

# HELPFUL NOTES FROM NICK, VOL. 4: NORMS & NOTIFICATIONS

WRITTEN BY Nick Bachan | JUL 26, 2016

It's important that we take care of ourselves and each other.

Even though that's implied by the mission statement I established in the [first volume](#) of this column, I wanted to restate it because those words are helpful among the slew of grim headlines. Our feelings as human beings are valid, and I will continue to wield words and empathy in my efforts to acknowledge those feelings. I'm excited to bring you this new batch of inquiries and responses.

## LEFTOVER GUILT

Dear Nick,

I steal my co-workers' food. Not like I steal their lunches, because that would be mean, but I steal bites. Like today I had a bite of a macaroni salad, a bite of a tempeh thing (I don't even know what it was), a bite of some leftover spaghetti, and a bite of some rice dish. I'm full...that was lunch.

Should I just steal one lunch and be done with it, or is this problem more about being sneaky and stealing than it is about being hungry?

Sincerely,

Are you going to eat that?

Dear Tupperware thief,

You have a code. You respect the sanctity of lunch. That means we can discuss this like two civil human beings. I have hidden all of my snacks, so don't try anything funny.

This habit you've developed is definitely fueled by the thrill, because no one is on their A-game when they bring food to work. Work lunches are sleepily assembled performance art pieces that reveal way too much about a person's lifestyle preferences. Microwaveable tempeh is for the vegan on the go. Leftover takeout brought into the light of day suggests near-admirable laziness. I have fallen into both categories, so no judgment either way.

It's not out of the ordinary for a cup of yogurt or a sandwich in a Ziploc bag to go mysteriously missing from the refrigerator in any break room. What struck me about your scenario is the fact that you forego stealing whole items to take bites (of things you may not even recognize) and put them back. It's clear that you somewhat entertain the idea of being caught. Perhaps you're setting a trap for yourself at the scene of the crime, to break your own habit! This is more intriguing than the [first season of Serial](#).

Since you are essentially asking me for permission to ramp up your criminal activity by going full lunch, your habit is more psychological than physiological. You may want to think about the nutritional damage you're doing by not consciously planning your meals. I know I always think twice about food choices after I google things like "healthy BMI" or "life expectancy after eating a lot of pasta." The things we eat matter, as well as when we eat them. It will only help if you make a meal plan and try to stick to it. Find things you like and have them around so your eyes don't wander.

As any [Snickers commercial](#) will confirm, satisfying your hunger is extremely important (even if that's not the core issue here). If you're at least full of the right stuff, you may be better equipped to address whatever deeper desires are fueling this habit of stealing from your coworkers.

## OBLIGATORY OVERTIME

Dear Nick,

I just graduated from design school and by some miracle, got an entry-level job at an advertising agency in the city. It's exactly the job I worked so hard in school to get! Problem is, it's taking over my whole life.

I'm already working 65 hour weeks just to keep up and impress the boss, and my peers work even more: I've observed a few of them wearing the same outfit two days in a row, as if they're sleeping at the office!

This is the field I really want to be in. Do I just need to suck it up? Are there companies out there that don't operate that way? How can I take better care of myself, so that I don't go crazy in the face of this daunting schedule?

Sincerely,  
Dream-job junkie

Dear conscious climber,

Take back your free time! I know that the sleepless, mole-like undergraduate lifestyle seems cool and all, but successful adults—even the cool, artsy ones—need their basic needs met to stay sane and achieve great things.

It seems as though you've become embedded in a company culture that treats "above and beyond" as the norm. Cultures are formed by people, though. You're simply mirroring the behavior of those people you see wearing the same outfit for two days in a row because you have no other frame of reference. If management sees things like this and accepts them, then I promise you: this is not your dream job. It's also worth noting that "above and beyond" doesn't simply mean "visibly overachieving to one's own detriment."

I couldn't function in the workplace if I didn't have a chance to recharge, shower, and put on a fresh outfit between each 8-10 hour workday. Self-care is important if you truly want to succeed in this field that matches your passions. This extends to both your physical and mental well-being. Give yourself permission to occupy your mind with pleasurable things outside of work hours (which should be 9-5)!

If you focus on developing your design skills, you won't have to bend to the whims of companies that may not value their employees. Good bosses will tell you to leave at 4:57 PM and take care of yourself if you are doing truly good work. Bad bosses may not even recognize good work, and they'll continue to exploit a culture of empty ambition until their employees are burnt out. You are a person and not a robot, so go to bed and make sure your shirts are dry-cleaned!

## PUSHY NOTIFICATIONS

Dear Nick,

The modern workday is so full of distractions! There's always something new to read on Facebook, my phone is pinging me with tweets, texts and snaps, and no matter how many devices I put on silent, it always seems like I'm hopping from one thing to the next.

What methods do you use to focus your efforts, and block out unwanted distractions?

Sincerely,  
OMG is that a Pokemon?

Dear screen fiend,

We live in a time of tweets, think pieces, snaps, vines, instas (?), and #content. It is so easy to open 47 tabs before even looking at one work email. Also, if a wild Pikachu appears on your way to the coffee shop, you MUST CATCH IT. The secret to feeling like these distractions are less burdensome is to simply trick your brain into thinking they are inaccessible. You can put your phone in airplane

mode, remove your Facebook bookmark from your browser window, turn off your phone's wi-fi during work hours, and keep something like a book handy to take to lunch. These all sound "meh" but I promise you they are extremely effective.

We react in a Pavlovian manner to stimuli from our technological devices. These come in the form of rings, beeps, tones, voices, and notifications of all kinds. I haven't had push notifications on for years—even for my email. I check things at times I can manage and I am better for it since I know when I can actually respond rather than archiving everything that comes across. We're conditioned to feel a sense of urgency when it comes to both technology and certain forms of communication, but intention is what we truly need to foster. The absence of intention when adopting tech is why fitness trackers are not inherently able to curb someone's health habits. Devices simply show us things. We must know how much we can afford to look at those things as well as how actionable they are once they are seen.

The idea of a digital detox is not novel—not since we've all become addicted to our tech. It's okay to not be in the loop with all of your tabs. Empty your mental queue every now and then and just go for a short walk. Try setting time windows for doing work tasks and telling yourself you will not grab your phone for 5, 10, or 15 minutes. Do one thing at a time, whether it's making a spreadsheet or tweeting. Looking at things on a task-by-task basis eases the avalanche effect of simply getting online without a purpose. Save those internet things for later and check back when you can give them your full attention.

Building habits around intention, and allowing yourself to step away from your technology altogether, will probably make you a more effective worker in the long run. Everything can wait...except for that Pikachu because who knows when he might stroll through that particular hallway again!? Priorities.

## A YAWNING ARTIST

Dear Nick,

Drawing is my true passion, and while my job is very comfortable and pays all my bills, it doesn't leave me with much energy for independent projects. By the time I get home for the day, all my energy has been spent on emails, meetings, project proposals and the like.

Then the weekend rolls around and it feels like my only chance to see my friends and family.

I want to find the time to improve my drawing skills, and maybe one day turn my passion into a career, but I just don't know where to find the time. Help!

Sincerely,  
All outta elbow grease

Dear pencil wielder,

I feel like I wrote this question. I draw as well, but I haven't consistently flexed those muscles for several months. I am currently in the process of formally building drawing time into my schedule. This response may seem circular or clinical, but the only way to make time is to actually make time. You must find the hours during which you're still lucid following a full day's work, and then commit to putting pencil to paper as your eyelids droop.

I am by no means saying you must become a hardened creature of the night and/or a vigilante. You may just have to (reasonably) sacrifice some sleep to give yourself the fuel to keep going. If you're like me, doing work compels you to do more work. Like I said, drawing feels like building muscle. It requires active periods and well-managed rest periods. I have been in a rest period for quite some time, so it will be exponentially more difficult to utilize my muscles when I attempt consistency again. Just like work, drawing must become a familiar routine. This takes actual hours and practice to achieve.

I do a lot of things outside of my work life, so the negotiation you're facing is one I think about daily. Sadly, there are only 24 hours in a day and most of those hours are spent paying the bills. The hope is that one day you can sustain yourself financially by doing creative work, but I've found it more productive to consider my creative pursuits well-developed hobbies. It's probably the best way to remove the pressure of needing to be good before you are actually good.

Creativity is a social thing for me, so I will sometimes bring a notepad or a sketchbook when I see friends and family. I'm mindful not to be rude when in their presence, but I will step away or retreat inward to capture a visual or an idea. These give me seeds that grow into fully formed ideas later. In [this recent Fresh Air interview](#), comic/writer/director Mike Birbiglia mentions writing as "making an appointment with his mind." He always shows up for these appointments, and he is always prepared. Think of drawing the same way.

## CEASE AND DISCUSS

Dear Nick,

Conversation is pretty free and easy at our office. No topic is taboo, and we're all comfortable sharing what's on our minds. That is, until George showed up.

I'll cut right to the chase: George is a misogynistic, racist asshole. Not in the loud, outward kind of way either but in the more insidious, "still thinks it's the 1950s" kind of way.

Now, whenever the office engages in a frank conversation, George chimes in with something ignorant, backwards or plain insulting. He's really thrown a wet blanket on the office camaraderie.

Is it my responsibility to correct George's behavior? Should I tattle to HR? Were we all in the wrong to discuss such matters at the office in the first place?

Sincerely,  
Woke and winging it

Dear silent and struggling,

Due to the current political landscape, people like George have found new confidence in perpetuating "traditional" viewpoints and shaming other people for calling them out on their close-mindedness. Statistically, a person like George is white and male which means he enjoys a level of socialized privilege that can make almost any dissenter feel weirdly marginalized.

The "tell it like it is" personality thrives in the "free and easy" work environment because there are literally no rules. Acknowledging offensive aspects of George's comments may be seen as the sudden imposition of social rules, and as an authority figure he will be able to undo any real progress toward a work environment that is 100% comfortable for all employees.

George may not be that diabolical. He may simply be ignorant. In any case, the effect of his presence and his behavior is destructive. You are feeling resistance even considering hypothetically confronting him because you are probably imagining things playing out the way I described in the previous paragraph. Enacting justice can be the scariest possible path to take, but it is completely reasonable to take this issue to HR and to voice your concerns in detail.

Frame it in your mind as "reporting" instead of "tattling" and focus on the improved camaraderie in the workplace following this decisive action. George will hopefully benefit from some formalized acknowledgment of his behavior as well. Like I said, though, privilege is a tricky thing to topple. It's tough for me to even explain that dynamic without being afraid of offending some readers, but I think we are all better for putting destructive norms out in the open and addressing them constructively. We can conquer all of the wet blankets.

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Thank you for sharing and reading! Please continue to send all of your personal and professional quandaries to [NickHelps@mathys-potestio.com](mailto:NickHelps@mathys-potestio.com).

Here to help,  
Nick