



CULTURE

A collection of essays on professional design culture

THIRD *in the* CURATIONS SERIES *from* THE PEOPLE *at*



UNIT
UNIVERSITY OF THE
SOUTH ALABAMA

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on professional design culture

from

Unit Interactive

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Introduction

Few things factor as prominently in the long-term results and prospects of a design studio or agency as the quality and soundness of its culture. Culture drives an organization's tangible output at least as much as skill does. When you interact with anyone in a design agency or studio, you're either brushing up against or awash in that organization's culture.

Wikipedia describes culture in part as:

- An integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning
- The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group

Shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices; that's the meat. Unfortunately, design agency and studio culture is often equated

with the office décor or the quality or volume of time the staff devote to non-work activities. In reality, the culture is found most fundamentally in the thinking and motivation behind how each member of the group conducts himself or herself in the course of the entire day's activities. The "what" is overwhelmingly defined by the "why" behind it. It is the consistent "why" that conceives the culture. What others perceive is simply the outward expression of that "why." As with everything else, it's the fundamentals that matter most.

With the collection of essays in this volume of Curations we work to touch on several of the dimensions of agency culture, regarding both foundation and expression. However, because our culture is specific to our staff and leadership, it may well differ from what is appropriate, functional, or advisable for your organization. We hope, though, that by exploring the foundations and motivations referenced in these essays you're able, by extrapolation, to seize upon those relevant to your context, and then exercise them.

Defining and habitually referencing the spirit behind the substance of your organization's culture will make clear for all what you're about, where you're going, and why it's right (for you and them). Productive results of your culture aside, it gives others—potential clients and potential employees—something substantive to consider in evaluations of mutual suitability.

This sort of substance is required for any organization to grow healthy and thrive. We sincerely hope that the words and ideas found in the text that follows will be of some help in that regard.

Andy Rutledge and Angela Conlon

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Our Four-Day Work Week

by Andy Rutledge

Ever since Angela and I started Unit in 2007, we've made four-and-a-half day work weeks the norm. Our reasoning for this schedule is twofold. First, we find it seldom takes five full days each week to accomplish our work, provided we work smartly. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, it's a quality-of-life choice.

One of the fundamental tenets of our practice is to cultivate a high quality of life for ourselves and our team. We've learned that our quality of life is improved significantly when the work week is shorter, allowing us to spend more time with our families, on individual pursuits, and away from the rigorously-professional processes of work life. While all of us here greatly enjoy

our work, we value the idea of responsibly fitting work into our lives, and not the other way around.

We have rules for Fridays. No project launches, no discovery meetings, in fact no meetings of any kind. Friday is when the pressure valve is opened, not tightened. Working smartly, most of our project work is accomplished in just four days. There are exceptions, but Friday half-days here are often when folks use the structure of office time to work on personal projects, to write articles or blog posts, or to catch up on things left behind by the sometimes overly-structured activities of the work week.

It's worth noting that we're able to make this sort of schedule work because we run a tight ship here at Unit. Everyone on our team works in a highly-organized manner and runs his or her projects such that everyone involved—our our side and the client's side—knows exactly what's being accomplished, by whom, and when it is due. This along with clear and regular communication among those involved in projects ensures that there are no loose ends that invite unnecessary interruptions or crises on Friday afternoon. In short, if the phone rings on Friday, it's a new inquiry and not a current client.

Our folks value how we structure the week and how it allows for no-pressure, half-day Fridays here, and that pays off in plenty of

tangibles and intangibles for all of us. If you employ the requisite organization and professional practices, there's no reason you can't do the same and enjoy the many benefits that come from this sort of schedule. After almost four years with this approach, I wholeheartedly recommend it.

About Unit Interactive

Unit Interactive is a digital media design and development studio in Texas. They specialize in strategic design with an emphasis on user experience-to-brand relationships. Their core disciplines include logo, website, and application design and development. Learn more about them on the web at unitinteractive.com.

Unit's staff is composed of smart, experienced people with strong opinions on matters of design professionalism. Their enthusiasm for sharing and their focus on sound principles has established the team as influential thought leaders in the industry. This collection of essays is merely a sampling of Unit's ideas and values. You can find more on their respective personal websites and Twitter feeds and on the [Unit Interactive blog](#).