

Confessions of a Former Hacker

By Stephanie Frank

Made you blink, didn't I?

Yes, it's true. I have been trained as a professional (although now "former") hacker. The true definition of a hacker is one who takes delight in solving problems and overcoming limits. Hackers, contrary to popular belief, build things. It is the Cracker who tears them down.

If you are a business owner and entrepreneur, I think you're a hacker too. How do I know?

Well, hackers have a code they live by, one very similar to the silent code that most entrepreneurs live by, and I'd like to share that secret code with you now. It's simple, and it only has 5 rules:

The Hacker Attitude

Hackers solve problems and build things, and they believe in freedom and voluntary mutual help. To be accepted as a hacker, you have to behave as though you have this kind of attitude yourself. And to behave as though you have the attitude, you have to really believe the attitude.

So, if you want to be a hacker, repeat the following things until you believe them:

1. The world is full of fascinating problems waiting to be solved.

Being a hacker is lots of fun, but it's a kind of fun that takes lots of effort. The effort takes motivation. Successful athletes get their motivation from a kind of physical delight in making their bodies perform, in pushing themselves past their own physical limits. Similarly, to be a hacker you have to get a basic thrill from solving problems, sharpening your skills, and exercising your intelligence.

(You also have to develop a kind of faith in your own learning capacity — a belief that even though you may not know all of what you need to solve a problem, if you tackle just a piece of it and learn from that, you'll learn enough to solve the next piece — and so on, until you're done.)

2. No problem should ever have to be solved twice.

Creative brains are a valuable, limited resource. They shouldn't be wasted on re-inventing the wheel when there are so many fascinating new problems waiting out there.

To behave like a hacker, you have to believe that the thinking time of other hackers is precious — so much so that it's almost a moral duty for you to share information, solve problems and then give the solutions away just so other hackers can solve new problems instead of having to perpetually re-address old ones.

(You don't have to believe that you're obligated to give all your creative product away, though the hackers that do are the ones that get most respect from other hackers. It's consistent with hacker values to sell enough of it to keep you in food and rent and computers. It's fine to use your hacking skills to support a family or even get rich, as long as you don't forget your loyalty to your art and your fellow hackers while doing it.)

3. Boredom and drudgery are evil.

Hackers (and creative people in general) should never be bored or have to drudge at stupid repetitive work, because when this happens it means they aren't doing what only they can do — solve new problems. This wastefulness hurts everybody. Therefore boredom and drudgery are not just unpleasant but actually evil.

To behave like a hacker, you have to believe this enough to want to automate away the boring bits as much as possible, not just for yourself but for everybody else (especially other hackers).

(There is one apparent exception to this. Hackers will sometimes do things that may seem repetitive or boring to an observer as a mind-clearing exercise, or in order to acquire a skill or have some particular kind of experience you can't have otherwise. But this is by choice — nobody who can think should ever be forced into a situation that bores them.)

4. Freedom is good.

Hackers are naturally anti-authoritarian. Anyone who can give you orders can stop you from solving whatever problem you're being fascinated by — and, given the way authoritarian minds work, will generally find some appallingly stupid reason to do so. So the authoritarian attitude has to be fought wherever you find it, lest it smother you and other hackers.

5. Attitude is no substitute for competence.

To be a hacker, you have to develop some of these attitudes. But copping an attitude alone won't make you a hacker, any more than it will make you a champion athlete or a rock star. Becoming a hacker will take intelligence, practice, dedication, and hard work.

Therefore, you have to learn to distrust attitude and respect competence of every kind. Hackers won't let posers waste their time, but they worship competence — especially competence at hacking, but

competence at anything is good. Competence at demanding skills that few can master is especially good, and competence at demanding skills that involve mental acuteness, craft, and concentration is best.

If you revere competence, you'll enjoy developing it in yourself — the hard work and dedication will become a kind of intense play rather than drudgery. That attitude is vital to becoming a hacker.

Finally, hackers and teachers like myself relate to the following modern Zen poem creed as their personal mantra:

To follow the path:
look to the master,
follow the master,
walk with the master,
see through the master,
become the master.

Become the master. That is my wish for you. Get help. And pass it on.