

Six 'what ifs' that could transform your digital agency

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As entrepreneurs we need to step back from day-to-day operations. We need to explore what would happen if we approached our business in a different way.

<https://youtu.be/1bh6ORMWluk>

What if you had super powers? What would they be and how would you use them? What if you lived a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away? What if the zombie apocalypse struck? How would you survive? These are the kinds of questions I spent my childhood imagining. I am sure I was not alone. At least I hope I wasn't, otherwise this is kind of embarrassing!

I think as kids we all like to imagine what could be. Yet as adults we are so consumed by the practicalities of our busy lives and businesses that we rarely stop to ask "what if". But what if we did? By exploring alternative scenarios for our businesses we might stumble onto a better way.

This is something I try to do with [those I mentor](#) all the time. Inspired by [Blair Enns](#), I explore six 'what if' scenarios with other agency owners. What we find is often surprising.

What if we could never sell or never retire?

Imagine for a moment you could never stop running your business. No retirement, no selling up to sit on a beach. You had to keep running it to the day you die. How does that make you feel? Be honest with yourself.

If the idea depresses you then it might be time to change. It isn't good for you or your business not to be completely engaged and invested in the thing you do everyday.

What if you could never retire? Would you still be happy working until the day you die?

How would your life need to change to create a situation where you would be happy working until the day you die? More practically, what would have to change in your business to create the life you would want to live?

For me this question made me walk away from running an agency for 13 years to become a solo consultant. For you it might be something different.

What if we could only have ten clients?

Next, imagine if you could only have ten clients at a time. Sure, one or two would swap out every year or so. But what if most of the time you only had ten. Which clients would you keep and why?

This question helps you think about the kind of work you should be doing. It focuses you on the clients you enjoy working with. But it also starts moving you away from the treadmill of constant client acquisition. It helps you move towards something that involves longer client relationships.

What if we could only provide ongoing services?

Talking of different client relationships, what if you could only offer ongoing services. You could no longer deliver finite projects.

As digital agencies we sell websites, mobile apps and similar deliverables. But that tends to lead to finite, fixed price projects. This increases the pressure on us to bring in new work, manage scope creep and focus on budgets.

But imagine for a moment if all your services were ongoing? How would that change your business? Maybe you would lease websites to clients and manage them for the client. Maybe clients would pay you a retainer to iterate and improve the mobile app you built.

For me this lead to my [mentorship offering](#), [blogging retainers](#) and [long term training](#) programs.

What if we no longer tracked and sold our time?

Another 'what if' that changed my business was what if I stop selling my time? This was the biggest mental shift for me and probably for you too.

Think about it for a minute. Why do clients hire us. They hire us to deliver a solution to a business challenge. They don't hire us for our time. That solution has a value to the business, so why don't we charge based on that value? Why do we choose to charge for the amount of time we committed to delivering it?

I am not saying this is easy. I am not even saying it is always appropriate. I am saying we need to consider how that might apply to our business from time to time. That we should ask, what if.

What if we stopped writing long unpaid proposals?

One what if we should think more about is 'what if we stopped writing long unpaid proposals?' What would happen? If you are anything like most agency owners, you spend a lot of time

writing proposals. Think about all that saved time.

But what about the consequences you ask. Well why don't you try it and find out? Are the consequences you imagine going to happen in reality?

I replaced detailed proposals with something much shorter. It almost always suggest starting with a discovery phase. My proposals argues that no agency was in a position to spec a project without undertaking some research first. I suggest that the engagement should begin with a small project to do the research. But go on to explain this benefits the client too. It is a chance for them to trial the working relationship with me. If they are unhappy they can take that research to another agency instead.

What if we stopped telling clients what they wanted to hear?

Finally, what if we started being more honest with our clients? You might say you already do this. But do you? What about in those initial meetings, before you have won the work? Will you tell a client their deadline or budget is unrealistic? Will you suggest that their brief is wrong and they should be taking a different approach?

I found this what if to be the most liberating when implemented. The freedom to share your advice and opinion changes your relationship with clients. You become their partner, not their supplier.

Sure, some clients can't take it. Sure, I sometimes lose work because of it. But those who do stay with me are more profitable and enjoyable projects. They are also more likely to recommend me to others.

What if...

So there you have it. My what ifs for your business. The key is to step back every now and again. Take the time to consider approaching your business in new and innovative ways. You may conclude that the way you work is the best approach. But you could just surprise yourself.

Now all I need to do is finalise my plan for the zombie apocalypse.

Thanks to [Videoblocks](#) for the the video clips used in my video

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