

# What the Creative World Needs Now Is Organization

Scott Branson



# Most ideas never happen.

Although we, as creative minds, would rather not think about it, the sad truth is that most of our ideas will never see the light of day. Indeed, brilliant breakthroughs are conceived and plundered in the hands of creative geniuses all the time. But why?

Creativity, it seems, is not only the catalyst for new ideas. Creativity is also the greatest obstacle to seeing our ideas through to the finish.

So, what is this darker side of creativity that obstructs progress?

It is the series of negative tendencies and challenges that accompany the creative psyche:

The self-doubts; The distaste for negative feedback; The tendency to use idea-generation as a way to escape the pain of self-discipline and execution; The rampant disorganization that (supposedly) fosters creative thinking.

It turns out that ideas don't happen because they're great—or by accident. Ideas are made to happen through a series of other forces. And the most neglected among them is organization.

# Why Organization Matters

Great execution starts with supreme organization. Ultimately, organization comes down to how you manage your energy. Contrary to popular belief, organization is not about “neatness,” it is about efficiency and allowing yourself to take action as swiftly as possible.

In 2007, my team at Behance conducted a poll of over a thousand self-described “creative professionals,” asking them how organized they considered themselves to be. Only 7% of those who responded claimed to feel “very organized.” Double that number (14%) claimed to work in a state of “utter chaos,” and the largest group attested to “more mess than order” (48%). Upon further follow-up, I also observed that, far from being a point of concern, the disarray experienced by many of these professionals was regarded as a badge of honor.

The reality is that creative environments—and the creative psyche itself—are not conducive to organization. We become intolerant of procedures, restrictions, and process. Nevertheless, organization is the guiding force of productivity; if you want to make an idea happen, you need to have a process for doing so.

Some companies have recognized organization as a competitive advantage and have invested accordingly. Since 2004, AMR Research—a leading authority on supply chain research that serves numerous Fortune 500 companies—has published an annual list of the 25 companies with the best supply chain management. You might be surprised to learn that Apple debuted on the list at No. 2 in 2007, and overtook companies such as Anheuser-Busch, Wal-Mart, Procter & Gamble, and Toyota to take the No. 1 slot in 2008.

Why would Apple, a company known for new ideas and its ability to “think different,” also be one of the most organized companies on the planet? The answer is that—like it or not—organization is a major force for making ideas happen.

Organization is just as important as ideas when it comes to making an impact.  
Consider the following equation:

**Creativity × Organization = Impact**

If the impact of our ideas is, in fact, largely determined by our ability to stay organized, then we would observe that those with tons of creativity but little to no organization yield, on average, nothing. Let's imagine a wildly creative, but totally disorganized, thinker; our equation would be:

**100 × 0 = 0**

Does this bring someone to mind? Someone who has loads of ideas but is so disorganized that no one particular idea is ever fully realized? You could argue that someone with half the creativity and just a little more organizational ability would make a great deal more impact:

**50 × 2 = 100**

The equation helps us understand why some “less creative” artists or entrepreneurs might produce more work than their talented and inventive peers. A shocking and perhaps unfortunate realization emerges: someone with average creativity but stellar organizational skills will make a greater impact than the disorganized creative geniuses among us.

Great execution starts with  
supreme organization.

The importance of organization becomes even clearer when we consider recent trends in the rapidly changing workplace. Creatives have always represented one of the most mobile groups in the workforce, and this trend of mobility is now extending to the business world at large.

The ranks of freelance, contract, and part-time workers, as well as small-business owners, are increasing daily. Many businesses are hiring people for rotational programs that last only two years. Practices such as “daylighting”—in which an employee works on a creative, personal project for 10–20 percent of their at-work time—are increasing in popularity as companies like Google tout their effectiveness. Even the more traditional “lifer” companies, such as General Electric and IBM, are acknowledging the value of a shorter experiential education over a lifelong career opportunity.

What this means is that, regardless of your industry, your professional life is becoming more nomadic, digital, and flexible. But as a wise sage once said—and what every small-business owner knows all too well—“total freedom means total responsibility.” As where and how you work becomes more flexible, the onus of organization shifts increasingly onto the individual. As such, productivity is not about how efficient you are at work. Instead, your productivity is really about how well you are able to make an impact in what matters most to you.

Creatives have always represented one of the most mobile groups in the workforce, and this trend of mobility is now extending to the business world at large.

# Combat Reactionary Workflow

These days we are “always connected” and constantly inundated with communications and information. As a result, many of us live in a state of what I call “reactionary workflow.” Rather than being proactive with our energy and taking actions that make an impact, we are reactive and simply try to stay afloat.

Think about all the stuff that you receive every day: emails, texts, Twitter and Facebook messages, phone calls, instant messages, not to mention the in-person interactions that take place in meetings. It is all too easy to simply react to the latest item at the top of our collective “inboxes” rather than invest energy in long-term projects that really matter.

Passionate and creative people are especially susceptible to reactionary workflow. The first reason is the deeply rooted fears and insecurities associated with leading creative projects. We’re always seeking assurance and trying to maintain connection without considering the return on our efforts. We respond and react as a misguided attempt to keep the ship afloat, without realizing that, by doing so, we’re not sailing forward.

We also have the tendency to want to do everything ourselves. As a result, we hoard tasks and “urgent” items that could otherwise be delegated or altogether abandoned for something more important.

To break the cycle of reactionary workflow, some leaders create “windows of non-stimulation” in their day that allow focus on specific tasks and long-term projects. You might also create two types of “to-do” lists - one with near-term tasks and the other with long-term projects. While the list of near-term tasks will (and should) dominate your day, you will also want to schedule consistent time in your calendar for focus on the long-term list.

Regardless of what tools you use to manage projects, you will want to work with a bias-towards-action. As I asked hundreds of people and teams for details on how they manage projects, certain themes emerged. Almost everyone had developed a system that emphasized actionable items over everything else.

I've found that that every project in life can ultimately be reduced to just 3 primary elements: Action Steps, Backburner Items, and References.

**Action Steps** start with verbs and are the lifeblood of any creative endeavor. You should always keep Action Steps separate from your regular notes and musings. Every Action Step must have a sole owner. While some Action Steps may involve the input of different people, accountability must reside in one individual's hands at the end of the day. If you can just capture, manage, and complete Action Steps, you are in the upper echelon of creative leaders!

**Backburner Items** are ideas that are not yet actionable but may someday be. The trick here is to create a ritual for yourself to periodically revisit these Backburner Items over time. Capture and store them in a single place, like a folder on your desk or in a text document on your computer. And then, perhaps once a month, grab (or print out) your collection and review them. Some stuff will appear ludicrous and should be deleted. Some stuff will still be a ways off. And some items will inevitably gain relevance and be transformed into Action Steps.

As for **References**—the static stuff that we accumulate and attempt to store over time—it turns out they're overrated. We seldom refer back to them and, given the cost and potential distraction of storing them in the first place, we should carefully question their value and act accordingly. Some people have resorted to a chronological References pile—where stuff is just organized with one criterion: date. And then, using our searchable digital calendars, any reference can quickly be tracked down by the date it was recorded.

An action-centric approach to managing projects prompts some realizations about the value of meetings, workplace productivity, and what tools we use to manage projects.

Here are just a few of the many best practices I have come across in my research:

**End with a review of Actions captured.** At the end of a meeting, take a few moments to go around and review the Action Steps each person has captured. This exercise takes less than 30 seconds per person and will often reveal either a few Action Steps that were missed or a few that were double captured (leading to duplicated work). It also breeds a sense of accountability. If you state your Action Steps in front of your colleagues, you are more likely to follow through with them. This simple practice will save time and prevent situations in which, weeks later, people are wondering who was doing what or how something got lost in the shuffle.

Organization is the guiding force of productivity;  
if you want to make an idea happen, you need  
to have a process for doing so.

**Foster an action-oriented culture.** Your team needs an action-oriented culture to capitalize on creativity. It may feel burdensome or even a bit aggressive to ask people to capture an Action Step on paper, but fostering a culture in which such reminders are welcome helps ensure that Action Steps are not lost. Some of the most productive teams I have observed are comfortable making sure that others are capturing Action Steps.



**Don't meet just because it's Monday.** Abolish automatic meetings without an actionable agenda. Gathering people for no other reason than “because it's Monday” (or any other day) makes little sense. Lacking an agenda, these automatic meetings have the tendency to become “posting meetings,” when everyone just shares updates to no particular end. If you can't entirely eliminate regularly scheduled meetings, at least allow yourself (or encourage your leaders) to cancel them liberally. In busy times when there is nothing actionable to meet about, fruitless meetings become even more costly.

**Don't call meetings out of your own insecurity.** For team leaders, the true purpose of a meeting is sometimes just to get reassurance. In some cases, leaders who are unable to keep track of what their people are doing will call a meeting to figure out what is going on. Or, in other cases, leaders are uncertain about their own success or decisions and crave a little positive reinforcement from the head-nodding yes-men for pure self-gratification.

Having our team members in the room to report what they are working on is soothing. But addressing our own insecurities as leaders should not be so costly. As leaders, we should recognize the cost of calling meetings and identify other ways to build trust and accountability in our teams. Great leaders candidly ask themselves why they are calling a meeting, and they are fiercely protective of their team's time.

**Advertise action to yourself.** At any moment in time, you must decide what to focus on and how to use your time. While prioritization helps you focus, your mind may still have the tendency to wander. When it comes to productivity, this tendency often works against you. As with the old adage “out of sight, out of mind,” so we learn that right before our eyes, actions thrive.

When it comes to staying focused, you must be your own personal Madison Avenue advertising agency. The same techniques that draw attention to billboards on the highway or commercials on television can help you become more (or less) engaged by a project. Use your workspace to induce attention where you need it most.

**Surround yourself with progress.** As human beings, we are motivated by progress. When you see concrete evidence of progress, you are more inclined to take further action. To use progress as a motivational force, you must find a way to measure it. For an ongoing project that has already been made public, progress is embodied by the feedback and testimonials from your audience. For projects that are still under wraps, progress reveals itself as lists of completed Action Steps or old drafts that have been marked up and since updated. Consider visual manifestations of progress as motivational office art.

**Choose five projects that matter most.** Recognize that compromise is a necessity. Some people narrow their list of important items to just five specific things. Family is often one of the five, along with a few other specific projects or passions that require everyday attention. The most important aspect of this list is what's not on it. When urgent matters come up, the “important” stuff you are working on that didn't make your list should be dropped. You may be surprised to see how much energy you spend on off-list items!

Regardless of your industry, your professional life is becoming more nomadic, digital, and flexible. But as a wise sage once said—and what every small-business owner knows all too well—“total freedom means total responsibility.”

# Less Inspiration, More Execution

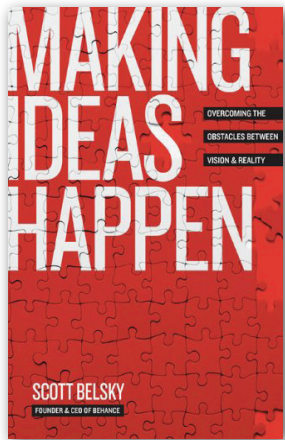
When we lose hold of the reigns of our creative projects, we also lose our interest. Disorganization slows our progress and, with it, our energy and commitment to push ideas to fruition.

For too long, organization and the habits that support (or obstruct) execution have been ignored in favor of sexier topics like “inspiration” and “ideation.” I want to expose the real forces behind brilliant achievements and start more discussion about the mechanics.

Organization can change us. As a creative person, you have a precious opportunity to become a better manager of your ideas. By giving your ideas the respect and support they deserve, you can make life more interesting for the rest of us. For this reason, I also hope you feel a sense of responsibility to get organized and develop your capacity to make ideas happen.

It is a shame that most ideas never see the light of day. We all suffer as a result.

**Those of us with the gift of creativity must learn to serve as stewards in the execution of our ideas. 📖**



## BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Scott Branson's [\*Making Ideas Happen\*](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott is the founder of Behance, a company that develops products and services for the creative industries. Behance oversees the [Behance Network](#), the world's leading online platform for creative professionals; [The 99%](#), Behance's think tank and annual conference devoted to execution in the creative world, and [Action Method](#), a popular online/mobile productivity application and line of organizational paper products. Scott is also the author of the upcoming book *Making Ideas Happen* (Portfolio, Penguin Books, April 2010).

## SEND THIS

[Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

## SUBSCRIBE

[Sign up for our free e-newsletter](#) to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

## BORN ON DATE

This document was created on April 7, 2010 and is based on the best information available at that time.

## ABOUT CHANGETHIS

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).

## COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [iStockphoto](#)®

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.