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## Embedding public relations with candour, clarity and no-pants humour

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### ABSTRACT

This review of Scott Berkun's *The Year Without Pants*, describes how the book codifies public relations, i.e., an honest understanding and relating about a company and its non-traditional "distributed" employees, without a deliberate intention on the author's part to have this focus. The review highlights the internal communications system developed by Matt Mullenweg at Automattic, the startup that he founded. This review considers the idea of whether for most companies public relations plays a creator or a supporter role.

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Rather than being an artificial or manipulated construct, the best public relations involves an honest accounting, understanding and "relating" of past history and ongoing [organizational narrative](#) about the culture lived by its inhabitants. If created and communicated well, the outcome is an understanding by internal and external stakeholders and other publics about the reputation, values and relationships embedded in a company.

Sometimes it's only after being on the other side of the employment equation or an opportunity arises to bring a fresh perspective that the influence of great leadership is fully appreciated. Namely, a mindful but minimalist management that empowers employees to feel their work and stakeholder understanding has meaning. There's also tangible and practised company mission and values that include clarity and simplicity in goals, communication, passion and even fun.

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These are the things at the heart of a healthy corporate ethos but it's not just about leadership and broad determinations or the "proclamations about culture that are easy to put in speeches and e-mails" as Scott Berkun writes, rather "it's the small decisions that define a culture" (p. 40).

In tech companies they talk about "shipping" code to customers to make the web experience more intuitive and the understanding of user possibilities greater. Possibly Scott Berkun's *The Year Without Pants* is one of the first books to codify public relations, i.e., an honest understanding and relating about a company and its non-traditional "distributed" employees, without a deliberate intention on the author's part to have this focus.

The organization in question is Automattic, an umbrella company that includes its better-known WordPress and WordPress.com arms.

## Backgrounder to Scott Berkun, this book and my appreciation

Scott Berkun describes his endeavour as "participatory journalism." If this book proves as successful as his earlier ones, it's interesting to speculate how Berkun's experiment might be a precursor for other short or long-term "corporate media" intentioned publications down the road, perhaps initiated by companies rather than by one person combining the roles of experienced project manager, consultant and pioneering writer.

Berkun was recruited by Automattic's founder, Matt Mullenweg, as the only externally hired team lead, when Mullenweg and his CEO, Toni Schneider, a former executive at Yahoo, who also founded and led several successful startups including Oddpost, decided to mindfully change the approximately 50-employee work structure from a flat hierarchy to 10 teams of five employees.

The team structure was implemented to better accommodate the company's explosive growth and its need for more complex project goals, agile decision-making and "support" management for the code creators and designers.

Mullenweg recruited Berkun in 2010, based on his knowledge of Berkun's nine years working in a similar role at Microsoft during the Internet Explorer launch years, past books he'd written about project management and communication skills, and earlier consulting gigs with the company. Berkun successfully passed the assigned trial project: The single pass/fail test Automattic uses instead of formal interviews and other traditional hiring assessments.

Berkun was upfront with Matt Mullenweg in accepting the Team Social lead role about plans to write a fifth book about the experience of working for a distributed (or virtual) startup company with employees around the globe. His inaugural team was distributed in different American states, countries and time zones, necessitating communication and relationship-building experiments.

After 21 months embedded in Automattic as a fully contributing (perhaps even transforming) and observant employee, the central themes of his promised book emerged as “making, creation and teamwork.”

Reading a review copy of this book, a great deal was learned about Automattic and its noble mission to “democratize publishing” through its Open Source software, “continuous deployment” project management and effective teamwork.

However, it was Berkun’s honest, transparent, insightful and humorous narrative about Automattic’s:

- quirky and original culture
- company values
- passion and fun in the workforce related to creating great, intuitive user experiences
- relationships built within teams and throughout the distributed organization
- effective (and some less successful) communication platforms and tactics
- insufficient creative friction and risk-averse truth-speaking to power; and
- mindfulness to be a data-influenced culture, not a data-driven one (i.e., Mullenweg doesn’t make data the core of all decisions, but he wants it to be a part of it: a balance of both intuition and analysis)

...that warmed the public relations cockles of my heart.

Even if the central tenets of employee passion and joy in coding and design work found at Automattic don’t translate to most companies, this book can help relate and communicate other core meanings found in company or client work.

In his summary, Berkun indicated one of the most profound things about Automattic is the long-term strategy of the organization. “Every perk, benefit or experiment ties back to its commitment to build a company for years and

perhaps decades into the future,” (p. 233).

Berkun’s respect for founder Matt Mullenweg is immense. He details how Mullenweg began the company at 22 about 10 years ago, seemingly born with cathedral-style thinking coupled with admirable principles, within his deliberately created company bazaar setting. (I wrote a complementary post on *PR Conversations* that [describes these concepts](#).) One of the most striking things is how still-young Mullenweg has the patience to let the company’s growth unfold more or less naturally.

It is noted that Automattic grew to 170 employees by May 2013, presumably when the book was completed. If indeed this style of company reflects the future, employee faith in and happiness about working for a distributed company is reflected in its unusually low attrition rate for a startup.

## Automattic’s corporate culture

The master facilitator of culture is founder Matt Mullenweg; even his name is embedded in Automattic. “If you ever wonder about why a family or a company is the way it is, always look up first. The culture in any organization is shaped every day by the behavior of the most powerful person in the room” (p. 139).

Public relations leads should intuit this concept about cultures that form organically – the idea that someone has to be the instigator, in order “to get things in motion, reinforcing the good and reducing the bad,” (p. 139).

Berkun’s observations are spot-on about how it’s engrained in human nature to look to the top to define our own behaviour, even at a company as near chaotically self-directed as Automattic. When unpacking a corporate culture, you’ll discover how much of it is based on employee emotions, rather than the formal infrastructure.

The onus, effective 2010 with the teamwork model, is on Automattic employees to decide how, when and where they do their work as generous, confident collaborators. As Berkun indicates, at Automattic the “big cultural bet wasn’t on process but on people” (p. 61). Results or outcomes also matter more than the process decided upon by each Automattic team.

Berkun indicates that studying how a workforce manages its challenges and problems is a powerful method of understanding the company culture. In relation to Team Social, he writes, “We were a small team, we worked fast, we had all the data we could ask for to help us make decisions, and we liked working together” (p. 117).

Regarding the concept of small decisions and actions defining a culture, Berkun waxes eloquently about how when good-natured, smart people who care about the same things communicate with each other, the result is “the kind of chemistry that executives spend careers trying, and mostly failing, to create” (p. 125).

It’s hard to stake out turf and hold grudges but easy to build team goodwill and bonding when humour is involved. Laughter at Automattic leads to running jokes, such as the teasing supposition by his experienced team that newer-hire lead Berkun did most of his distributed work not wearing any pants – hence the book’s provocative title.

In addition to the seriousness of determining the what, why and when of project completion based on his past successful methods, which includes an almost obsessive ongoing list-and-priorities creation process with which he indoctrinated Team Social, Berkun encouraged running jokes as a way to create a shared history for Team Social. He believes that a communal narrative is rooted deeply in our history: “Humor, storytelling and songs are social skills we developed a thousand years ago around fires while we did the critical work of staying warm and cooking food to survive” (p. 232). These skills remain tied to a healthy company culture, particularly ones that are distributed, meaning most of the time campfires need a technology-assisted base.

In its own way, good-natured humour is a form of trust, especially when it comes to remote work. Particularly at a distributed company like Automattic, where face-to-face time is limited to an annual agenda-and-schedule-free staff retreat, plus a handful of team meet-ups in different parts of the world each year. Camaraderie and humour help build the rites of passage and shared experiences, both in the present and for future collaborative work.

## Embedded values

I warmed to Berkun’s take on the [need for company values](#) to be principles and beliefs that every employee, from the founder/CEO down, demonstrate and use continuously, rather than the sterile proclamations made in many corporate mission statements, but rarely followed.

Similar to trust being necessary in an organic, honest and healthy corporate culture, the same is true about trust being needed in the stated or unstated values.

According to Berkun, Automattic’s values include autonomy and empowerment (i.e., it’s up employees to figure out how to be productive) and

volunteerism related to providing additional communication and generous help across the distributed company, both of the immediate and legacy variety. He observes that trust is expensive to build and easy to destroy – which is why it's rare in companies. And such trust needs patience.

Turning the equation around, Berkun indicates patience is a manifestation of trust: It conveys to employees they are worth the time and effort invested in their hiring and training – yet another intangible value in a healthy culture.

With Matt Mullenweg's "democratizing publishing" mission, values and patience at the heart of long-term thinking for the company and its employees, the Mullenweg creed is writ large in the "formal" offer letter Berkun and other new hires received:

I will never stop learning. I won't just work on things that are assigned to me. I know there's no such thing as a status quo. I will build our business sustainably through passionate and loyal customers. I will never pass up an opportunity to help out a colleague, and I'll remember the days before I knew everything. I am more motivated by impact than money, and I know that Open Source is one of the most powerful ideas of our generation.

I will communicate as much as possible, because it's the oxygen of a distributed company. I am in a marathon, not a sprint, and no matter how far away the goal is, the only way to get there is by putting one foot in front of another every day. Given time, there is no problem that's insurmountable (p. 39).

## Where Automatic could improve

A great [culture with values](#) that stem from the founder and are embraced by all employees does have a downside in Scott Berkun's estimation, mainly due to how it becomes increasingly harder to scale vision, innovation and creativity as a company grows. As well, it is difficult to see how every decision and relationship can be given hands-on attention by one leader or just a handful of supervisory staff.

Goodwill and collaboration, mainly unhindered by meetings, schedules and deadlines, were great for Automatic and its distributed employees' daily tactical work and continuous deployment of WordPress applications and functions. However, this type of frictionless work can also make people conflict and risk averse.

On the surface this seems like a good thing, but creativity often stems from challenging the status quo, introducing alternative thinking and ideas. Smoothly functioning cogs help create small bazaar items; what they don't envision is a future big cathedral.

Like a puck on an air hockey table floating around aimlessly, ideas need something to work against – a mallet or a wall – to use as leverage. There must be someone challenging ideas in ways their creators don't necessarily like in order for those creators to see the blind spots in their thinking. Breakthroughs await in those blind spots. Those critiques, delivered with the right touch, push people toward superior work. The needed friction can come from coworkers or bosses, but it has to come from somewhere (p. 162).

Berkun wanted more Automattic employees to push for big changes, big ideas or crazy thoughts. And to have the guts to push the big things at the team leader, Automattic's founder or the CEO.

Possibly the biggest gift Scott Berkun gave to Team Social during his time at Automattic was instilling the courage and understanding to look up from the daily work to see the big picture and persuasively articulate how things could be improved or enhanced. He also identified and trained individuals as his potential successors to perform this same mentoring in a team lead role.

## Public relations as a creator or supporter role?

Automattic's CEO, Toni Schneider, believes many companies confuse supporting roles (Berkun identifies legal, human resources and information technology, as well as most management) with the production creation roles like design and development. Automattic believes that product creators are the true talent of any corporation, "especially one claiming to bet on innovation" (p. 162).

Marketing is identified as a supporting role to the product creators at Automattic. And for the few teams where sales and marketing play a part – generally the WordPress.com VIP clients, the biggest revenue stream for the company – it's more after-the-shipping fact, rather than playing a role in the product conceptualization and creativity process.

Although Automattic does not appear to have an in-house public relations role, it did get me reflecting about whether for most companies public relations plays a creator or a supporter role?

My *PR Conversations* colleague Heather Yaxley prefers to define public relations as a “craft” rather than a management profession. Using Automattic’s definition of creators versus supporters, Yaxley’s definition casts our role in a more interesting light, especially if a practitioner’s mindful craft will result in “shipping” honest, relevant and useful public relations for an organization.

It’s something to think about.

*The Year Without Pants* inspired many other such related thoughts, including some musings about how being employed at Automattic in a public relations role would likely result in passion and joy for work most days, particularly if allowed to introduce creative-friction counsel and with the implicit permission to speak mindful truth to power.

## References

Berkun, Scott (2013). *The year without pants: Wordpress.com and the future of work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand