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## HELPFUL NOTES FROM NICK, VOL. 7: SOUNDS & SOLUTIONS

WRITTEN BY [Nick Bachan](#) | OCT 23, 2017

I'm a writer, illustrator, and kindness snob obsessed with the stories that connect us. In this column, I provide insights to people navigating the intersections of their personal and professional lives.

This column usually features a collection of questions. For this installment, I chose to focus on a single question that highlights a particularly complex yet common situation for creatives.

Dear Nick,

I used to intern in a large newsroom. While I was there, a mentor and colleague advised me to find a solution to a problem. If I could communicate that solution to my team, it would help me get hired as a full-time employee.

One of my core duties was producing underwriting promos. This involved searching for music using the company's existing database. The process was frustrating due to a lack of advanced search options. For example, I could only filter music by track title – there were no options for filtering. Finding the right track was a chore, which meant I'd located my problem.

During a previous internship, I'd used a music database that enabled users to search using almost any algorithm, parameter or constraint. For example, one could plug in a popular song in order to find a similar-sounding track. I wanted to bring this kind of scalable functionality to my new company, so I began meeting with team members to discuss viable solutions. I documented my research and proposed fixes based on both employee needs and my prior experience.

My initiative was met with enthusiasm, but nothing substantial came of it. While doing my research, I learned that it had actually been years since the database was worked on – so I figured things just moved slowly. At the time, I was also told that there weren't enough resources to hire someone who would be solely focused on improving the database. All things considered, I was glad I stepped up and communicated the issue. I counted that as a win.

It's been several months since my internship ended. While I was on Twitter last week, I noticed something – there's a new internship on my former team that seems to be centered on optimizing the music database. There's also a full-time bump built into the internship if someone performs well. I find myself feeling cheated.

Although I'm happy the database issue is being addressed, the idea to address it was originally mine. I documented several conversations with stakeholders that will undoubtedly provide the new intern/hire with key insights. My idea could have been my ticket to staying at the company and securing a full-time job.

I've been looking for and applying to full-time jobs in my chosen field(s) for almost two years now. I'm exhausted.

My unpaid internships never lead to anything more than a "Thank you for your time!" and a pat on the back. I continue to invest time, money, energy, and creative ideas into media companies that don't seem to value me. I thought things would change when I made the switch from entertainment to news, but that hasn't been the case. I feel mentally and emotionally drained.

What should I do? Is it worth talking to someone about? Am I overthinking it? If I were to talk to someone about it, how should I approach it? Who would I talk to? The only person I would possibly trust to by my advocate is my former supervisor.

Sincerely,

## Tired

Dear Tired,

Your situation is frustrating and your exhaustion is completely understandable.

I've navigated several hierarchical agency environments consisting of designers, strategists, copywriters, and project managers. Ideally, these hierarchies reward people with the best ideas because – like your mentor and colleague said – problems arise that require solutions. Ideas are the seeds from which those solutions sprout. You proactively planted a seed and watered it as best you could. It was just never going to grow in that particular environment.

Clumsy plant metaphors aside, it's difficult to maintain a creative and innovative spirit when you feel inherently marginalized. The knowledge that you're not being taken seriously as a professional and/or human being can be unrelentingly toxic. You can easily develop a negative self-perception that follows you throughout your entire career.

I imagine you want to continue on your chosen path (as you should), so this response is geared toward preserving your sense of self. You have to trust your instincts and develop a personal rubric for success that won't waver even when people refuse to give you credit, compensation, etc. You're already on the right track since you're exhausted with conventional validation.

Surrendering to a hierarchy and a prescribed chain of command can leave you feeling out of control when you lack advocacy. Involving key stakeholders in your research was smart because it allowed you to combine hand-on knowledge with your prior experience.

The pitfall of such an approach is that it spreads your idea to several minds that can take ownership of it. The internship posting you recently saw could be a manifestation of someone taking the seed you planted, nurturing it according to the rules of that company's hierarchy, and presenting the fully grown version in a manner that resonated with the person signing paychecks.

Media companies and other corporations that employ creatives assemble collections of great minds to make a few individuals look good. It's extremely difficult to stand out as a key contributor of ideas when you aren't in front of a client or audience. I haven't interned for an agency, but I've been a contractor for several years. My work is categorized into project-based buckets and my ideas are invisible 99% of the time. You and I are often little more than line items on scheduling spreadsheets, but that won't always be the case.

One ugly possibility that should be addressed is that you may not be the kind of person this company perceives as owning the initiative you wanted to launch. If this is the case, it is 100% their loss if they are waiting for specific kinds of people to represent good work. The issue you diagnosed impacts several people at that company. At some point in time, behind closed doors, your observational skills were likely acknowledged. It's just that you weren't the one hand-picked to receive credit for it. If you're still walking the path of approval paved by your former superiors, this is a defeat. If you're valuing yourself and the skills you can bring to a more receptive team, you win.

***I believe in you because  
you're clearly a confident  
person with concrete ideas  
about what you're worth.***

I believe in you because you're clearly a confident person with concrete ideas about what you're worth. These are things some people never figure out, so you've already made a significant amount of progress. It's



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frustrating when your professional environment doesn't reinforce your value, but your sense of worth has to come from within.

It's telling that you were primarily trying to maximize your resources as an intern. You were striving to do the best job possible in the position you were given. There was no agenda to impress or mimic someone higher up in the food chain. Ironically, that could be another reason why the issue took so long to be addressed.

People making bottom-line decisions at that company might never be substantially hindered by a database's limited search functionality. In fact, some would even use that inefficiency as an argument for an intern's job security. If that were the case in your situation, it would tell you everything you need to know about how much they were invested in your development as a media professional.

For lack of a better expression, this scenario could be chalked up to "business as usual." Applying an impersonal filter is important in situations that could compromise your self-worth is processed incorrectly.

You don't need to internalize mental and emotional exhaustion as your new reality. You should be tired. You should be frustrated. You should be treated like someone with a voice. Your chosen industry has flaws that are systemic and fixable only by people who hold power. As an intern, you had no power. Bearing too much responsibility for this particular outcome may keep you from flourishing when you do the actual work. What matters is refining your craft and finding people who support that.

My workplace is full of whiteboard walls and comfy couches. We have several seating areas near large windows, an endless supply of cold brew, and free avocados! These things are meant to create an environment in which we can think freely. It's great that we're encouraged to brainstorm and to arrive at good ideas, but once those ideas arrived they often get attributed to just a few people who are in influential positions.

One would think good ideas could facilitate an ascension to positions of influence, but decisions like who gets to be in charge often come down to things other than merit. You weren't necessarily denied an opportunity because you lacked the qualifications. It could be that you just weren't there at the right time. This is another objective lens through which you can assess things while being kind to yourself.

***Channel the frustrations you feel into new applications, cover letters, or personal projects that can enhance your portfolio and showcase your skills.***

Since I sit next to a lot of brainpower at work, I'm constantly fighting to have my voice heard. It's something I have to be conscious about – that intellectual rat race. Ideas and solutions are inherently impersonal when you are embedded on a team trying to solve the same big problems together. There's a beauty in that, but for interns and contractors, that beauty can't be as visible until they have more job security. You've found yourself needing

validation that transfers into employment because you can't fully give yourself over to serving the greater good yet. This is the kind of limbo creatives navigate for years and sometimes for their entire careers. I think you should keep fighting while prioritizing taking care of yourself if you want to remain poised for success.



You should channel the frustration you feel into new applications, cover letters, or personal projects that can enhance your portfolio and showcase your skills. Creatives are exploited for their knowledge and skills because those things are difficult to develop in the first place.

You are already pretty good at doing the things you want to do. Remembering that as you fall asleep at night will make these kinds of experiences worthwhile. It's important to stay in touch with what drew you to what you love. When I'm working on my writing, illustrations or any new idea, I frequently check in to ask myself "Why?" The answer is always a reassuring one as long as I'm only trying to impress and outdo myself (as opposed to arbitrary forces I cannot control).

Since you've been hardened by this most recent experience as well as by the industry in general, you're likely to be sharper on your next outing. In the meantime, practice a healthy amount of self-love. If you reach out to your former supervisor to describe what happened, approach it the way you approached things as an intern – with a burning desire to make things better.

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