CTRL+CLICK CAST #123

Biz Growth & Hiring with Ross Nover

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Preview: We're big believers that working together produces better work than working apart, and along with that is, working with a team that is on your team produces better work than working with external people. We like working with external people, but we would rather work with our own team because there's ramp-up time with working with other people, just like there is with clients, and the more you cut down on that, the easier everything is.

[Music]

Lea Alcantara: From Bright Umbrella, this is CTRL+CLICK CAST! We inspect the web for you! Today we are Ross Nover joins the show to discuss business growth and hiring. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

Emily Lewis: Emily Lewis!

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Emily Lewis: Our topic today is another one inspired by our time at Owners Summit earlier in the year. I think I've mentioned it on the show already, but the group breakout session at the event were really transformative for me, especially the discussion about growing a business through hiring, and I met our guest Ross Nover at the conference and we talked afterwards about his own experiences growing his agency and hiring, and his perspective was so honest and practical that I really wanted to share it with our listeners. So without further ado, Ross is an interactive designer, illustrator and comic creator. He is also the founder and creative director at Friendly Design where he helps nonprofits and socially-conscious organizations achieve their goals so they can make a difference in the world. Welcome to the show, Ross.

Ross Nover: Thank you, it's great to be here.

Lea Alcantara: Absolutely. Can you tell our listeners a bit more about yourself?

Ross Nover: Yeah. Well, so I mean, that was such a great and thorough paragraph.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: That I'm always like, "Man, who do I have something like?" So I live here in the Washington, DC area. I have since college. I went to school for graphic design. I'm a huge, well, a huge nerd about a lot of things. I'm a huge coffee nerd.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: I'm a cycling nerd. I'm a comics nerd, a little bit of a video game nerd, and honestly, I think a design nerd as well.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: So pretty much in all of those categories, you could definitely consider me a huge, huge nerd.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] How did you even get started working on the web?

Ross Nover: So I'm 34 and I think I fall into a common origin story for a lot of people I know that's approximately my age because of when the web was doing what it was doing at the age that I was. So in high school, you had AOL Instant Messenger and other things that very much state exactly what I'm talking about, and I got really interested in reading comics online. I was a little bit just fascinated, "Oh, he's contacting me online." But mostly, because comics online were free and I couldn't afford to read comics in print very much.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: So it was just a very, very accessible thing. So the first web foray I really had was about me trying to put comics online, and that was kind of making my own online website, which I did not know what I was doing at all.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: I did not understand the like bare-boned content management system that this company at the time called Keenspot/Keenspace had been working on, and I was like just trying to figure it out and this is not one of those stories of me learning all of the ins and outs, know exactly

how it works and all that stuff, like no, I never really figured out very well. It always kind of perplexed me, but it was like an early foray for me, and then when I went to school for graphic design, which I did here in the DC area at the American University, you had a chance to specialize in web or specialize in print.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And it felt like a good idea to specialize towards web and I know a lot of people that said like, "Well, with the web, you can't do as much, and it just doesn't seem as fun and as creative so I'm really going to print."

Emily Lewis: Hmm.

Ross Nover: And it's amazing how many people I know have looked back on that decision or I have met that made a similar decision who were like, "Well, I find print worth to do, but I should probably have learned that web stuff sooner."

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: So I'm really glad I dove into it because in comparison to many other people I've known in their professional careers, it's like I've been very fortunate to always at least have job opportunity.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

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Ross Nover: And that very much has come through specializing into a field that there's a lot of growth at the right time and hopefully a little bit of talent and luck on top of that.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: So it really served that early stuff, but the way they taught web design and the web and all that kind of stuff that a designer would have to touch, and there wasn't specialized fields within that. It was just like you're a web person and you do web things. There wasn't sysadmins and front-end developers and back-end developers and QA people and this and that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: It was just like this one person is in charge of all of it who just do the whole thing.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: In school, we weren't really that well versed in a lot of the practical aspects at all. It was like, "Make a thing in Photoshop, slice it and then make the links in Dreamweaver and then put it online."

Emily Lewis: Yeah. [Laughs]

Ross Nover: But honestly, at the time I was at school, we knew how to put it online. We'd put on a CD and turn it in, so like we didn't even have the experience…

Emily Lewis: Oh, right, I remember that.

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Ross Nover: Yeah, exactly…

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: Of like really posting it online and seeing it online. Browser testing was a foreign concept.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And so like it was just a very different time, but I think it also came out of, with no disrespect to my teachers at the time, there's this cycle that had to happen where something would happen in the real world and then teachers would learn it and then they would work it into a curriculum and then they would teach it.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Ross Nover: And that was a slower process, and I think it had to speed up a lot and teachers have gotten a lot more savvy over the years about keeping up with those things, especially as technologies have to evolve. But at the time, we were arguably doing about three or four years behind what web design was really doing, and I think American University, I know, has sped up that a lot. I'm proud to say that I tried to help spearhead some of those efforts, but it was a real wake-up call when I got out to the real world and suddenly, I had to post real sites and really upload things to real FTPs and really make websites happen and troubleshoot and test and work in content and all of that kind of fun stuff.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: But it's been a mad dash ever since I got to say. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Well, and part of that mad dash was creating friendly design. How did you start that, and how have you grown it since it started?

Ross Nover: Yeah. So in 2012, I had been teaching full time in American University for about two full academic years, and I was looking for a new opportunity, and at the time I thought that was probably going to be taking the summer to do some freelance work, turn that freelance work into some portfolio work, make a new portfolio website, which, as all designers know, takes about ten times as long as any other industry I've ever been familiar with because you have to not only revamp your resume, but redesign your resume, design a portfolio site, make case studies, make all the images at the site and all of that. So I figured I'd take the summer and do all that and start working out of the coworking space here in the DC area called Canvas, and it was at a point where I had to still explain what a coworking space was to people.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Because it's a different time now, it really is. So it was a real right place for a time sort of thing where the coworking space was really thriving and there was a great social community of events happening at the space itself, so by going there every day I was meeting people and going to events just by sitting at my desk, which was a really fantastic opportunity. So I was doing some freelance work and I had a good friend named Geoff Silverstein who was also at Owners Summit,

and we had talked about working together on projects, but like most projects that have no set deadline, budget or reason for happening as to specific time, it kept slipping.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: We were like, "We should work together on something because it could be cool," but it was very vague. So after a while of not doing anything, I said, "Why don't we take some work and split the work on it, split the money on it, and see how it goes to work together?" And it just so happened that he had a position that he was looking to leave, so we did that and for the summer, we worked on a couple of projects to just see how we liked working together, and I definitely liked working with another designer as opposed to working by myself.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: I felt like I was being pushed further. We had better ideas. We're passing files back and forth and projects back and forth. We had someone to talk over, "I don't know what to write in this email, or how to write it, or does this sound okay?" And it just helped me get over a lot of those smaller little anxious moments and really push our work forward, but because of that coworking space community, while we're working on that, other work was coming up and we hit a point in the early fall where we realize there might be something to really just continuing to do this and not applying for other jobs and really see where this went.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Ross Nover: And we decided maybe we should just focus on that. So it definitely was a kind of test the waters and see how it goes and then decide if we like it and then keep going, which has been a real approach in strategy, especially in the earlier years in terms of how we did a lot of what we did of which as we talk about hiring a little later, I think you'll hear over and over again. We are a "slow and steady wins the race" sort of approach.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And it doesn't sound as flashy as we dug a huge hole and worked our way out of it.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: But we've took on a little bit of work and then we kept doing that and we kind of wait for it for it build up, and so we built off of that, and I had a former student reach out to me who said, "I could use an internship. Do you know of any places?" And I looked at Geoff and said, "You know, I think we have enough work that an intern could help, and she's a good student, and I knew would be good at it." But at the time we didn't have a name and we said, "Well, we need to have a name before we could have an intern." [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

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Ross Nover: So we finally prioritized that, and for a couple of weeks there, we were Friendly Neighborhood Design Co., but that is entirely too long of a name for a thing.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And we found that both us and our clients were shortening it so we finally just shortened it, so now we're Friendly Design Co. So that was all throughout 2012 with that kind of formative process, and since then we've grown as a team. We're now a group of eight people total including Geoff and myself. Geoff now resides in Omaha, Nebraska heading our efforts out there and also very much working with the team in DC. We take on a variety of work, though our focus is really branding and interactive projects and we've been able to do some really cool stuff, and I really think that doing work together has let us do way better work than we're able to do on our own.

Lea Alcantara: So before we dive into the nuances like the in between from "I was just working with Geoff" to an 8-person agency, let's talk about just some basics about hiring.

Ross Nover: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: What are common misconceptions business owners have about hiring in the first place?

Ross Nover: Sure. So I think the most common misconception I've encountered is that people think of one way of hiring and they got hung up that that's the only way that exist as a possible way of hiring. For example, I know people who will hire on contract and they insist that the only thing that they could possibly do is hire contractors, and I've seen people, in my mind, might have a rather ballooned team of contractors where it's twelve people on contract and no full-time employees.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: I've also seen someone afraid of a full-time employee because they think the only thing they could do is a full-time employee and the idea of doing a contractor at some sort of part-time position just doesn't make any sense to them or whatever, and the truth is there's a huge variety of ways of hiring someone that you can go forth and try to see what's going to work for you and to see what you're most comfortable with, and whatever that way is, I think as long as you are honest and open to the people that apply for that position, you can do whatever works for you. That being said, we do not have unpaid interns because there's a million reasons why a professional industry such as design and tech just should not have unpaid interns.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Read the American Institute of Graphic Artists' statement on internships. They'll tell you what I'm talking about, but pay your interns. It's a good thing to do. It encourages better outcomes. It's a better practice. But that aside, figure out what's going to work for you and what you want to do and what way you want to grow your team, and then grow it in the way that is most natural for you and your business.

Emily Lewis: I feel like that point is the one that I think it was you who shared it at Owners Summit, which was really what turned my perspective because I was coming from a perspective of really viewing hiring from like a full-time position thing and the sense of responsibility of what you need to owe someone or pay someone and guarantee security and those types of things, and so almost making it a bigger thing that made sense for our business.

Ross Nover: Right.

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Emily Lewis: And almost hearing you and other people talk that it really can be whatever you want, it really just opened up my mind of that hiring is a way to do more with the business rather than being this – yeah, I think I viewed it as a burden as opposed to opportunity.

Ross Nover: Yeah, yeah, and I think it's really about figuring out what you're trying to build, too. I mean, if the end result is that you want to have full-time employees, then that's good to know and you can build towards that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: But if you're not able to take that leap, you can advertise for a position that is part time and with the goal of after six months, hopefully making it full time, or you can say it's part time and then try to replace it with a full-time position if that doesn't work for the applicants that you have or whatever else. I feel like I've encountered a lot of metaphors around dating and hiring being very similar.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: Like about it being the right fit and like putting out there what you need and like all this kind of stuff. Don't take me too seriously from like an HR standpoint.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

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Ross Nover: But my point being that you can put out there what you're trying to get out of the relationship and there are people out there that want that on the other side, and it might not be who you originally thought, but there might be someone who's the perfect fit who a part-time job fits into the rest of their schedule that they have, if that's what you want to do or that's what fits for your business.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: The way that we built at first is by working at first with freelancers and then we would look back on a chunk of time about three months or six months and realize, "Here's how much we paid in freelancers," and then realize, "What would a full-time person that could have handled that work have cost us?"

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And then realize, "Oh, not only can we afford a full-time hire, but we already could have afforded a full-time hire.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And I think, especially for those first couple of positions now that we have kind of a more fleshed out team, the more it worked, the math on it all works a little differently. But especially like our first developer, for example, we've hired outside developers and we did it on a project-by-project basis where it was, okay, we're going to get a project, it's worth $20,000. We estimate $5,000 of that is development. We find the developer that's willing to do it for that amount of money, and then

if we consider it more of a project cost than like business operations cost, like the money comes in is automatically set aside.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And that kind of let us mentally break it down a little bit, and then when you look back on four or five projects and realize, "Oh, we're doing that a lot, that added up to X amount of money. If we gave that as a salary, we could afford X amount of person," and you realize, "Oh, we really could hire someone or maybe we already should have hired someone or we could be able to doing it now. The work doesn't seem to be going anywhere." But we transition that from an external position to an internal position.

Lea Alcantara: So I'm curious, you mentioned, okay, hiring a developer.

Ross Nover: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: That seems like an obvious need for a lot of our listeners when capacity is full or if there a design agency, they need development. What are other situations that prompt a need or consideration for hiring?

Ross Nover: Yeah, in terms of common misconceptions, one of the things that I've heard is really different philosophies on what you should hire for. I've heard some people say, "Build out the capacity for what you already know how to do. Find people that know how to do what you know how to do, hire them on and then you have more capacity to do it." So if you're a brand designer hiring more brand designers, you now have twice as many brand designers you can get more brand design work, et cetera.

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But I've also heard people say, "Don't hire for what you know how to do, then you're building out your capacity. Now, instead of just being able to do design, you can do design and development or design, development and UX or design, development, UX and VR/AR, whatever it is." And I think both can be somewhat true, it really depends on your business and how you're growing it and what your clientele is and who you want it to be and where you're trying to head to, things like that. For us, it's been a mixture of we have this capacity.

We're big believers that working together produces better work than working apart, and along with that is, working with a team that is on your team produces better work than working with external people. We like working with external people, but we would rather work with our own team because there's ramp-up time with working with other people, just like there is with clients.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And the more you cut down on that, the easier everything is. So we like building a team. We want to build a team and so we are in the efforts of trying to do that and have a larger team. So there are efficiencies to working with the same people over and over again, and that means building a team, whether you're paying for their insurance or not, that's building a team.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Ross Nover: And we really want to do that, so we hit a point with some of the early hires with just we're at capacity or we're past capacity. I think a lot of business people or business owners I know run into this problem where they start by doing everything, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: They are the accountant and the designer and the developer and the copywriter and the operations person and the HR department, and all of the things, they're everything, and we've become big believers that like if you only have so much time in a day, what do you want to spend the time doing? And everything else you should hire. Whether that's again internal or external, part time versus full-time, that I think depends on the position stuff, and we have a full-time team, but we also have external support in the positions of, for example, we have an external account.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: She's on retainer. She's great. She works with design firms and knows how design firms work, which is not easy to find in an accountant. There's no reason for us to have a full-time accountant, and this is like an arrangement that works for everybody, and the same where we have an HR consultant who we have on retainer who can help us with HR concerns.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: She's helped us with writing job descriptions, doing the initial screening on job applicants, on figuring out what to do in HR situations that we're not sure exactly how to handle, helping us write an employee manual, and things like that where it's good to have that person around, but it doesn't make sense to hire full time because we wouldn't have enough work or enough money coming in to pay for that person's full-time salary. But for the most part, for what we do day to day, it's, "Let's offload those things because I'm not good at nor efficient at nor interested in doing some of those tasks and let's try and focus on what we want to be doing."

Emily Lewis: I think that's an interesting scenario because I think that's the goal, at least, it's a goal for Lea and I, but then you also have the challenge, especially when you're starting out, if you don't have the money to justify those sorts of expenses.

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Ross Nover: Sure.

Emily Lewis: Is that something that you work for? Do you set aside a certain amount to have in a bank before you decide to hire whether, especially for those ones that are like less, they're not billable, like bring on a developer that you can maybe bill out all the time for versus bringing on an HR consultant that's just purely internal expenses sort of.

Ross Nover: Right. And that all didn't happen at once, I mean, I think accountant is a real start from scratch sort of position because making sure getting off on the right foot and moving forward on the right foot is really, really crucial.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: But it's also a rather small expense. I mean, we're talking hundreds of dollars over the course of a couple of months, not thousands.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And that price or that cost can be a little more at initial setting up of ways working on it and things like that, but on a monthly basis. It's not very much at all and it's pretty easy to account for, and the HR consultant, we have found immensely useful and I think it's been great for us, but that didn't happen right away. That's happened within the last year. So that's not something that I would say if you're starting a business, get an HR consultant.

I think that's more of a down the line thing, but I also think that the takeaway there or the philosophy there is if there's something that you're really struggling with doing, don't be afraid to ask for help and in those cases, if it's something that frees you up to do something else, it might be worth that expense. So if I can do five hours of billable work versus spending five hours not getting very far in

writing an employee manual, it is a better use of my time if you're doing the billable work, going out and getting more work, et cetera, et cetera than it is for me to try and write an employee manual and also tear my hair out in the process.

Emily Lewis: How about when you are getting to that place where you know you are going to hire something part time or full time? Is that something that you're planning for in advance? Are you setting aside money for that?

Ross Nover: Yeah. I mean, I think there are two pieces. One is having conversations with your accountant on what that could look like because an accountant can help you look at the books and say, "Well, these are your expenses this year. If the amount you're bringing in were to stay consistent over the next year, here's how much you should be bringing in. Let's look at what would happen if you brought in a designer, a developer or whatever it is." And that will give you a baseline, but you have to remember what that's going to replace.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: If you bring on that extra person, is that extra person freeing you up to do something else or adding to your capacity that you can then bill for?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: For example, when we had a team of four, so myself, Geoff and two designers, that's when we decided to bring on both a developer and someone to help with business development, and helping with business development can mean a couple of different things to different people. To us, that was mainly focusing on writing proposals in addition to many other tasks, but that was the one that we really kept coming to as the most important. The reason being, Geoff was writing a lot of proposals. They were taking him a long time to write and it was slowing down our response time,

which we thought was slowing down our ability to get projects, and then we looked at what a salary might be for someone to do that position and realized, "Okay, if we won four or five projects more than we were winning based on being more responsive and having someone dedicated to that time and freeing up Geoff to have more of the initial conversations than writing the proposals, that could be worth it, and it could be worked at very easily."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And so sometimes it's getting a little creative with what that position could be and what it would free you up to do, but I think the accountant piece is piece number one. Thinking about what it frees you up to do is piece number two, and then the third is, yeah, having some padding, definitely true. I mean, we are, like I said, "slow and steady wins the race" people, and what's that meant for us is keeping up operating expenses in the bank at all times. I mean, it's varied a little bit, but it's always at least I'd say two to three months of operating expenses that we try to keep on hand or know is coming in versus by looking at upcoming invoices and things like that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: So we know what's coming a little bit and can plan for it and hopefully start knowing what we're doing.

Emily Lewis: We had a couple of listener questions. Both Rachel and Travis Gertz at Louder Than Ten, they have essentially the same question.

Ross Nover: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: They were curious if you have thoughts about when it makes sense to hire a new person versus promoting somebody to a new responsibility or training them to a new position.

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Ross Nover: Yeah, great question. Go, go Rachel and Travis! [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: So we've done a mix of both. It really depends on what the position is versus the staff that we have, and first off, we very much like to promote or advancing within whenever possible because ramping someone up on the team is no small amount of time and effort, and hiring a new person is no small amount of time and effort, and a process is entailed. So actually, we have that business development position I mentioned previously, that has slowly morphed into partially a business development position, but much more a project management position.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Which was a slow transition over the course of I would say about a year and was not an easy task both for us to do and to train up that role, but also for the person in that position whose name also coincidentally is Rachel.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: So on all sides, that took a lot of effort, but it started with a small project and seeing how that went and overseeing it a lot and slowly shifted into more and more projects, more and more complicated projects supporting more, and we've actually signed her up into apprenticeship that lets her really focus on learning the skills of project management and has been really worth it, but also

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kind of knowing when to be hands off and saying like, "Let us know when there's a problem," but otherwise, removing ourselves, not micromanaging it and trying to let them run with it.

And that was a lot of smaller conversations that led up to that, both with the employee Rachel about what she wanted and what her goals were and what she was interested in and testing the waters a little bit and seeing her interest in different facets of the position, and also from our end, talking about what positions we wanted to have, and we realized that for Geoff and myself, managing projects is not the best use of our time.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Because it takes a ton of time.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And again, it's like what do we want to be doing, what are we good at doing, and what's best for the business for us to spend our time doing.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And going through and reviewing copy, writing timelines, emailing for updates, all of these things take a ton of time to do well. It's not an easy task and it's not necessarily a task that we're best suited to.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Ross Nover: So there's another design firm here in the DC area called Threespot. There's the owner there named Bill Colgrove who has been really amazing to just talk shop with a lot, and he's given me advice that if someone else can do – I forgot the percent – I want to say 80% is good on a job at something that you could do, you should delegate it and have someone else do it, and I really believe like that that sort of thing does not come easy, especially to business owners where you got into business doing things for yourself and now you're giving it up for someone else to do.

But writing proposals, I think at first, Rachel was not 80% as good because it's a very specific industry and it's a very specific way of writing and Rachel had to get to know the writing style we are going for in proposals, and also all of the very minutiae terminology of design and development, but now, I would say is very good at writing proposals, and the same with project management and has found her own ways of going about on all these things and is excelling at those tasks.

Emily Lewis: So reflecting back on that, obviously, it was a good fit to promote her or train her internally, but do you feel like you could say that it has worked out better than had you hired someone who already knew project management and brought them on?

Ross Nover: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Because is it kind of like she was already a fit for you and that just made it more sense to go in that direction versus bringing someone on?

Ross Nover: So I really don't like the term "culture fit" because culture fit gets used a lot of time to mean already like the people that we already have on board.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

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Ross Nover: And it becomes like an excuse to not hire more diverse applicants, so I don't like that term, but there is something to someone who already knows the team, already knows how you all work, already knows the philosophies and values that are important to a business and the rhythm of how things work within that business, and having someone with all those skills is half of it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And then just being able to do the specific job is I would say the other half. Does that look better than hiring someone else? I don't think you want better, but I think we saw what roles Rachel was playing, what role she wanted to play, how to also advance her while staying at Friendly, which for a small firm is not always easy because in the design field, a lot of time the only way to move up is to move out.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And we didn't want that to happen with her and with other positions, and so when we have the opportunity to create growth for our employees, we also want to do that.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: I think we're very interested in doing that because if you have two designers, they can become better designers. You can give them a little more responsibility. You can try and create a job title that reflects that responsibility, but at some point, if you're not bringing on more people, if you're not growing, if you're not bringing on new roles and new tasks, you're also in some way limiting their growth. I remember there was a talk at that Owners Summit we all went to about growth.

I don't remember the gentleman's name, but he run a marketing and analytics firm as I recall and he talked about how growth allows not just new people to come on board, but the people in positions to grow into new positions because a bigger business needs more positions that allows for more growth.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And I don't think you should grow for growth's sake, but I think that's a pretty good reason also to promote from within and grow.

Lea Alcantara: And just as an aside, that was Wil Reynolds, I believe.

Ross Nover: Thank you. Yes, Wil Reynolds who gave an amazing talk that I was so busy frantically taking notes on with this random quote, this crazy thing.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: Yeah, sometimes I can't really sit still.

Emily Lewis: You know, we talked a little bit about your accountant and kind of projecting out what you could support. We have a listener question from Stephen Callender and his is a little bit more specific about that, and hopefully, we can address it, but he was asking like, "If you're bringing someone on and they're billable and they're essentially making $40 an hour from the business cost perspective, how much revenue should their role be adding to the company? In essence, like how much value should this staff member be bringing to the company to justify having them on staff?"

Ross Nover: This would be a great time for me to throw out a specific number that said, "Oh, this number, this percentage, this thing."

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: I think that's really difficult to achieve, at least for us. I mean, we are trying to be much better about tracking specific metrics. The truth is we haven't done the best job of that to date. Some people are all about billable hours and every hour should be billed by the hour and things like that, but if you really track all of that stuff very specifically, then you can also get into, "Do different people have different billable rates based on this, that and the other thing?"

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: At the time, especially for our initial roles, like we just realized we needed the help.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And we wanted that help and we thought, well, like I said, the initial roles were started as freelance roles that we brought in house, and that makes it really easy to calculate if it's worth it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Because you realize you just paid another designer $20,000 to help on a project and then you realized, "If we brought on a designer full time, how many projects could they have done in the last eight weeks, and how much would those projects be worth?"

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And then you can compare that number to probably be bigger than $20,000 to what it would cost to have a person of a comparable level on salary, and that number will be probably lower. Now, the number of what someone costs to be on salary factors in more than just salary. It can depend on the minutiae of your benefits package and things like that. We're big believers that in providing full benefits to our employees and just knowing that that's a cost going in to all of our calculations, and in varying times we've estimated different ways, but it's about an extra 33% outside of salary can be a good estimate of what a lot of those other costs can be in terms of payroll and insurance and things like that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Of course, that number can vary depending on how you're providing insurance and are you going from a simple payroll system to a new one in order to do this, that and the other thing. So there's a lot of more minutiae to it, but it's at least a number to have in mind that at least let you get it in your head, "Okay, well, if the salary was $60,000, divide that by 12 multiply that by the number of weeks and figure out how many weeks and versus all those other numbers I said before, and I bet you'll find that once you get that person up to speed, it would have been worth it to hire as long as that contract work you were doing remains somewhat consistent.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: So Ross, sort of following up on Stephen's question, maybe this model isn't how your agency approaches it, but do you ever approach a new hire from the perspective of saying you need

to have a certain amount of cash on hand relative to that new hire's compensation that you should already have in the bank before you bring on that other person?

Ross Nover: Yeah. We do try and make sure that we have about two months on hand in terms of making sure we have their salary covered, their position secure and that you're in a good place to hire for. So for us, we've been very slow about that and making sure we have those things, and then also if it's your first hire, keep in mind a couple of things. One, while nobody wants to fire anybody if things don't work out, the way you are hiring for this position is not permanent for life.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Ross Nover: All jobs, unfortunately, are temporary. So if money dries up or you're not getting the benefits out of it that you need to, that's okay. It's not going to feel great.

Emily Lewis: That's hard.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Ross Nover: I didn't say it was easy.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. [Laughs]

Ross Nover: If you're listening to this and this happens to you, I will make you the same offer that Bill Colgrove made to me, which is on that day, I will buy you a drink, just find me here in DC, but you have to fly to DC.

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Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: That's the one expense. But once you fly to DC, I'll buy you a drink and we'll talk shop. It will be a rough day, but I think hopefully you're not going to let that day sneak up on you. You're going to be having conversations with people at the right times. One of the big things about hiring that I'm a huge believer in is making sure you have good and open communication with your employees or contractors or freelancers or whatever it is.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Do not dangle a position in front of them that's not going to exist anytime soon. I had that happen to me and I don't want to ever do that to somebody else. One time we came what I feel as too close to that where we had someone we had worked with on a couple of projects and we said, "After doing a project, we would discuss what a partnership together might look like," and when we had that discussion, we didn't feel like the partnership seemed like a good idea and that other person was pretty hurt by that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And even that didn't feel great. Even though we did not promise anything, we said we'd have the discussion, and we had it, but I think being honest with people with where you are, what you're able to do, what you want to do in longer term, it might not be fun conversations, but it is smarter conversations and I think is appreciated in the long run. Again, it's kind of like dating.

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Emily Lewis: [Laughs] Awesome. I think we have enough time. Do you have any good resources that you found that have helped you as you've considered hiring or just running your business that you'd love to recommend?

Ross Nover: Yeah. I would say, first off, talking to other business owners I found vastly helpful.

Emily Lewis: Oh, yeah.

Ross Nover: Like I used to think of myself very much as a designer, and I still think of myself as a designer, but I realized very quickly that I needed to talk to other business owners in a lot of ways more than I needed to talk to other designers when it came to my professional growth.

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Because people who have been through it, and forming that network of people that you can go to on that day where you have to let someone go or on that day where you're really nervous about hiring and all those sorts of things is vastly, vastly helpful, and how do you find that network? There are definitely events strewn about the area. I would say if you're involved in design, AIGA is a great resource for that. There are also plenty of conferences. We all met at the Owners Summit, part of the Bureau of Digital conference series. I definitely recommend that one. And other ones like it or just going to those conferences and making sure you're trying to chat with those sorts of people, and going to events and meeting the speakers afterwards, all that sort of stuff.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And people are really willing to talk shop because everyone I've talked to, someone else did it for them and they like doing it with other people, and even if that other firm is twice your size and has been around five times as long, they know what you're going through. They've been through it before.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And I found people to be immensely generous with their time to meet up for coffee, lunch, whatever it is, drinks or five, whatever it needs to be.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And that is really the best resource. Myself and my business partner are 50/50 partnership, and sometimes that means I think one thing and he thinks the other and we need a tiebreaker or not a tiebreaker so much as an external advice to push us one way or another and figure out how to get past the deadlock.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And a lot of times that's been another business owner, talking with another business owner about their experience and realizing that that can help us figure that out. The other is finding a good accountant, and again, going to other businesses that are like your business and learning who their accounts are.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Accountants are not a trade secret. An accountant can work for two design firms or five design firms. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And finding ones that work with your type of business is really, really helpful because a great accountant that has never dealt with a design firm, I don't know exactly what the difference is, but we tried it in the past and they just don't seem to understand the cycles of it, the expenses of it, what aren't expenses with it, all those sorts of things.

Emily Lewis: Yeah,

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Ross Nover: And so finding that is really helpful, and then having conversations with those people. In terms of books and websites and things like that, I just found this website called orgdesignfordesignorgs.com.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: I thought it would be .org. I really did.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: But it's a website/book by O'Reilly and I've been reading through it, and I don't feel like I've learned anything brand new, but it is, for me anyway, in one place a lot of things I've read in a lot of other places.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: And then one other thing I'd say while you're out there trying to find resources everywhere you look is just because one article comes out strong against something that you believe in doesn't mean the article is right.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: I mean, there's plenty of advice we've read out there that is not right for our business or not right for us. People that say, "Do it fast and loose. Do it this way and that," all that sort of stuff. Like "hike your own hike."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: It's a term that one of my former students taught me that I really think is true when you're running your own business as well.

Lea Alcantara: So speaking of generosity of time, [laughs] that's all the time we have for today, but before we finish up, we've got our rapid fire ten questions so our listeners can get to know you a bit better.

Ross Nover: Great.

Lea Alcantara: Are you ready?

Ross Nover: Yeah, it's so funny because we have a rapid fire set of questions in our hiring process that we do as well.

Lea Alcantara: Fun.

Ross Nover: It's where it's don't ever think the answer, just real quick, favorite color, coffee or tea, Star Wars or Harry Potter, boom, boom, boom.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And it's always really interesting to see how people answer. So I love it. You're turning the tables, I'm ready for it.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Okay, first question, what's your go-to karaoke song?

Ross Nover: Oh, great question, it's recently changed because I realized how repetitive the song was doing before really was and how terrible my vocal range is.

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Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: So it used to be this song by Beck called *Debra*.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And I just do not have the falsetto for that anymore, and now it's *Space Oddity* by David Bowie. Everyone loves that song. Everyone will sing along. You don't have to sing it alone.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: It's great.

Emily Lewis: What advice would you give your younger self?

Ross Nover: Oh, man, you don't look fat in that photo.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And you're on the right track.

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite PG-rated curse word?

Ross Nover: Oh, man, so I'm a huge fan of the show *The Good Place*.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And it's an absolutely great show, you should definitely watch it, and they can't curse in the show because they're in the afterlife and no one is allowed to curse there, and they say, "Holy forking shirtballs."

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Ah! [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And that one really stuck with me.

Emily Lewis: Who is your favorite superhero?

Ross Nover: Hmm, man, that's like I know it's rapid fire, I'm thinking too much. Lately, Spiderman. I'm playing the new PlayStation game, it's amazing.

Lea Alcantara: What is your favorite time of the year?

Ross Nover: Oh, fall, when you can just start smelling.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Ross Nover: Like people are starting to light fireplaces and you just get a little bit of that in the air.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Ross Nover: Oh, it's the best.

Emily Lewis: If you could change one thing about the web, what would it be?

Ross Nover: Removing comment sections.

Emily Lewis: Hmm. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: What are three words that describe you?

Ross Nover: Hmm, clever, I hope, silly, for sure, and thoughtful.

Emily Lewis: How about three words that describe your work?

Ross Nover: Oh, definitely, I hope clever, at least those are my favorite projects when I'm able to do that. Clear design, you'd be amazed how many times clear is just what you're going for. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Ross Nover: And easy-to-use, I'm hyphenating that so it's one word.

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite meal of the day?

Ross Nover: Breakfast.

Emily Lewis: Last question, coffee or tea? [Laughs]

Ross Nover: Coffee.

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Lea Alcantara: Awesome.

Emily Lewis: We already knew that from the beginning! [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Ross Nover: Yeah, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly. [Laughs]

Ross Nover: That was easy.

Lea Alcantara: So that's all the time we have for today. Thanks for joining the show.

Ross Nover: It was my absolute pleasure. Ever since I met you all at Owners Summit, I've been listening and really enjoying it.

Lea Alcantara: Awesome.

Emily Lewis: Oh, thank you. In case our listeners wanted to follow up with you, where can they find you online?

Ross Nover: Well, you can try Friendly Design Co at friendlydesign.co and my contact info is on the About page.

Emily Lewis: Awesome. It was absolutely great having you on. We really appreciate how open and frank you are about running a business.

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[Music starts]

Ross Nover: It's my pleasure and if anyone listens to this and wants to talk more, please reach out because I think we've all been there and we could all use friends sometimes.

Lea Alcantara: Awesome. CTRL+CLICK is produced by Bright Umbrella, a web services agency invested in education and social good. Today's podcast would not be possible without the support of this episode's sponsor! Many thanks to Empirical Path!

Emily Lewis: We'd also like to thank our hosting partner: Arcustech.

Lea Alcantara: And thanks to our listeners for tuning in! If you want to know more about CTRL+CLICK, make sure you follow us on Twitter @ctrlclickcast or visit our website ctrlclickcast.com. And if you liked this episode, consider donating to the show — then give us a review on Stitcher or Apple Podcasts or both! Links are in our show notes and on our site!

Emily Lewis: Don't forget to tune in to our next episode which will kick off our October focus on mental health and wellbeing. Author and coach Gina DeLapa will join us to talk about thriving at work. Be sure to check out ctrlclickcast.com/schedule for more upcoming topics.

Lea Alcantara: This is Lea Alcantara …

Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis …

Lea Alcantara: Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

Emily Lewis: Cheers!

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