

gimme some slack!

Can design save us from efficiency?

By Scott Francisco, director of discovery, HLW International

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"You can't teach an old dog new tricks ...Unless you have food" – Anon

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Our industry of late has a lot in common with Rupert. We know there are problems with our behavior, yet we constantly are rewarded for repeating it. The meat of our day is "picking up slack"—sniffing out inefficiencies that can be analyzed and "measurably reduced." The more slack we find and eliminate—with clever strategies, designs, furniture, or technology—the more we are rewarded with new projects, fees, and credibility. How can we resist? Even as today's most revered business thinkers declare that slack is essential to a sustainable economy, we sneak up on the table and grab the meat. Are we, like Rupert, hard-wired for short-term survival?

In his latest book "Drive (Penguin Group, 2009)," Daniel Pink shows that human motivations are very different from Rupert's. According to Pink, the essence of human creativity and ingenuity is our ability to see beyond immediate and short-term rewards, to look into both the past and future of multiple possibilities, and then decide where we want to go and how to get there. We don't have to take the meat.

In a time when everyone is trying to do more with less, slack is an easy target. No one wants to waste resources on something that isn't needed in a business, government, or our own homes. But is there a difference between slack and waste? The recent confusion between these concepts may be detrimental to both culture and creativity—the twin engines of our economy. In these challenging times, the design industry can lead the way past the dead-end obsession with short-term efficiency and begin nurturing some slack before it's too late.

A Short History of Slack

Twentieth century America was a dangerous place for slack as Taylorism (scientific management) and mass-production swept the nation. But it also was a time of incredible invention, and the design of radically new things opened up new spaces and possibilities: The airplane, moving picture, telephone, and rocket ship were not attempts at greater efficiency, but were brand new things. Innovation and efficiency were not so easily confused. At the same time during this period, a tremendous amount of slack was preserved in the sheer physicality of daily life. In many ways people lived like they had for centuries. They talked to each other on the street, knew their neighbors, read books, wrote letters, played musical instruments, and went to work in a physical place with people, tools, materials, and machines.

Then things went digital. With almost all aspects of daily life integrated into one central informational language, a whole new era in slack-hunting opened up. New technologies have made it possible to measure and commodify most of what had been protected by physical space and time: Pauses in conversation at the dinner table (BlackBerry™), letters to friends and lovers (Gmail™), gossip (Twitter™), scribbles in the margins of a favorite books (Kindle™), our preferences, our ideas, our location—even friendship itself (Facebook™)—now could be measured, sold, and subjected to the "efficiency" once reserved for industry.

Here in turbulent 2011, innovation has become a common pseudonym for efficiency: smaller, faster, cheaper, and more interconnected. You don't really need to talk to a real person, those five minutes of down time, those airplane meals, or that quiet place to think, do you? Slack eliminated. Reward earned! But we also are seeing the impacts of slack depletion. The many "crashes" around the world—technical, environmental, and financial—are examples of hyper-efficient but increasingly fragile systems with low margins and minimal redundancy. While increasing consumption, we have decreased our reserves of knowledge, skills, money, time, and space. This means less opportunity to adapt and take risks—or for creativity to thrive.

Design and Efficiency

Rather than the design industry resisting this trend and focusing on our core strengths of inventiveness, intuition, and insight, we have often followed suit: "The workplace can be efficient too! We have measurement, analytics, and data!"

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practice

Viewing the workplace as a cost-center or a set of independent variables allows us to believe that by eliminating slack the workplace too can be optimized. This focus on measurement fits so well with conventional management strategy that selling it at a facility management conference is like shooting fish in a barrel: “Look at how many square feet you can save!” “Imagine the CFO’s face when she sees these density numbers!” The story would be different if the CEO could forecast the real impact on the business. By that time, it’s usually too late—we’ve already snagged the meat.

Following the Leaders

Today’s most respected and forward-thinking business leaders are challenging the emphasis on managerial analytics and efficiency, and arguing that design skills and culture are needed now more than ever. They are staking their claim on a problem-solving approach that draws on the very skills that the design industry is leaving behind. (See *Harvard Business Review’s* recent “Column: Don’t Get Blinded by the Numbers” by Roger L. Martin.)

In “What is Strategy” (HBR, 2009), Michael Porter describes the failure of managers to distinguish between “operational” effectiveness (picking up slack) and true “strategy” (the invention/design of new competitive positions). Porter sees the focus on operational efficiency distracting from critical leadership and vision. Best practices easily are emulated by competition. The riskier creation of new things and new culture, needed to address urgent social and environmental challenges, goes wanting.

Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management, uses “reliability” versus “validity” to frame the problem. “Reliability” represents easily quantified elements, whereas “validity” speaks of what cannot be reduced to numbers but what matters most. Martin has been so concerned by the business world’s obsession with reliability that he rebuilt Rotman’s MBA program to emphasize “design” as a cornerstone for management thinking. Numerous top schools—Stanford, Carnegie Mellon, and MIT—have followed suit, integrating design thinking into their MBA education. And Martin’s recent books elevate design skills to the highest level of business strategy. Solving “wicked problems,” Martin notes, requires comfort with problems that have “no definitive formulation...whose definition is open to interpretation.”

Many of these leaders have been influenced by “systems thinking,” where authors like Jamshid Gharajedaghi and global pioneer Donella Meadows promote a holistic understanding of complex systems in order to help leaders affect real change. The key to sustainability in businesses, organizations, and the environment, Meadows argues, is un-learning “rational analysis” and cultivating

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practice

the “systems knowledge” we all have acquired through interacting with people and our environment: “Every person we encounter, every organization, every animal, garden tree, and forest is a complex system.” In these systems, she explains, feedback loops, flows, diversity, and intentionality are all fundamental. Gharajedaghi highlights the difference between the outdated analytical approach and a systems approach, arguing that a “social, purposeful, multi-minded” model for business is the only way to address the complex problems of today’s economy, society, and environment. He calls this new typology for business strategy “redesign.”

Is Slack Worth Protecting?

Among musicians, athletes, and mechanics, slack goes by another name: “Play” describes how unique parts (and people!) can function in relationships that are neither measurable nor predictable. Machine parts are never perfect, and rules do not create the great music or games we love. Play is the space between things where movement and relationship happens. In complex systems, slack and other “redundancies” often can be critical components whose value is not yet understood. The need to grow, change, and remain flexible requires reserves of space, money, time, and knowledge. While some slack may be excess baggage, knowing what to toss and what to keep is the essence of design. The most important question for our organizations today may be, “is there enough play?”

Like these leading business and systems thinkers, designers uniquely understand this need for serious play. Designers’ best work always mixes subjective and objective, quantitative and qualitative evaluation. And this special understanding presents both an opportunity and a responsibility to protect slack for future generations and potential leaders.

Here are a few things that the design industry can do right now to protect the systems we value for the future:

Elevate validity over reliability. Plenty of other professionals can advocate for reliability, but few can do the same for validity. Design has a unique ability to envision, make visible, and then create new worlds and solve the tough multidimensional problems. This is both a mantle of global societal leadership and a business-survival strategy.

Use the language of design rather than the “me too” vocabulary of analytics and data. Design has the power to shape the conversations that lead to widespread cultural change. We need to embrace our poetic side and help change the language inside and outside the industry.

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Follow the business leaders who promote Design Thinking. Systems thinking and integrative thinking are examples of business leadership reaching out to the design industry to support, challenge, and collaborate with us. We need to take this seriously and build on the opportunities.

Promote excellence and solidarity among design firms. One of design's greatest enemies is the tendency to downplay peers' achievements is due to habitual "zero sum" competitiveness. If design is to grow in influence, we need strong common values, as well as a culture that supports our great diversity.

Lead the world in understanding sustainability. Sustainability is a complex challenge of massive cultural and systemic change. It needs the integrated and the validity orientation thinking that lies at the core of design disciplines and culture.

Lead the world in participatory problem-solving. This is an area we are good and bad at. We need to transcend egos and authorship and apply our skills to involving people with the diverse knowledge. Our test as an industry will be our ability to create and facilitate the best collaborations the world has ever seen in the spaces, services, tools, and environments we design.

Unexplored and "unprogrammed" space, time, and knowledge are critical in today's increasingly complex world—space that can be filled with new ideas and imagination. To preserve this we may need slower tools, slower food, slower learning, and slower growth. We may need "inefficient" conversations with (real) people that lead to unforeseen paths. We may need lessons learned in forests and creeks, at dinner tables, and while picking up shredded garbage at your neighbor's curb. Without sufficient slack our industry will not only lose its ability to meet the rising challenges, but even its purpose for trying.

Design never will have all the solutions, but we can have a vision, and we can model a process that puts much more on the line. We can help to draw others into this new vision—places that support many kinds of work and thinking. We can create places in which people want to live, and places where you can get great work done, without having to leave the premises. ☑

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**Contract Magazine, May 2011 Issue
Scott Francisco**

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