

The Power of Time Off

Part 1

I run a design studio in New York. Every seven years, I close it for one year to pursue some **little experiments**,¹ things that are always difficult to accomplish during the regular working year. In that year, we are not available for any of our clients. We are totally closed. And as you can imagine, it is a lovely and very energetic time.

I originally had opened the studio in New York to combine my two loves, music and design. And we created videos and packaging for many musicians that you know, and for even more that you've never heard of. As I realized, just like with many, many things in my life that I actually love, I adapt to it. And I get, over time, bored by them. And for sure, in our case, our work started to look the same. You see here a glass eye in a **die cut**² of a book. Quite the similar idea, then, a perfume packaged in a book, in a die cut. So I decided to close it down for one year.

Also is the knowledge that right now we spend about in the first 25 years of our lives learning, then there is another 40 years that's really reserved for working. And then **tacked on at the end of**³ it are about 15 years for retirement.

And I thought it might be helpful to basically cut off five of those retirement years and intersperse them in between those working years. That's clearly enjoyable for myself. But probably even more important is that the work that comes out of these years flows back into the company and into society at large, rather than just benefiting a grandchild or two. There is a fellow **TEDster**⁴ who spoke two years ago, Jonathan Haidt, who defined his work into three different levels. And they **rang very true**⁵ for me. I can see my work as a job. I do it for money. I likely already look forward to the weekend on Thursdays. And I probably will need a hobby as a **leveling mechanism**.⁶ In a career, I'm definitely more engaged. But at the same time, there will be periods when I think is all that really hard work really worth my while? While in the third one, in the calling, very much likely I would do it also if I wouldn't be financially compensated for it. . . .

Part 2

If I look at my cycle, seven years, one-year sabbatical, it's 12.5 percent of my time. And if I look at companies that are actually more successful than mine, 3M since the 1930s is giving all their engineers 15 percent to pursue whatever

¹ Sagmeister uses the term "little experiments" to refer to creative pursuits or non-work-related projects.

² A "die cut" is the cutting of paper or card using machines with sharp, steel knives.

³ Something that is "tacked on the end" or "tacked on at the end" is added after something else is finished, usually without careful thought. A *tack* is a type of short nail with a flat head.

⁴ The term "TEDster" refers to an individual who has given a TED Talk.

⁵ When something you hear or see "rings true" for you, it feels relevant and accurate for you.

⁶ A "leveling mechanism" is something that creates a flat surface. In this case, Marks means that he needs a hobby to have a better balance between work and life.

they want. There [are] some good successes. **Scotch tape**⁷ came out of this program, as well as Art Fry developed **sticky notes**⁸ from during his personal time for 3M. Google, of course, very famously gives 20 percent for their software engineers to pursue their own personal projects. . . .

When I had the idea of doing one, the process was I made the decision and I put it into my **daily planner book**.⁹ And then I told as many, many people as I possibly could about it so that there was no way that I could **chicken out**¹⁰ later on. In the beginning, on the first sabbatical, it was **rather disastrous**.¹¹ I had thought that I should do this without any plan, that this vacuum of time somehow would be wonderful and enticing for idea generation. It was not. I just, without a plan, I just reacted to little requests, not work requests—those I all said no to—but other little requests. Sending mail to Japanese design magazines and things like that. So I became my own **intern**.¹²

And I very quickly made a list of the things that I was interested in, put them in a hierarchy, divided them into chunks of time, and then made a plan, very much like in **grade school**.¹³ What does it say here? Monday, 8 to 9: story writing; 9 to 10: future thinking. Was not very successful. And so on and so forth. And that actually, specifically as a starting point of the first sabbatical, worked really well for me. What came out of it? I really got close to design again. I had fun. Financially, seen over the long term, it was actually successful. Because of the improved quality, we could ask for higher prices. And probably most importantly, basically everything we've done in the seven years following the first sabbatical came out of thinking of that one single year.

And I'll show you a couple of projects that came out of the seven years following that sabbatical. . . . This is a whole wall of bananas at different ripenesses on the opening day in this gallery in New York. It says, "Self-confidence produces fine

⁷ "Scotch tape" is a popular cellophane tape sold by 3M.

⁸ "Sticky notes," also known as Post-its, are small pieces of paper with adhesive on the back of them.

⁹ A "daily planner book" refers to a book with a calendar in which a person writes his or her daily schedule.

¹⁰ To "chicken out" means to decide not to do something because of fear.

¹¹ Sagmeister uses the term "rather disastrous" to mean it did not go well at all.

¹² An "intern" is a young staff member, often a student, who works for no pay or a very low salary in order to gain work experience.

¹³ "Grade school" refers to elementary or primary school.

results.” This is after a week. After two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, five weeks. And you see the self-confidence almost comes back, but not quite. These are some pictures visitors sent to me. And then the city of Amsterdam gave us a plaza and asked us to do something. We used the stone plates as a grid for our little piece. We got 250,000 coins from the central bank, at different darkneses. So we got brand-new ones, shiny ones, medium ones, and very old, dark ones. And with the help of 100 volunteers, over a week, created this fairly floral typography that spelled, “Obsessions make my life worse and my work better.” . . .

We are also working on the start of a bigger project in Bali. It’s a movie about happiness. And here we asked some

nearby pigs to do the titles for us. They weren’t quite **slick**¹⁴ enough. So we asked the goose to do it again, and hoped she would do somehow, a more elegant or pretty job. And I think she overdid it. Just a bit too ornamental. And my studio is very close to the monkey forest. And the monkeys in that monkey forest looked, actually, fairly happy. So we asked those guys to do it again. They did a fine job, but had a couple of **readability problems**.¹⁵ So of course whatever you don’t really do yourself doesn’t really get done properly. That film we’ll be working on for the next two years. . . .

Thank you.

¹⁴ Sagmeister says that the pigs in his project weren’t quite “slick” enough to explain that the outcome wasn’t as nice as he had hoped.

¹⁵ Sagmeister continues to joke about working with the animals by describing the monkeys as having “readability problems.”