BY GLENN JOHN ARNOWITZ

IN-HOUSE ISSUES

GOING IT ALONE

If you're the sole designer at a big corporation, you probably feel both isolated and overextended. Following are some tips for making connections and lightening your workload.

When I was growing up in the 1960s in Lincoln Park, NJ, I noticed that there was a little bit more room at our house compared to my friends' houses, and it wasn't because our house was bigger. You see, I am an only child. And back then, I was pretty happy about it. I didn't have to share a room with a kid brother or share the house with an obnoxious sister. I had my parents' attention all to myself, and I loved it. More room, more stuff, more love. Not until I got older and hooked up with my wife—who is one of nine siblings—did I realize how much I had missed: the camaraderie, the sharing, the secret language of brothers and sisters that bonds them for life; the opportunity to share memories and compare notes about growing up together, about life, about mom and dad. And when mom and dad are gone, a sibling is a soulmate survivor.

If you're the sole in-house designer at your company, it's kind of like being an only child. You get all the attention, all the love—and all the work, too, which can be a disaster if you're not prepared. It takes a strong personal initiative and an entrepreneurial spirit to be the boss of *you*. Following are strategies that can help those of you going it alone combat the isolation, manage the overflowing workload and find help so you can take some time off.

JACK OF ALL TRADES—MASTER OF ALL

So you meet with your clients, brainstorm, strategize, develop ideas, execute viable solutions, present to the clients, make revisions, handle production chores, prepare files for printing, and work with vendors to ensure project deadlines are met. In between all that, you have phone calls, technical issues, e-mails, a bathroom break or two and maybe lunch. Are we having fun yet?

Managing multiple tasks and responsibilities is overwhelming, and if you're the only one on staff, you may be headed for serious burnout. Lark London is the only designer in the creative services department

at the UCLA Anderson School of Management in Los Angeles. She supports 25 stakeholders by providing design, production and print management to more than 17 departments. Her biggest challenges are getting clients to plan ahead and to provide key project information in a timely manner so she can produce quality work and meet their deadlines.

"It takes a lot of follow-up to keep things moving," London says. "I'm constantly making calls and sending out e-mails to ensure projects stay on track. And I don't assume our clients are going to jump as high as I do. Being proactive is very important."

Stephanie Hoare is the creative muscle behind New Jersey Family magazine and wears many hats. She provides design for three magazines, advertising, corporate branding, marketing, web creative, production, press communication and printer bids—and works directly with the sales team, publishers and editorial departments.

"Multitasking and being able to shift priorities are always challenging," Hoare says. "Because I wear so many hats, I have to go from calculating statistics to brainstorming a concept to designing a feature story. I often take breaks, visit favorite websites or read a magazine to recharge my batteries. For inspiration, I surround myself with my favorite magazines, postcards, ads and good design."

There are perks to being a one-man band, too, and London enjoys the independence of managing the workflow and creative direction. "I get to use all my strengths as a designer and project manager and can make improvements to our office systems as well," London says.

Hoare agrees with London: "I feel that my skill in creatively dodging bullets has grown significantly," she says. "Actually, I've really developed a full-picture view of the company that I would rarely be exposed to. Also, the amount of different creative tasks that I've taken on (or have been thrown at me) has made me more valuable to my company and any company I work for in the future."

TAKE IT OUTSIDE
If you're feeling overextended, there are a few things you can do to lighten your load. Meet with your clients to assess their needs and determine which projects you can handle in-house and which projects should be outsourced to a freelancer or agency. Make recommendations based on need, priority, cost-effectiveness, turnaround times and delivery dates. Take on projects that are within your scope, and outsource those that are beyond your capabilities. It's very important for your clients to recognize your limitations.

Managing and designing internal communications materials, for example, would be more appropriate for you to take on, because as an in-house employee you have a deeper understanding of the culture, history, services and products of your organization. You're able to produce these materials at a fraction of the time and expense of an external agency.

Emily Carlton, who provides design, print production, photography and web support at Texas A&M University's College of Education and Human Devel-

It takes a strong personal initiative and an entrepreneurial spirit to be the boss of you.

opment in College Station, TX, offloaded the college website to a design firm but manages updates in-house, which is more efficient and cost-effective. Dan Green, a solo designer at Foth, a consulting engineering, science and construction services firm in Green Bay, WI, also relies on an advertising/marketing firm to support services he can't provide in-house, such as web design, video development and public relations.

To assist with workflow and project management, look to job-tracking applications. Many off-the-shelf products, such as Creative Manager Pro and Job Suite, can be customized to your needs and help organize your process. Carlton uses Behance's ActionMethod (www.actionmethod.com) for job tracking to maintain timelines. Although Green doesn't use any apps to manage workflow, his company employs Deltek (www.deltek.com) for high-level project management and Microsoft Project (www.microsoft.com/project) for larger projects, which are then transferred to Vision software for assignments and billing. At New Jersey Family, Hoare uses SpaceMaster to manage and produce orders for magazine advertising.

I AIN'T GOT NOBODY
Physically, departments of one have a relatively small footprint and are usually outfitted with nothing more than a workstation and a computer. Because of this, you may find yourself in a cube among your co-workers without many of the tools of your trade. No flat files, work tables or large-format printers. No co-workers either, which can be very isolating at times. Nobody to talk shop with. Nobody to compare notes with. Nobody to share ideas with. You can eventually lose perspective and begin to second-guess everything: type choices, layouts, color palettes, what you're wearing.

Networking, both inside and out, is the key to retaining your sanity. Internally, you'll need to create a network composed of peers, colleagues and stakeholders from various business units and departments, especially those you work with on a regular basis. Why? Because navigating the corporate bureaucracy is hard enough on your own, and finding the right people to champion your cause can make the ride a lot smoother. This will happen over time as business relationships develop into partnerships and you build trust that can transform your role in the organization into a valued in-house resource.

Then you'll need to reach out to designers outside your company. Introduce yourself and meet for coffee, lunch or a beer. Start your own in-house network and invite peers from neighboring companies to meet once a week to talk shop, share best practices and discuss design trends. Or join up with an existing organization, such as InSource (www.in-source.org), that caters specifically to the in-house creative community. Attend

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>
> *– Emily Carlton*

design conferences, like those sponsored by HOW, AIGA or the Design Management Institute, and take advantage of local paper shows. Connecting with others is essential to your mental and professional health, and the best way to do that is joining an industry community or creating one of your own. "Outside networking is invaluable," Carlton says. "I look for outside perspectives to influence and inspire me. How else will I grow?"

Carlton also misses having a creative co-worker to brainstorm or share ideas with, but regularly reaches out on professional forums, via Twitter and through video chat to connect with other creative professionals to fill that void.

In the academic world, London maintains relationships with colleagues to share ideas and best practices. She also attends AIGA and regional Art Directors Club conferences, but finds more value from University and College Designers Association conferences (www.ucda.com). "Since I'm employed by a university, I feel very connected to the UCDA because I can meet with others who have the same workplace experiences that I do," London says.

I'VE GOT YOU COVERED

Managing the workflow is challenging when you have no backup. Not only is there nobody to assist you, but also nobody to be there when you're not there. Who's going to cover for you when your car breaks down and you can't make that 9 a.m. marketing meeting? Or when you're out for a week sick with the flu? Or when you need to leave early for a doctor's appointment? And how will you ever take a vacation without a backup plan?

"If I know I'm going to be out of the office, I'll work very hard to tie up loose ends before I leave," Carlton says. "And I usually don't take vacations during peak periods when we're very busy. If I'm sick, I have the opportunity to work remotely from home."

More and more companies are offering a work-from-home option, and it may be a viable solution for those times when health issues, car trouble or bad weather keep you from making it into the office.

Green adds, "Since I have no backup, I give a heads-up to my most active clients that I will be out of the office. Generally, I don't take any more than two to three days off in a row. And I try not to get sick."

"Vacation? What's that?" laughs Hoare. "Vacations are very difficult to fit in, and I have to work extra hard to get things in order before I leave." But even when she does manage to get away, she must be available via cell phone if any problems arise at the office.

This is why it's important to establish a good working relationship with a creative staffing agency; when life happens, you're prepared and your clients stay happy. There are a few ways you can approach this.

One is to develop a partnership with a freelance designer who can cover for you on an as-needed basis. You'll need someone who has the flexibility and availability to essentially be on call. Maybe you have a freelance designer friend who would appreciate the extra work. London has the ability to contract with a designer/production freelancer on an as-needed basis to help balance her workload but has to keep an eye on the budget. Usually, she simply plans ahead so projects are either wrapped up or continue moving along without her until she returns.

Another approach is to contract with an agency on retainer so a team of designers is available at a moment's notice. Either way, it's important to have an understudy in the wings.

No budget to cover these expenses? Well, this is where your keen customer service skills come into play. Meet with your stakeholders and see if they're able to budget for freelance support when needed. I was able to convince a few key clients that it would be to their advantage if they had funds available, in the form of a blanket purchase order, for freelance support if no one on my team is available. This pre-emptive action gave them peace of mind that there would be no disruption in business or missed deadlines. It was an easy sell.

INDEPENDENCE DAY

As a solo designer in a corporate environment, the pressure will always be on you and your ability to deliver the goods. Don't sweat it. Leverage your autonomy. Your unique position enables you to be the master of your own domain to develop and manage departmental policies, procedures and standards that serve both you and your organization. What doesn't kill you will only make you stronger, enhancing your design chops, business acumen, communications skills and client relationships. And that's what it's all about, right? Being the best you can be and finding where you can make the most impact and create value for your company. And like an only child, you'll have a little more elbow room and an opportunity to not only get all the work, but get all the glory, too. HOW

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