

THE **BEYOND** BOOKLET SERIES



BEYOND

<h2> **WEB DESIGN** </h2>

STAY AFLOAT AS A
FREELANCE WEB DESIGNER.

<h2> WEB DESIGN </h2>



THE **BEYOND** BOOKLET SERIES

WITH ARTICLES BY DESIGNERS

Jeffrey Zeldman, Matt Griffin,
Rachel Andrew & Lea Alcantara

pg_03

pg_07

pg_14

pg_17

pg_27

CONTENTS

Understanding Web Design

By Jeffrey Zeldman

Pricing the Web

By Matt Griffin

The High Price of Free

By Rachel Andrew

Walking the Line

By Natalie Jost

About the Authors

Jeffrey Zeldman, Matt Griffin, Rachel Andrew, Natalie Jost

<article>

<h1>



</h1>

</article>

BY JEFFREY ZELDMAN

“If we want better sites, better work, and better informed clients, the need to educate begins with us.”

We get better design when we understand our medium. Yet even at this late cultural hour, many people don’t understand web design.

Among them can be found some of our most distinguished business and cultural leaders, including a few who possess a profound grasp of design—except as it relates to the web.

Some who don’t understand web design nevertheless have the job of creating websites or supervising web designers and developers. Others who don’t understand web design are nevertheless professionally charged with evaluating it on behalf of the rest of us. Those who understand the least make the most noise. They are the ones leading charges, slamming doors, and throwing money—at all the wrong people and things.

If we want better sites, better work, and better-informed clients, the need to educate begins with us.

Preferring real estate to architecture

It’s hard to understand web design when you don’t understand the web. And it’s hard to understand the web when those who are paid to explain it either don’t get it themselves, or are obliged for commercial reasons to suppress some of what they know, emphasizing the Barnumesque over the brilliant.

The news media too often gets it wrong. Too much internet journalism follows the money; too little covers art and ideas.

Driven by editors pressured by publishers worried about vanishing advertisers, even journalists who understand the web spend most of their time writing about deals and quoting dealmakers. Many do this even when the statement they’re quoting is patently self-serving and ludicrous—like Zuckerberg’s Law.

It’s not that Zuckerberg’s not news; and it’s not that business isn’t some journalists’ beat. But focusing on business to the exclusion of all else is like reporting on real estate deals while ignoring architecture.

And one tires of the news narrative’s one-dimensionalism. In 1994, the web was weird and wild, they told us. In ’99 it was a kingmaker; in ’01, a bust. In ’02, news folk discovered blogs; in ’04, perspiring guest bloggers on CNN explained how citizen journalists were reinventing news and democracy and would determine who won that year’s presidential election. I forget how that one turned out.

When absurd predictions die ridiculous deaths, nobody resigns from the newsroom, they just throw a new line into the water—like marketers replacing a slogan that tanked. After decades of news commoditization, what’s amazing is how many good reporters there still are, and how hard many try to lay accurate information before the public. Sometimes you can almost hear it beneath the roar of the grotesque and the exceptional.

THE SUSTAINABLE CIRCLE OF SELF-REGARD

News media are not the only ones getting it wrong. Professional associations get it wrong every day, and commemorate their wrongness with an annual festival. Each year, advertising and design magazines and professional organizations hold contests for “new media design” judged by the winners of last year’s competitions. That they call it “new media design” tells them nothing and you and me everything.

Although there are exceptions, for the most part the creators of winning

entries see the web as a vehicle for advertising and marketing campaigns in which the user passively experiences Flash and video content. For the active user, there is gaming—but what you and I think of as active web use is limited to clicking a “Digg this page” button.

The winning sites look fabulous as screen shots in glossy design annuals. When the winners become judges, they reward work like their own. Thus sites that behave like TV and look good between covers continue to be created, and a generation of clients and art directors thinks that stuff is the cream of web design.

DESIGN CRITICS GET IT WRONG, TOO

People who are smart about print can be less bright about the web. Their critical faculties, honed to perfection during the Kerning Wars, smash to bits against the barricades of our profession.

The less sophisticated lament on our behalf that we are stuck with ugly fonts. They wonder aloud how we can enjoy working in a medium that offers us less than absolute control over every atom of the visual experience. What they are secretly asking is whether or not we are real designers. (They suspect that we are not.) But these are the juniors, the design students and future critics. Their opinions are chiefly of interest to their professors, and one prays they have good ones.

More sophisticated critics understand that the web is not print and that limitations are part of every design discipline. Yet even these eggheads will sometimes succumb to fallacious comparatives. (I’ve done it myself, although long ago and strictly for giggles.) Where are the masterpieces of web design, these critics cry.

That Google Maps might be as representative of our age as the Mona Lisa was of Leonardo’s—and as brilliant, in its way—satisfies many of us as an answer, but might not satisfy the design critic in search of a direct parallel to, oh, I don’t know, let’s say Milton Glaser’s iconic Bob Dylan poster.

Typography, architecture, and web design

The trouble is, web design, although it employs elements of graphic design and illustration, does not map to them. If one must compare the web to other media, typography would be a better choice. For a web design, like a typeface, is an environment for someone else’s expression. Stick around and I’ll tell you which site design is like Helvetica.

Architecture (the kind that uses steel and glass and stone) is also an apt comparison—

or at least, more apt than poster design. The architect creates planes and grids that facilitate the dynamic behavior of people. Having designed, the architect relinquishes control. Over time, the people who use the building bring out and add to the meaning of the architect’s design.

Of course, all comparisons are gnarly by nature. What is the “London Calling” of television? Who is the Jane Austen of automotive design? Madame Butterfly is not less beautiful for having no car chase sequence, peanut butter no less tasty because it cannot dance.

So... what is Web Design?

Web design is not book design, it is not poster design, it is not illustration, and the highest achievements of those disciplines are not what web design aims for. Although websites can be delivery systems for games and videos, and although those delivery systems can be lovely to look at, such sites are exemplars of game design and video storytelling, not of web design. So what is web design?

Web design is the creation of digital environments that facilitate and encourage human activity; reflect or adapt to individual voices and content; and change gracefully over time while always retaining their identity.

Let’s repeat that, with emphasis: “Web design is the creation of digital environments that facilitate and encourage human activity; reflect or adapt to individual voices and content; and change gracefully over time while always retaining their identity.”

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

Great web designs are like great typefaces: some, like Rosewood, impose a personality on whatever content is applied to them. Others, like Helvetica, fade into the background (or try to), magically supporting whatever tone the content provides. (We can argue tomorrow whether Helvetica is really as neutral as water.)

Which web design is like that? For one, Douglas Bowman’s white “Minima” layout for Blogger, used by literally millions of writers—and it feels like it was designed for each of them individually. That is great design.

Great web designs are like great buildings. All office buildings, however distinctive, have lobbies and bathrooms and staircases. Websites, too, share commonalities. Although a

great site design is completely individual, it is also a great deal like other site designs that perform similar functions. The same is true of great magazine and newspaper

layouts, which differ from banal magazine and newspaper layouts in a hundred subtle details.

Few celebrate great magazine layouts, yet millions consciously or unconsciously appreciate them, and nobody laments that they are not posters.

The inexperienced or insufficiently thoughtful designer complains that too many websites use grids, too many sites use columns, too many sites are “boxy.” Efforts to avoid boxiness have been around since 1995; while occasionally successful, they have most often produced aesthetically wretched and needlessly unusable designs.

The experienced web designer, like the talented newspaper art director, accepts that many projects she works on will have headers and columns and footers. Her job is not to whine about emerging commonalities but to use them to create pages that are distinctive, natural, brand-appropriate, subtly memorable, and quietly but unmistakably engaging.

If she achieves all that and sweats the details, her work will be beautiful. If not everyone appreciates this beauty—if not everyone understands web design—then let us not cry for web design, but for those who cannot see. ●

BY JEFFREY ZELDMAN

```
<article>
  <h1>
```



```
    </h1>
  </article>
```

BY MATT GRIFFIN

“[W]hether we’re talking about design, development, or business methodologies, our processes affect our motivations, and influence outcome — often throughout the entire project.”

I probably don’t have to tell you that pricing is slippery business. It requires a lot of perspective, experience, and luck (read: trial and error). There are a number of ways we can correlate monetary value to what we do, and each has its pros and cons.

It may seem at first glance that pricing models begin and end in the proposal phase of a project. That pricing is simply a business negotiation. But whether we’re talking about design, development, or business methodologies, our processes affect our motivations, and influence outcomes—often throughout the entire project. We’ll be examining both client and agency motivations in our comparisons of pricing models, so you can judge whether those motivations will help you make better work with your clients.

All of these pricing systems operate with the same set of variables: price,

time, and scope. In some systems, such as hourly pricing, variables are directly dependent on each other (e.g. if I work an hour, I get paid my hourly rate, and deliver an hour’s worth of work). In others, like fixed price and value pricing, the relationships can be nonlinear (eg. I am paid a sum of money to achieve some set of results, regardless of how much time I spend doing it).

These dependencies tend to define each system’s inherent risk and potential for profit. And all the differences can get pretty bewildering. One person’s experience is hardly enough to understand them all well, so I’ve enlisted some friends from web agencies of various sizes to chime in about how they make things work.

As with most things in life, there’s no perfect solution. But if you want to get paid, you have to do something! Enough gum-flapping, let’s take a look at some of the different ways that people are pricing web projects.

Fixed price

With fixed-price projects, you and the client agree up front on a cost for the entirety of the project. Many folks arrive at this number by estimating how many hours they think it would take them to do the project, and multiplying that by an hourly rate. That cost will be what the client pays, regardless of actual hours spent.

CLIENT MOTIVATION

When the price of a project is fixed, the variable tends to become scope of work. This encourages clients to push for the maximum deliverables they can get for that cost. This can be addressed to a degree by agreeing on a time limit for the project, which keeps requests and scope changes from occurring in perpetuity.

AGENCY MOTIVATION

On the agency side, your motivation is to be as efficient as possible to maximize the results while reducing time spent. Less time + more money = greater profit.

PROS

Because you know exactly how much money is coming in, revenue is fairly-predictable. And since revenue isn’t tied to the time you spend, profit is potentially greater than with a time-based model—especially when the cost is high and the timeline is short.

CONS

The same factors that provide the possibility of greater profit create the potential for greater loss. Defining exactly what a client will receive for their money becomes a high priority—and defining things well can be harder than it sounds.

- - - - -

Eileen Webb, Director of Strategy and Livestock at webmeadow, provides some insight into how she defines scope with her clients:

“I like to define the project boundaries clearly by having a ‘What’s Not Included’ section. This may be a listing of services you don’t offer, like SEO or hosting. It’s also a place to list features that you and the client discussed but decided against for this budget or phase. Defining what falls outside the scope is a good way to help everyone agree on what falls in it.”

Now, getting to this definition in the first place is—I probably don’t need to tell you—hard work. And hard work is something you should get paid for. Starting out with an initial discovery engagement is something nearly any project can benefit from, but for fixed-price projects it can be invaluable.

Resourcing for a fixed-price project can also be hard to estimate, since scope is not necessarily easy to equate to effort and person-hours needed.

But the primary difficulty with fixed price may be the innate conflict between a client’s motivation to ask for more, and an agency’s motivation to provide less. For a fixed-price project to be successful, this must be addressed clearly from the beginning.

Remember that scope discussions are just that: discussions. More isn’t always better, and it’s our job to help keep everyone on the project focused on successful outcomes, not just greater quantities of deliverables.

Hourly

At its core, hourly pricing is pretty simple: you work an hour, you get paid for an hour. Hourly, like all time-based pricing, suggests that what’s being paid for is less a product than a service. You’re being paid for your time and expertise, rather than a particular deliverable. Rob Harr, Technical Director at Sparkbox, explains how hourly projects tend to work for them:

“Since everything we do is hourly, the end of the job is when the

client says we are done. This sometimes happens when there is still approved budget left, and other times when the budget is completely gone. Often times our clients come back for additional SOW’s to continue the work on the original project.”

CLIENT MOTIVATION

With hourly, clients are encouraged only to ask for work when that work appears to be worth the hourly cost. Since there’s no package deal, for each feature request or task they can ask themselves, “Is this worth spending my money on, or would I rather save it for something else?”

Project delays are not a financial concern for the client, as no money is spent during this time.

AGENCY MOTIVATION

The more an agency works, the more they get paid. In its purest form, this leads to the agency simply wanting to work as much as possible. This can be limited by a few factors, including a budget cap, or not-to-exceed, on the project.

Project delays are a major concern for the agency, as they’ll lose revenue during these periods.

PROS

Every hour a team member spends is paid for, so the risk of this model is very low. If a company is struggling with profitability, I’ve personally found that this is a great way to get back on track.

CONS

Unlike fixed-price models, you can only earn as much as you can work. This means that profit maxes out fairly quickly, and can only be increased by increasing hourly rate (which can only go as high as the market will bear), or expanding the team size.

- - - - -

Because the agency is only paid when they work, this also means a big imbalance in how project delays affect both sides. Thus clients that aren’t in a big hurry to complete work—or have inefficient decision-making structures—may not worry about long delays that leave the agency financially vulnerable.

This can be addressed somewhat by having conditions about what happens during delays (the client pays some sort of fee, or the project becomes disproportionately delayed so the agency can take on new work to fill the gap in their schedule). Even with these measures, however, delays will cause some kind of financial loss to the agency.

Weekly or monthly

Though similar to hourly in many ways, charging by weekly or monthly blocks has some distinct differences. With these models, the cost assumes that people work a certain number of hours per week or month, and the client is billed for the equivalent number of hours, regardless of whether or not actual hours spent were more or less than assumed. Trent Walton, founder of Paravel, explains why they like this approach:

“Most of our clients operate in two-week or month-long sprints. For many projects, we’ll quote chunks of weeks or months to match. This alignment seems to make sense for both parties, and makes estimating scope and cost much easier.”

CLIENT MOTIVATION

Clients tend to want the agency to work as much as possible during the time period to get the maximum amount of work or value. This can be curbed by having a maximum number of hours per week that will be spent, or understanding limitations like no nights or weekends. Related to this, it’s in the client’s best interest to not let project work succumb to delays.

AGENCY MOTIVATION

On the agency side, we’re encouraged to be as efficient as possible to maximize results each week, while spending fewer hours accomplishing those tasks. As long as the results are comparable to what’s expected, this motivation tends not to result in conflict.

At Bearded we’ve found that with weekly projects we spend, on average, the number of hours we bill for. Some weeks a little more, some a little less. But it seems to all come out in the wash.

PROS

Knowing that a time period is booked and paid for makes resourcing

simple, and keeps the financial risk very low. Because the agency is paid the same amount every week or month, clients will tend to do whatever’s necessary to avoid any delays that are in their control. This completely removes the risk of the agency losing money when projects are held up, but also requires the agency to use a process that discourages delays. For instance, at Bearded, we’ve moved to a process that uses smaller, more frequent deliverables, so we can continue working while awaiting client feedback.

CONS

Similar to hourly, the agency’s profit is capped at the weekly or monthly rate they charge. To make more revenue they’ll need to charge more for the same amount of work, or hire more people.

Value

Value pricing is a method wherein the cost of the project is derived from the client’s perception of the value of the work. That cost may be a fixed price, or it may be a price that factors in payment based on the effect the work has (something closer to a royalty system).

Dan Mall, founder of SuperFriendly, explains his take on value pricing using a fixed cost:

“I use a combination of value pricing with a little of cost-plus. I try my best to search for and talk about value before we get to dollar amounts. When my customers are able to make a fully informed price/value assessment, the need to justify prices has already been done, so I rarely have to defend my prices.”

Dan’s approach suggests that if a company stands to gain, say, millions of dollars from the work you do, then it doesn’t make sense for you to merely charge a few thousand. The value of your work to the company needs to be factored in, resulting in a proportionally larger fixed cost.

Other takes on value pricing tie the cost of the project directly to the results of the work. This can be assessed using whatever metrics you agree on, such as changes in revenue, site traffic, or user acquisitions. This sort of value pricing lends itself to being used as an add-on to other systems; it could augment an hourly agreement just as easily as a fixed price one.

It’s worth noting that none of the folks I talked to for this article have done

this in practice, but the general approach is outlined in Jason Blumer's article Pricing Strategy for Creatives.

CLIENT MOTIVATION

This depends primarily on the other system that you're using in conjunction with value pricing. However, if a client recognizes the tangible gain they expect from the outset, this will tend to focus their attention on how the work will influence those outcomes.

AGENCY MOTIVATION

When payment is tied to metrics, the focus for the agency will be on work that they believe will positively affect those metrics. Like client motivations, an agency's other motivations tend to be the same as the other system this is based on (fixed, hourly, weekly, or monthly).

PROS

Because of the nonlinear relationship between labor and revenue, this approach has the highest potential for profit. And as long as the base pricing is reasonable, it can also have very low financial risk.

CONS

Since value pricing is potentially connected to things outside your control, it's also potentially complicated and unpredictable. If revenue is based on future performance metrics, then accurately determining what you're owed requires knowledge of those metrics, and likely a little legwork on your part.

There's also a certain amount of risk in delaying that payment until a future date, and having its existence in question altogether. As long as the base pricing you use is enough to sustain the business on its own, that risk seems less worrisome.

With value pricing, there's also the need to assess the value of the work before agreeing on a price. Which is why—as with fixed-price projects—value-pricing projects often work well as a followup to an initial discovery

engagement. Patty Toland and Todd Parker, partners and co-founders of Filament Group, explain their approach to an initial engagement:

“Most of the projects we engage in with clients involve fairly large-scale system design, much of which will be defined in detail over months. We provide high-level overall estimates of effort, time and cost based on our prior project work so they can get a sense of the overall potential commitment they're looking at.”

If those estimates work with their goals, schedule and budget, we then agree to an initial engagement to set a direction, establish our working relationship, and create some tangible deliverables.

With that initial engagement, we estimate the total amount of time in person-days we plan to spend to get to that (final) deliverable, and calculate the cost based on a standard hourly rate.

What's the Best Approach? It depends.

I've talked with many very smart, successful people that use very different takes on various approaches. Each approach has its benefits and its traps to watch for, and each seems to work better or worse for people depending on their personalities, predilections, and other working processes.

Ultimately it's up to you. Your hunches, experience, and probably a little experimentation will help you decide which method makes the most sense for you, your team, and your clients. But don't be surprised if once you find a good system, you end up changing it down the road. As a business grows and evolves, the systems that work for it can, too. ●

BY MATT GRIFFIN

```
<article>
  <h1>
```



```
  </h1>
</article>
```

BY RACHEL ANDREW

“As an industry we have become accustomed to getting hundreds of hours of work, and the benefit of years of hard-won knowledge for free.”

Doing business in the web industry has unbelievably low start-up and fixed running costs. You need little more than a computer and an internet connection. The overheads of freelancers and small agencies that build websites and applications for other people, or develop a digital product, are tiny in comparison to a traditional business.

Your training can be free, as so many industry experts write and teach and share this information without charging for it. Even the tools you use to build websites can be downloaded free of charge, or purchased for very little.

As an industry we have become accustomed to getting hundreds of hours of work, and the benefit of years of hard-won knowledge for free.

My free time in the last couple of years has been put into looking at the

Grid Layout spec. I start most days answering emailed questions about the examples I've posted, before I get down to the work that pays the bills.

I'm not unusual in that. Most of my friends in the industry have tales of invites to events where no payment is offered, a queue of issues raised on their personal project on GitHub, or people requesting general web development technical support via email.

What pays the bills for me, and enables me to spend my spare time doing unpaid work, is my product Perch. Yet we launched Perch to complaints that it wasn't open source. There are very good reasons why someone might want, or be required, to use software that has an open source license. However, when we ask about it, people rarely cite these reasons. When they say open source, they mean free of charge.

I'll be 41 this year. I don't feel 41, but the reality is that at some point I won't be able to keep up a pace of work that encompasses running a business, putting together talks and workshops, writing books, and contributing as much as possible to the industry that I love being a part of. I need to make sure that I am building not only a body of work and contributions that I'm proud of, but also financial security.

Is free really that affordable?

I can't do this anymore. Yes, that free work does sometimes result in someone trying my software or offering me paid consultancy, but not as often as you might think. Despite having very marketable skills, I don't own a home, much less have a pension and savings in place.

I wondered how other independent and freelance web workers dealt with this conflict between earning money and contributing back. I also wondered if I was alone in feeling that the clock is ticking. I put together a survey (the responses to which probably will be the background to several other pieces of research), and a few things stood out immediately.

Of the 211 people who responded and said they worked for themselves, 33% said they had some provision but not enough to fully retire, while 39% said they had no pension or retirement savings at all. In fact, 30% of the 211 said that they live pretty much “month to month” without so much as a contingency fund. Even filtering out the under-40 age groups, those percentages remained roughly the same.

I asked the question, “Are you involved in open source projects, writing

tutorials, mentoring, speaking at events-that you do free of charge or for expenses only?” 59% said they were not involved, with 27% of those people citing time constraints. Some people did explain that they were involved in volunteer work outside of the web. By the time I filtered out the under-40s, the non-involvement figure rose to 70%.

We know that not paying speakers and not covering speaker expenses causes events to become less diverse. The ability to give time, energy and professional skills free of charge is a privilege. It is a privilege that not everyone has to begin with, but that we can also lose as our responsibilities increase or as we start to lose the youthful ability to pull all-nighters. Perhaps we begin to realize how much that free work is taking us away from our families, friends, and hobbies; away from work that might improve our situation and enable us to save for the future.

If you are in your early twenties, willing to work all night for the love of this industry, and have few pressing expenses, then building up your professional reputation on open source projects and sharing your ideas is a great thing to do. It's how we all got started, how I and the majority of my peers found our voices.

As I get older, however, I have started to feel the pressure of the finite amount of time we all have. I've started to see people of my generation taking a step back. I've seen people leave the industry, temporarily or permanently, due to burnout. Others disappear into companies, often in managerial (rather than hands-on) roles that leave limited time for giving back to the community.

Some take on job roles that enable them to continue to be a contributing part of the community. The fact that so many companies essentially pay people to travel around and talk about the web or to work on standards is a great thing. Yet, I believe independent voices are important too. I believe that independent software is important.

For example, I would love to see more people who are not tied to a big company be able to contribute to the standards process. I endorse that, yet know that in doing so I am also advocating that people give themselves another unpaid job to do.

The enthusiasm of newcomers to the industry is something I value. I sit in conference audiences and have my mind changed and my eyes opened by speakers who are often not much older than my daughter. However, there is also value in experience. When experience can work alongside fresh ideas, I believe that is where some of the best things happen.

Do we want our future to be dictated by big companies, with independent input coming only from those young or privileged enough to be able to work some of the time without payment?

Do we want our brightest minds to become burned out, leaving the industry or heading into jobs where the best scenario is contribution under their terms of employment?

Do we want to see more fundraisers for living or medical expenses from people who have spent their lives making it possible for us to do the work that we do?

I don't believe these are things that anyone wants. When we gripe about paying for something or put pressure on a sole project maintainer to quickly fix an issue, we're thinking only about our own need to get things done. But in doing so we are devaluing the work of all of us, of our industry as a whole. We risk turning one of the greatest assets of our community into the reason we lose the very people who have given the most. ●

BY RACHEL ANDREW

```
<article>
  <h1>
```



```
  </h1>
</article>
```

BY NATALIE JOST

“[T]hose who work from home with their families face a unique set of issues -- and need equally unique ways of dealing with them.”

Working from home, whether as a freelance contractor or remote employee, can be a great thing, particularly if you live alone. But what if you have a spouse and/or children at home with you while you work? Every work environment offers distractions, but those who work from home with their families face a unique set of issues—and need equally unique ways of dealing with them.

How it happened to me

A year ago, I was returning to a full-time career after taking time off to be home with my then toddler daughter. She was going into preschool and my husband had just renovated the back of our basement into a dazzling office just for me. A stellar company in San Diego, Monk Development, hired me to work from home. Life was good.

A few weeks into the job, I suddenly became very ill and couldn't work. I quickly discovered I was pregnant with twins, after five years of trying.

As you can expect, that “good life,” though it got even better, is completely gone. With the huge change, I rebalanced my freelance career. As I did so and spoke with others in the same or similar boats, this article began to come to life. Here're some pointers for not just getting through the day, but relishing it and begging for the next one.

Location, location, location

Despite what works in a company environment, there must be different rules for the home. The first rule for getting the most accomplished—and stealing the least amount of time from family—is to get your own work space. If that means converting your garage to an office and parking your car on the street, then it's a necessary compromise if you're going to successfully work from home. If you have no space to set aside, it doesn't mean you can't work from home, but be prepared for a more difficult experience.

Many set up offices in a basement, over the garage, or right off the living room, but one thing productive offices have in common is closed space. Though some share space with a spouse or work from the family couch, the consensus is that it takes a quiet place, cut off from the world, to do one's best work.

Readers who commented on Dan Benjamin's “Offices and the Creativity Zone” seem to agree with this. Some work in places who have what one reader calls “cube farms,” where closed offices or high cubicle walls are either in short supply or non-existent. The common argument for his arrangement is that it fosters communication and learning, but in a family situation, I can't imagine how my daughter yelling at Dora the Explorer can improve my creativity.

My office is a separate room in the basement, with a door I can close and lock. Although a lot of my work ends up getting done sitting at the kitchen table upstairs while the kids play, my best work gets done alone in the quiet office.

Recognizing and curbing distractions

The most common complaints about working from home are family-created distractions and self distractions. The distractions I experience now, though, are so different from the “cube” distractions I dealt with in my corporate jobs, that sometimes they seem worse.

Where in an office I had to contend with “gossip girls” and candy dippers (don’t ever put a bowl of candy on your desk), at home I have crying babies and “Mom, when you’re done, can I play on the computer?” The difficulty lies in finding a way to recognize what’s getting in the way and nip it before it stops production.

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

Maybe this is different for women than for men. I’m generalizing, but some mothers tend to have a stronger “home” instinct that makes it more difficult to detach work from family duties. We see a pile of laundry and feel the need to stop everything else to get “just the one load” in the washer, and before we know it, we’re running a laundromat.

Likewise, we hear a child cry and stop everything to make it better (even when Dad or a sitter is there to take care of it). It’s not easy to stay put and keep working when our instincts are so powerful.

Of course, many men suffer this distraction as well. Men whose wives stay home with the kids know it’s tough to stay “at work” when you know you’re really at home. For me, the kids are a huge distraction, so I do the bulk of my work when my husband is home and able to take care of them for me.

HEADPHONES AND A CLOSED-DOOR POLICY

Having a good pair of headphones and some music you love helps to keep the external noise out while giving you that boost to keep working.

There’s also the “closed-door” policy, in which your family understands not to bother you if the door to your office is closed. James Higginbotham’s policy means, “If the door is closed, please don’t interrupt unless [there is] a fire or loss of limb,” which says a lot to his five year-old, as it does to my own. You may still want to have a lock on the door, just in case.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

For some, Twitter is a huge distraction: it’s like having a chat window open all day. Others have a problem with new e-mail popping in all day long. If you’re trying to get some serious work done and you’re not the type who can tune out a conversation going on near you, it’s probably a good idea to turn off the Twitter or chat client, and even close e-mail if you’re inclined to read and answer each one as it comes in.

For me, the phone is a big distraction. Although I’m not against talking on the phone when it’s necessary or when a client prefers it, in general I tend not to place calls or answer them while I’m in “the zone.” Not everyone feels this way, but I know myself well enough to know my limitations. You know your distractions, so it’s a matter of balancing what distracts you most.

As for e-mail, it might help to set a time when you read and respond to it. If you have a lot of e-mail you might even read it at one time and respond to it another time. This works well for me because it also gives me that in-between time to process what I’ve read before responding (which is particularly helpful when it comes to blog comments).

The same is true for physical mail. I go get the mail, open it, and sort it while the kids are around during the day, but I wait to read or respond, pay bills, etc., until after the kids have gone to bed. Getting it prepared in advance makes it easier to get through it that night.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, GET AWAY

It’s important not to isolate yourself in an office all day, particularly if you have a creative job. But even with a more technical job, you need to be able to focus and if the distractions at home are getting in the way, take a break.

Get out of the house. Go to a coffee shop, the park, your car—wherever you need to be to get away from distractions and get refreshed. For me, that means leaving the house completely and driving, usually to the other side of town. When there’s a child’s cry within earshot, there’s also a desperate, instinctive pull that says I need to stop what I’m doing and fix it. Leaving the scene helps me more clearly define my immediate responsibility and turn off my “mom” personality to turn on my worker personality.

The Family Phone

Something else you’ll want to consider is getting a business phone line if you don’t have one. You can use your wireless phone if that works. Skype offers a direct line that works great too. It’s a direct phone number to your Skype client, or with the Skype phone, you can have a “real” phone that runs off the Skype network.

There’s also Grand Central, which allows you to have a phone number not attached to any particular location. Instead, you can program the number through the internet to forward to any phone you’re using at the moment, or directly to voicemail. I use this because it allows me to freely give out

a phone number and mark telemarketers as “spam” in the same way you would with e-mail. And, I can program specific people or groups of people (clients, family, friends) to ring through to my cell phone instead of voice-mail without actually giving them my cell phone number directly (when working via the web, it’s nice to have that added bit of security).

Michael Boyink works from the family home and recommends teaching the kids to answer the phone anyway, just in case. You never know when you may have to give your home number to a client and you don’t want them hearing what my clients would (my daughter answers every call with “Hi, Daddy!” because it’s usually Dad calling).

Dealing with clients

There are two things I would say are more important than anything I’ve mentioned up to this point.

Be transparent: Be upfront and honest with your clients about how, where, and when you work.

Be discriminating: Be choosy about your clients. Select only those you think will be able to work with your schedule and environment.

ON TRANSPARENCY

This is an area for caution. You don’t want to spill your guts to a potential client in your first meeting, telling them all about your family and how one time Susie spilled her juice on your keyboard and you were backed up for two days. Still, you don’t want them to assume you work a normal 9-5 schedule in a brick office downtown, free to design in quiet until the sun goes down.

Tell them you work from home. Tell them your family is home during the day. In my case, I’m honest about my twins, explaining that my first priority during the day is being a mom, but that I also only work on one project at a time, so they can be sure that when I am “at work”, their project is my top priority. Tell them just enough to be fair to them without disclosing enough to scare them off.

BEING DISCRIMINATING

Seek out people who understand your lifestyle and work schedule.

Look for the like-minded, who don’t mind odd business hours and who won’t push deadlines too hard. That’s not to say deadlines are to be broken, but in a home where family trumps work, there’s a bigger chance that those family obligations will get in the way of your work. There’s no need to try to pretend otherwise. Own it, but be prepared to work a little harder to make up for it.

I have only one corporate client: the rest are individuals or small businesses who “get” me and are, in most cases, willing to work around my family obligations. I also don’t take any local clients. If I lived in a hip big city I might feel differently about that, but in my experience, my local prospects are deadline-driven, creatively dull, and less forgiving when it comes to any obligations apart from them and their needs.

There’s nothing wrong with being discriminating. We do it every day—choosing one brand of butter over another, or deciding which channel to watch. You have the right to choose your clients, and taking every client that comes to you isn’t fair to them or to you.

When everything breaks down

Even if you happen to be able to get everything set up—the perfect office with sound-proof walls and a Pleasantville-style family to back you up, something is going to go wrong.

SOUND EFFECTS

Someday, you’ll be on the phone with a huge client, discussing their quickly depleting budget (which would make anyone tense), and suddenly there’ll be a bloodcurdling scream from the family room. What do you do?

Me? Well, I was transparent with the client from the beginning, (of course, well...usually) so they were prepared for that scream. Plus, I made sure to schedule this particular call when I was “off duty” as a mom, so I don’t have to run to the rescue. So what do I do? I laugh, apologize, and head outside to the deck to finish the call from the quiet of the back yard, while offering them the option of continuing the call another time.

When this happens, it’s embarrassing for sure, and can cause tension for the family if you get angry at them for interrupting your work. But imagine you work in an office that happens to be right next to a railway. You’ve let it be known that a train could happen by while you’re on a call, and that you try to schedule calls around the train. But this time, the call and the train came together. It happens.

Do apologize—assure the client you’re right there with them and the conversation is still “live.” Don’t grovel or stop to yell at the wife or husband to shut the kid up. Just keep cool and keep going as if it’s part of your life—because it is.

Sick kids and other obstacles

Thankfully, I have pretty healthy kids, but about once a year, they get sick and deadlines suffer. But you know, we all get sick. Computers lock up. We get creative blocks. No matter what we do, we just can’t make the deadline. Life happens, and the way we deal with it matters more than whether we make a particular deadline.

One thing I’ve learned from my own work and from helping junior designers with theirs is that it’s better to miss a deadline and finish the project than roll out an unfinished project just to hit a deadline. Most clients will have greater respect for your candor in dealing with a missed deadline if you have the integrity to complete the project.

Still, deadlines are there for a reason. Clients’ lives are equally important, and their professional success often depends on our work hitting their desk on a certain day, at a certain time. There’s not much worse than having to tell a client it’s not going to happen on time because the kids got the flu, but if you’re a parent, you know your responsibility is to put those kids first, even if it puts you in a bind with a client.

It is possible to get out of those binds, though, with some creative pre-planning. Here are a few tips I use to be on top of things with my clients as best as I can:

HAVE A BACK UP

I have a good list of colleagues I turn to when I need someone to pick up slack or when an impending family obligation is about to collide with a deadline. In fact, I’m in the process of putting together a sort of design co-op or partnership with another woman in my shoes (she’s about to have a baby herself).

We’ve each found ourselves stretched thin with our own projects, so it has been nice being able to lean on each other from time to time. We’ve done one project in partnership, and it worked great: we just met the deadline, and she’s about to go into labor any day!

WORK AHEAD

In most cases, I have a little insight about what the client needs before

we get started, so I start sketching designs. I usually have something in mind before the first payment. I also start coding some things before I have finished or approved comps.

I find it helps to have things planned and partially implemented as far ahead of time as I can, just in case. In some cases this makes extra work, but as I get better at it and become more intuitive, I find there are many projects I can get ahead on and have room to breathe—or take care of family things behind the scenes.

Personal accountability

The bottom line is that even when you have a boss somewhere, at home you are your own boss. You are responsible for getting the job done, despite any distractions or interruptions.

KEEPING TRACK OF TIME

An important aspect of personal accountability is keeping track of how you spend your time. Just as an accountant accounts for the money, you must account for time. If you’re paid hourly, you track your time because you have to bill for it—and it’s also important to know where the non-billable hours go.

There are a million time-tracking programs out there—both standalone software and web apps. What is important is that you have some way of keeping track of what you do and how long it takes you to do it.

I’ve started doing this not just for work, but for my family as well. It has been incredibly helpful to see, on days when the laundry or dishes didn’t get done, what did get done. Sometimes I discover I’ve spent too much time on Twitter, or on the phone, and I can adjust things the next day to make sure I cut back on what got in the way.

Writing down or typing up what you’re doing helps. If you find yourself actually writing down “browsed blogs and responded to comments” instead of “finished that big project” you may be compelled to get away from blogs for awhile and get back to work.

I started out using Dave Seah’s Printable CEO forms, but ended up making my own similar one that is much simpler for my needs. Still, the original forms are spectacular for micro-managing yourself. (If you’re into that sort of thing!)

GET THE FAMILY ON BOARD

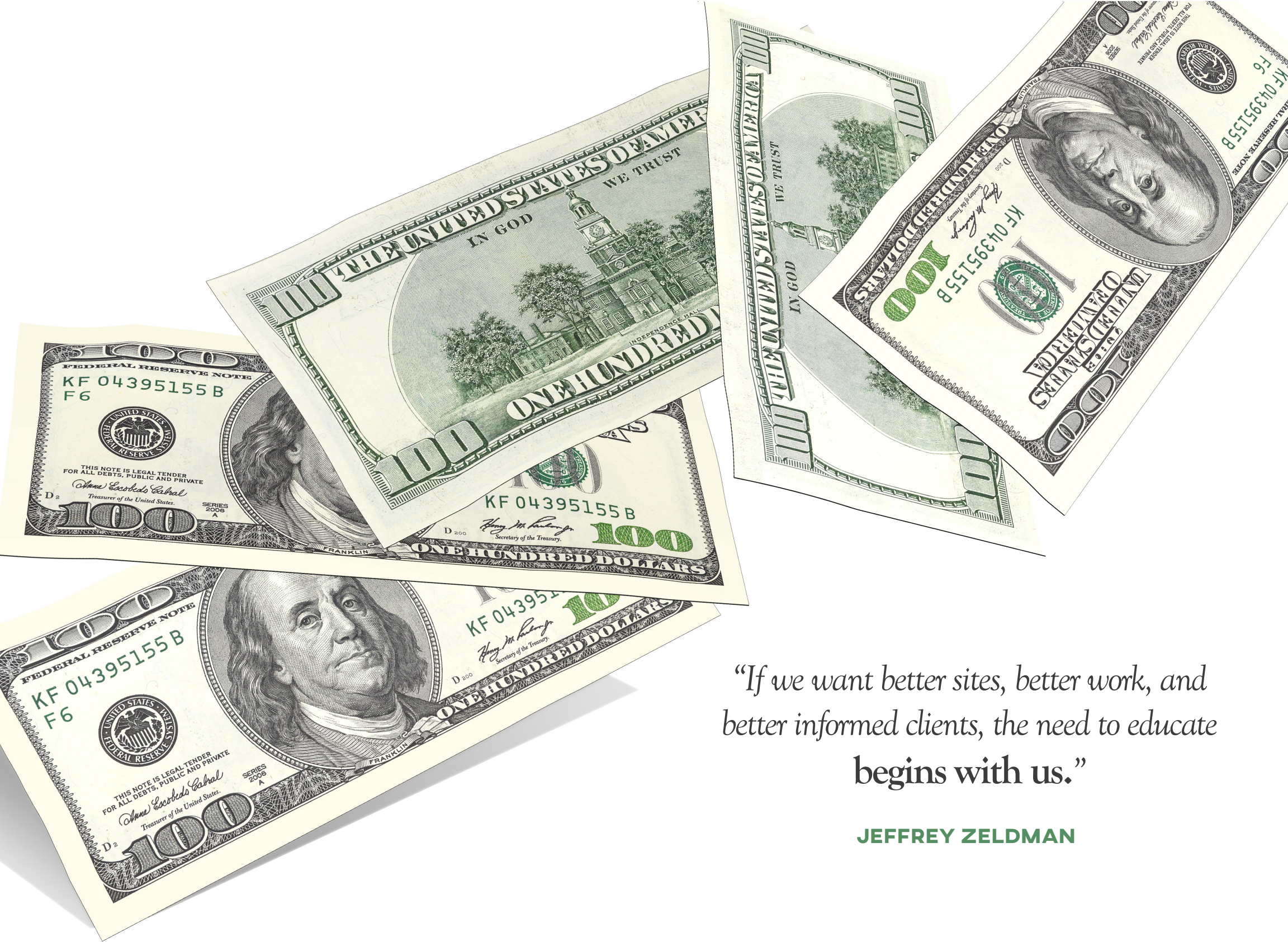
Being accountable is even easier when you have peers to remind you to stay on track. In an office you would have co-workers, but at home you have people there to help as well. Tell your spouse, and the kids too, that you need their help staying “at work.” Get them involved and ask them to help remind you to get back to work if you wander out into the family living space.

Several people I spoke with said their spouse lovingly forbids them to do any work in the family areas, like the living room or kitchen. If they ever complain that they can’t get any work done, the spouse will tell them, “You have your space, and we have ours. You’re in our space now.” My daughter has caught on to this as well. She’s not quite in kindergarten yet, but she’ll tell me to go to my office if I tell her I’m trying to work.

Walk the line

Working from home is a balancing act, to be sure. But pre-planning, negotiation, flexibility, perseverance—and, of course, quiet time—are all you need to successfully walk the blurry line between work and home. ●

BY NATALIE JOST



“If we want better sites, better work, and
better informed clients, the need to educate
begins with us.”

JEFFREY ZELDMAN

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Articles and biographies were obtained from **A List Apart.**

A List Apart is a website designed for people who make websites,
providing new and relevant articles on design regularly.

Check them out at www.alistapart.com.

Jeffrey Zeldman

<p> Designing and blogging since 1995, Jeffrey Zeldman (@zeldman) founded A List Apart in 1998; co-founded the web design conference An Event Apart; co-founded and publishes A Book Apart—brief books for people who make websites; wrote the industry-changing front-end bible Designing With Web Standards, now in a third edition coauthored by Ethan Marcotte; teaches in the MFA Interaction Design program at School of Visual Arts NYC; and hosts The Big Web Show, an internet radio spectacular. His newest thing is studio.zeldman, a design studio in NYC. </p>

Matt Griffin

<p> Matt Griffin is a designer and founder of Bearded and Wood Type Revival. He's a speaker, writer, and an avid advocate for collaboration in design. </p>

Rachel Andrew

<p> Rachel Andrew is the founder of edgeofmyseat.com, the company behind the CMS Perch. She regularly writes and speaks about the work she does, and can be found via her blog and personal site and on Twitter. </p>

Natalie Jost

<p> Natalie Jost is a freelance web designer, wife, and mother of three girls, two of which were born minutes apart. Her blog, Standards for Life, is known for fresh and honest writing. It focuses on her passion to follow the highest standards in design and in life. <p>

THE BEYOND BOOKLET SERIES

BEYOND

<h2>Web Design</h2>

**STAY AFLOAT AS A
FREELANCE WEB DESIGNER.**

YOU CAN'T DESIGN SITES
if you can't pay your electric bill.

Understand the business beyond the browser.

Get tips and tricks from current, respected web designers (Jeffrey Zeldman, Matt Griffin, Rachel Andrew, Natalie Jost) as they discuss what they wish they knew before heading into careers as (freelance or not) web designers.

Articles and biographies were obtained from **A List Apart**.
Check them out at www.alistapart.com.