

## SIMONE LEAMON




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 DESIGN YOUR LIFESTYLE SO  
 YOU ARE WORKING SMARTER  
 NOT HARDER AND DITCH  
 'BUSY' FOR 'EFFICIENT'
 

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Like so many individuals in the design industry, I have lately fallen into a habit of repeating a mantra in my head: "I'm so busy! I don't have enough hours in the day!" It's as if I'm conditioning myself to believe I'm being swamped by my to-do list.

I'm not alone here – 'busyness' is an epidemic within the design field, especially for solo operators, smaller studios and suppliers. This morning, I've already received three e-mails – from a consultant, a client and a fabricator, – all of which opened with something along the lines of, "Apologies for my delay in responding – I've been extremely busy."

I confess I use this line, too. But what do we really mean by 'busy' – and is it a good thing? While we need to recognise design as a business, is it helpful to let 'busyness' rule our approach? Perhaps we need to change how we think and talk about our work – to transform our sector by finding ways to design our time better?

My partner, Sean, an internet entrepreneur who designs collaborative business software, thinks I spend too much time on unnecessary tasks. He recently said, "You're a designer, but all I see you do is write emails and letters to clients". I replied, tearfully, "But it's so tiring running your own design business. I have to do everything!" He gently responded, "You don't have to do everything – you have the power to determine what you do, and the complexity of your tasks. Work smarter, not harder."

I appreciate what Sean says. But like many creative types guilty of chronic busyness, my excuse is always that my work is so entwined with my sense of self that it's hard to separate them. It's hard to do your 'best' in the face of timelines, productivity demands and fee schedules. Designers walk a tightrope, trying to maintain the delicate balance between allocating time for ideas, concept generation and designing, and attending to the nuts and bolts of admin, client liaison, and hunting for the next job.

The digital revolution is both help and hindrance. Information circulates faster than ever, and the Internet has profoundly changed both work methods and business models. We waste huge amounts of time on what creative industries guru Scott Branson calls "insecurity work" – repeated actions that ease our minds, but offer no real progress or outcomes. Like obsessively checking email, blog stats, or website traffic (sound familiar?). In the face of information overload, how do we decipher, differentiate and decide what's important? How do we, or can we, prioritise, focus, find balance and avoid burn-out?

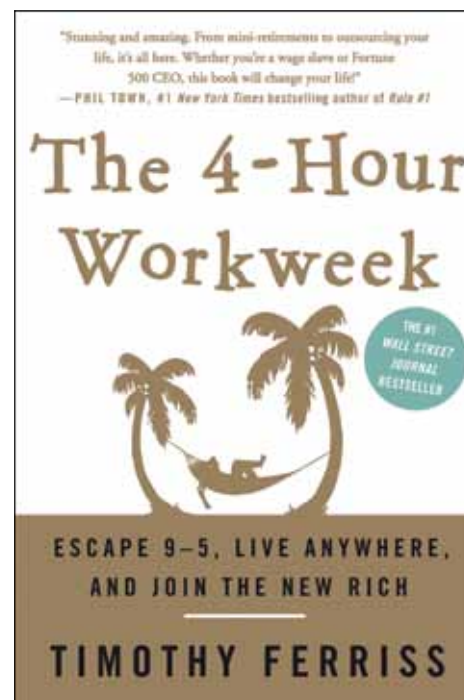
Greater efficiency may be the key. A colleague recently recommended a book that apparently has cut her admin time greatly, freeing her up to focus on the fun of designing. Tim Ferriss, author of *The 4-Hour Work Week*, makes efficiency his mantra. In his December 2008 TED talk, he said: "It's often what you do – not how you do it. There's a difference between being effective, doing the right things, and being efficient." He also cited Parkinson's Law: a task will expand to fill the time you allot it.

Ferriss advises downsizing our commitments, ditching the 'static' – things that consume time and income without giving back – and focusing on the few critical tasks we're best at, and

which benefit us most. Make a 'not-to-do' list, follow a 'low-information diet' (consume only when needed) and deal with emails just twice daily, at set times (set up an autoresponder, with a phone contact for urgent matters). This "single-tasking" helps us complete the important stuff in one hit, without interruption. As entrepreneur and software developer, Jason Fried said, speaking at TEDxMidwest 2010: "Creative people need long stretches of uninterrupted time to get things done, to consider a problem deeply."

In order to ditch 'busy' for 'efficient', I'm keeping these tips in mind: reflect on your core roles and responsibilities, both creative and business; focus on your goals, and only say 'yes' to projects that advance them; identify your strengths and out-source the tasks that jeopardise your performance; and when your plate is full, say no, offering your client an alternative solution instead.

Let's stop saying we're busy. We need to be more honest if we want to connect with people, including ourselves: admit that you can't bear to give up your dreams, or that overscheduling yourself veils your fear of



ABOVE The cover of the *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Timothy Ferriss

underperformance. And let's ditch the Protestant work ethic for a more strategic approach. Busy does not equal strategic, and as creative people we need to get organised, streamline our work, and free up time for generating new ideas. This is the greatest gift of efficiency: more headspace to create.

What else can efficiency offer? A better lifestyle – and a better life. Years ago my parents said something profound to me when I was in work mode, too busy to engage with them: "Sweetheart, your work doesn't love you back."

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