

DPI

De Programmatica *Ipsium*

DE PROGRAMMATICA IPSUM

Issue 007: Work

April 1st, 2019

Table of Contents

Issue 007: Work	5
Business As Unusual	9
Learnings From Toxic Abuse	19
Finding A Purpose	27
Tales Of The Interview	35

Issue 007: Work



April 1st, 2019

Welcome to the seventh issue of *De Programmatica Ipsum*, dedicated to the subject of *Work*. In this rather depressing yet unabashedly hopeful edition:

- Marie-Cécile Godwin Paccard writes about the danger and meaning of burnout¹ and how to avoid Karōshi.
- Adrian Tineo denounces unspoken bullying and harassment² in workplaces.
- Graham shares a very personal quest for meaning and purpose³ through work and towards Ikigai.
- In this issue's subscriber-only article, Adrian shares some job interview anecdotes⁴, with a hopeful twist at the end.

ISSUE 007: WORK

Enjoy this issue! Please let us know if you have any feedback⁵ and get our free newsletter⁶ to stay updated about new releases. If you want to support us, subscribe⁷ for a month or a year, and let us know if you would like to write with us⁸.

Cover photo by Sean Mungur⁹ on Unsplash¹⁰.

REFERENCES

- ¹ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/business-as-unusual/>
- ² <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/learnings-from-toxic-abuse/>
- ³ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/finding-a-purpose/>
- ⁴ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/tales-of-the-interview/>
- ⁵ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/feedback/>
- ⁶ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/newsletter/>
- ⁷ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/subscribe/>
- ⁸ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/write-with-us/>
- ⁹ https://unsplash.com/photos/QAOnHoisyfw?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText
- ¹⁰ https://unsplash.com/search/photos/dystopia?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText

Business As Unusual



By Marie-Cécile Godwin Paccard

We need to talk about work.

“Work? What is wrong with work?” you may ask. You would be right to do so.

A couple of years back, I might have asked the same thing. From the outside, nothing is wrong with the world of work, nor the workplace. Especially in the tech industry, right? Most of us get pretty good perks and we no longer have to spend 40 years of our life fiddling around for 12 hours a day on a production line like our elders.

Metaphorically speaking, of course...

However, we are way past the honeymoon now and work is not what it used to be even a couple of decades ago. Whoever you are, wherever you are, I am sure you have an acquaintance who has burned themselves out. There is a high probability this person is in your inner circle. It might even be you. We burn ourselves out because we work too much, giving in to the unmutable Slack channel, or because we lack “actionable feedback” in order to do our job properly. We burn ourselves out because our organisations are too big, too small, too agile or not enough, because there are too many layers of management or none at all to protect us from a toxic boss or client. We burn ourselves out because it is harder and harder to maintain a sense of meaning in what we do.

But I believed in it. I gave all my vitality to my work for the last twenty years, along with my hopes for a positive future for myself and the world. The system promised a stable income, pleasant working conditions in a nicely lit office, responsibilities and missions to accomplish, a retirement plan and most importantly, a balance.

I shaped my life around work, because that is what you do, that is what you are told: you can have it all. The joy, the busyness, the relationships, the fulfilment, the personal growth, the purposefulness of it all. Everything else was a distraction, something to help you occupy what is left of your time outside of your precious work.

It has been a decade since we began to talk about burnout. I dived those depths myself on several occasions since then, and I still bear the scars (my hair and nails never recovered from cortisol excess, neither did my ability to hold onto ideas in conversation, leading to awkward silences and hastily stammered requests for what I was saying). It was perhaps David Graeber’s “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs”¹ which sparked the fire of widespread conversation in 2013. In this piece he elaborated on the idea that many “spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.” He theorizes that many jobs were created solely to maintain the illusion of a functioning capitalist system. After reading this article my brain was impregnated with a dark, malicious seed. What if all this, employment, middle management, support functions, was a scam?

What about design? I had always had that familiar treadmill sensation, patching up interfaces and putting together brochures thrown at me as if the world would end were they not completed on time.

When it is too much to take, bodies and minds surrender to *Karōshi*. A Japanese term with no equivalent in English, *Karōshi* literally refers to death by overwork, be it a sudden and tragic health issue like a stroke or a heart attack, or even suicide. Do not believe those who will say that only the weak do burn out, that overcoming depression is a just matter of willpower. Burning yourself out is not about strength. People die at work or from work, because the machine strips out their hope. The machine lies to them, making them think it is their fault and theirs alone. It is they who are the problem, they are the dysfunction that requires fixing.

Yet employment is still to many the sole path to income, purpose and social inclusion. You cannot rent any kind of flat in Paris these days without a very well paid full-time contract and landlords asking -illegally- for further financial guarantees, forcing people to take their own illegal steps by desperately forging payslips² if they wish to live anywhere. Unemployment is still a huge social stigma. Friends and family can turn their back on you quite quickly.

The gig-economy amplifies the toxicity of employment by creating ever more tenuous positions, which count towards official employment figures, to the continuing joy of President Macron and his “Start Up Nation”. A new type of precarious self-employment dominates job markets now, and competition is deadly. A few weeks ago, a French Uber Eats worker was killed³ after conceding to deliver an order in an area famous for being a cyclist no-go zone in Bordeaux.

If you will not do it, no worries mate, someone will show up and accept a lower pay, a smaller space, a shorter deadline, an illegal assignment, a deadly route.

As networks and communities slowly dislocate under the pressure of continuous individualism induced by capitalism and consumerism, work and employment are the only way left to make an income, to afford a roof over your head, to have a purpose to follow and people to call friends. If your job is harming you, leaving could be social and financial suicide, and staying a slow death. How are you

supposed to recover from work exhaustion when the very system in which you operate has been specifically designed so you cannot?

What is it we are chasing at work, and what is the reality we are allowed? The biggest scam lies here: our vitality, our motivation, our values, purpose and energy are utilised to feed a different machine. We rarely see the results of our hard work, be it financially or physically. In a tech worker's career, how many projects stopped for a whim, lines of code ditched in a breath? How many regulations were dodged, or decisions taken against the protection of basic human rights like privacy? How many of our sleek apps actually work against us or worse, society's most vulnerable?

As a designer, I cannot help but see my own guilt in all this. There are humans behind harmful tech. There are techbros behind toxic company culture. Billionaire tycoons make the blatant choice to reduce breaks so employees are forced to wear diapers on the job. Alexa did not come from a void: she was engineered byte by byte, a reliable and discreet harvester of data and profit.

"We are making a difference", the Product Owner of our new Support Chatbot says, "we are building a product that will actually change lives". Whose lives? Almost always it is their own; rich, white, privileged. In the end, in the very end, no one is making a real difference anywhere but in the realm of venture capitalism and the disgusting accumulation of wealth. That is what tech is all about today; the increasing riches of the rich. Company culture, manifestos, design thinking trainings... all exist simply to make our pill easier to swallow.

That is the true reason we burn out. That is the final boss of cognitive dissonance. We will never work for anything other than the indecent enrichment of someone else who does not intend to share a single dime.

Do not get me wrong, some people have a purpose. Some jobs are worth the hits. I myself managed to find respectful partners and clients who share the same thirst for meaning I found on the day I decided to be vulnerable enough to discard the bullshit. Money is but a positive side-effect of our deep need to do something together. But consider this: where is tech making a difference? A real, positive, difference? Is it fooling anyone anymore?

The world is going through a very special phase. Big changes are afoot and although we have managed to keep them at a distance, some obvious signs are peeking through the cracks of our certitudes. To me it feels like the direct effect of this intangible, looming dread is that we as a society are trying to get the most of what we have while we can. Profit, bandwidth, stocks and shares, oil, solar panels, autonomous cars... it is like we know, deep inside, that this abundance has always been temporary. Hence the peculiar exodus tech is now facing.

Several people around me, including two close friends, have already taken a leap of faith and left the industry. The first spends all his weekends with his grandfather, a man still tied to something real; the land. This friend is learning from him as best he can, while toying with his hope and fears, wondering when he will eventually feel ready to devote his full time to more earthly things. The other quit his job and is relocating to the South of France to build an eco-neighbourhood and give permaculture a try. He will not stand the idea of software development anymore.

I crossed paths recently with “Foutu pour Foutu”, a duet of two business school graduates who found their learnings useless when looking at the current state of the world. They felt so helpless, so ill-equipped by their nonsensical degree that they decided to turn that despair into the energy to make a documentary, a story about “the lost”, the desperate, who see how the world has changed and do not know what to do so they start by talking about it.

The low-signals are here: the deeper people look, the more they peel the onion and the more they feel that meaning is fading away.

“Ingénieurs Engagés” (Committed Engineers)⁴ was born from the same acknowledgment that there is something wrong in the way we envision the world, and thus the way we teach it. Engineers from all across France have rallied to deconstruct what they have been taught in an effort to understand what is required to make the discipline of engineering better.

What myself and my friend Thomas are doing with Common Future(s)⁵ is something similar, only for design. We cannot allow ourselves to repeat the mistakes of the past. We cannot let business-as-usual be the only way forward. Whether we

leave our industry or remain a part of it in an attempt to reshape it from within, something is definitely happening. We want “business **as unusual**”.

Over the past five months I have spent countless hours watching Derek Powazek’s Instagram stories⁶, his journey from the Silicon Valley dream to a farm in Portland, Oregon staffed only by friendly goats and turkeys. I have no idea how to get from toxic tech to goats and turkeys, but I know I now want to enter this era of business-as-unusual, of unusual activity that barely bears any business.

Something **is** wrong with work. It must now shift from the life-sucking, rights-trampling machine it has become and move towards what it has always been: **the simple human activity of doing things together while caring for one another.**

We burn ourselves out because of one thing and one thing only: there is nothing to expect from work anymore. Among all the rhetorics we hear, all the managerial theories and agile mindsets, the big lie lies in front of us: the only rhetoric behind the human comedy of work is the one of exponential profit. Let us put an end to this charade.

This is a call for minds and arms. We can turn the workplace into something different so it makes employment something that really matters. We could heal each other, we could support our peers through resilience. Just by caring, and also throwing away the idea of exponential growth, seven figure salaries and start-up contests. Let us ward off those billionaires who want to fly to Mars, let them go if they want, let alone can.

Business-as-unusual does not mean that we abandon money and safety. There are brilliant people right now writing about and doing things that are setting the bases of a new way of doing business. A way that respects every living thing and ensures we can all live in dignity. In France, we call some of it “*économie sociale et solidaire*” (social and solidarity economy). It is one of the new ways of doing business while caring for one another. There are many others, it is up to us to find them.

We are not going anywhere, we are here to set new foundations. Care first. For nature and its limited resources. For ourselves, for our peers, for everybody we have been designing or developing for. Let us care for their lives, their humanity and their freedom. We can abuse our own privileges and refuse to help toxic tech to grow. We must reclaim purpose. You coming?

A few questions to help you dive into introspection:

- What do you really need in life? Who do you really care for? What are your three core values? I want three real words that truly mean something to you.
- How can you turn your own privilege into a weapon against oppressions? How can you care more for people, both known and unknown? Write down a couple of ideas.
- What is your relationship with consumerism, exponential growth and profit? What do you think you can do to break down these concepts, both in your personal and professional life? Take it easy, this is a tough one.
- What do YOU think work is about for you? What does really matter to you in your daily job?
- Last but not least: where do you want to start? Start small: listen to a friend's burdens, read a piece about surveillance capitalism, write your three core values on sticky notes and put them on the wall in front of you, be vulnerable around someone you love.

I have no worries the next steps will show themselves to you once you are ready. See you there. In the meantime, I will be honoured to read your very own story about how you will do business-as-unusual. Write and reach out!

A few seeds for you to sow:

- Basecamp's "Signal v Noise" blog⁷ & their post about leaving Medium for self-hosting⁸
- Frédéric Laloux's "Reinventing Organizations"⁹, a must-read also available in illustrated short version.
- The Guardian's review of David Graeber's "Bullshit Jobs"¹⁰
- Jake Knapp's "Make time" blog / book¹¹
- Elle Luna's famous essay "The Crossroads of Should and Must"¹²

ISSUE 007: WORK

- Kate Raworth's "doughnut economics" theory¹³
- Ind.ie's Ethical Design Manifesto¹⁴

Cover photo by Elijah O'Donnell¹⁵ on Unsplash¹⁶.

REFERENCES

- ¹ <https://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/>
- ² <http://leplus.nouvelobs.com/contribution/1331497-falsifier-son-salaire-pour-trouver-un-appart-j-ai-du-mentir-je-n-ai-pas-eu-le-choix.html>
- ³ <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20190117.OBS8713/a-pessac-un-livreur-ubereats-de-18-ans-tue-par-un-camion.html>
- ⁴ <https://ingenieurs-engages.org/>
- ⁵ <https://common-futures.org/index-en.html>
- ⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/powazek/>
- ⁷ <https://m.signalvnoise.com/>
- ⁸ <https://m.signalvnoise.com/signal-v-noise-exits-medium/>
- ⁹ <http://reinventingorganizations.com>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/25/bullshit-jobs-a-theory-by-david-graeber-review>
- ¹¹ <https://maketime.blog>
- ¹² <https://medium.com/@elleluna/the-crossroads-of-should-and-must-90c75eb7c5b0>
- ¹³ <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>
- ¹⁵ https://unsplash.com/photos/t8T_yUgCKSM?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText
- ¹⁶ https://unsplash.com/search/photos/unusual-business?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText

Learnings From Toxic Abuse



By Adrian Tineo

Though I was well aware of toxic abuse in the workplace, I only really began to understand it when I was subjected to it. By sharing my story I hope to spark reflections and discussions that will contribute to create a healthier workplace in our industry.

The Ceaseless Rumination Of The Troubled Mind

I was greatly affected by my situation at work, which had been developing for about a year. I complained many times to my boss in private. In return, reality was constantly being reframed to me, as if I was looking at things all wrong. They would tell me time and time again to accommodate all the aggravations, ball-dropping, spite, accusations... in other words, all the abuse. Failure to do so was regarded as being a bad team player and a difficult person to work with.

The cognitive dissonance¹ between what I perceived things to be and what I was told they really were fuelled my ceaseless rumination. Eventually, I could not get it out of my head. It would be the first thing to come into my mind when waking up and my last thought before falling asleep. At its worst, it would literally take every waking moment of my day.

It is embarrassing to admit that I was such a mess inside, despite my year-long experience in meditation, therapy work, and healing practices. I failed to follow every directive from my teachers. I despised myself for that, too.

The Toll Of Emotional Stress

It took a lot out of me to deal with the toxicity. At times, I felt like a pressure cooker on high heat with no possibility of blowing off steam. For the better part of that year I had been developing symptoms related to the stress and the constant repression of my emotions. I thought I could weather the storm by just focusing on my work. I was wrong.

I refused to fully acknowledge the insomnia, the mounting anxiety, the physical symptoms. They crept in slowly and I would justify them to myself as temporary results of the stress. I did not know how much I was affected by the whole situation until much later. When you are deep in the situation, it is hard to keep perspective.

The only time the company management took swift and decisive action was when I reported my medical symptoms. That is when I was pulled from the team.

With A Little Help From My Friends

I kept this from my friends for way too long. When I told them, I was overwhelmed by the loving support and care that they showed me. It really saved me to feel supported by people that would not judge me and would show me such kindness.

I learnt that far from being a sign of weakness, talking about my difficulties made me more human in their eyes. They shared their stories with me too, some of which I was only partially aware of. Some of them had given up career paths or significantly lowered their professional ambitions due to toxic behaviour they encountered. This stuff is real and it happens every day. All it takes is one unchecked toxic element and the stage is set.

A Bright Beginning

I was an iOS developer at an agile team in a well-known middle-sized company. Our product had thousands of daily users and was well established in the market. I was brought in at a time of expansion and great transformation.

This team was very immature in many respects. We all had a lot to learn, myself included. Together, we introduced a new branching system, automated unit and UI tests, continuous integration, code review, and lots of best practices at the source code level. This meant a lot of transformation for all of us. Despite the challenges, the team managed admirably well and I considered the camaraderie to be high.

Shortly after joining, a member of higher management shook everybody's hand to compliment the team for a particularly challenging release. When he shook my hand I said, "thanks, but I did not do anything." He answered, "never mind, you are now part of the team, too." That little gesture impressed me beyond words. Life was good.

The First Impression Is One To Last

I was not very smart during my first months at this place. I made a mess about the project reporting, which I found to be excessively micromanaged. I escalated my complaints about the tracking, which I found excessive. I still stand by what I said,

but my feedback was poorly timed. None of it served anything. It only created a reputation of me as being an insufferable know-it-all. I must have been the person that makes people uncomfortable just by walking into the room.

In one appraisal, my boss told me that I had criticised other people's work without having proper context. The comments turned out to be related to an email from some 18 months ago. I learnt that once you are pigeonholed into a certain character, some people will never see you differently.

A Relationship Gone Sour

The problems started when a team member with no leadership over me called me to a private meeting to tell me everything she did not like about me. My input in the agile meetings was not appreciated and my participation in an upcoming hackathon, in which all devs had been encouraged to take part by higher management, was seen as a failure to serve the team's looming deadlines. She intimidated me, lashing out against aspects of my personality she did not appreciate. At the following retrospective, I was humiliated in front of the whole team for interfering with the team's operations.

I felt like run over by a truck. In my 14 years of professional experience in 4 different countries, I had never encountered such level of animosity directed towards me on a personal level.

After that I tried to avoid her as much as I could. I felt so hurt that it would be uncomfortable for me just to be around her. I waited for an apology for months. It would have taken 2 seconds and it would have meant the world to me. It never came.

From Bad To Worse

Over time, I realized that agreeability was the highest principle governing the team. My ideas were systematically dismissed, often repeated and embraced when suggested by others. Everything I treasured in my profession was routinely stepped on. Thorough analysis was looked at with suspicion. Innovation was stifled from the root. Anything that sounded technical was immediately dismissed as lacking

user value. Collaboration happened around personal agendas of the different roles and their one-sided view about what their competencies were.

I was coming from a scientific research background and it was unbelievable to me that hard facts and well-known references were dismissed without proper arguments. I was totally unprepared to deal with decision-making in such an environment. I struggled repeatedly.

I had been told to be patient, to wait for more success stories to accumulate and the atmosphere would naturally improve. The team was delivering on budget and with top quality. Stability was excellent, release after release. In the process, we were consistently upping the engineering practices of the team. Despite all those markers, the team dynamics were going from bad to worse.

My burn-out point occurred when an abusive team member planned to thwart a 2-day family reunion, with no pretence of project-related reasons. Somehow this seemed okay to both the team and management because they never made any indication to the contrary. When you are living in a foreign country and you only get to see your family 3-4 times year, this feels particularly nasty. I could not reconcile that someone on my team hated me so much that they wanted to attack me where it hurt the most.

Toxicity Spreads When Not Curbed

I struggled to deal with the toxic element. I experienced her like a mad rash: it itches a lot but you know it is better not to scratch it. Answering to any of her taunts would only make her go on and on. My mood was lifted when she was away, and it would sink again when she was back. I pulled away from social activities in the team, just for the sake of having as little interaction with her as possible. That prevented me from having more contact with people that I appreciated.

After my story went public, a colleague from another team wanted to meet me. This person had also been abused by the same toxic element. This was comforting for both of us. We were not alone! We were not imagining things. I cannot tell how reassuring it was to finally find some of the external validation I had been so badly missing.

My colleague had chosen not to escalate the issue and I cannot blame that. It was very stressful for me to come public with my story and it got me a lot of exposure in ways that I never wished. I wanted to be known by my engineering skills, not for being the sick guy that was gone overnight. I went public because I believed I had to. It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do.

It Is Hard To Fix A Problem You Do Not Have

Thrashing other people's work for personal gain is toxic. Intimidating and humiliating is toxic. Ruining the reputation of other professionals is toxic.

We need to start calling problems by their name², otherwise there is no hope to fix them. Studies³ have shown that feeling safe at the workplace is a predictor of success. The benefits revert to both the people and the business.

We could say that appreciation and kindness towards fellow team members is not a job requirement, but I cannot think of a cheaper and more effective way to build trust and resilience into a team.

I would have exchanged all the free beer (and there were lots of it!) for an apology, for another handshake, this time deserved, for anything that showed me that I mattered as a person, that I was more than a disposable resource. I never knew that appreciation was so important to me until I was so deprived of it.

I was deeply frustrated by the level of impunity that abusers had at this place. I understand people deserve a second chance, maybe even a third or fourth. It is important to give toxic elements a dignified way out of their behaviour. But meanwhile, what about the chances of those abused? Who will protect them?

Funnily enough, this happened at a place where I believe most people were competent professionals and generally kind-hearted. I really do. They were simply thoroughly unequipped to deal with conflict. I think this is partly human nature. We do not like to think bad about our fellow human beings. It is easier to reframe the facts than to admit there is inadequate behaviour.

A Word Of Support

To you who are suffering from toxic abuse, do not let anyone tell you that what you are going through is not real and just in your imagination. Trust your own best judgement, based in your observations and experience. They do not have the right to gaslight you.

It is OK to be affected by it. Look for support from the people that care about you. They will help you find the courage to do what is right for the situation. Finally, it is not a weakness to look for professional help. Do not hesitate to get a therapist and learn some tools to manage the situation.

Whatever you do, do not keep it to yourself. There is people out there willing to help. You are not alone. Good luck and all the best.

Cover photo by Florian Pérennès⁴ on Unsplash⁵.

REFERENCES

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance

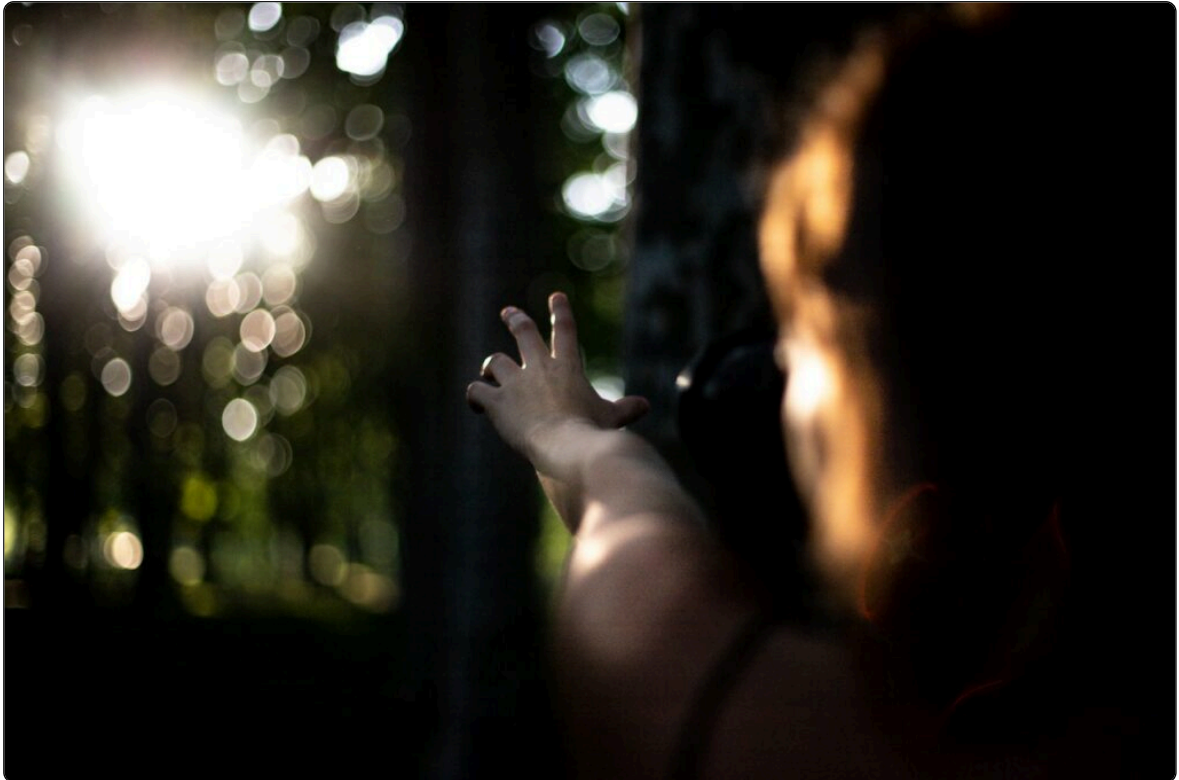
² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37SZgnh8930>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>

⁴ https://unsplash.com/photos/SuGPa_uldZc?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText

⁵ https://unsplash.com/?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText

Finding A Purpose



By Graham Lee

I have spent a lot of my forty work hours a week over the last five years looking for a way out of burnout. Sometimes, it is an active process. I write plans about the next phase of my life, make changes, or throw myself into a new job or hobby. At other times it is more passive. I stare down the clock in my latest chair-warming job. Then I can get home to stare at that clock and warm a more comfortable chair.

It Is Just A Job

Some people say that their route to a more fulfilling life was to abandon professional pride. They treat work as a necessary evil that pays the bills and enables the music, parenting, flying lessons, extreme crochet or other activity that acts as their

outlet for self-definition. That does not work for me. I am like the stick figure in XKCD #386¹ who cannot go to bed because someone is wrong on the internet. To me, the whole world of software could be better. I feel a personal mission to make it better, and a personal sense of underachievement because it is not better.

I cannot disentangle the causality. Is software broken because I burnt out, or did I burn out on the realisation that software is broken? I do not know. To quote Hemingway, this state crept up at first slowly, then all at once. I have discussed the all at once part² before. It actually feels self-righteous, being either the only person of at least one of a select band of the enlightened. The few who “get it.” I get to sit there, not contributing to what I know to be the problem. By not contributing at all.

Damn Them All To Hell

This is also very isolating. Whether your One True Way™ genuinely is the better way, people will not want to deal with the cynical manner in which you tell them that they are doing everything wrong. Of course they do not. It is neither a kind nor a helpful thing to say. And of course, you do not really want to hang around with those losers who do not get it, anyway. If you find a playlist of my developer conference talks, you will see a long gap. It is not just that I did not speak, I was not there. A lot of friends that I had made there became people I stopped talking to. Apparently because I thought I had some insight into how the abstract representation of little lumps of silicon worked. Because I was angry that this insight was not shared, that the light was not shining uniformly.

Life was like perpetually living the last scene of the Planet of the Apes. The scene in which Charlton Heston discovers the statue of Liberty, realising that the world of humanity has been destroyed through humanity’s own idiocy. I apologise if I have just spoiled Planet of the Apes for you. It is kind of an iconic scene, so I expect even if you have not seen it, you know it happens. The world of software engineering is not brilliant at maintaining and sharing its own history, but the glimpses I got gave the impression of some antelapsarian or antediluvian land of milk and honey in which programming was more thoughtful, more careful, more *betterer*.

A Guide To Burnt-out Software Engineering History

Ada Lovelace showed me how to design a computer program when nobody had even built a working computer yet. Grace Hopper demonstrated empathy in programming language design. Edsger Dijkstra taught me how to prove that my software worked, and Bertrand Meyer showed me how to compose big provable systems out of small provable systems. Meyer relied on the work of Alan Kay, Adele Goldberg and others, who showed generally that big computer programs are best made out of independent small computer programs, running conceptually on independent small computers. Richard Rashid and Avadis Tevanian let me into the secret of what an operating system would look like if you built it that way. Sophie Wilson proved that one person with a microcomputer can design a CPU architecture. Niklaus Wirth went one better, and designed everything from the hardware to the applications.

Wirth's insight was conceptually expanded by Donald Knuth, Kent Beck and Ward Cunningham, who showed that the best way to build a large capable system is to start with a small capable system, and work with a small capable team.

Somehow, the millions of people doing scalable Scrum to shovel their story points of Javascript into a container running on a 1970s minicomputer OS, sitting in a virtual machine on a hardware platform evolved from a washing machine controller, did not seem like the lesson we were meant to learn. Tricking the machine into enabling anything beyond a megabyte of memory by leaving "real mode" did not seem like the apotheosis of our art.

From Nothing To Something

Of course, I did the most obvious thing in the circumstances: nothing. In my head-canon, I was mere months away from becoming the instigator of a new computing revolution. A system based on the things I had learned would eclipse Windows, macOS and all of the other contributors, with a lean team of a half dozen or so people. It is easy to see how my strategy of barely producing anything at all would get me there!

Gradually, though, things did begin to change. The lesson I *really* needed to learn would be taught to me later, but somehow I started acting on it anyway. Once it became explicit, its effects accelerated. A friend told me that what I needed to do was to tell stories. A signatory of the manifesto for Agile software development³ told me that.

We were reflecting on the direction taken by Agile software development and its proponents. It is easy to see that a collection of values, principles and practices created by people who were “uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it” had run out of steam. People talk about dark Scrum and its effects on workers down the software mines. Suspicion is cast upon “scaling Agile” frameworks, and on the processes promoted by people selling what they claim value “individuals and interactions over processes and tools”. It was in this context that we discussed the importance of telling and repeating stories.

Story Time

If a story is told once, even if it has a huge impact, that impact will still lessen with distance and time. Being disappointed in 2019 that the Agile manifesto is no longer effective is like turning up to an American Independence Day party on July 5th and complaining that you do not see the fireworks. But on July 4th, the fireworks were loud, bright, and easy to notice. And the story of that July 4th party is *itself* derived from the story of July 4th 1776.

All of the truly impactful, enduring stories survive not because they were told, but because they were *retold*, added to, and reinterpreted. Jesus and Mohammed have a huge influence in the modern world not because they told their stories hundreds of years ago, but because people are telling their own stories about those people and those stories today. Each of those new stories may individually have a small impact, and the focus of the message may shift over time, but collectively these stories reinforce and redistribute the central message. The story is regenerated each day.

So telling stories is important. Half a year ago, Adrian and I decided to come together and share our stories⁴, along with those of our guests, relating to what we see as important matters in the world of “the software itself.” But telling stories does not just involve broadcasting sentences at recipients. It means understanding

who the listeners or readers are, empathising with them, and understanding how the story will resonate. Sharing stories undoes the isolation of burnout, by forcing you (or me) to connect with others.

Getting Up In The Morning

A month ago, I shared the story of my burnout⁵, including the fact that it was a story without an ending. I asked who else had experienced this, and what they had done about it. The empathy and connection was overwhelming. So many people were going through, or had been through, similar situations. And they wanted to share their experiences, commiserate, or ask for help with their own cases. When people tell you that “you are not alone” in dealing with mental health issues, it is no mere platitude.

One person, the `lobste.rs` user `olivier`⁶, mentioned the concept of *Ikigai*⁷. It is a Japanese word, translated as “what you live for”, and describes a framework for finding your purpose. Your purpose is at the intersection of what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can get paid for. I saw in this an opportunity to find the work that would have meaning for me. Taking some coloured marker pens and a sheet of static whiteboard paper, I drew the *Ikigai* idea as a four-circled Venn diagram. I thought about each of the things that are important to me, and plotted them on the diagram. Then I explored how to shift or combine them into the magic *Ikigai* region where all four circles intersect.

To The Exit

I came up with this mission statement: “I make it easier and faster to create high-quality software that respects privacy and freedom”. This is a story I can tell other people, to help them understand what I do. It is a story I can tell *myself*: both to remind me of the value of my work, and to consider whether an opportunity advances my mission. If it does not, I am merely keeping the chair warm until the next time I quit.

It does not matter if some work is only tangentially aligned with the mission. That work tells a small story that supports and reinforces the bigger story. It is a step forward. A step toward being proud of my work again.

ISSUE 007: WORK

Cover photo by David Monje⁸ on Unsplash⁹.

REFERENCES

¹ <https://www.xkcd.com/386/>

² <https://www.sicpers.info/2016/12/by-the-river/>

³ <https://www.agilemanifesto.org>

⁴ <https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com>

⁵ https://lobste.rs/s/21co2p/how_did_you_rediscover_your_software_moj

⁶ <https://lobste.rs/u/olivier>

⁷ <https://upliftconnect.com/ikigai-finding-your-reason-for-being/>

⁸ https://unsplash.com/photos/isbRhHh8Nkw?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText

⁹ https://unsplash.com/search/photos/reach-out?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText

Tales Of The Interview



By Adrian Kosmaczewski

What follows are all true job interview anecdotes I have accumulated since I started working as a software engineer in 1997. They are all different; some are sad, some are just plain stupid, but one in particular, the one at the end, is simply fantastic and will provide hope to all of you looking for a job.

Excellence

After a three hour trip throughout Switzerland, I arrived on time for a meeting at a wide, dimly lit office, of around 150 square meters, in which there was a single desk at the far end of it. Closer to the entrance there was a small round table with two chairs.

The person sitting on that desk was on the phone, and waved her hand asking me to sit down at the table.

After around thirty minutes of waiting there, the lady comes to me with some papers on her hand, and sits down. Then without even greeting me or introducing herself, she starts telling me about their excellent company and how they are committed to excellence and how hard it is for them to find excellent candidates because of the excellence of their interview process required to provide excellent services to their excellent customers who expected nothing less but excellence.

For a while it seemed to me like she was not even breathing.

Her speech lasted about forty minutes, during which she barely looked at me or even asked me to say something about my own experience. At the end she looks at me, smiles, thanks me for coming to the meeting and gets up, saying something about contacting me soon. I clumsily get up, shake her hand and leave the room. I find myself outside, facing another three hours of trip back.

I have never heard of them ever since.

Those Gaps On Your Resume

The man in front of me took my resume on his hands and sit back on the chair. For about an hour he went through each one its temporal gaps.

What did you do from December 2001 to July 2002? And why did you not work from August 2003 to January 2004? What about from August 2007 to January 2008?

He made no questions about my actual work. No questions about best practices, or about the programming languages I knew, or the teams I have been with, or about the IDEs I had used, or the challenges I met in my previous jobs.

I made the huge mistake of falling in the trap of actually answering the questions. I should have not, and rather, just asked him to actually review my experience instead.

Actually, I should have left that meeting right away.

Reversing A Linked List

I was interviewing for a mobile app developer job at a very large company in front of two senior developers. As expected, at some point they asked me one of those typical interview questions¹. If I remember well, it was the question that appears in the SICP book, about finding an algorithm to provide change with the minimum amount of coins.

To be clear, I had read the book and I probably could have winged the question. But instead, out of exasperation of the whole concept of whiteboard interviews, I declined answering to it, much to the bewilderment of my interviewers. A long silence followed, and I answered their unspoken question directly. I told them that by answering like this, they could learn many things from me:

First, that I did not fill my brain with elements of information that I can find in a book. A much better question would be to ask me how to deal with typical problems in large software projects. And, besides, I was pretty sure that their own app did not need or used such an algorithm to minimize coins.

Second, that I had strong opinions about this industry, which they could like or not, but never ignore. Among those, I stressed the fact that I strongly opposed (the proper word would be abhorred) the whiteboarding interview concept.

And third, that I was not bullshitting them by repeating by heart an answer out of those books that prepare developers for interview questions. And that I was worried that the team they had hired would have done that.

An awkward silence followed, while they both looked at each other.

They made me a job offer. I declined it.

Weird Academic Paths Need Not Apply

During a phone screening, the recruiter asked me what diplomas I had. I told this person that I had dropped out of university early, but that I had been accepted in a Master Degree program later, thanks to my professional experience, and that, as such, I had a Master degree, but no Bachelor degree.

There was a long silence. “Wait, how can you have a Master degree without a Bachelor first?” I re-explained the situation calmly, thinking that this situation was more common than it sounded at first.

“But, but... sorry.” And she hung up.

And that is how I learnt that no, my situation is *not* that common.

The Truth Is In The PDF

I sent once an application for a senior role at a major Swiss company. A few weeks later, I received an e-mail from the HR manager with the following words:

“Please open the attached PDF.”

I duly opened the PDF, and inside it was a letter of the same HR manager (apparently it is company policy to send PDFs inside e-mails) where they declined my application using the following words:

We regret to inform you that we cannot consider your application this time, because of the following reason: <xyz>.

I guessed that the company had a series of templates for letters, templates into which one could add some information before sending them. And maybe the person in question just had forgotten to fill in the blanks. No worries. I sent a quick e-mail to the HR manager asking for the missing reason.

A few minutes later, the same HR manager replies back with another terse e-mail (no PDF inside this time) stating the following:

According to company policy, we do not provide reasons for rejections.

I answered back, suggesting this person to modify the PDF template for the next rejection.

I have never heard back from them again.

Unanswered Homework

I applied to a mobile developer job a few years ago, and they asked me to complete a small homework assignment after the first phone screening. They said in their e-mail that the assignment, which consisted of the creation of a small mobile app, should not take more than 5 hours to complete.

I did so, and I sent it. It must have taken me about 4 hours of work to do, and I was quite happy with the result. I even provided tests and some documentation with it, all in a nice Git repository somewhere.

A week later I sent an e-mail to ask about the status of my submission. I asked again a few days later.

I never received an answer from them, not even an acknowledgement of receipt.

The Other Side Of The Medal

Thankfully, things are changing. I am soon going to start a new job in a company that, thankfully, wants to do things in a different way.

First, they invited me over to have coffee with them, and we talked about their current business needs, and how we could help each other.

Then they invited me to spend a whole day in their offices; I met many of the people working there, and even collaborated in a small task with one of them. I could see how they worked, how they collaborated with each other, and how they treated each other. They invited me for lunch, and I got to meet a lot of very nice people.

I want to stress that this is exactly the kind of interview I want to have with companies, every time: it is called a dialog. Its objective is to find out if we can work together, and if so, how we can help each other.

This is the way how work should be defined. Nothing more and nothing less than a collaboration.

Companies pay salaries, very well; but we, the workforce, provide our own “CPU time” to these organizations, and we must choose carefully where to spend that

CPU time. Only companies who understand the meaning of the word “collaboration” can evolve into this new way of dealing with job interviews.

One must never work “for” a company: one must work “with” it, and it must work “with” oneself.

To make a short story even shorter, this last company made me an offer, and I wholeheartedly accepted it. I will start there next month.

And this is how I found out, 22 years after I started in this industry, that things really are changing; there is better way to do job interviews, and the change is happening right here, right now.

Cover photo by Tim Gouw² on Unsplash³.

REFERENCES

¹ <http://tonsky.me/blog/hiring/>

² https://unsplash.com/photos/bwki71ap-y8?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText

³ https://unsplash.com/search/photos/interview?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText