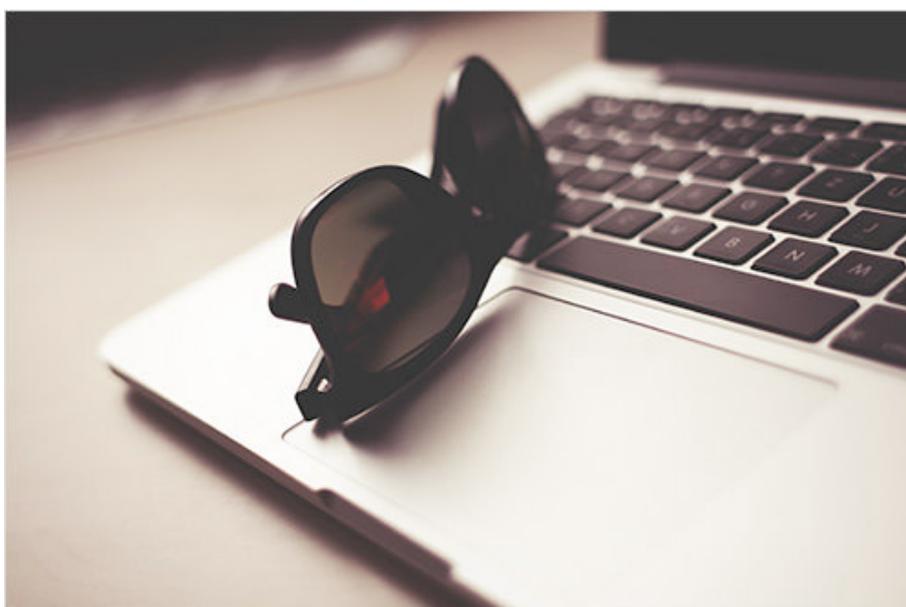
Yiannis Knostantakopoulos wrote an excellent article on Smashing Magazine about “Dealing With Workaholism on Web Teams.” (*Editor’s note: see chapter 4 of this eBook.*)

His article explores the misguided way that many companies and individuals in the Web industry “not only disregard” the dangers of workaholism, but “actively promote it.” Yiannis’ article does a great job of illustrating workaholism in the workplace, but it does not cover another equally problematic scenario: Web professionals whose workaholism manifests itself in numerous small jobs and projects, as opposed to one 14-hour-a-day job.

Web professionals have a number of ways to “keep busy” – all I have to do is look to my own life for an example. In addition to my full-time job as head of website design and development for Envision Technology Advisors, I also teach night classes at the University of Rhode Island, maintain my own blog and portfolio website, and write articles like this one for other publications. This is in addition to occasional personal projects and design work for friends (how many of you have been asked to design a friend’s wedding invitation?). Yes, workaholism often manifests itself in the way that Yiannis describes in his article, but all of these little “side projects” can also easily consume and overwhelm someone.

Learning To Say “No”

These side projects are often tougher to deal with than what Yiannis describes because Web professionals enjoy these side projects and view them as an outlet for their creativity, as opposed to an extension of their workday. I can relate to this. I love being able to meet and instruct new students in the classes that I teach. I also very much enjoy sharing my ideas and experiences through the articles that I write. I find both of these activities enjoyable and rewarding, but they do take time away from other non-work things that I could be doing.



There are only twenty-four hours in a day, so use them well.

(Image credit⁵⁴)

Maintaining a healthy work-life balance means learning to say “no.” This might mean saying “no” to staying late at

⁵⁴. <http://picjumbo.com/>

the office, or turning down a freelance project, or politely telling a friend that you do not have the time to design their invitation. You might enjoy doing all of these things, but they are all work. If you fill all of your time with work activities, then you will have no balance in that aforementioned work-life balance.

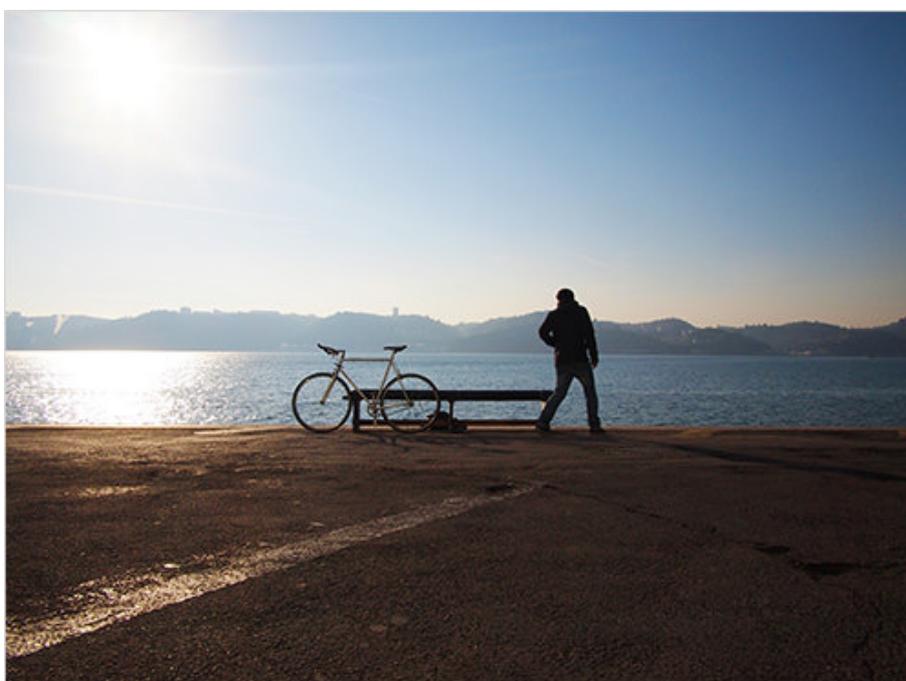
Saying “no” can be very hard, and everyone has a different threshold for how much they can take on while still maintaining balance. But one thing is certain – no one can do it all. One of the first things you need to do is recognize your threshold and prioritize your time. If you know you can spend only so much time on “work,” then you will be better able to decide which projects to proceed with and which to decline.

Find A Hobby That Does Not Involve Computers

I remember interviewing a young designer a while back. In the interview, I asked him what his hobbies are. He responded that he spends all of his time “online, working on HTML and CSS and building websites for fun.” I suspect that he thought I would be impressed by this statement, and I know that some companies would find this appealing, but I just found it sad. I also remembered being like that at one point in my career.

There was a time when I would spend every night and weekend learning the latest Flash tricks (yes, it was quite some time ago) and redesigning my own website over and over again so that I could apply the skills that I was learning. The problem was that, while I was learning a lot,

I was not healthy. I had put on a substantial amount of weight, I was consistently lethargic, and I had grown somewhat distant from the people I cared about. I finally realized that the problem was that my “hobbies” and my “work” were one and the same. I was always in front of a computer monitor, which left very little room for other activities or people in my life. The situation had to change. I decided that I needed to find hobbies that did not involve a computer.



Find a hobby that takes you away from your daily routine work and freshens your mind. (Image credit⁵⁵)

I had always wanted to play the violin, so I decided to give the instrument a try. Later, I also began playing the

⁵⁵. <http://unsplash.com/>

ukulele. Both of these instruments gave me an outlet for my creativity that did not involve a computer.

In addition to playing music, I also began to enjoy hiking – an activity that not only takes me away from the computer, but also gets me outdoors exercising (more on that later), where I can spend quality time with my wife and kids. Hiking became a family activity.

While playing the ukulele or heading out on a hike might not appeal to you, the point is that you need to find a hobby that takes you away from the activities you do in the workday. This does not mean that you should not spend any of your free time on the computer learning and experimenting – our industry actually requires this level of dedication to continual learning. But it does mean that you should not spend *all* of your time improving your professional skills at the expense of everything else (and everyone) in your life.

Enjoy Nights And Weekends

There is a reason that the workday, and the work week, ends – it is so we can recharge and not become consumed by our jobs. In this day and age, however, the line between our time at work and our time at home has increasingly blurred.

Our society is more connected than ever. The mobile devices we carry allow us to stay in constant contact with the people in our life, including those we work with. Because of this level of connectivity, many people feel that they need to be “on” at all times, checking messages even

after they have left the office for the night or the weekend. You need to break this habit.

For years, I would check my email right before bed. I'm not sure why I did that. It was more of a compulsion than anything else, but I can tell you that I endured many sleepless nights because of this habit. I would often read an email from a client that upset me, either because they were asking for changes that I didn't agree with or because they made some comment or request that I knew I would need to address in the morning. The email would hang over me all night, keeping me awake and restless — all because I insisted on checking my email before bed, a time when I really couldn't do much about it anyway!

About a year ago, I decided to stop checking my messages at night. It was one of the best decisions I've made. Immediately, the sleepless nights due to unresolved work issues all but went away. I still receive those distressing emails from clients, of course, but now that I check them during the workday, when I can handle them, they do not cause me sleepless nights.

Once I stopped checking emails at night, doing so on the weekend as well was a logical progression. This enabled me also to reclaim my weekend for activities outside of my work life and to recharge for the week ahead.

Speaking of recharging...

Take A Vacation – For Real

I have spoken to many Web designers and developers who have “taken a vacation from their job to catch up on

their work.” While that sentence would make no sense to non-Web professionals, I’d bet that anyone in this industry knows exactly what I mean!

Taking a vacation from work so that we can get to other work that we have not been able to do is a recipe for burnout. A quality vacation does not need to be a big expensive trip to some exotic location or to a ride-filled theme park; it just needs to be a time when work is put aside.



Vacations, like weekends, are time when we need to step away from work and recharge. (Image credit⁵⁶)

Do not try to get in some extra work or check email just so that you can “keep up and not get swamped when I return to the office.” Those messages and projects will be

⁵⁶. <http://unsplash.com/>

waiting for you when you get back, refreshed from your time away and ready to tackle the challenges ahead.

Make Your Health A Priority

IT professionals, as a whole, are not considered the healthiest people around. An overabundance of caffeine, sugar and heavily processed foods seem to be par for the course for many in our field. Couple that with the long hours spent sitting in front of a computer, and you do not exactly have the makings of a healthy lifestyle. This is why your health must be a priority.

When I decided to change my own lifestyle some years ago, one thing that I did was pay more attention to the food I eat and my physical activity. Even small changes to your diet and exercising a few days a week will have a considerable impact on your life. I found that I had more energy (especially in the hours after lunchtime, when my energy level would normally crash), and I was able to think more clearly. I also lost some weight, which made me feel better about myself and had a positive effect on my interaction with clients and others.

Now, I am not one of those people who will talk about how much they love to exercise. On the contrary, I pretty much hate it. Every workout is a struggle, and it is very easy to say “You know, I’m just not feeling it today” or to make excuses by believing other things are a priority, like your current project, but the reality is that that project will still be there after your 30-minute workout! Squash those excuses, and make your health a priority. After all,

you are the only one who can maintain and improve your relationship with your own body!

Make Friends And Family A Priority

The people in your life – whether it's your spouse, significant other or other family or friends – are important to you and need to be prioritized. Many of the failed relationships I see amongst my peers happen because people stop communicating or paying attention to each other's needs. As I said earlier, when you are stuck behind a computer monitor all day and night, you leave no room for anyone else.

Long hours at the office and late nights in front of the computer take you away from the people in your life. If you consistently neglect a personal relationship because you need to work on projects, then that relationship will eventually fail.

As I said at the beginning, I am not an expert in human psychology or relationships, but I do not need a degree to know that if you ignore the people in your life, they will not be in your life much longer.

However, if you follow the tips in this article, then you will be doing a lot to make the important people in your life a priority. Take hiking. My family began to join me on those hikes I told you about, so not only did I get away from the computer and get some exercise, but I also found something that we could all enjoy together.



Putting aside some code for a while to focus on a personal relationship is healthy and necessary. The code will be waiting for you when you return. The converse is not always true, however. ([Image credit⁵⁷](http://picjumbo.com/))

Many of the activities mentioned in this article are like this. If you start making nights, weekends and vacations a time not to catch up on work, but to experience new things, then you will find that many of those new activities have room for your loved ones and will bring you closer to them.

In Summary

Strong, healthy relationships require work. Just as you must pay attention to the needs of your clients and colleagues to keep those relationships strong, so too must

⁵⁷. <http://picjumbo.com/>

you be mindful of the non-professional relationships in your life.

- Do avoid the workaholic mentality by learning when to say “no.”
- Do not try to “do it all,” at the expense of other aspects of your life.
- Do find a hobby or outlet for your creativity that gets you away from the computer.
- Do not check email at night or on the weekend.
- Do give yourself time to recharge at night and on the weekend.
- Do take a real vacation that allows you to relax or experience new things – as long as those “new things” are not more work.
- Do make your health a priority by improving your diet and exercising a few times a week.
- Do involve family and friends in your life, and make them a priority. 🍷

You Are Not A Machine.

You Are Not Alone.

BY PAUL BOAG 🍷

It was pouring with rain and I found myself driving. I didn't know where I was going. I just needed out of the house. I needed to escape. After what felt like an age I found myself parked outside my parents' house, just staring at their front door. Eventually I got out of the car, rang the doorbell and burst into tears the moment my mum answered.

Me, a grown man. A respected figure in my field. A success. Standing on the doorstep of my parents' house, crying to my mum like a small child. This was the breaking point for me, the minute I finally realized I had depression. In fact I'd been depressed for over a decade. Burnt out. Used up with nothing left to give.

It had started back in the late nineties when I took a job with a dot com. I had a boss who was a bully, plain and simple. He shouted, he threatened, he manipulated. I stood up to him, but it drained me. Every day was a battle.

He was replaced, but the next guy wasn't much better. He used to put me in a room with the company's investors and make me present to them. He knew I was a good presenter, so when things got tough he would wheel me out. But he would sit next to me through the meetings kicking me under the table when I said something he didn't like.

In time, the dot com bubble burst and I found myself forced to make people redundant. People I knew. People I

considered my friends. Worse than that was having to make redundant people I didn't know, people who worked for companies we had acquired. When you have to make a friend redundant at least they know you find it hard, that you don't want to do it. When you fire a stranger, you are just an evil hatchet man.

From bad experiences, good things grew. Following the dot com company folding, I and two colleagues set up *Headscape*, the agency I run to this day. I love Headscape. I love the people I work with. But the stress didn't dissipate — if anything, it increased.

I remember standing in a newsagent's, wasting time before a big pitch. I was terrified. Terrified of not winning the work, work we needed as a company to survive. The last thing I wanted was to have to make people redundant again. I was so worried that I vomited, right there in the middle of the shop.

I love working for myself but every month is a roller coaster. Either we have too much work and I fret about delivering, or not enough and we worry about going out of business.

Then there is the pressure to keep up. The day I read Jeffrey Zeldman's book *Designing with Web Standards* was one of the most terrifying of my life: the sudden realization that the table-based design I had built my career on was about to go away; that I would need to relearn my entire skill set.

Not that this was the end of the changes. The demise of Flash, the rise of user-centred design, content strategy, the mobile web, responsive design. The list goes on. Al-

ways something new to learn. Always the pressure to keep up.

Even now, twelve years into Headscape, things are hard. Like many agencies right now, we had a bad first half of the year. The sector feels like it is changing again, and so once again the pressure is on.

But this time is different. This time I will not end up on my parents' doorstep in floods of tears. Because along the way I have learnt something. I am not a computer. I am not a machine. I am a human being.

We demand too much of ourselves as web professionals. We lie to one another, all living in a consensual delusion we build together. We talk about digital being our passion. We tell each other how great our jobs are. We work every hour in the day either in the hopes of getting bought by Google, or because we have convinced ourselves we enjoy it. Maybe we do and maybe we will be bought by Google, but is it healthy? I can tell you from experience it is *not*.



I realized that I was not a machine able to work 24/7. I realized I had times of insane productivity and then periods where I needed to rest; that I could not expect to churn out high quality work without stepping away from time to time. (Image credits⁵⁸)

I realized something else, too. I realized that I could be human with my colleagues, that I didn't need to pretend to be a machine. This I discovered when I told my co-founders I was burnt out; they understood and helped lighten the load. When I shared my depression online, nobody laughed at me or thought I was weak. Instead they thanked me for allowing them to talk about their struggles.

In fact, I found huge support from total strangers, people who suffered or were going through the same difficulties as me. Far, far more than I ever could have guessed, based on the way we talk online. If you believe what we post online, we are all happy, successful and rich.

And I had one final revelation. I realized I wasn't a machine stuck in a preprogrammed routine. I could change things. I started looking after myself both physically and mentally. I found friends outside the web. I took regular walks, found other interests, and spoke up about my struggles. I even stopped working long hours, screw the consequences. As it turned out, I just learned to work smarter. Long hours are not a badge of honor, they are a sign of failure, pure and simple.

As part of my job I meet hundreds of web designers every year, either at conferences or as part of my work within organizations. Many are contractors who never get a holiday and worry about being able to pay the bills. Others are in-house web developers so beaten down they are resigned to being trapped in their organization forev-

58. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/87957708@N00/324259281/>

er. And yet what do you read online? You read about successful startups, acquisitions, and competitors with their amazing client lists.

You might think this all sounds rather depressing but, you know, it isn't. It is meant as an encouragement, that if you are struggling you are not alone; that there is not something wrong with you, there is something wrong with the industry.

This article gives you permission. Permission to stop being a machine and become a human being. Permission to spend some days in your pants watching daytime TV rather than working. Permission to be honest about your fears and stresses. Permission to tell somebody you are struggling and get help.

For those of you reading this thinking "Well, my work is my passion and I am happy" then good for you! But it won't always be like that. There will be times when it gets tough. They won't last forever but they will happen. I ask you to remember one thing when those times come... You are not a machine. Allow yourself to be human by cutting yourself some slack and getting help. 🍷

Let's Talk About It

BY CHRISTOPHER MURPHY 🍷

Talking about mental health can be awkward and embarrassing, but it really shouldn't be. Mental health is just an illness, like any other. When we talk about mental health, we do so in hushed terms. We whisper, "Don't mention it, he or she isn't 'all there.'"

I believe this approach — sweeping the problem under the carpet, hiding it from view, or stating, "Let's not talk about it" — is a problem. Mental health is an issue. It affects our industry, in particular and confronting it head on is important. We need to talk about mental health more openly, and I'm happy to be one of a growing number of people in our industry who are helping to bring this subject out into the open, where it should be.

Mental health is an issue, it shouldn't be a stigma. If more of us address it, openly, we'll be able to address some of the problems we face collectively. Our industry is, in many ways, unique in its approach. We share what we learn, pooling our knowledge for the betterment of all. We can apply this approach to greater issues, like health, particularly mental health, and in so doing win the battle of the mind.

A Broken Elbow

Four years ago I broke my elbow. I left my house, on the west coast of Ireland, intending to take a short cycle ride and, barely a few minutes from my front door, managed to throw myself over the handlebars, bounce down a

steep hill and break my elbow into what felt like a million pieces.

It was a stupid mistake. I wasn't wearing a helmet – note to self, that's never a good idea – and when my body, frail as it was, impacted upon the tarmac and gravel, it suffered immense trauma. Covered in cuts and bruises and bleeding profusely, I tried to pick myself up off the ground, only to discover that my left elbow was, I'm sad to say, almost beyond repair.

Fortunately, my wife, Cara (who – it has to be said – has supported me for an inordinate length of time), happened to be following behind me moments later in a car. She pulled in, gathered me up and took me to the hospital. I'm not a hospital person (I have a real phobia of hospitals), so this wasn't the greatest day of my life, but I was soon taken care of and dispatched to Belfast, where I was admitted to yet another hospital for an operation to fix my broken elbow.

Unfortunately, all of this coincided with my end-of-year student assessments. I work as a senior lecturer at the Belfast School of Art, and my students, after many years of hard work, were just about to graduate. It was a difficult time, but, thanks to the generous support of my colleagues, I was able to assess my students from the relative comfort of a hospital bed, all thanks to technology. (iPhones are just the ticket when you're assessing students from afar.)

I returned to work a fortnight later, my arm nestled in a sling. I wore that sling like a badge of pride.

A Broken Mind

Barely two years later, I would find myself in a hospital again. This time, I awoke in a hospital bed feeling exhausted, disorientated and ashamed. The day before, I had tried to kill myself. I didn't wear that like a badge of pride. Indeed, outwardly, you wouldn't have seen any evidence that I had even been in hospital at all.

I suffer from depression.

I find myself all too often overwhelmed by life, questioning the point of it all. I wonder, "Is there an easier way out of this?" The answer, for me at that time, was simple: It's time to exit.

At that time, with my elbow on the mend, my mind was in a terrible place. I couldn't see the point of anything; I could only see a way out. Try as I might to rationally address my worries, my mind was cast adrift, and my thoughts were illogical. I had had enough. The rational – or, rather, irrational – solution was to end it all.

I am married and I have two wonderful children. I love my wife, Cara, and my children, Ross and Caitlín, dearly. They mean the world to me. When I look back on that time, I am ashamed of myself. I was ready to leave; I had had enough.

These words are the hardest I've written. They are almost impossible to write and to share. How can you state that you were ready to abandon your family? That's the worst thing anyone could put down on a page.

Managing A Mind

My last year has been one of change. I've regrouped and focused on trying to live a healthier lifestyle. I've also resigned myself to the fact that I cannot be all things to all people. The edges of my day had blurred: 9:00 to 5:00 had become 8:00 to 6:00 and, not long after, 7:00 to 7:00 (and worse). This kind of ever-increasing workload, where the balance between work and life switches, is not uncommon.

I'm sure we've all spent evenings or even whole nights just "catching up." At the risk of stating the obvious, this is extremely unhealthy. We need to wake up, look at ourselves and ask, "Is this what life is really all about?"

Over the last two years, I've read a great deal to try to understand how the mind works. That journey has been an interesting one, and I've learned a great deal. I've found books to be the most helpful. Alain de Botton's *Status Anxiety*⁶⁰ is excellent, as is Viktor Frankl's incredibly moving *Man's Search for Meaning*⁶¹. Both are well worth owning.

If you can afford to buy just one book, however, get Steve Peters' *The Chimp Paradox*⁶². Peters' ideas on mind management are invaluable, and if he can help athletes win Olympic gold medals, then he can most certainly help you.

Books are great – as an educator, you'd expect me to say that – but we in this industry share something

⁶⁰. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0141014865/monographic-21>

⁶¹. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1844132390/monographic-21>

⁶². <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/009193558X/monographic-21>

greater: a strong sense of community. Unlike in many other industries, we share our knowledge freely. Let's share our knowledge about more than just design and code. Let's share it about the issues we face in life.

You Are Not Alone

I'm not alone in writing about the issues I've faced. A growing number of others have, too, many of whom have been inspired to share their experience as a result of Geek Mental Help Week⁶³. Geek Mental Help Week affords us all an opportunity to address these issues head on. We work in an industry that is relentless. Keeping up with change can be a challenge.

A year ago in my journal, fsck, I wrote⁶⁴:

I believe, as an industry, we focus all too often on the headlong excitement of endlessly moving forward. That's fine, but there's a flip side. Relentless progress brings with it relentless pressure. It can be difficult to keep up, and the pressure to stay on top of everything can at times prove debilitating.

That remains the case.

Our industry is constantly evolving. It's developing at an unprecedented rate, and it is intimidating at times. New technologies emerge yearly, monthly, weekly, even daily. Maintaining a knowledge base that is fit for purpose is incredibly time-consuming.

⁶³. <http://stuffandnonsense.co.uk/blog/about/announcing-geek-mental-help-week>

⁶⁴. <http://fsck.monographic.org/fsck.php>

Keeping up is hard, and sometimes the stress of trying to stick with the pack (a pack that always seems to be pulling away from you) is frustrating. The older I get, the harder I find it to keep up with the pace of progress.

No one can do everything; we need to remind ourselves of that from time to time. AngularJS, Ember.js, Node.js; Bower, Grunt, Yeoman – I have no idea how any of these things work, and that's fine. I have a skill set – I'm essentially a creative director and a mentor – and I've slowly come to the realization that my skill set is more than adequate.

I hope, as an industry, we can learn to let go a little. A wonderful world exists inside the machines we work with, but – equally – a wonderful world exists outside of those machines. Look up. Step away from the computer. Go for a walk in the park. That's where you'll witness what life is really all about.

We are all struggling. Even those who seem to effortlessly accumulate knowledge are struggling (though they might not admit it). Together, we can confront the challenges we face, as we do so many other challenges. Let's not forget that. 🐼

About The Authors

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Previously Smashing Magazine's Typography editor, and currently on the Experts Panel, Alex Charchar has had his writing published and referenced in some pretty cool places around the web and in print. He's fanatical about design, letterpress, espresso, and podcasting. Most of all, he likes helping designers and creatives hone their craft. You can visit [Retinart.net](http://www.retinart.net)⁶⁵ to find more of his writing. Twitter: [@retinart](https://twitter.com/retinart)⁶⁶.

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⁶⁵. <http://www.retinart.net>

⁶⁶. <http://www.twitter.com/retinart>

⁶⁷. <http://www.annholm.net/>

⁶⁸. <https://twitter.com/AnnholmNet>

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Christopher Murphy⁶⁹ is a writer, designer and educator based in Belfast. Creative Review described him as, “a William Morris for the digital age,” an epithet he aspires to fulfil daily. He is the organiser of Break⁷⁰, a new design conference that, “questions the edges of design,” and has just established a new Interaction Design⁷¹ programme at the Belfast School of Art.

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⁶⁹. <http://monographic.org>

⁷⁰. <http://breakconf.org>

⁷¹. <http://ixdbelfast.org>

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About Smashing Magazine

Smashing Magazine⁸⁵ is an online magazine dedicated to Web designers and developers worldwide. Its rigorous quality control and thorough editorial work has gathered a devoted community exceeding half a million subscribers, followers and fans. Each and every published article is carefully prepared, edited, reviewed and curated according to the high quality standards set in Smashing Magazine's own publishing policy⁸⁶.

Smashing Magazine publishes articles on a daily basis with topics ranging from business, visual design, typography, front-end as well as back-end development, all the way to usability and user experience design. The magazine is – and always has been – a professional and independent online publication neither controlled nor influenced by any third parties, delivering content in the best interest of its readers. These guidelines are continually revised and updated to assure that the quality of the published content is never compromised. Since its emergence back in 2006 Smashing Magazine has proven to be a trustworthy online source.

⁸⁵. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com>

⁸⁶. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/publishing-policy/>