



## *Communications Digest*

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*Because Good Copywriting Should Grow on Trees!*

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### **Welcome Mid-January!**

With the holiday season now officially over, I'm happy to strategize ways to make 2017 a productive and fulfilling year!

In last month's (Christmas/Holiday) issue, I featured a "Coping with Christmas" publication of the American Hospice Foundation. And in "Ask an Expert," from writing colleague Daphne Gray-Grant, I shared insights on how writing daily can improve all of our lives. Bryan Garner weighed in, in "Word Nerd's Corner" on the distinction between "distinct," "distinctive" and "distinguished."

In this month's issue, I visit American workplace consultant Rich Fernandez on how we can increase our resilience at work. From Barbara Davidson (in "Ask an Expert"), I feature strategies to work when we have low (or no) motivation. And in "Word Nerd's Corner," Bryan Garner returns to differentiate the word "tautology" from "redundancy."

Take heart, good reader! As this month concludes, we should soon be through the worst of winter's frigid air--or, at least with February, the daylight hours will become appreciably longer!

Sincerely,  
*Elizabeth*

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### **IN THIS ISSUE:**

**ARTICLE 1: Want to boost your resilience at work?**

**ARTICLE 2: "Ask An Expert": Barbara Davidson on how to be more productive at work**

**WORD NERD'S CORNER: Wordsmithing with Bryan Garner: the case of 'tautology' and 'redundancy'**

**SHOP NEWS**

**ABOUT US**

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## **Article One: Want to boost your resilience at work in 2017? Rich Fernandez tells us how**

I have recently begun work on a second ebook that interviews local, entrepreneurial women whose lives demonstrate resilience. For this project, I have been reading various sources that define or explore the concept of resilience—what scholar Raymond Williams would have called a “keyword” for our time.

Last June, workplace consultant Rich Fernandez wrote an article on how we can increase our resilience at work (*Harvard Business Review* [hyperlink to June 27, 2016 article](#)).

He writes that the World Health Organization (WHO) has described stress as the “global health epidemic of the 21st century.” Because many people today work in “constantly connected, always-on, highly demanding work cultures where stress and the risk of burnout are widespread,” we urgently need to learn how to become resilient, as we navigate our working lives.

Here are some of Fernandez’s insights on workplace stress:

- 1) “Being hyperconnected and responsive to work anytime, anywhere, can be extremely taxing.” And yet, most organizations are “weak” at helping leaders and employees to manage scheduling and the flow of information.
- 2) There is a “direct and adverse relationship between negative stress, wellness and productivity,” and yet stress and burnout are on the rise across Asia, Europe, Africa, North and South America. On these continents, stress and anxiety account for nearly 83% or all cases in the Employee Assistance Programs.
- 3) While some kinds of stress can be useful (“good stress” that motivates us, makes us perform at our best and even makes us healthier), once stress exceeds the peak where it motivates us, it becomes unhealthy and “if sustained over time, leads not only to burnout but also to chronic disease.”

Fernandez suggests five ways to develop resilience that enables us to “stay motivated in the face of chronic, negative stress and constantly increasing demands, complexity and change.” His tips come from neuroscience, and from behavioural and organizational research:

- (1) Exercise mindfulness: Mindfulness “facilitates job performance,” separately from work engagement (and separately from the engagement qualities of vigor, dedication and absorption). Mindfulness has the power to predict the “accuracy” of employees’ “judgment . . . and insight-related

problem solving,” as well as cognitive flexibility. Mindfulness has been shown to be “effective in decreasing employee stress, while improving resiliency and work engagement,” that thereby enhance overall well-being and performance. Books and smartphone apps, as well as mobile learning and onsite training, webinars and peer-to-peer learning networks” can all help to build mindfulness.

(2) Compartmentalize your cognitive load: Fernandez says that we receive 11 million bits of information every second, while the thinking centres of our brains can only process 40 bits of it. So while we cannot reduce the amount of information coming in, we can compartmentalize our cognitive tasks “to optimize the way we process that information.” For instance, separate different kinds of work activities, such as emailing, strategy sessions and business meetings. Know that when you consider switching from one type of task to another, you’ll find it “difficult to tune out distractions” that can diminish “productivity by as much as 40%” (American Psychological Association). “Avoid context switching.” Proportion parts of each day for specific kinds of tasks (and not others). Fernandez calls this “serial monotasking.” That separation of tasks will create the best conditions for making good decisions, while also decreasing your mental strain.

(3) Take detachment breaks: we all have “peaks and valleys” in our energy and productivity, so know that focus clarity and energy cycles last 90-120 minutes long, after which we need to take a break from work (even if only for a few minutes) to reset energy and attention. Balancing work with detachment from work promotes increased energy, mental clarity, creativity and focus, which altogether increase our “capacity for resilience throughout the course of the workday.” In the longer term, “we preserve energy and prevent burnout.”

(4) Develop mental agility: Fernandez says we must decentre stressors in order to manage them. We can turn the neural networks (that we use to process stress) to respond rather than to react to difficult situations or people. This would mean that we don’t deny that we feel stressed, but “pause, to observe the experience from a neutral standpoint, and then to try to solve the problem.” Stopping and labelling our emotions “has the effect of activating the thinking centre of our brains, rather than the emotional centre,” so that we can cope with demanding workplaces.

(5) Cultivate compassion: He writes that having the ability to cultivate compassion for oneself and for others is often overlooked. Research shows that such “compassion increases positive emotions, creates positive work relationships, and increases cooperation and collaboration.” Greater employee happiness and reduced stress can result.

Fernandez concludes that one study shows that building a resilient and psychologically healthy workplace returned \$2.30 for every \$1.00 invested. Resilient workforces make “good business sense.”

*Do Fernandez’s insights about building resilience resonate with you and your workplace? How do you define “resilience” at work? Please share your thoughts with me on the “contact” page of my website. I’d be delighted to discuss this further.*

**Article Two: "Ask an Expert" with Barbara Davidson on how to be productive at work .**

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Business writer Barbara Davidson wrote a blog recently on the “NetCredit” website on how to be productive at work “when you’re not feeling [like] it.” My thanks to mentor Wilf Popoff for sharing the source.

Since many of us have returned to work after the Christmas and New Year’s holidays, we often find it a challenge to return to being productive over long hours. I thought Davidson’s pointers have value.

Her most valuable insight is that “difficult or boring tasks can become so much easier once you find your flow.” That “flow” comes when one has garnered the needed motivation to work. But garnering that motivation may be tougher than ever, when so many of us are overly plugged-in to rapid technology.

Davidson writes that researchers from the University of London discovered that external pressure from “the barrage of emails, instant messages and phone calls we receive each day can effectively reduce our IQ as much as a sleepless night and twice as much as cannabis use.”

That external pressure, in addition to internal feelings of “boredom and frustration can hold us back from taking the first step each working day, even if we know it’ll become much easier once we find our flow.” Too often, we retreat into procrastination. She also writes that “the hardest part of work is getting started” and recommends 14 easy strategies to raise your morale (“to get your mojo back”), and with it, your productivity:

(1) Tell yourself that you’re starting something new: adopting the attitude that you’re starting a new period or activity can “improve motivation.” If you treat work like a new project, you can remind yourself of the goals behind it and reconsider how best to approach it.

(2) Reward yourself “before you begin”: starting your work with a “slice of cake” or a “short comedy video” can help you to break free of procrastination. The chemical dopamine will be released in your brain, which will help you to gain self-motivation.

(3) Try smiling: research shows that cracking a smile reduces stress and anxiety, “which helps you to feel better about the work you need to get done” She says that even “faking” one can help, when you’re unhappy.

(4) Try a power pose: I wrote many months ago about Amy Cuddy’s famous Ted Talk on how posture and body language can affect one’s performance (such as in a job interview). Davidson writes in the same vein that sitting in a “power pose” can “increase testosterone, decrease cortisol (a stress hormone), and increase your feeling of power and tolerance for risk,” as you start to work.

(5) Try getting a massage: therapeutic touching in the form of a massage has been shown to decrease cortisol and raise the neurotransmitter serotonin needed to muster willpower.

(6) Break your work into manageable tasks: for decades now, psychologists have recommended “chunking,” or breaking down a project into “small, achievable, measurable tasks.” By doing so, one doesn’t get overwhelmed by what work lies ahead and avoids escaping into procrastination or other forms of avoidance.

(7) Remember there's a "bigger picture" to what you're working on. Davidson says that if you keep in mind the benefits your work will have for others (readers, clients, etc.) you'll view your own work as important and worthwhile pursuing. She recommends that you "write down your ultimate goal" and the benefits you'll have when you achieve it. Doing so will help you get through the small, daily tasks needed to complete your project.

(8) Form an agreement with yourself: make a contract to become accountable in your work. Davidson recommends the app "stickk.com" on your smartphone, "to get your work done in a given time."

(9) Expand your frame of reference by collaborating with someone else: ask them for their input in your project and update them on how you progress. Taking collective pride in a project can increase your motivation to get it done.

(10) Be around and use the colour green: psychologists have found that exposing oneself to the colour green can make us "happier, less tired and more motivated." So have your office wall painted green or put a green lampshade on your reading lamp. Consider spending your coffee break taking a short walk in a garden or park nearby (maybe the civic conservatory in Saskatoon).

(11) Take a walk: targeted exercise (such as using an exercise bike for 20 minutes or taking a leisurely walk) can "reduce fatigue levels by 65% and increase energy levels by 20%." Even a walk around the block can help!

(12) Use a "mantra": tell yourself out loud that what you're working on is important and achievable. Your motivation could rise as much as 57%.

(13) Mark the passage of time: using an app (e.g. "Pomodoro Time") that reminds you that time is passing can help to motivate you to do work before your next break.

(14) Allow yourself to daydream: find a private location where you can close your eyes and daydream for 10 minutes, undisturbed, about the success your current project will achieve. Davidson writes that imagining success that your work will find in the future can increase your motivation in the present.

Not all of these tips may work for you. But trying and adapting some of them can keep you from procrastinating and help you find the flow of ideas and thinking that you need to complete the tasks you're doing.

*Do you find the daunting nature of a blank screen or new page causes you to avoid doing anything, or even to avoid thinking about how to tackle a project? Try some of Davidson's tips and keep me posted on your progress ([www.elizabethshih.com](http://www.elizabethshih.com)).*

**WORD NERD'S CORNER: The case of "tautology" and "redundancy" (American etymologist Bryan Garner explains the difference) . . .**



In a recent “Usage Tip of the Day,” etymologist Bryan Garner discussed the similar terms, “tautology” and “redundancy.”

*Tautology*, he says, is a term found mostly in discussions of logic and rhetoric. It “refers to a restatement of something already said within the immediate context—in words that are different but do not add anything new.”

He quotes this example: “Some people in Europe seem to think international bureaucracies and global treaties automatically generate good policy. Indeed, they define good policy as anything that is produced by this process—a rather convenient tautology” (Daniel J. Mitchell, “European Cult of Multinationalism,” Wash. Times, 7 Nov. 2002, at A25).

Tautologies can lead to repetitive or circular reasoning, as the previous example shows.

Redundancy, Garner writes, is a more “general” term, referring to a word or phrase that adds nothing to the overall meaning because its sense has already been expressed.

An example would be: “Inspector Gamache lifted the tarp to find a dead corpse.” Here, the term “corpse” denotes a dead body, so that the adjective “dead” is redundant and unnecessary.

*Do you find tautologies in reading that you do, or redundancies in today's spoken word and common, written documents? Please share them with me: I'd be delighted to hear from you.*

## **SHOP NEWS**

Particular thanks this month to mentors and friends who sent such cheering correspondence (whether texts, emails or cards) over the holiday season. I love to receive your comments, notes and letters!

Thank you especially to Saskatoon man of letters, Wilf Popoff, for sharing electronic reading materials, including Barbara Davidson's blog on the NetCredit website!

Thank you also (in no particular order) to fellow women of the Freelancers' Roundtable Group-- Ashleigh Mattern, Amy Rederburg, Katherine Duncombe, Julie Barnes and Leanne Bellamy. We discuss the highs and lows of freelancing-- the support and friendship make winter's deep freeze more manageable!

Extra special thanks go out to Kayla Kreuger and Ashleigh Mattern for allowing me to interview them for an upcoming ebook. I was (and am) deeply impressed and inspired by these women's stories of resilience and will present them along with a much more comprehensive interpretation of the term “resilience” than space here affords.



## **ABOUT US**

Since 2011, Elizabeth Shih Communications has provided B2B marketing and communications services on the Prairies and across Canada.

Do you need help writing your “marcom” materials?

Please contact me through my website, via the CASL-compliant email form, on the right-hand side of each page ([www.elizabethshih.com](http://www.elizabethshih.com)).

After I have received your permission, I’ll be pleased to discuss projects with you!

I specialize in **entrepreneurial storytelling**, chronicling the successes of entrepreneurs against the odds to sell their products or services and simultaneously give back to their communities. I tell these stories most often in newsletters, articles and case studies. But I can also adapt them for press releases, website copy, annual reports, white papers and related formats.

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