

# From Sleepwalking to Sparkle

A reflection on the problems with  
project work today

**By Dan Szuc**

+ a little help from Optimal Workshop

## WHO IS DAN SZUC?



Dan is a Principal Consultant at Apogee, as well as the co-founder of the UX Hong Kong conference. He has been involved in the UX field for over 18 years and has been based in Hong Kong for over 15 years.

He co-wrote *The Usability Kit*, an implementation guide providing best practices and guidelines for usability teams, and *Global UX: Design and Research in a Connected World* with Whitney Quesenbery.

Dan Szuc was previously the Vice President of the UX Professionals Association (UXPA) International, and is currently on the Editorial Advisors Board of Rosenfeld Media.

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**Note:** This ebook was taken from a conference Dan presented at [WIAD Wellington 2015](#). Optimal Workshop had permission to transcribe, edit, and add external resources to this talk for the purposes of this ebook. We hope you enjoy this personal story from Dan.

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## How to read this book

This is not a *How To* manual or *Ten Top Tips* to transform yourself or your workplace. Instead, it's a philosophical reflection on the meaning of work.

Dan strings together stories from his childhood, his early working years, and his recent past to shed light on the problems he sees facing project work today.

He invites us to reflect on what frustrates us about our work, and posits that we need to go deep to find out what will take us from sleepwalking to sparkle.

# Looking back to forward

1969

I was born in 1969. David Bowie's now-class song "Space Oddity" also came out in 1969. Do you know the song?

I want to take you back in time. Listen to the song now with your eyes closed. Think back to when you were a kid. A little kid. I want you to think about what it felt like to be that little kid, and the dreams and the aspirations that you had at that time. Take a moment right now. I'll wait.



If you're anything like me, you'll remember the curiosity—the excitement about life ahead and what, or who, you wanted to be when you grew up.

What words or images went through your head? What did it feel like to be a child again, looking at the journey ahead?



This is me as that little boy.

I grew up in Melbourne, Australia. One of my strongest memories is of the in-ground swimming pool that dad built in the back yard. We were so excited, watching him build it. As a 5-year-old, I'd sit on the edge of the pool at night and stare at the stars. I'd gaze into the night sky at the stars and think about bigger stuff. At that age I wasn't really able to comprehend it, but I do recall thinking 'There's something wondrous and magical and mysterious and fun ahead.'

I'm probably describing what a lot of kids just naturally feel.

I've been thinking about and reflecting on those moments as a child, as it relates to the topic of what I call *sleepwalking to sparkle*—the meaning of work.

I'm now 45. And I wonder, as we all get older and become adults: at what point does our expectation of magic get lost? Does it get lost?

Maybe we're the lucky ones in our community of practice, because so many of us are passionate and have a real sense of purpose about what we do. I think we are some of the lucky ones.

Maybe that's not the same for everybody. And maybe it's not the same for all of us, all of the time.



When the year 1984 came around, I'd finished Form 2 (7th grade) at Caulfield North Central School in Melbourne, and began my studies at Melbourne High School. The logo for my high school is pictured above: a **unicorn**.

Remember weekly school assemblies? At ours, the principal would stand in front of us and together we'd sing our school song, 'Honor the Work'. That phrase was our motto, and I still agree with it, in part. It has a certain ring to it.

However, a gradual change was afoot. This change was something I began to notice as I moved from Form 3 to Form 6. Thinking back, it's something I'd describe as an indoctrination of sorts: an indoctrination into the world of work.

To put it another way, we were being prepared to be **productive**. Sadly, we weren't necessarily being prepared to be productive at the things about which I felt passion for as a little kid. In some cases, it was quite the opposite.

## At a crossroads

I've been thinking about this topic of what it means to do meaningful work for the last few years. What does it mean for us to really reconnect to that sense of purpose in what we do? If we've lost it, how do we get it back?

This act of reflection highlighted for me that there were only really two paths offered to me during my school years. At Melbourne High, there was the **sciences/mathematics** path. This was for the very smart kids who would go on to study things like medicine. And then there was the **humanities** path. I felt like this was the only option for the creative dummies who wanted (and needed) to find themselves.

I really liked both paths presented to me at high school, which meant I was faced with a dilemma. Perhaps you felt the same way?

Let's fast forward again.



In 1993, George Michael released his album, *Older*. By this stage he was starting to show his age. I entered the workforce, and landed my first job at a telecommunications firm—at a company called Telecom Australia.

I wasn't at all prepared for work. In fact, there were moments during this job, when I actually felt quite depressed.

This wasn't what I imagined life to be. I felt lost in the work that I was given. And I noticed that work was scarily similar to school—the different paths offered at school mirrored the different departments and silos at work. People seemed to fit into one or the other.

I felt increasingly departmentalized in my thinking, although I didn't recognize it at the time. This 'work' thing didn't sit well with me. It didn't reflect how I naturally socialized as a person. In fact, it seemed at odds with how the people I knew conversed and connected in their normal lives.

I was curious then. I'm even more curious now.

# The great tragedy of speed



This is a photo from inside the Shanghai Maglev Train.

The Maglev travels at 431 kilometers per hour. No, that's not a typo: 431 km/h. When I last travelled at this ferocious pace, it dawned on me that, as a society, we've come to believe that *faster is better*. Speed has become the aspiration. Faster, faster, faster.

When I ask people, "How are you?" the most common response I receive, whether it's in Hong Kong, Seattle, Silicon Valley, Shanghai, or Ottawa, is "I'm busy."

Busy. Busy. Busy.

It makes me wonder: *has busy become the new goal?*

Then I see scenes like this. It's another photo that I took on a train ride, of the underground in Shanghai. It's of a guy who has fallen asleep *standing up*.

They've just got too much going on.



Now, you might be thinking, “Well Dan, that’s life.” Maybe that’s true. But drowning in business produces larger problems. For instance, we’re being fed words like **innovation** and **creativity**, and we’re asked to bring these concepts into our work.

Innovation and creativity require **thinking time**. You can’t just turn them on like a tap. Yet people don't have enough time to think.

# What do you do?



Let's fast forward a little bit more. This is my wife Jo. About 18 years ago, when I first moved to Hong Kong, we founded this little company called Apogee Asia.

User experience has always been a huge part of what we do. But what we discovered a few years ago was that UX was just a vehicle for what we were trying to do for our clients. This discovery kicked off our ongoing research into project work—it wasn't enough for us to say "We work in user experience." We were searching for a stronger narrative, to better define what we did so that we could get excited about it—and get other people excited about it.

It turns out we weren't the only ones searching.

# Sleepwalking



Let's talk about sleepwalking. People who walk in their sleep appear as if they're in a daze; they're acting without interest, enthusiasm, or awareness of the possible consequences.<sup>1</sup>

About two years ago I felt **stuck**. I think the trigger for this feeling was one particular presentation that I saw at a great user experience conference in China. The presenter described a UX maturity model, as measured from zero to six.

The UX maturity models basically work like this:

- At zero, you've done nothing—users are not involved in your process at all, you're not really doing important work, and everyone involved in the business has blinkers on.
- At six, you're basically Yoda. You're truly transforming business and changing the way people think for good, through being user-centered and so on and so forth.

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\*1: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sleepwalk>

As a passionate fan, and a vocal champion of user experience, you'd be forgiven for thinking I might have had a 'hooray' moment when asked where I sat in this model.

Instead, all I could think of was "What do I do? I'm stuck".

It wasn't that I had an issue with the model. But I question whether we understand, in a holistic sense, the systems within which we work. I'm not entirely sure that looking at the bigger picture through the lens of user experience and calling it *mature* is the right approach.

So what do you do when you're stuck? I had lots of options.

I could have left the world of user experience, but that wasn't really something I wanted to do. I'd already invested a reasonable amount of my life in this pursuit. I could have spoken to friends who were older and wiser and had more life experience. I could have sought out counseling. I could have seen a shrink. I could have chatted more with my wife. I could have done all of the above.

What I decided to do was **listen**. Listening is probably the simplest thing that you can do when you're stuck—go out and have lots of conversations with people and ask lots of questions to be able to work out what your next move should be.

Of course, this is actually not a whole lot different to what we do with our clients, when we're trying to make sense out of data that we don't really understand. I was just trying to do that with myself, so that I could feel less stuck.

That process has taken about two years. What's been really wonderful about this journey is that it's allowed me to distance myself from much of the language that we use in the user experience world. It's enabled me to see our "in-crowd" language with new eyes.

It doesn't matter what we use as the umbrella term, whether it's *user experience*, *interaction design*, *information architecture*, or *content*. By effectively abstracting myself away from my own community, I was suddenly able to see things a lot more clearly.

There is one basic question that I'm trying to answer, and the answers I

get to this question will shape much of the next two years of our research around this topic.

The question is:

### **What frustrates you in the work that you do?**

It's a very simple, warm, accessible question that everyone working in work today can probably answer. Getting more specific, the question could be phrased as "what frustrates you about the projects that you work on?"

We need to be able to start having more truthful conversations about what is actually going on in our work today. Before we go ahead and start drawing beautiful UX maturity models and talking aspirationally about what we want to do, we need to deal with the *fundamentals*. We view this as a design problem.

Here are a few problems that I've seen (they may be familiar to you).

**Functional disconnects between roles.** How many projects have you worked on where you haven't understood the core meaning of the project or the product that you were working on, but everyone just went along with it anyway? You know the ones: nobody mentions the elephant in the room within the project, but everyone bitches about it in the hallway. Then, when you come back into meetings, you pretend that you're actually working on something valuable and meaningful.

"How are you?"

"Busy."

**People just don't have the time** to plan a week ahead, a month ahead, six months ahead, or a year ahead. There's no planning going on. This is a form of sleepwalking.

**No customer insights or observations at all.** Stuff gets made up or pulled from all sorts of places. And there are all sorts of assumptions floating around.

**Not being connected to a project or product story.** When you're sleepwalking, you're not connected to the story that relates to the business, or to the sense of why you're there or what you're doing. You understand

that you have to deliver something. You understand this is your job function, but you're not necessarily connected to why you're doing what you do.

You clock in, you clock out. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, repeat.

My friend Michael Davis Burchat says there's an adopted system, especially amongst corporate and government, that we've unwillingly accepted. I think we're too accepting of these contexts, and that more and more people who work in those contexts of work are feeling down, depressed, hateful, and disconnected.



Michael also says that silos are a cancer to our work. Finding a cure for this cancer will involve prototyping alternatives to silo structures.

In the spirit of what we do, we have to assess the alternatives we come up with—not just accept that we've solved it. It's not enough to talk about the problem, or just read a book called *The Lean Startup*. I'm not critiquing that. I'm just saying that you're not going to solve a problem with the fundamental nature of work by taking a paracetamol and turning the other way.

If we believe, as a community, that there is a problem with the system of work today, we need to think about how we're going to work together before we jump into the work.

Anyway, that's enough about sleepwalking. Let's talk about **sparkle**.

# Sparkle



Sparkle. It's such an evocative word. Not that I want you to get caught up with the language. Of course it's not possible to feel sparkly all the time. But *sparkle* is not about ensuring that everyone is constantly in a state of happiness. Just that there's more of it.

There are times when we do need to be fast. I call this a routine, or a ritual. There are many routines and rituals within the context of project work.

However, I think speed for the sake of speed is not a good answer. Because the thing about speed is that, when things get faster and faster, everything becomes a blur. When things become a blur, you just can't see the detail that you might need to see in order to plan effectively.

So what's the answer?

# Reflection and mindfulness



My first tip on how to sparkle comes from a tea ceremony I attended with Jo's family in the South of China. A tea ceremony for me is almost the opposite of speed. We need to take more time to stop.

In the study of mindfulness, people talk about being **present**. We need to build routines into our work that give us the time to reflect, so that we can actually learn. There's something nice about stopping, thinking, and reflecting.

# Beyond engagement to... stories, lives, complexities



The photo above is of a lady who I met over Christmas. I went for a walk in a place called Luk Keng in Hong Kong, with Jo and a friend. This photo was taken right at the end of a path, where this lovely lady lives alone.

My Cantonese is not very good, but my wife and our friend took the time to speak with her. We learned a little bit about her family, about how long she's been living in the village. As we took the time, she opened up more and more and more.

It's easy to sparkle when you think about people as people—not as generic things like customers, stakeholders, participants, employees, or employers, but as **people**.

As Jo always reminds me, it takes time to really get to know people. She's very wise, my wife, and she's right. Think about your friends and family, and other people you've known your whole life. Think about how well you really know them. It takes time to create that bond. I think we need to promote that in business as well. We need to promote this idea that the persona is not the most important deliverable.

# Routines

When you're working, in project teams or otherwise, and someone asks to you do something, you're often being asked to switch routines, to stop following your own routine and start following theirs. But what's governing the routines, yours and theirs?

A friend of mine in Australia, Jay, uses the word **ritual**. The label doesn't matter, but the concept is important. What's your ideal ritual? And how well does it fit with those of everyone around you?



How do we comfortably switch routines, from our current routine of busyness and implementation, to one of envisioning, of critique, of planning, of experimentation?

However we do it, it's not always going to be simple. It often won't be. You need to switch into a different gear, into a different mode, to do things like experiment, critique, envision, and ... add your own.

Because you've got the boss coming over to you and saying, "Hey, I'd really like it, if you could, Dan, to go ahead and innovate. That would be great. If you could innovate by Monday. That would be much appreciated, because we are an innovation company."



If you haven't got time to think, and you haven't got time to plan, and you haven't got time to think ahead, well, there won't be a lot of innovation happening. Or creativity. Or experimentation.

### **We need permission to relax.**

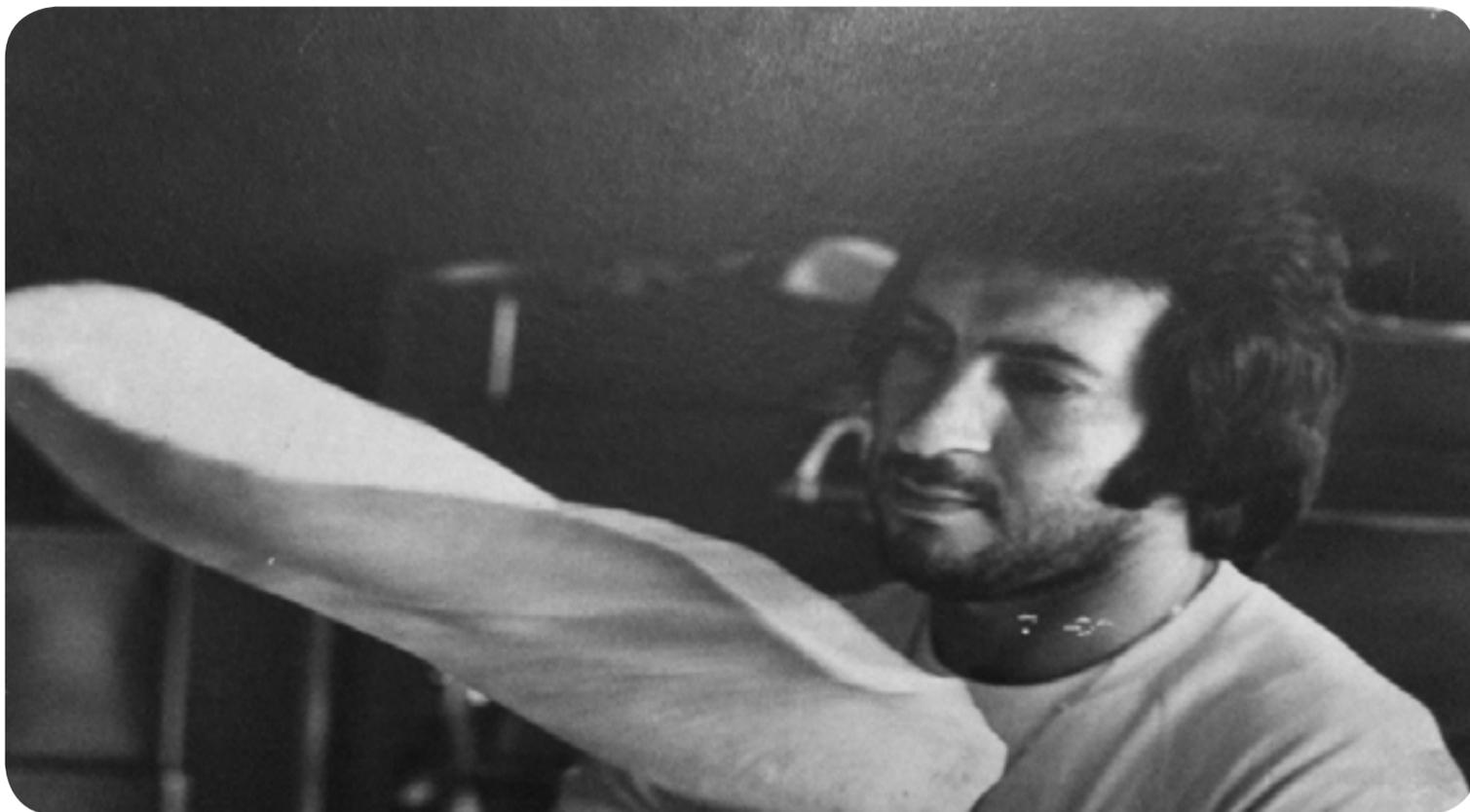
It's funny how we go through the routines in the morning to prepare for work. There's quite a stress build-up. By the time we get to work we've transformed into our work persona. Then, as it's getting closer to the end of the day, we start to shed that work persona, and then we're home.

Why can't we be the same person at work and at home? Why do we have to build up to something different? Maybe I'm not talking about not being unprofessional. You can still be professional, but what does it mean to have that sense of **contentment**? To be more of yourselves in life and in work. Because in my observation, happy, fun, relaxed people tend to do better work.

I'm not entirely sure things like processes, measurements, or KPIs are going to get us there. You may be thinking, "Well Dan, that's business." But I don't know. Because if the answer requires us to transfer or transform, then maybe it's our responsibility to also change the language. "We can't do that Dan, we're not the business."

Maybe we are the business. It's okay. We can effect change. This is 2015. It's meant to be the future.

# All you need is love



This is Michael, and Michael is a local pizza owner in Melbourne. His restaurant is our go-to pizza shop in Melbourne when I go back home. The photo above of Michael flipping a pizza hangs on the wall next to the cash register in the shop.

When I was there last, I walked up to Michael and I said, "Hey Mike! When was this taken?" He looks a lot younger in this photo. He replied, "Oh Dan, that was taken about 30 years ago." I said, "Wow. You've been making pizzas for that long? It seems like a very boring thing to be doing for 30 years, just making pizzas. Why do you still make pizzas?"

Michael turned to me without any hesitation. He said, "Dan, the reason I still make pizzas is that, I love... I love making pizzas."

# The power of intent

We don't have to accept the way things are. We don't have to accept workplaces that don't, or won't even try, to represent sparkle. We need intention. We need to create a sense of narrative that speaks to something greater than the tools and the activities of our practice. The end goal has to be a story that you believe in. It took Jo and I two years to discover this story. I'm not saying it's easy and I'm not saying it's finished yet either.

For me, part of happiness and part of life is striving for something that makes me feel purposeful. It sounds obvious, but you have to do what you love. Otherwise what's the point? If you're ever feeling down, I recommend taking time out to think about what that means for you.

I'm not saying that your sense of purpose won't change over time. It's certainly been the case for me, but I'm focusing on it as part of my practice, as a ritual, as a routine.

If you're feeling a bit stuck at work, I hope this missive has helped you find a way to get unstuck. I hope you'll take some of these stories, and apply them to your own situation. Perhaps you'll find inspiration to enjoy the moment, like this group of enthusiastic Taiwanese tourists in Brisbane I encountered a couple of years ago.

Life's too short to sleepwalk through it. It's your time to sparkle.





## Enjoyed Dan's ebook?

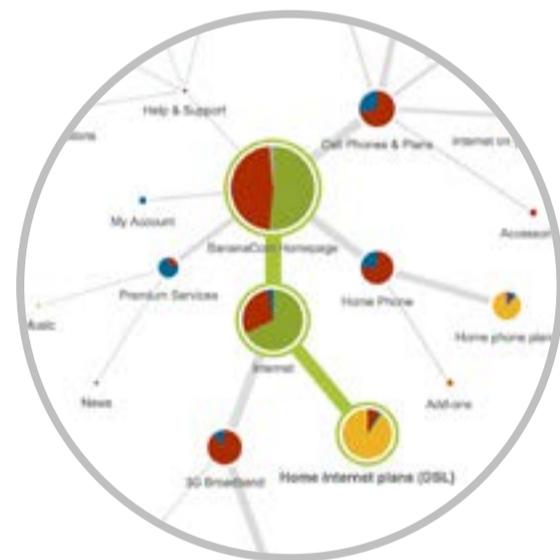
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