



slack

VARIETY PACK

Episode 13: Tick Tock Pack

Host: You're listening to the Slack Variety Pack, a collection of stories about work, life, and everything in between, brought to you by Slack. If you don't know what Slack is, head over to slack.com and change your working life forever.

Reporter 1: On this episode, neuroscientist Lisa Genova on how her debut novel, Still Alice, became a smash hit.

Lisa Genova: Thousands of books in this bookstore and think all of these people wrote books, Lisa. They all did it, so why not me.

Reporter 1: The benefits of working remotely.

Jason Fried: There's extremely talented people all over the world, and why would you want to cut yourself off from them? Our feeling has always been hire the best you can. It doesn't matter where they live. Where they live is secondary.

Reporter 1: A law professor goes from courtroom to racetrack as she attempts to break a cycling world record.

Racetrack Voice: We're starting to hear some shouts from the Velodrome.

Racetrack Voice: She's in the last three minutes. It's the last three minutes folks. Go, Molly, Molly, Molly!

Reporter 1: But first, the daily routines of famous people from the past and how they would change if we created a listicle for them today.

Speaker 1: Slack Variety Pack? Yeah, cool.

Speaker 2: Making work less worky.

Listicles Guy: Morning routines of the successful:

What twelve highly successful people eat for breakfast. See the daily routines of the world's most famous creative people.

The internet is filled with listicles about the habits of history's most remarkable people. Seriously, Google it. There are a bunch of infographics that compare an average day in the life of Beethoven, Darwin, and Picasso. You can see how they scheduled their work and leisure, who slept the longest, who skipped breakfast, and who kept their day job. These are fascinating or inspiring or something, but they're not exactly useful to the average person in 2015. What is it you want from me, infographic? Ultimately, you can't really compare the days of two different creators because it's too hard to fathom the context of different times and places. Let's take a look at some of these daily routines and imagine how they would change in 2015.

In the 1780s, Mozart would compose and give music lessons in the morning and then have a long meal and give concerts in the evening. Today he'd probably want to double check when his concert is so he'd open up Facebook to check on the event but would immediately get distracted and spend 45 minutes trying to remember why he opened Facebook in the first place. Oh, it's Salieri's birthday.

Benjamin Franklin was such a prolific inventor, writer, and statesman, there's no doubt that in 2015 he would have so many tabs open on his browser it'd just be crashing all the time, and much of his genius would be devoted to deciding whether or not to send an error report.

Sigmund Freud was devoted to his work, spending over 12 hours a day seeing patients, researching, and writing, but he also smoked around 20 cigars a day, and that wouldn't fly in 2015. Today, Freud would totally vape, and that would seriously cut into his productivity, because as we all know, for every minute you spend vaping, you spend another ten minutes talking about vaping.

W.H. Auden took Benzedrine, an amphetamine, to kick off his 12 hour poetry writing jags. There's so much wrong with this statement today. Now, why not just drink a weird brand of energy drink and live-tweet the effect?

Finally, Picasso. On an average day, he slept until 11:00 in the morning, which means he would probably miss the delivery guy trying to drop off a shipment of canvasses, and when he wakes up he's got one of those notification cards on his door and he's got to drive down to the nearest courier location, which is way out in the suburbs of Spain. When he gets there, "Well, do you have any photo ID?" "No, but I have this self-portrait. The features are in the wrong places, but you get the idea."

And while these listicles may not be too useful, they're still pretty fun and full of interesting tidbits, like Balzac drank 50 cups of coffee a day, or Victor Hugo spent half as much time in an ice bath as he did writing. There is one thing all these daily routines have in common. None of them included reading listicles.

Reporter 1: Suck. Your team's collective brain.

Speaker 2: Channel change. The big picture channel.

Reporter 1: When we come up against tough life situations, it's often difficult to see past the obstacles, but sometimes big challenges give us an opportunity to reinvent ourselves. Meet one woman who turned her difficult situations into the best thing that ever happened to her.

Reporter 2: Meet Lisa Genova, author of the runaway best selling book, Still Alice.

Lisa Genova: I love writing novels. I feel so lucky that I get to do this.

Reporter 2: Still Alice was Lisa's first novel. Her heart-wrenching tale of a Harvard professor with early onset Alzheimer's disease spent well over a year on best seller lists everywhere. There are over two million copies in print, Hollywood turned it into a movie, and Julianne Moore, playing the lead role of Alice, won the Academy Award for Best Actress.

Julianne Moore: I know what I'm feeling. I know what feeling and ... It feels like my brain is dying, and everything I've worked for in my entire life is going.

Reporter 2: Still Alice is an amazing success, but even more amazing is how it all happened. This is the story of how a single question led to one of the most successful and most unusual career transformations you'll ever hear.

You see, Lisa never wanted to be a novelist at all.

Lisa Genova: I was always a geeky math and science kid and knew that I loved biology. I went to college and my first year read the Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat by Oliver Sacks and took a psychology course called physiological psych, which is basically neuroscience. I was in love, like this is what I am going to do.

Reporter 2: The first pivotal moment that would eventually to Still Alice occurred in 1998. Lisa's grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Lisa Genova: She was pretty far along in that I couldn't sit down with her and ask her what it feels like to have it. Despite me reading everything I could find about Alzheimer's, because I'm the neuroscientist in the family. I'm going to learn about this and do that homework for my family. Everything I read was helpful to a point, and where it stopped was answering this question of what does it feel like to have it.

Reporter 2: Not being able to understand what Alzheimer's was actually like for her grandmother led to a flash of inspiration.

Lisa Genova: I really did, at the time, think fiction is the way to answer this question. Someday I'll write a novel about a woman with Alzheimer's and tell it from her perspective.

Reporter 2: Meanwhile, the rest of Lisa's life was unfolding exactly according to plan.

Lisa Genova: I had chosen a college. I was going to be a neuroscientist. Then I went and got my graduate degree. While I was doing that, I got married. What do you do when you get married? We had a baby and then we bought a house, and that was this perfectly linear, predicable planned life that I had, until I got divorced. It shook everything up for me.

Reporter 2: Suddenly, Lisa's carefully planned life was imploding.

Lisa Genova: I was not only divorced. I was unemployed. I had taken what I thought would just be a temporary break from my very high-powered, fast-paced job to get my daughter started on the planet. It was terrifying.

Reporter 2: At the point of greatest fear and despair, Lisa asked a question that would radically change her life.

Lisa Genova: For the first time in my adult life I had some space to really consider consciously what do I want to do next. What if I could do anything I wanted? That's exciting, right? It's not just if I could do anything I wanted what would I do, it's the if I don't have to worry about what people think or expect of me. What if you didn't have to worry about that?

Reporter 2: The answer she kept coming back to was to write the novel about what it's like to have Alzheimer's, and so the neuroscientist decided to become a first time novelist.

Lisa Genova: There was a lot of concern and worry. There was a lot of whispering, and the gist of the whispering was, "Lisa Genova has gone crazy."

Reporter 2: Lisa developed a brilliant strategy for keeping her confidence high when the going got tough.

Lisa Genova: I would panic every now and then and think, "Oh my God, what am I doing? Who am I to do this?" I would go into libraries and bookstores when I felt that panic rising. I would look at the thousands of books in this bookstore and think, "Well, all of these people wrote books, Lisa. They all did it, so why not me?"

Reporter 2: She finished the book. The next challenge, get a literary agent.

Lisa Genova: I queried 100 literary agents and I heard back, "No," from every single one who bothered to answer my letter. Complete utter and total rejection.

Reporter 2: No one would publish Lisa's book. Did she give up? No. Against all expert advice, she decided to self-publish her novel and spend a year selling it out of the trunk of her car.

Lisa Genova: So the trunk of my car stats, I sold 1100 copies in ten months.

Reporter 2: After months and months, she got a break. Beverly Beckham at the Boston Globe read her book.

Lisa Genova: God bless Beverly. She wrote this amazing review in the Sunday Globe. That was the tipping point. Once that article came out, libraries all over the state were ordering it. My Amazon rank when crazy. Bookstores were ordering it. There were a bunch of moments where I had sort of left my body and realized something huge was about to happen with this.

Reporter 2: Something huge did happen. Lisa landed a book deal, a big advance, and 250,000 copies for the first print run of the book. Lisa became a best selling author on the New York Times list.

Lisa Genova: Yeah, it's pretty crazy to go from the trunk of your car to the red carpet because I was at the Oscars this year.

Reporter 2: From neuroscientist to best selling novelist because of her grandmother, a personal life crisis, and one very powerful question: What would you do if you could do anything you wanted?

And one final beautiful twist. In the end, Lisa's biggest contribution to neuroscience are her novels.

Lisa Genova: It's so circular and strange because part of what I loved about going into neuroscience is I want to make a contribute. Here I am writing novels and in a very different way that I could not have imagined or planned, I am part of the progress that is going to lead to treatments and survivors. I raised the awareness that helps generate the funds that pay for my science friends to do their research.

Speaker 2: Slack. Love what you do.

Speaker 3: Channel change. Job channel.

Reporter 1: For Lisa Genova, leaving her first career to start a new one was a great move. For a lot of us, quitting is a tough decision to make, and the act of doing so can sometimes be memorable.

Reporter 2: It's drilled into our heads at an early age. The coach tells us, "When the going gets tough." The parent tells us, "Winners never quit, quitters never win." And the cat on the poster tells us, "Hang in there, baby." But what if leaving a job is good? What if it leads to better things? What if quitting is not a failure but a heart-warming, human, and pretty brave move? It's just that act of quitting that's tough, but for many, at least it's creative.

Do you have a funny story about leaving a job or quitting a job?

Speaker 4: The three of them, it's their last day today.

Quitter 1: And I didn't get along with my boss very well at all. I indirectly insulted her once. I told her one day after she cut my hours back. I told her I was quitting and leaving for another job. She said, "Well, that's nice, but I need it in writing. It's not official unless you put it in writing." So I decided the best way to do it was in a haiku poem.

- Quitter 2: My new manager seemed to be expecting a baby, so I just happened to remark how excited I was for her that she was expecting. She said, "Well, I'm not expecting," and then I was fired. That was a quick first job.
- Quitter 3: I had these sort of self-destructive fantasies to get out of work, and I worked at a very nice jazz bar. One of my jobs was to extricate the melted wax from the previous evening and put in the fresh tea light into the glass, but I was using a knife. The knife went right through the glass, lodged right into my palm. I'm in the middle of this really swank, nice jazz bar. Blood is propelling out of my hand. Did I plan to stab my own self in the hand? No, but then I didn't have to work.
- Quitter 4: I did get fired for not accepting a return of an empty bottle of Estee Lauder Night Repair Cream. When the store manager called me into the office and he was firing me. I really stood firmly in my beliefs that I did the right thing and handled things appropriately, he told me I needed to go home and reflect, and that I needed to learn about humility.
- Speaker 5: Oh, come on!
- Quitter 5: So I was working at this farm and ranch supply store, and they kept putting on this top diva crap all the time and I was getting really irate. I kept changing it back to country. One day, I had the country music on and I go out back to help a customer and I come back and there's Celine Dion on the radio, just caterwauling that Titanic song. I put my orange smock on the hook and I'm out. I'm gone.
- Reporter 1: There's the door, folks, and may it lead to greater things for you.
- Slack Variety Pack. Got any good job anecdotes that you'd like to share? Tweet us at slackhq.
- There's quitting your job and then there's taking your job with you. For this couple, uprooting from a big city to move to a small town for the sake of sanity and family didn't mean they had to leave their jobs behind.
- Speaker 2: Channel change. The office.
- Remote John: About four years ago, my wife and I decided we were done with city life. Over time we'd accumulated a list of grievances which included, but were not limited to ...
- Remote Tammy: We realized we'd never be able to afford a home. Commuting to work and not getting home until about 7 every night. Running a house that was totally infested with rats. And getting broken into, literally, literally, more times than we could count. Car alarms, crappy air quality, standing in line for everything, and random urban screaming.

Remote John: That's my wife, Tammy Everitts, giving you the short list of reasons for why we decided it was time to get out of Dodge. There was a problem, though.

For the past 200 years, people have been flowing from small communities into big cities, and for good reason. That's where the jobs are. Finding work in a small community wouldn't be easy or particularly lucrative, so we figured the only way to do it was to be try to hold on to our current jobs and work remotely.

In the end, I had to quit my job to make the move, opting to embrace the life of a freelance writer. Tammy, on the other hand, had better luck.

Remote Tammy: Oh, God. I sweated for weeks. Trying to mentally create a case that I could present to my boss to explain why it was a good idea for me and my family to move nine hours away and work remotely. I corralled all of these data-driven arguments for why remote working can be actually really productive, etc. etc. When I finally knocked on his door and explained this is what I want to do, please go away and think about it, don't answer me right now. I'd expected he'd need to take a few days to get back with me. Actually I was barely finished speaking and he just gave me the thumbs up and said, "Yeah, go for it."

Remote John: So without really knowing what to expect, we hit the eject button and made the move to Nelson, a small town just west of the Rockies.

Remote Tammy: It wasn't like we didn't research where we were before making the jump, but back in 2012, not many people were offering advice. There's no guide for this, so we just sort of made it up as we went along.

Jason Fried: But why would I tell you as your employer where you can live? Hey, you want to go live over here, go for it, man. Enjoy yourself.

Remote John: That's Jason Fried, co-founder of Basecamp and co-author of the book Remote: Office Not Required. Jason's a huge advocate for remote working and thinks it's going to change the way we live and work.

Jason Fried: Our company's about 50 people and about 35 of them live in about 32 separate cities around the world, so we've learned a whole lot about how to make this all work using a variety of technologies and in-person meetings and flying people on planes when we need to and shooting stuff back and forth.

Remote John: Now, before we go any further let's clear something up. Remote work means the same thing as telework or telecommuting. It's just a better name for it. But what is it exactly?

Jason Fried: For me, remote working just simply means not at the office. So even though someone might live two blocks away, I consider them to be remote. It means not together in the same place all the time.

Remote Tammy: These days, I'm about as remote as you can get. My current head office is in Mountain View, California, which is at least eight hours away by way of two flights, assuming my local flight actually leaves the airport because we get clouded in a lot in the winter, so I don't go into the office all that often. But it's not really necessary. We're in constant contact via video conferencing and other online collaborative tools every day, so it's pretty easy to forget the distance.

Remote John: Sounds great, right? But how can this approach possibly benefit a company?

Jason Fried: I think remote work makes a ton of sense for companies for a variety of reasons. Number one, I think it's just flat out respectful to let people live wherever they want, have whatever lives they want, and then do some work for you at the same time. One of the best things about remote working from the company's point of view is that you have the world's talent pool available to you, so our feeling has always been hire the best you can. It doesn't matter where they live. What's most important is talent and cultural fit and character and the things that really matter about people.

Remote John: So what's the employee side of the equation look like?

Jason Fried: The woman who runs our customer service name, her name is Kristin, she used to live in Chicago. We hired her here in Chicago. Then she moved to Portland, Oregon. That was awesome. Good for her. She loves Portland. Go, go to Portland. And you get to keep your job and we get to keep you and this is perfect for everybody. Everyone wins.

Remote John: This all sounds terrific. The question is ...

Remote Tammy: Why isn't everybody doing this? I mean, I get to see my kids everyday when they get home from school. I can go into the kitchen in the middle of the day and throw some food in the crock pot and then I don't need to worry about dinner. If I need to clear my head any time, I just take my dog for a walk. I just think it's a better way to work and more importantly to live that people simply haven't figured out yet.

Jason Fried: I think the biggest objection comes from people who've never tried this before. They just assume that it's not going to work. They assume people can't work together if they don't see each other. They assume that you can't tell if someone's working if you can't watch them work. I think the next generation that's coming up is going to be a lot more amenable to remote work, and when the next generation becomes managers down the road, they will be a lot more friendly to remote work environments.

Remote John: We are now three years into our remote work experiment. You might be wondering how it's all working out.

Remote Tammy: To be frank, one of my biggest concerns was being stuck in my current job, just not having a lot of opportunities, hitting a ceiling where there are no changes for growth or to attract any interest from other companies down the road, but stuck didn't happen. Actually it was quite the opposite. My career has really taken off. My work life has never been as good as it is right now. Life is good.

Speaker 2: Share this story with friends. Go to soundclock.com/slack/singleservings.

Channel change. Observational interlude.

Angry Clock Man: Dear people who make things that I use with clocks in them,

It's been many days since daylight savings time has kicked in and I am deeply, deeply frustrated. Why? Because I can install apps, update operating systems and work in the cloud, but I can't change the clock in my car. The buttons are so small. No human body part can use those buttons. I need the tip of a sharp pencil or a pen or one of those miniature glasses screwdrivers. It's awful. At 9:13am, I tried to change the clock on my microwave and ended up turning on the actual microwave for nine hours and 13 minutes. The same thing happens with my oven and my alarm clock. Why? Because they all work differently and they're all designed horribly.

So I am asking you, manufacturers of all things on earth that contain clocks, please, can we agree on a common user interface for updating the time? Or at least connect every clock on Earth to the internet so they update automatically? Is this too much to ask?

Now if you'll excuse me, I'm late for an appointment with my toaster oven's clock. Actually, strike that. I'm an hour early.

Sincerely,

Angry Clock Man

Speaker 2: Channel change. Winning channel.

Reporter 1: The life of an academic is a pretty full one: teaching, researching, advising. But in the case of this woman, she shares that full time work career with her life career, breaking athletic world records.

Racetrack Voice: Good evening. We welcome you to our presentation this evening of Molly Van Houweling UCI hour record attempt.

Reporter 2: We're in Aguascalientes, Mexico, and Molly Shaffer Van Houweling from Berkley, California is attempting to break the women's cycling world record for the fastest one hour ride in a velodrome.

Molly: So it's race day. I feel ready to race today.

Reporter 2: In a seven year career, she's racked up over 20 divisional and national titles, but Molly isn't an ordinary athlete. In fact, she doesn't even cycle full time. Her day job is a far cry from the open road. It's the academic halls and courtrooms of Berkley's law department.

Molly: I definitely kind of put it on the line in terms of putting a goal out there to break the records. I'm nervous now. Less than ten minutes left until race time is supposed to start.

Racetrack Voice: The current women's world record is held by Leontien van Moorsel was set in 2003. The current record is 46.065 kilometers.

Reporter 2: The record has withstood all challengers for 12 years. It was set by an Olympic gold medalist, and the last time someone tried to break it and failed was in February. So how does Molly manage it? Teaching, researching, publishing, and then training to aim at a world record. She literally takes her work with her on the bike.

Molly: So go into work, have meetings, do some research, teach my class, end of the day rush home so that I can get out on the road as soon as I can to get my training done. It's true that I process a lot of what went on during the day, think about how I might respond to a tricky email or write about a case or sometimes think about what did I teach today that wasn't as clear as I would like it to be and how might I fix that tomorrow.

Racetrack Voice: All right. Making her way up to the bike.

Molly: I walk carefully up the track to the starting gate, swing my leg over ...

Reporter 2: Even though Molly's day job is demanding, most women racers around the world struggle to get enough time on the bike.

Molly: There are very few women in the world who can actually make a living as a professional bike racer, so even among the women who compete at the highest level, there are lots of people who have to split their time between bike racing and coaching or being a student or doing other things. Because of that, there's not a very sharp dividing line between professional and amateur women bike racers. I get to compete against people who are also competing in the Olympics and the world championship and the women's racing at the Tour de France and the Tour of Italy, and so forth.

Reporter 2: Months of training, buckets of sweat, thousands and thousands of miles pumped out, have brought Molly here. It's race day.

Let's join our trackside announcers.

Racetrack Voice: Okay, there's the ten second time and you'll hear five tones.

Molly: It beats five, four, three, on two I stand up out of the saddle, on one I kind of swing my butt back to get some momentum and then the final beep.

Racetrack Voice: She's underway!

Molly: Trying not to think about whether I'm about to break a world record or not. I'm just thinking do another lap just like that, another lap just like that, another lap just like that.

Reporter 2: Molly's track is a 250 meter oval. She's aiming to loop it every 19.5 seconds for the next hour. To do that, she needs to race at least 28.6 miles per hour every minute after minute after minute.

Racetrack Voice: You start getting down to that last 10 or 15 minutes is when it really, really starts to hurt.

Molly: And what I'm mainly think about is don't somehow crash yourself out in the closing laps of this event.

Racetrack Voice: We're starting to hear some shouts from the velodrome.

That's the last three minutes folks.

Go, Molly, Molly, Molly!

She still has to finish this lap. A land mine!

Perfect! She finished! Outstanding! Yes!

Look at her. Sorry, we can't help but cheer. Oh, she has a huge grin on her face. That's not a grimace, I can tell.

She gave us a big smile when she came by. I'm so happy for her.

Reporter 2: She smashed the old record by over 200 meters.

Molly: In terms of my own satisfaction, I'm satisfied but I don't think I had even finished that post-race lap before I was thinking, well, shoot, that's over now. What are we going to do next? Because I really enjoy being on a mission and now this one's mission accomplished. Well, that's thrilling but it's also kind of boring because being on a mission is really where it's at.

Reporter 2: As Molly says, there's plenty of other athletic challenges on the horizon, other records to break. But for now, the world champ is happily back in front of her law class at Berkley.

Reporter 1: You've been listening to Episode 13 of the Slack Variety Pack.

Speaker 2: Next episode:

Reporter 1: A milliner who literally pulled a new career out of a hat.

Speaker 6: I never, ever would have thought that this was going to be my thing in life, ever. But it is, and I love it.

Reporter 1: When the barista constantly botches your name.

Speaker 7: I totally gave up on giving my real name and I have fake coffee names.

Speaker 8: Graham, Perkin, Pram, Prim ...

Reporter 1: Applying agile software development theory to parenting.

Speaker 9: I have to say the week we introduced one of these morning checklists into my house it reduced parental screaming in half.

Speaker 2: The details.

Reporter 1: Each of our stories are called single servings, and each single serving is shareable. Go to soundcloud.com/slacksingleservings and share your favorite stories. You can also share the whole episode at soundcloud.com/slackvarietypack.

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Thank you for listening.

Speaker 2: Slack. Making work less worky.