The NeIC work-life balance talk:
Your (brain) health first

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Copenhagen, **NeIC All Hands**

NORDIC E-INFRASTRUCTURE COLLABORATION

Michaela Barth and NeIC

Executive Manager (March 2013 – February 2021)

Setting up and leading the NeIC Generic Area and the Pool Competencies focus area

Project ownership for SGAS maintenance, B2SHARE Nordic, Nordic WLCG Tier-1, CodeRefinery++, Glenna++, iOBS++, Ratatosk, NDHL, NICEST2

Leading evaluations on NHPC or the Nordic use of PRACE

NeIC Senior Advisor (since May 2025)

Project ownership for NordIQuEst2

Steering Group member for Nordic Data Stewardship Network (NDSN)

Part of NeIC Project Management Office:

Benefit realisation, HR competence development, strategy co-development and implementation, project portfolio management, funding applications management, impacts analysis and reporting,..

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How to succeed in life 2.0

- A follow-up and tribute to Joel Hedlund's iconic talk @AHM17
- This presentation will feature some of those slides and build on it.

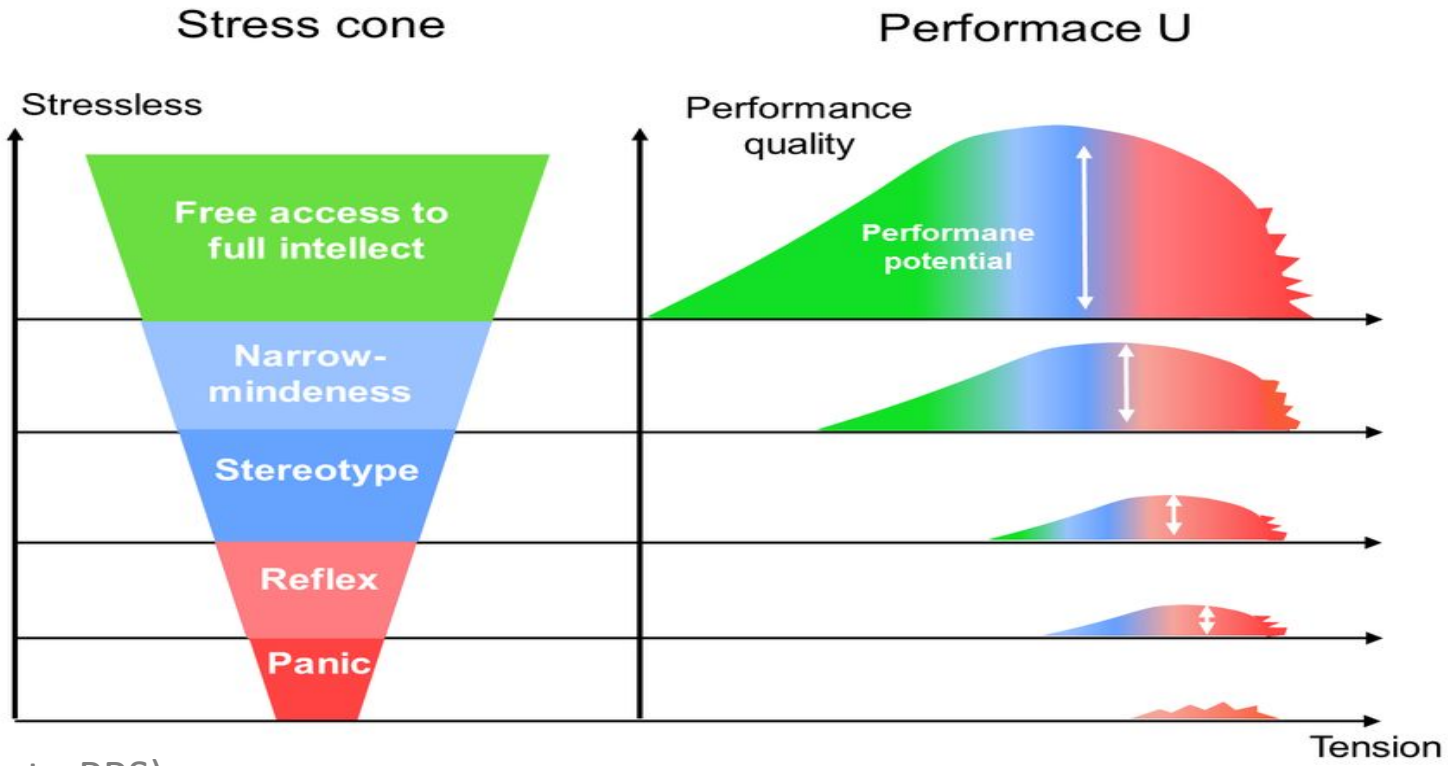
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Interlude: it's just work.

- Work-related stress is nothing.
- People die from cancer daily.
- People have sick children.
- People struggle with substance abuse.
- Often, you can cope with tremendous amounts of work-related stress if you have other outlets, like family, hobbies, friends…
- Work-related stress only becomes a problem when you become dependent on your work, for example through mortgages, work permits, ego…
- Still, many people suffer and hurt themselves from work-related stress.
- This session is about eliminating work-related stress, so you can focus on other things, and be a better and happier person.

Stress and performance

Strain is perceived as a threat or challenge



(Slide from Tieto PPS)

Stress: built into human biology

Defense mechanism preparing your body for a maximized physical response (fight/flight) in reaction to danger to help you survive in case of emergency

faster breathing, trachea dilates, increased sweating, blood sugar increases, outer blood vessels constrict, tunnel vision, sensitive to sound, increased heart rate, increased pain tolerance, blood transported to large muscle groups (from the frontal lobes of your brain!): thinking deteriorates

Specific focus instead of general focus, emotional instead of logical, my PoV instead of broader perspective/listening, less impulse control, contextual loss instead of self-awareness

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When stress goes wrong

Thoughts about an **unknown and potentially dangerous** future can be perceived as threats by the body and also trigger the stress response.

Work situation, finances, sleeping patterns, but also unnecessary "instagram stress" not exercising enough, home not stylish enough, not cooking enough healthy food, not a good enough parent

others are fitter, happier, healthier, …

Who sets the height of the bar? **You** do!

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Long-term stress symptoms

Sleep disorders

Bodily symptoms

Mood swings

Anxiety (worries)

Reduced ability to form new memories (relying on Post-its)

Cognitive impairment

Depression

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Change your point of view

Is it really worth worrying about at all, **now**, is it even **realistic**?

This potentially stressful threat: is it empowering you, is it putting you **back in the driver's seat**, so you can make the first step towards a positive change, plan strategic counter measures, rethink your **priorities**, start mitigating the risks, splitting up problems into smaller parts and **start solving.**

or

Are you just reacting in panic?

Get out of the reaction zone and see the full picture. Zoom out!

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Prevention and management

Behavioral change, ACT: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Catch yourself in time: mindfulness exercises, “little Sam”

Be kind to yourself

Differentiate between thoughts and reality, adjust your focus

Game plan as game changer: Visualise outside of actual emergencies

Life compass: How to prioritize; Unnecessary pain: Change it or accept it

Communicate: Priorities, hinders, fetch more input, solution space

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work-life balance part 2

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Work makes you happy

Lots of the ingredients needed according to Science of Happiness within Positive Psychology:

- Purpose and Meaning
- Mindfulness and Presence
- Money
- Entering the Flow state
- The satisfaction of a job well done

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Your work environment - your choice

Changed boss 4 times in three years

Department failing in HR surveys: Issues with mobbing and many people leaving

Even the boss's boss (who was great) left into industry

My long-time mentor retiring

I should have left too, but wanted a work place close to the kids' school and not to start from scratch while my husband switched jobs

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If work doesn't make you happy - try to change your circumstances!

Or be accepting of your own decision not to do so

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Life/work compass: An iterative process

“You can’t fail unless you give up.”

Your first priority is to know your priorities

Only do prioritized work.
Only work work time.
Go home and feel good.

Prioritize, Plan, Set goals

Get the facts.
Plan. Set goals. Go do it!
Reprioritise based on new information.
Then change the plan, change the goals! Allow yourself to be wrong!

How to succeed in life

Know who's boss

- Lots of people have opinions about your work.
- **Lots of people are not your boss.**
- Your boss has a legal responsibility for your well-being at work.
- Your boss directly benefits from your success.
- Others don't.
- "Others" include: collaborator, customer, client, colleague, board member, your boss' boss and their boss, the research council…
- All these opinions add to the "perceptions of the **demands of the environment**".
- If you have trouble with these perceptions: talk to your boss.
- Realise that some of these are addressable from within your position.
- The rest is your boss' headache.

Get a good boss

- A good boss will support you and empower you
- if you give them the chance.
- Be open and straightforward about your needs.
- Make an effort to get along with your boss.
- If you can’t get along with your boss: replace your boss.

...or actually: Eliminate your dependencies

- Past a certain point, "job security" is "having a good CV".
- This has very little to do with "employer loyalty".
- Expand your skillset!
- Take on new challenges!
- Pay off your mortgages!
- Get insurance!
- Learn to swim!

Having been part of NeIC is a badge of honor:
This is proof that you are a highly independent national expert, capable of carrying out collaborative technical work remotely in a highly distributed virtual team!

My own story

Some lessons learned

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“It won’t happen to me”

June 2023: Accident on the playground, “severe trauma”,

- balance issues
- eyes wouldn’t focus properly (“allergic” to screens)
- constant one-sided headaches
- no feeling in the right side of my face

>3 years vertigo problems, one-sided headaches when overdoing it, chronic neck pain and mostly avoiding moving pictures. Still getting tired faster.

BUT: Others I know got a stroke/cancer, others died straight away.

+: Wake-up call, lost ~15kg (there was nothing to do besides sports)

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Jun 2023
vs
Jun 2025



Young and pretty for ever?

Got stressed about maybe never being fully healthy again and obsessed with health overall.

Read up on real up2date science on longevity:

- Every cm over x waist is a ticking time bomb, you shouldn't weigh more than 10 kg compared to your late teenager years and your early 20s.

Exercise at 5 am? Blood transfusions from your own kids??

Not rocket science: **move**, **eat healthy**, **be social** + regularly add **new experiences**.

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Things that actually helped (and were not just boring)

- Meditation
- Journaling
- Acceptance: put things in perspective, stare at the ceiling, have a game plan
- Swimming, lots of swimming
- Yoga
- Acupuncture

Find your own thing: Music, other sports, art, hobbies, pets, vent to AI?,..
exercise / walk / have a nap before demanding tasks

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Prioritizing your alone time, training time, social time:

“But I don’t have time for this”

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Prioritizing your alone time, training time, social time:

“But I don’t have time for this”

That’s when you need it the most.

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The one big caveat

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Fine to prioritize your family, your health, .. **BUT**

- Be aware that you are not alone!
  - Ask for help, ask for clarification, don't be shy to ask too much. You can do that already **before a problem even arises**
  - Never say: *Yes, I'll manage* unless really confident
  - You can say: *I want to have a go at it first, just by myself*
- Let others know **asap**:
  - Someone might be able to jump in even on short notice
  - Someone might help you get past the (for you) tricky part
  - **Expectation management:** everyone gets a chance to re-prioritize

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Remember:

It’s just work

No one is dying in our kind of work if you don’t show up

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Other useful clichés

- Continuous improvement ~ *kaizen*.
- Perfect is the enemy of good enough.
- Done is infinitely better than almost done.
- It’s not done until it’s done.
- Nothing’s done.

Proactive breaks and tweaks

Screen work is demanding both for your mind and body.

Placing your laptop on some books can help getting the ergonomics right.

***Proactive** means you do this before you get exhausted or your neck hurts!*

Micromicro breaks:

- Close your eyes for 5 seconds and take a deep breath

Mini breaks:

- Take a stretcher
- Going to the bathroom?
- 5 minutes office exercise: vast amount of tips on the internet

Meeting Hygiene:

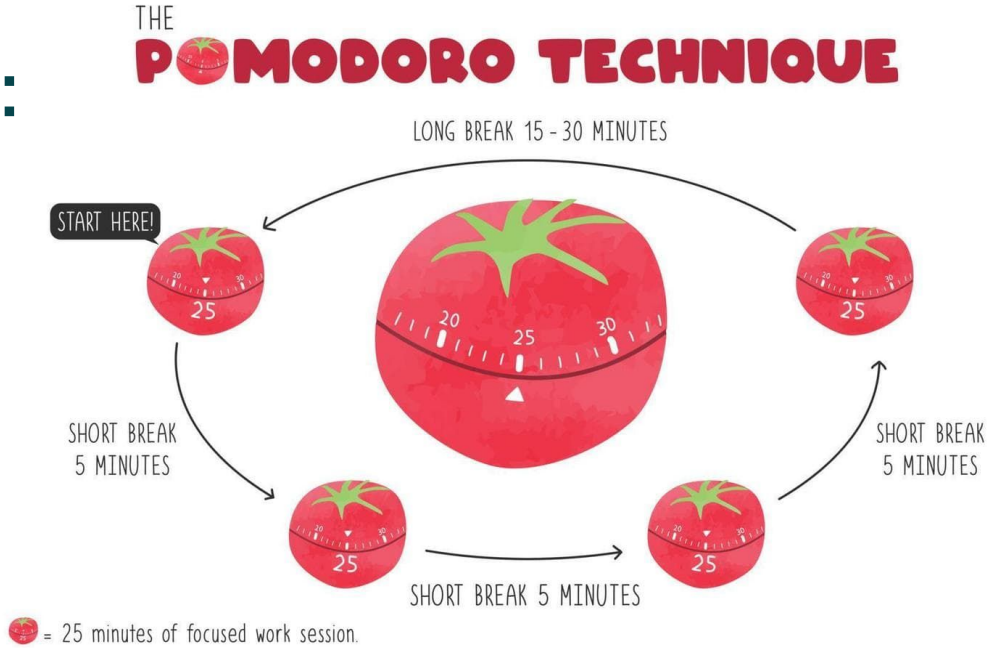
- Enable small breaks for everyone: start meetings quarter past, finish before the full hour
- ask for a leg stretcher in longer meetings

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Physical Balance Presents
OFFICE STRETCHES
TO SAVE YOUR SPINE
TOP TIP
Research shows that it's much easier to form a new habit if we do it at the same time each day. So try and find some time slots that suit your working day to do these stretches such as 10am, 1pm & 3pm.
BACK STRETCH
Place the palms on the lower back and gently lean back briefly before returning to the neutral standing position. Be careful not to lean back too far or over extend your neck. Repeat 2-3 times.
TEAPOT STRETCH
Stand with your feet shoulder width apart. Place your right hand on your hip, take your left hand over your head and gently bend your upper body to the right and hold for 1-2 seconds. Slowly return to the centre. Repeat on the other side. Repeat 2-3 times.
SHOULDER PULL
Hold under your right upper arm and pull across your chest. Hold the stretch for 20-30 seconds. Repeat on the other shoulder.
TOP TIP
Stop the exercises and seek medical advice if they cause pain, make symptoms worse or create new symptoms.
SHOULDER STRETCH
Interlock your hands in front of you and turn palms away from the body. Gently straighten elbows and reach forward. Hold stretch for 20-30 seconds.
NECK STRETCH
Reach over your head with your right hand. Slowly and gently pull your head away from your left shoulder then let your left shoulder drop down to increase the stretch. Repeat on the other side.
QUADRICEPS STRETCH
Stand on one leg with your knees touching. If you need to, grab hold of a chair or wall for support. Grab your right foot with your right hand and pull toward your butt. Hold for 20 to 30 seconds. Repeat on the other side.
HEALTHY TIPS
DRINK more WATER
STAND AT WORK & walk MORE
USE THE Stairs MORE
GET OUTSIDE & maybe GET A DOG
Physical Balance


OFFICE
WORKOUT
#thesquatchallenge
stretching
stretching
stretching
Front bend
neck stretching
neck rotation
Warm-up
www.thesquatchallenge.com
Back stretching
stretching
stretching

Structured breaks:
The Pomodoro model



Break work into intervals,
separated by short breaks

Why? By yourself you typically:
chose longer study sessions,
-> higher levels of fatigue and
lower levels of concentration and motivation.

consistently improved focus, reduced mental fatigue, and enhanced sustained task performance, outperforming self-paced breaks

Next slide: Example for my working scheme at 50% work time

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	Måndag	Tisdag	Onsdag	Torsdag	Fredag	*Beskrivning pauser*
9:00-9:30	Planering för veckan	Info.Mail.Intranät	Info.Mail.Intranät	Info.Mail.Intranät	Info.Mail.Intranät	
9:30-9:40	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	
9:40-10:15	Info.Mail.intranät m.m	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Avstämning med chef, planering för nästa vecka	
10:15-10:30	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	
10:30-11:10	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	
11:10-11:20	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	Återhämtning	
11:20-12:00	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	
12:00-13:00	L	U	N	C	H	
12:30-13:10	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	
13:10-13:20	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	Mikrovila	
13:20-14:00	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Uppdrag	Egen planering,tidsrapport, Inför nästa vecka	

Decide when and how

Don’t worry, be happy!

Time spent worrying is time spent not solving the problem.

Can’t solve it right now? Well what do you need to solve it? Break it down, and break it down further into manageable parts. Put that on your **todo list**, then put it out of your mind until you can address it.

Prioritize, don’t procrastinate

Sometimes there are perfectly good reasons for not “doing it”, only you haven’t formulated them for yourself yet.

Sometimes, the thing is important after all, only you hadn’t got your full brain on board yet.

Enumerate all the arguments for and against, and make a judgement call. Move on, and feel better.

How to succeed in life

What can you do about it?

Get the facts

What can you do about it?

Talk.

Work smarter, not harder

- Actively work to take yourself to the top of the stress cone, and you will work smarter, automatically, because you will be smarter!
- Put yourself in a state of mind where you can think.
- You will feel better, and you will be smarter.
- Allow yourself some variation, use different parts of your brain.
- Change up your work environment, go look at a duck!
- Go home.
- Exercise! Rest!
- Ride a pony! Take a massage course! Do some speedway! Go to yoga!
- Don’t worry!
- Don’t procrastinate!
- Only do prioritized work! (remember, these are your priorities!)

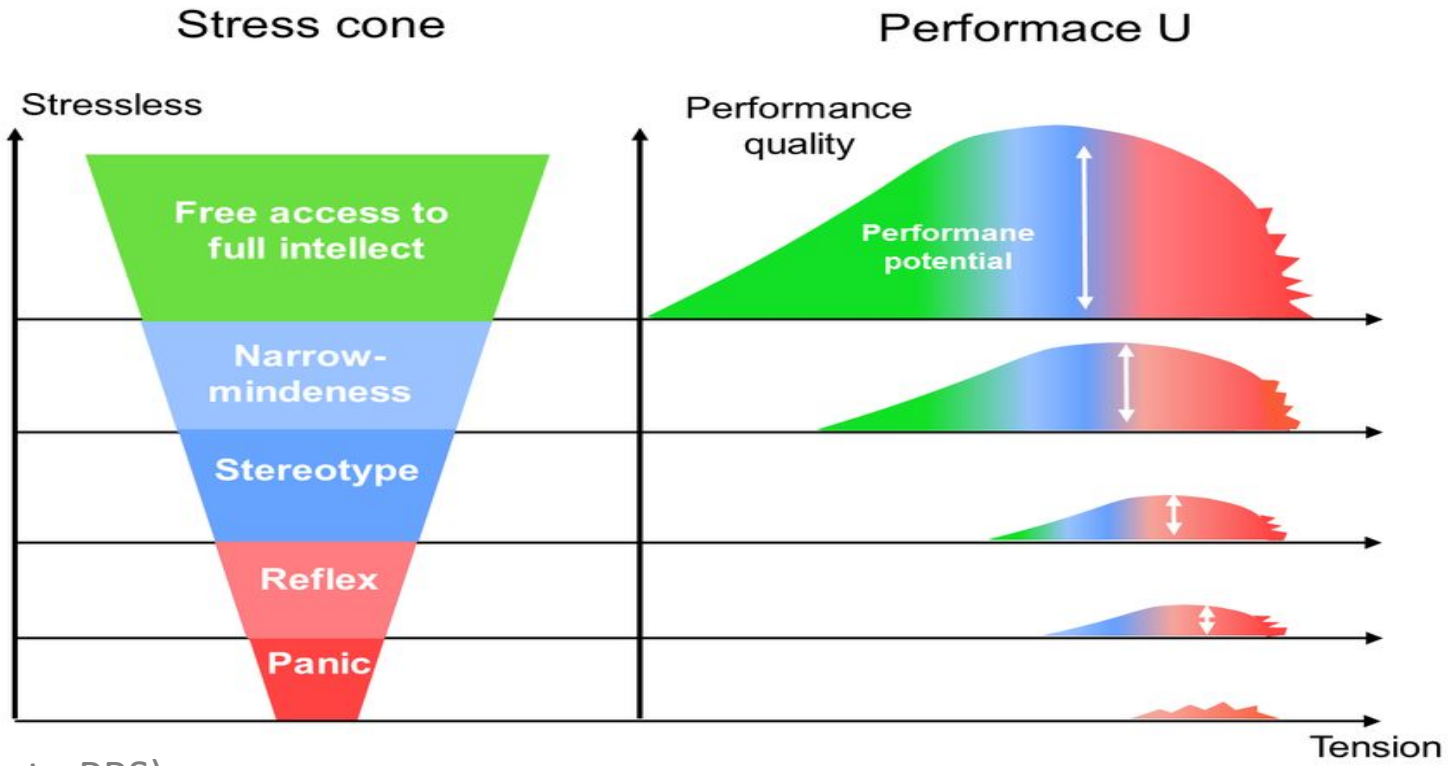
Summary

"Chill, mum, it's not that deep"

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Stress and performance

Strain is perceived as a threat or challenge



(Slide from Tieto PPS)

Your optimal performance

- NeIC would like to see you at your optimal performance and support you to stay/ get there
- Take your breaks!
- Think what you need to get/stay there: **Prioritize & Communicate**
- Your family and health comes first: It's just work
- **BUT:** Let others know and ask for help early if you hit a block / get sick / have any other emergency

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