

Make Your Creativity Productive

It's not enough to be creative. Without the ability to harness your ideas and see them through, your brilliant ideas will founder. Here's how to bring your creative inspiration to life.

By Lisa Baggerman Hazen

You probably have a notebook—as most designers do—where you record your creative ideas. It may contain sketches for that brilliant self-promotion piece you've been meaning to create. Ideas for your friends' wedding invitation—that you haven't quite gotten around to just yet. Imagined logos for future projects. And ideas for that T-shirt design that's going to sell like gangbusters.

You're in good company if your notebook is brimming with ideas that have never seen the light of day. For most designers, coming up with creative ideas isn't the problem. Rather, the problem is that the skills that complement a creative mind are often at odds with productivity. Behance is a company whose mission is to empower creative professionals to make their ideas happen through what they call “Productive Creativity.”

“All too often, great ideas never materialize due to lack of productivity, inefficient networks, and poor accountability,” says Scott Belsky, one of Behance's founders. The founders spent more than six months interviewing hundreds of successful creative individuals, asking them how they made their ideas happen.

The collective wisdom provided the foundation for the company, which offers products and services for the creative industry. The Behance Network is a free and open platform that creative professionals can use to post their latest work, manage their portfolios, and build contacts. The Behance Think Tank is responsible for research and development. Action Method Products are offered as tools for boosting productivity through design. And the Creative Index is a global directory of portfolios and Web sites that belong to creative professionals.

At the heart of Behance's methodology is a concept called the “Action Method.” It involves three steps.

1. Capture Action Steps, Relentlessly

During a brainstorming session, team meeting, or on the run, ideas arrive in a flurry of other activity and can be lost unless they are captured and transformed into action steps. Action steps point to task to be completed. Each action step should start with a verb (ie: follow up with x, review y, meet with z).

2. Tend to Your Backburner

Keep a “backburner” to catch ideas that might someday require action, or just to clear your mind of the little and non-urgent things. Preserve your creative energy and focus on action steps.

3. File Reference Items, Sparingly.

Keep only the notes, articles, and sketches that you need. Avoid clutter.

Although the Action Method consists of just three steps, it represents a significant shift in process for many creatives. With the Action Method as a foundation, we asked the Behance team to recommend more tips for implementing “Productive Creativity” into their daily practice. Here are eight ways to put your creative genius into action.

TIP 1: SET UP ACTION AREAS

Some tasks are destined to linger in limbo. The mailing of invoices. The shipping of packages. Make sure these banal—but essential—tasks get done by designating a spot of your desk or office as an “Action Area.”

“At Behance, we used blue painter’s tape to isolate a portion of a counter space and a corner of the floor as a space reserved for items that require action,” says Belsky. “The concept being that when you walk by, everything you see requires action. This is where letters to be mailed, packages to be sent, and even snacks to be eaten would go.”

The implementation of Action Areas moved action steps from a conceptual line item on a to-do list to a physical space, which is harder to ignore. “Before we launched the Action Areas, packages and letters would sit on various desks and tables around the office,” says Belsky. “With the implementation of Action Areas, tasks that require action were getting more attention than ever before.”

TIP 2: CREATE AN ENERGY LINE

You have a finite amount of energy with which to juggle multiple projects and fuel endless creative ideas. Is it any wonder that projects slip through the cracks? Lack of focus combined with limited time and energy can sabotage your productivity. Prioritize projects to best channel your creative energy.

Belsky advocates creating what he calls an Energy Line, which is simply a horizontal line that starts with “idle” and goes up to “extreme” on a cork or dry erase board. Write the names of all your projects on small cards and plot them along the line based on priority.

“The Energy Line is a simple mechanism to graphically display energy allocation,” says Belsky. “Customize the system with words, colors, and design that works for you and your team. Remember that beauty breeds loyalty when it comes to organization systems. At best, this device keeps you focused and serves as a constant reminder of how energy should be spent. At its worst, the energy line makes for great office art.”

TIP 3: MEASURE MEETINGS WITH ACTION

While some of the greatest ideas and solutions can result from meetings, they can also represent the biggest time suck in your schedule. “Ideally, meetings lead to realizations that result as action steps assigned to individuals with deadlines,” says Belsky. “Realistically, most meetings are fruitless.”

You can immediately improve the usefulness of your meetings adopting a new perspective about when and why to schedule a meeting. “Consider how costly it is to interrupt the workflow of each team member, literally stop all progress, and consume all brainpower with one topic,” says Belsky.

Belsky deems weekly status meetings a waste. “A meeting to share updates can be done via email or voicemail,” he says. “Abolish ‘Monday Meeting’ syndrome. Gathering people for no other reason than ‘It’s Monday’ makes little to no sense.”

Most importantly, conclude every meeting by reviewing the action items captured. “It takes less than 30 seconds per person, and it almost always reveals a few action steps that were missed,” says Belsky. “The exercise also breeds a sense of accountability. If you state your action steps in front of your colleagues, you’re likely to follow through.”

TIP 4: ADVERTISE ACTION TO YOURSELF

Prioritization is at the heart of productivity. Staying on task can be challenging. Belsky suggests that you advertise action steps to yourself to keep yourself on track.

“When it comes to self-discipline, you are your own personal Madison Avenue marketing agency,” says Belsky. “You have some critical, time-intensive projects that require your energy and relentless focus. Your time is precious currency, and there are many other activities competing for your attention.”

Designers are inherently visual—so communicate with yourself in the language you know best. “Design helps us organize thoughts and maintain a sense of order amid creative chaos,” says Belsky. “However, design is also a valuable tool for managing—and controlling our own attention spans.”

Behance suggests using different colored Post-Its representing different action steps to create a multi-colored “Action Wall” that details the various tasks that need to be done. The different colors will help you visually sort tasks by category and keeps it visually interesting. And invest in high-quality supplies. If you like the look and feel of your pens, folders, paper, you’re more likely to use them.

Also, there’s no room for subtlety when you promote action to yourself. Think big, bold, and obvious when you advertise your action steps.

TIP 5: CREATIVITY AMID BUREAUCRACY

Despite what you may have heard (or experienced), creativity and bureaucracy aren’t mutually exclusive. True, the two share a stormy past. But even in bureaucratic environments, there’s plenty of room for creativity to flourish.

The secret is to hone your communication skills to make sure you’ve assembled the team necessary to see the idea through. “To make ideas happen, creative professionals must

work in a system that values a bias-to-action and boundary-less collaboration,” says Belsky.

Remember that it just takes one person in the right position to quash an idea. Belsky advocates assembling everyone needed to make the idea happen from the get-go. (Be this metaphorically or physically.) “If the plan for implementation involves designers, programmers, accountants, and lawyers, then they should have representation at the brainstorm meeting,” says Belsky.

TIP 6: DISTINGUISH BETWEEN URGENT AND IMPORTANT TASKS

A common refrain of the creative professional is, “If it’s urgent, I’m on it.” And while it’s valuable to be an effective problem solver, excess attention to what may be wrongly perceived as “urgent” problems can jeopardize important long-term projects.

“Can we really let everything that is merely ‘important’ suffer at the mercy of urgent tasks?” says Belsky. “Especially for those of us who have families or passions of the utmost importance—how can we protect them? If you let urgent matters consume your time, you’ll never make progress on anything important.”

It comes back to creating a clear list of priorities. “Some people narrow their list of important items to just five things,” says Belsky. “Family is often one of the five, along with a few other specific projects or passions that require everyday attention. “

It’s essential to be specific about what does make the list—and ruthless about what doesn’t. “When urgent matters come up, the ‘important’ stuff that didn’t make the list should be dropped. You’ll be surprised to see how much energy is spent on off-list items,” says Belsky.

Compartmentalizing urgent matters as they arise. “As fearsome humans, we tend to dwell on problems and conflicts,” says Belsky. “Dwelling takes time and distracts us from resolving the urgent items and returning to the important stuff.” Don’t hoard urgent items—challenge yourself to delegate urgent matters to others.

And take advantage of what Belsky calls “windows of non-stimulation.” “Late nights and early mornings are precious opportunities to make progress on important items with little risk of urgent matters popping up,” he says.

TIP 7: SHARE IDEAS LIBERALLY

Your instinct may be to keep ideas to yourself for fear of having them stolen. But you’ve got more to gain by sharing your ideas than you have to lose by sharing them.

For one thing, sharing ideas makes you accountable. “Many productive creative professionals and entrepreneurs claim that they became more committed to their ideas

after telling people about them,” says Belsky. “Great ideas are plentiful, and very few people have the discipline and resources to make them happen.”

This is also an opportunity to refine your ideas through criticism. “Great ideas don’t develop in isolation,” says Belsky. “You can become drunk on your own Kool-Aid without candid feedback from others. A critical component of pushing ideas forward is gathering feedback to refine the idea.”

Lastly, engage a few partners to see the idea through. “The more people you work with, the more pressure you will feel to provide further updates—and have some progress to report,” Belsky says.

TIP 8: SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PROGRESS

There’s no better way to conclude this list of tips than with one that validates a job well done. Belsky encourages you surround yourself with the artifacts of your progress in your workspace. “The inspiration to brainstorm comes easily, but the inspiration to take action is rare,” says Belsky. “Why not decorate your workspace with completed action steps? While we tend to surround ourselves with art and imagery that serves to inspire us in our work, is it more inspiration that we need? Most creative professionals report that they are not short of ideas, but rather the discipline and organization to make them happen. For this reason, consider surrounding yourself with testaments to taking action.”

So don’t throw away those completed to-do lists. Tack them up as evidence of your hard work and productivity. After all, you did just see some of your creative ideas through to fruition.

Lisa Hazen is a Chicago-based writer and Web designer who is working much more efficiently after researching and writing this story. lisahazen.com

SIDEBAR OBSTACLES TO CREATIVITY

In many cases, lack of creativity isn’t the problem. Rather, it’s the *abundance* of creativity. The Behance team isn’t interested in generating or preserving creativity. Rather, they’re interested in harnessing that creativity and making it more productive. Here’s what founder Scott Belsky identifies as the greatest obstacles to making ideas happen.

1. A Love for Idea Generation: “Creative professionals and teams have the tendency to jump from idea to idea —and fail to execute or follow through,” says Belsky. “As creatives, we love the process of brainstorming and generating ideas. However, when it comes to taking action, we tend to get disorganized. Our passion is one of our greatest obstacles. Of course, it is also a gift. What we need is discipline.” Take yourself beyond mere idea generation by attaching action and goals to your creative ideas.

2. **Lack of Accountability:** “All too often, creatives generate ideas in isolation,” says Belsky. “Given our tendency to generate many ideas, we undernourish them. Gradually, even great ideas disappear unless we have a mechanism to be held accountable.” Sharing your ideas with others and inviting them to provide critical feedback is a great way to bring your ideas to life. You’re much more likely to follow through when others are involved.
3. **Notetaking:** “Drawing sketches amid notes, next steps, and future ideas is a huge problem,” says Belsky. “Often, only a few hours after a meeting, the mix of ‘stuff’ on the paper becomes a mishmash, only to sit stagnant and gather dust.” Again, the solution is all about incorporating your action steps. Following a meeting or brainstorming session, immediately translate notes into specific action steps and make sure anyone else involved in the creative process is aware of any action steps they must be responsible for.
4. **Inadequate Professional Representation:** “Especially among creative freelancers, we noticed a real struggle to disseminate work efficiently and represent oneself professionally,” says Belsky. “A personal Web site is expensive, difficult to maintain, and hard to promote. With the Behance Network, we developed a system that rapidly disseminates work. Whenever you post a new project in your portfolio, your entire extended network sees it. In addition, your projects, profile, and network is presented professionally.”
5. **Disorganized Professional Networks:** “Another great limitation for creatives across industries is the old-fashioned rolodex,” says Belsky. Take advantage of the different networks available on the Internet to reach out to groups and individuals both broad and narrow. Behance provides a vibrant creative network that allows you to connect with other individuals based on interest, skills, and practice. You can also find specialized networks based on interest through a variety of different groups (search Google Groups and Yahoo Groups), LinkedIn, and even our HOW message boards.