

HELPFUL NOTES FROM NICK, VOL. 6: SIDE GIGS & SICK DAYS

WRITTEN BY Nick Bachan | APR 4, 2017

Modern life feels increasingly like a dream—and not necessarily the kind that’s fun to dissect with friends. Twitter and cable news networks are shouting things at us while we engage in every possible form of self-care to cautiously ignore the noise. We are a generation maturing as technology matures alongside us in deeply personal ways. It’s all quite a bit to factor into our continuing human existence.

Despite the proliferation of things that can so easily distract, derail, and dishearten us, I remain optimistic that most people are invested in building an inclusive future. I am happy to bring you my latest insights about what’s on our minds as we continue to live, work, and learn.

Dear Nick,

I’m a part of a tight-knit team at work, but lately I’ve been really sick. Consequently, my productivity has suffered. I think I need a sick day to take care of myself, but I feel preemptively guilty about making that decision. I’m also worried my team will think I’m not doing my part or contributing enough if I take some personal time. Do you have any advice?

Sincerely,
Drowning in mucus

Dear silently sniffing,

As much as I love magic, there’s no spell for salvaging your productivity while you march quickly toward almost-certain death! You may be a high-achieving employee on a team committed to excellence, but you are also a human being vulnerable to disease, heartbreak, shaky wi-fi connections, etc. Please take some personal time. While you do so, pretend the following things don’t exist: your smartphone, your inbox, push notifications, and the imaginary expectations of your peers.

One day can make all the difference if you are intentional about resting, unplugging, and focusing on the things that make you function as a human being. Drink some water. See a medical professional. Take the necessary medications to ease your particular ailment. Rest in a way that doesn’t involve sporadically checking Twitter while your phone charges on your bedside table. When you return to work with your wellness intact, your hunger for success and your lengthy to-do list will still be there. The difference will be your readiness to resume your current level of productivity and even surpass it.

Please take some personal time.

In the grand scheme of things, the “momentum” you’ll sacrifice by simply stepping away to heal pales in comparison to the subpar quality of work you’ll do

if you try to ignore the limitations of your mind and body. If you work with peers who would make you feel self-conscious about self-care, no job is worth that. We are people first and employees second. Our professional lives are enriched by practiced curiosity and care in our personal lives.

If one sick day becomes two, three, or even seven, keep in mind that it’s wise to understand the things we can and cannot control. You will never be entirely in control of your body’s healing schedule, but you can always take tangible steps to respond to its signals. Success is impossible if you aren’t at your sharpest. Speaking from personal experience, ignoring those sniffles over a long enough period of time can be a cruel form of self-sabotage. Here’s some suggested reading: an article about how our contemporary professional

landscape supports working yourself to death. In reality, there's no glory in overworking yourself in ways that are detrimental to your fundamental well-being.

Dear Nick,

I'm the lead copywriter on a project aimed at revamping a local retailer's website. This company is unfortunately behind the times, so its staff has asked us to help modernize their site's look and functionality.

In the beginning stages of the project, we sold the client on a common-sense design with a clear visual language and a new, scalable logo. As the project has progressed, however, our design and development teams have complacently regressed. They've used the client's lack of technical aptitude as an invitation to settle for sub-standard work.

I know we can do so much better, but the design director is pressing forward with a client review.

Should I push the team to do better, or leave well enough alone?

Sincerely,
Capable copywriter

Dear concerned creative,

I currently work in an agency environment as a copywriter. It's a tricky role because sometimes it's clear that the client's approach and standards are misguided. As lead copywriter, your role is simply to deliver on the client's expectations. It may seem like overstepping to offer insights on industry best practices and what you believe to be the most competitive solution. Internal overstepping may be a perceived issue as well since your work is done before design implementation begins. It's important to remember that everyone in a creative environment wants to do the best work they can. Once you approach your feedback with that in mind, the client, the developers, and the design director will appreciate your input.

Since the design director is moving ahead with a client review, you are already limited in terms of how much of a pivot the creative team can make. Copywriting and design are often siloed, but the entire delivery process should be collaborative. You, as the lead copywriter, have seen your efforts combined with stronger design work on previous projects. Pointing this out to the design and development teams will resonate as empathetic and encouraging. It's not even manipulative because you truly believe in the work they can do. If they are empowered to exercise more agency in addressing the client's needs, the limited guidance they've received may not be such a hindrance. The collective technical aptitude among the designers and developers will close glaring gaps between the client's proposed vision and what's currently being produced.

It seems counterintuitive for an agency to show a client what the client may actually want, but a modern, responsive, completely functional site is the end goal for everyone involved. Simply put, the client's request isn't designed to deliver what the client would actually prefer. Taking the reins and reminding the team of its abilities while remaining committed to the client review deadline will make everyone happier.

Dear Nick,

My boss is one seriously cool lady. She's an accomplished entrepreneur, a talented artist, and a personal inspiration. In fact, she's a huge part of why I took my current job in the first place.

I really appreciate the personal touch my boss applies to her workplace interactions. She takes time to ask her employees about how they spend evenings and weekends, and she really listens when we respond. It's evident that she truly cares as much about our happiness and overall well-being as she does the health of our company.

I want to share my extracurricular interests with my boss because of her innate curiosity. I think it would bring us closer together and enhance our working relationship. The thing is—I spend nearly all my free time these days writing erotic fan fiction. Don't laugh! My

work is quite popular, and I actually make a significant chunk of change doing this. It just doesn't seem ready for primetime in terms of topics I can bring up with my superior at work.

When our boss makes the rounds on Monday morning to ask how we've spent our off hours, I tend to make something up. I've mentioned "writing assignments" to her a few times, but she is bound to notice my continued refusal to disclose the nature of those "assignments."

Do I maintain the lie, write something else from scratch, or reveal my hobby to cool boss lady?

Sincerely,
Pensive pen name

Dear saucy side hustle,

I am impressed that one option you're weighing is writing "something else from scratch." This implies that the way to succeed at office small-talk is to start an entirely new life and change your identity. While that premise would make for a great low-stakes film noir, your situation is much simpler. Here are a few suggestions:

- When you boss asks about your "assignments," you can send her an email that includes titles and blurbs describing some of your work. She should be able to put the pieces together, and then she can decide whether or not she wants to examine the actual content. It seems like she would admire your success in the world of erotic fiction. The "title and blurb" approach would allow you to share a bit of your world with her without forcing a commitment to any content consumption if that literary genre isn't her cup of tea.
- Display your expertise in this genre and your knowledge of the industry surrounding it by owning your earned success and conveying that in small talk form. During the Monday rounds, you can say something like "I spent the past two days crafting some erotic fiction for my growing audience. Once you figure out the conventions of that style, it can be quite gratifying and consistently challenging." Society at large compels you to exercise discretion, but your boss would admire your dedication and skill in any endeavor. Lead with your authority on the matter and you'll be less vulnerable to any preconceived notions your boss could apply regarding the genre.
- Play up the other writing you do as a precursor to mentioning your successful forays into erotic fiction. Test the waters and see if you feel comfortable disclosing the more conventional stuff. This is all about your comfort level since you are never obligated to share your personal details and passions in a workplace environment. A curious, social boss doesn't change the reality that your professional relationship with a higher-up (or any coworker) should not require personal disclosures.

Dear Nick,

I have reason to think my coworker doesn't wash her hands after using the restroom. I share a small workspace with her and I'm feeling so creeped out that I can barely even look at our (single! shared!) coffee machine.

How do I get past this? Or—should I investigate further?

Sincerely,
Creeped out

Dear sensibly shuddering,

Once you can avoid violating her privacy and making her feel unjustly shamed, I would investigate a bit further to see if your coworker's hands are being washed! If they aren't, take action accordingly and tell her she absolutely needs to be maintaining proper hygiene. Beyond the "ick" factor (a scientific term) inherent in this situation, consistent hand-washing prevents infection and is just good practice.

The communal nature of many workplace environments can lead to some disheartening realizations about varying hygienic standards. For example, if employees share kitchen utensils and rely on one another to keep them clean, the entire office can become subject to one person's lackluster dishwashing skills. Can you truly trust anyone to clean the fork you are going to use to put food into your mouth at

some point? My personal answer is, “Never ever ever.” I bring my own utensils from home to avoid leaving my fate in the hands of people who could be non-dish-soap-using monsters.

I once worked with someone who brought a cup of coffee into the restroom every morning AND TOOK IT BACK OUT INTO THE WORLD WITH HIM TO CONTINUE DRINKING IT. He was definitely a murderer. You can't convince me otherwise. Anyone who thinks a food item or beverage is unaffected by having passed through a restroom for several minutes has killed and will kill again. I encountered this person several times, but I never said anything because I had no idea where he actually sat and conducted his monstrous business. Your situation, on the other hand, may require a confrontation.

Anyone who thinks a food item or beverage is unaffected by having passed through a restroom for several minutes has killed and will kill again.

Maybe you'll be pleasantly surprised upon further exploration! As of right now, though, you're living in a world of uncertainty that will soon contaminate every inch of your tiny workspace. Free breakfasts will be minefields if she gets there first. You'll never

be able to accept a piece of gum from her. She can NEVER be in charge of cutting or distributing office birthday cakes.

If you share a coffee machine with your coworker, that means you're essentially married. You have every right to expect—nay, demand!—that your workspace proximity spouse keep things sanitary so that you can comfortably consume your caffeine and perform your job duties.

Unfortunately, there's no “getting past it” in this situation that doesn't involve self-induced memory loss. If necessary, you can simply have a conversation with your coworker sans complicated investigation. Explain your concerns and doubts respectfully and try not to judge her even though you are probably disgusted by the mere possibility that she isn't respecting the general need for a hygienic space. The way in which you communicate the issue at hand (see what I did there?) must be sincere and considerate.

Dear Nick,

I spent my early twenties doing a desk job that felt like a good post-college career step, but it turned out to be draining in ways I was not willing to accept. I care a lot about my work/life balance and being proud of what I do. I left my desk job to wait tables at a restaurant while I figure out something that meets my criteria, and now I'm worried I'm not making the progress I should going into my late twenties.

Is this inadequacy just in my head? Am I okay as a mid-twenties person trying to figure out a version of success that doesn't drive me crazy? I feel like I'm failing left and right and not wanting to make certain compromises that everyone else makes.

I also feel like I have creative outlets that are not being explored—including comedy, music, and writing. It seems like it's already too late and that I should just buckle down and find another desk job. Even that seems like a challenge now because I'll be interviewing as someone who left an office job to wait tables. Sorry for the essay, but HELP!

Sincerely,
Am I making progress?

Dear trying in your twenties,

It seems like the restaurant job is something you intended to do while figuring out your next step. That next step will take some work and intention to decipher. It may be possible to contemplate a logical move while doing a job that has more appeal on paper and forward momentum (even if it's not THE THING you want to do).

Some people enter their thirties and forties not having figured out THE THING. Other people find a way to make their current thing THE THING by investing time/money and making the most of a perceived skill set. You should reflect on whether or not you were good at the skills your desk job demanded. Did you leave in an act of early-twenties rebellion or due to a realization that it was genuinely not a good fit?

A 9-5 office job can give you more flexibility and work/life balance because you'll have structured free time on nights and weekends. Conversely, if you need to stay busy and active to think through things, the restaurant gig may create perfect brainstorming conditions. Intention is the key here. You'll need to set aside time to think only about your skills, your next move, and the kind of lifestyle you want. Society prescribes certain lifestyles and professional paths as ideal, but people can find fulfillment doing many things and living many types of lives. This is not to say that everyone should settle or ignore pursuing conventional things that could be fruitful. It has more to do with meditating on what you want your days and nights to look like and taking small, purposeful steps toward achieving that reality.

Many people are plagued by a post-college malaise associated with trying to immediately become a "successful adult." Sometimes this is remedied by traveling. Sometimes it's cured by pursuing a passion that becomes either a dedicated hobby or a lifelong vocation. If creating things (songs, comedy, stories) moves you, strive to make that a part of your 9-5 life or your office worker life. Prioritize it and treat it like you would brushing your teeth or exercising. There's a mythical idea that we should wait for a sign or some kind of "permission" from the universe to start being happy. The truth is that "happy" may be too ambitious a pursuit. What you are seeking is a sense of calm and a sense of reason behind the decisions you make. Intention will help get you there. The mere idea that your twenties are a ticking clock pressuring you to figure things out is a construct that is creating failures in your mind. Think about how you want your present to look as opposed to how your future should look.

Thank you for sharing and reading! Please continue to send all of your personal and professional quandaries to nickhelps@mathys-potestio.com.

Here to help,
Nick

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

SHARE THIS:   

RELATED ARTICLES

Creating the Room Where It Happens: on Being an Organizational Agent for Change

How to Get Over a Job When It Breaks Up With You

Helpful Notes from Nick, Vol. 5: Buckets & Boundaries

ONE COMMENT

Shobha

Great advice .

APR 5 10:15 AM

REPLY

ADD NEW COMMENT

comment