

Exit to Protocol: A Future After Retirement

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Arguably one of the best television shows of the twenty-first century¹ is *Fleabag* from auteur Phoebe Waller-Bridge. While critically acclaimed across multiple dimensions of cinematic artistry, two qualities elevated it to unanimous acclaim. The first, *Fleabag* pioneered a new twist on the narrative device of breaking the fourth wall.² Second, the show ended after only two seasons.

Having contributed a novel paradigm to the medium of television, *Fleabag* made its exit. No one has dared try the mechanism again, but the potential awaits; the streaming platforms that drove the popularization of the miniseries format give creators and showrunners a form factor to create a cinematic universe without the fear of needing to jump the shark with endless seasons.

Few blueprints exist for graceful endings in the world of corporate enterprise, where a celebrated exit is less of an ending and more of an expansion—a merger, acquisition, or going public. A business closure announcement typically includes apologetic phrasing like “we regret to inform you,” “unfortunately, after years of . . .”

The 2023 closing announcement from IKEA’S world-renowned research and design lab SPACE10³ was a refreshing twist. After ten years of work and with no apologies, no asks for continued funding, and no regrets about the end, they shared a parting sentiment that “together we have achieved what we set out to do” and it was time to say goodbye.⁴ The clean curtain call was as radical as the team and its portfolio. SPACE10 took as much spacetime as it needed to ful-

1. Or as *Rolling Stone* would consider it, the fifth best of all time, or as President Obama would consider it, the best of 2019.
2. The twist itself is not the point of bringing up this example, but for the reader who hasn’t yet seen *Fleabag* and might, I put this explanation in the footnotes to avoid a spoiler. For the reader who will never watch *Fleabag* for whatever reason, the mechanism in question is that the central character who breaks the fourth wall quite often in the first season finds herself in the company of someone who is also able to break the fourth wall with her in the second, resulting in simultaneous shock, relief, and plot enablement.
3. www.ikea.com/global/en/stories/people-planet/space10-190904/
4. space10.com/history

fill its purpose and having done so, retired gracefully.

Their webpage transitioned from an active platform of updates, events, and experiments to an archival portfolio site. The *product* of their work would live on in this memorial, but what they did to preserve the *process* is even more incredible. A collection of resources including keynote templates, an archive of open-source projects and exhibitions, and a handbook detailing types of roles, contracts, expectations, and form factors of meetings, birthday celebrations, air quality, and more are shared with an invitation to “borrow anything you need.”⁵

Such generous documentation and sharing of the metawork of a studio or any place of knowledge work is beyond rare in an industry where most documents are labeled *confidential* and nondisclosure agreements are signed before first introductions are made. The SPACE10 gift, which can be framed as the dance between what is created and how it’s made, was made possible by the compilation of nearly a decade of work, with an immense amount of time and care devoted not only to developing and refining the underlying methods, but to documenting and making them available to distribute.

Timber Schroff in *Safe New World* lays out how *workplace safety protocols*, defined as “intentional patterns of human behavior that reduce work-related injury, disease, and death,” have been a neglected source of overall improvements in workplace safety.⁶ Borrowing from this framing, *workplace productivity protocols* can be defined as intentional patterns of human behavior that increase the capability of an organization to outperform itself. These protocols prescribe a choreography for objects and bodies and brains, a dance notation spanning months of run time on the stage of meeting rooms and emails.

5. space10.com/resources

6. Timber Schroff, *Safe New Worlds*, Summer of Protocols 2023. summerofprotocols.com/research/module-three/safe-new-world

Some protocols may have subtle effects on productivity—like placing a water-cooler in the crosshairs of highly trafficked hallways to encourage interdepartmental cross-pollination⁷—or direct effects like implementing synchronous working hours for distributed remote teams. SPACE10’s handbook details many examples, such as “we request the use of Google Calendar over Apple iCal.”⁸ Larger productivity protocols or protocol systems are recognizable by name as design sprints, scrum, or agile processes. They are intended to shape a more effective organization. These organizations are in effect systems of protocols that a worker inhabits when entering a workplace, taking on a particular protocol identity depending on their role. Workplace safety or productivity protocols are a subset of this larger system.

If workplace productivity protocols have similar attributes to internet protocols wherein nobody owns them, everybody can use them, and anybody can improve them,⁹ then like internet protocols, they attract continuous improvement through the same evolutionary cycle of birth, mutation, selection, and death Schroff illustrates for safety protocols. However, the power dynamics in a workplace can impose selection pressures that prevent protocols from adapting through mutation, resulting in productivity protocols that become unfit for purpose. This stuckness has characteristics comparable to the ossification of internet protocols. Agile development expert Daniel Mezick’s 2016 essay, *The Agile Industrial Complex*, presents a fantastic case study of how a productivity protocol system has stagnated, in part due to the selection pressures that prevent protocol evolution, put in place by the institutions, thought leaders,

and consulting firms that have made a profitable business out of it.¹⁰ But rather than experiencing protocol death through abandonment, the agile industrial complex creates an entire workforce engaged in what David Graeber called *bullshit jobs*—a group of workers kept employed under imbalanced power structures that encourage keeping up the pretenses of unnecessary work, prolonging a performative and “spiritually violent” ethic.¹¹ A protocolized framing of a *bullshit job* would be any worker experiencing what Summer of Protocols researcher Angela Walch calls protocol dysphoria.

Graeber’s provisional definition of a bullshit job is “a form of employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence, even though the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case”¹² and suggests five categories these jobs roughly fall under, summarized here:

- *flunkies*: jobs who make those in power feel important
- *goons*: jobs that exist only to perpetuate their own existence, artificially creating a need where there isn’t one in order to sell something that fulfills it
- *duct tapers*: jobs that continuously perform temporary fixes even though a permanent fix is within reach
- *box tickers*: jobs that follow business liturgy for the sake of something looking like work
- *taskmasters*: jobs that create extra, unnecessary work for others, specified by two types; type 1: supervising work that does not need supervision and type 2: inventing unnecessary work to occupy those they manage in order to keep them employed¹³

7. And risk decreasing productivity due to increased socializing time.

8. Kajsa Lindström et al., *Space10 Handbook*, August 2023, docs.google.com/document/d/16nCOZkIdlsmB-wfQHHABVCt-YoY2jufxZt_uQaxyW2s/

9. Doc Searls, “Net Pains,” essay, in *The Intention Economy: When Customers Take Charge* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), p. 103–105.

10. Daniel Mesnick, “The Agile Industrial Complex, Invitenotimpose: New Technology Solutions,” New Technology Solutions | Enabling Enterprise Agility, August 6, 2021, newtechusa.net/aic

11. David Graeber, “Why Do Those in Bullshit Jobs Regularly Report Themselves Unhappy? (On Spiritual Violence, Part 1),” essay, in *Bullshit Jobs* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2019), p. 67–99.

12. Graeber, p. 8.

13. Graeber, p. 27–65.

It seems that there are actually two overarching categories of bullshit jobs. Flunkies, duct tapers, and type 2 taskmasters exist as a result of misaligned incentives and unbalanced power structures. Goons, box tickers, and type 2 taskmasters exist due to the inefficiencies of workers following ossified productivity protocols—they do not have the agency to drive protocol mutation due to adverse selection pressures. In the framing presented by Sarah Friend in *Good Death*,¹⁴ we might categorize these jobs as following protocols that should have been allowed to die.

Misaligned-incentive bullshit jobs might find a solution in the movement of Exit to Community, a movement that helps start-ups “aim to mature into ownership by their community of stakeholders” rather than “aiming for an acquisition by a more established company or a public stock offering.”¹⁵ Ownership by a community of stakeholders eliminates the need for flunkies, duct tapers, and the first type of taskmasters because the steady-state organizational model would coordinate more value creation for all. Flunkies are eliminated entirely because the premise of perceived power is unnecessary emotional overhead. Duct tapers are incentivized to work towards permanent fixes because a longer term incentive structure is in place. Type 2 Taskmasters can be reassigned to a different job that actually needs doing. Exit to Community models solve for many of the bullshit jobs created by shifting the model of ownership, resulting in realigned incentives and a group of workers with the agency to evolve them into non-bullshit protocols.

But what of the goons, box tickers, and type 1 taskmasters who are stuck following ossified productivity protocols? They may be compared to actors in a piece of *en masse* performance art, playing out a Sisyphian

masterpiece over the course of decades for a few patrons who are also performers in the same piece. Whether or not they are aware of the protocol system they are inhabiting varies by individual, as does their level of protocol dysphoria or perhaps, euphoria. Perhaps ossification of a productivity protocol is the proverbial canary in the coalmine of the office. In the same way that a safety protocol is no longer needed because a hazard has been removed, a workplace productivity protocol is not needed when human behaviors no longer account for resulting productivity. Retiring a position allows the protocol to die. For example, productivity protocols around stenography and professional typing have largely been eliminated due to the selection pressure of personal computers becoming ubiquitous, and typing becoming a more universal skill.

In consumer products and goods industries, anachronistic methods of work can simply be marketed as artisanal. In knowledge services, anachronistic methods are rarely framed as adding value.¹⁶ However, a recent shift in the orientation of purpose for knowledge industries might indicate a new market opportunity. In a paper entitled *100 Years of Corporate Planning: From Industrial Capitalism to Intellectual Monopoly Capitalism through the Lenses of the Harvard Business Review*, the authors conclude that in corporations,

The purpose of planning has also shifted from a productive-oriented purpose toward a knowledge-oriented one. In former periods, corporate planning seems to be concerned with the maximization of productivity gains (“Indexes of Machine Utilization,” 1929) and limiting waste (Smith, 1927). Knowledge, in the first and second periods, appeared as a functional resource that could be used to fulfill these purposes. In the last period, knowledge becomes an end in itself. “Intellectual assets” (Hayes & Jaikumar, 1988) are recognized as the most strategic assets that corporations must capture and manage.

16. This sentiment may change with the introduction of artificial intelligence tools where “created by humans only” and “powered by AI” are both presented as value propositions.

14. Sarah Friend, *Good Death*, Summer of Protocols 2023. summerofprotocols.com/research/good-death

15. Danny Spitzberg, Nathan Schneider, and Zebras Unite, “Exit to Community,” Exit To Community | Media Economies Design Lab | University of Colorado Boulder, 2019. www.colorado.edu/lab/medlab/exit-to-community

The never-ending process of “learning” becomes the goal of any corporate strategy (Leslie & Holloway, 2006) [...] which in turns can be used to ensure the success of operations and, ultimately, the protection of long-term financial interests.¹⁷

The rise of intellectual monopoly capitalism presents a new buyer of workplace protocols for the sake of the protocols themselves, and not necessarily for their resulting productivity. This risks replicating the incentives that led to the agile industrial complex. But if workplace protocols can be assumed to have a market value, could they serve a function in the knowledge industry equivalent to that of catalysts in the chemicals industry, increasingly becoming more multicomponent and effective towards intended outcomes? In the same way that innovations in chemical catalysts made it possible to decrease costs and the environmental damage of industrial-scale chemical processes, workplace protocols may play a similar role in the knowledge industry, if the right selection pressures are brought to bear. Chemical catalysts find their tangibility in liquids, powders, other physical forms, or shorthand notations to allow for recombination and experimentation towards improvements and learnings. What are the possible equivalent form factors of workplace productivity protocols towards the same end?

One example to consider is the Hats Protocol group:

Hats empowers groups to get things done by delegating responsibilities to the right contributors, giving them the hard and soft authorities they need to do their work, and installing real-time accountability mechanisms to ensure people follow through.¹⁸

The design of the protocol preserves the space a role occupies in an organization even when an employee might exist, much

like a job description, hiring plan, or organizational chart does. It improves upon these by functionally reducing the friction of onboarding someone into a role. The protocol system conveys the people and their relationship to data, spaces, and other people, describing it as a “role in a box” with different preset levels of access, permissions, and incentives to represent and augment the organization. These include access to specific accounts on communication platforms like Twitter or Discord, decisionmaking power, accountability, access to funds for expenses, and compensation.

If we were to imagine future capabilities of the Hats Protocol, it might attach to specific roles calendars for recurring meeting times, tickets to external events and conferences, or subscriptions to software tools. While the Hats Protocol is currently designed for digital and distributed workspaces, could it extend into physical workplaces and streamline access to buildings, particular rooms, or specialized equipment? If so, it may be a medium to capture and convey the patterns of human behavior that make up workplace productivity protocols.

If the intricate choreography of people and the productivity protocols they follow within an organization can be encoded and made tangible like the Hats Protocol does, might it become possible to incentivize efforts to develop and improve productivity protocols? Returning to our example of SPACE10, their library of resources is a generous gift that another studio might have kept confidential to maximize future consulting fees, or as Friend puts it in *Good Death*, sealed in “dumb storage” so that the “fantasy of recreating the thing being archived potentially exists”¹⁹ in case another funder comes along.

By opening up the handbook, SPACE10 created a curious variant of exiting to community. In a traditional exit to a community, SPACE10’s protocol system would be inhabited and mutated through protocol evolution as it adapted to a new set of people and

17. Hannah Bensussan, Cédric Durand, and Cecilia Rikap, *100 Years of Corporate Planning: From Industrial Capitalism to Intellectual Monopoly Capitalism through the Lenses of the Harvard Business Review (1922–2021)*, 2023.

18. docs.hatsprotocol.xyz

19. Friend, 2023.

the shocks of decentralizing its operations. It would simultaneously also be looking for a new mission, purpose, leadership structure, sources of funding, and other organizational structures to replace the ones that drove the closure decision.

Instead, through retiring and sharing some of its workplace protocols publically, this exit may shape many and new communities. This we might call an *exit to protocol*.

An exit to protocol could be compared to a *whale fall* in ocean ecosystems, where the death of a whale and its subsequent decay process after falling to the ocean floor creates an energy-rich habitat and frees up nutrients to incubate rapidly evolving new life forms that all thrive in similar but previously non-existent conditions. New species are commonly created through this process, known as adaptive radiation.

The metaphorical organizational equivalent of a whale fall at a minimum frees up talent and market share, but in releasing workplace protocols, particularly unique or novel ones, gives name to and makes tangible what contributed to its success. This is the premise for an organization to retire voluntarily, even if it could have extended its runway further. Exiting to protocol in a moment of failure or crisis would taint the entire protocol set, making it hard for it to be seen as productive, even though individual protocols might be of value. Retirement that ends on a celebratory note allows for the Bannister Effect, where organizations or emergent groups may feel more confident about adopting the new methods through seeing that it was possible to achieve success with them.

At a minimum, new organizations are saved the time, effort, and lessons learned from the protocols birthed from previously encountered “hazards”²⁰ giving new organizations with a shared ethos a solid foundation to start from—there are some organizational lessons that don’t need to be earned from scratch. An exit to protocol keeps alive

the attributes of an organization that aren’t yet ready for retirement even if its people or the larger unit might be, and seeds a new ecosystem of organizations either immediately or far off into the future, with shared underlying patterns of behavior.

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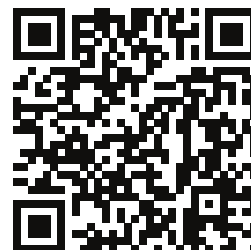
20. Schroff, 2023.

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