Business Sustainability
Best Practise Guidelines

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INTRODUCTION

Promoting sustainable business practises is a key issue for the [International Game Developers Association](#) (IGDA), which aims to help foster a healthy game development industry and the respectful treatment of staff. Sustainable business practise guidelines tend to be framed in very broad, high-level terms. This white paper aims to provide practical tips for sustainable management—featuring a series of points that have immediately actionable value.

BEST PRACTISE GUIDELINES

The following points are warning signs for studios conducting unsustainable business practises, and serve as a first line of protection for employees against abusive working conditions. Each point includes a tip (highlighted in italics) on how to improve management processes.

1. Diversity and inclusivity

We spend the majority of our time at work so the workplace should be a trusting environment where Individuals feel comfortable being themselves—irrespective of gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, and religion. Team members should feel comfortable and empowered to have complex, and sometimes difficult, discussions about diversity and inclusion. This courtesy should be extended to the community level with proactive support of individuals in misrepresented and overlooked groups on forums, conference panels, social media, etc. Inclusive teams and communities perform better because they feel their values are shared and, as a result, have a greater sense of purpose and potential to engage wider audiences. *Management at sustainable, diverse, and inclusive studios has an open door policy that makes any member of the team comfortable talking openly.*

2. Juniors filling key team roles

It is perhaps inevitable that some studio's will employ recent graduates and juniors to fill key roles. This has positive advantages such as, giving industry newcomers opportunities to further their career as well as reducing base running costs (compared to employing a seasoned industry veteran). However, it must be noted that projects should consequently be allocated significantly more time to compensate for an individual's lack of experience. Individuals assigned tasks outside their core specialisation should be given even more time to allow them to familiarize with the work. *To ease juniors into their roles it is recommended to have a mentoring system in place where one or several experienced developers give due support to newcomers for a minimum of one year.*

3. Team-defined schedules

Management should consult team members *before* milestones are finalised. Scheduling must remain an explicit agreement between the two parties. *We suggest the following process, which has proven to be highly effective for calculating schedules, strengthening teamwork and reducing meeting times:*

a) *Every team member is invited to review a project's task-list in a shared online document—adding new tasks if any have been overlooked.*

b) *Once the list is complete, each team member works independently to assign a personal time estimate to each task—including those outside their area of expertise—and submitting their estimates to the group document when complete.*

c) *Task estimates are compared and those with a consensus are automatically confirmed, while those that have drastically different timeframes must be negotiated. It is common that the average figure is eventually agreed upon.*

Once the team supplies the schedule estimates, only then can management set outward facing schedules to avoid undue pressure on the team. Physical and mental fatigue will undoubtedly occur if management is in the habit of dictating task timeframes without acknowledging the team's needs to perform their work correctly.

Nobody can overcome the Fast/Cheap/Good project management triangle (image via purechat.com)

4. Respect the medium

Iteration on gameplay is key to development. *Not only is gameplay and interaction the essence of the art form, iterating quickly with "grey-box/white-box" prototypes BEFORE implementing art assets is an industry standard because prioritising production quality art and assets over gameplay creates top-heavy projects, where adjusting the underlying gameplay becomes increasingly difficult.* The project may appear cheaper upfront but will ultimately suffer delays and team conflict due to the subordination of game design and the inherent development complications created by this approach.

5. Systematic crunch

Overtime that occurs on a regular basis (systematic crunch) is a telltale sign of disconnect between management expectations and time allocated for specific tasks —as described in point (3). Management should make it a priority to avoid team members having to work outside of normal work hours to ensure a healthy work/life balance. *Game development is an unpredictable business due to the multidisciplinary nature of the medium so, in addition to collaborative scheduling, a minimum 30% buffer should be added to every project estimate, by default.* Eliminating crunch ensures healthier, happier teams and higher turnover in the long-term.

6. Project reviews

Project reviews are a good opportunity for both management and team members to express what went right and what could be improved. Management should be open to criticism to demonstrate camaraderie and learn from its mistakes. *Management should conduct regular project reviews timed to coincide with the end of sprints or milestones. Project reviews should be used to self-assess and see if there is anything different that management could be doing to ensure the team's success. Honest self-assessment by both management and the team will result in better processes, a stronger team, and better games.* Above all else, tension is unavoidable in any business but it should never become the normal mode of operation.

7. Lack of gratitude towards team members

This is a characteristic of management or team members that work independently, in isolation of the team and the development process. When not working alongside team members, individuals will tend to develop unrealistic expectations that are often the result of points (2-4), in particular. A team that doesn't receive gratitude and celebration of its achievements will lose moral and become less effective. *Management should find ways to celebrate the success of the team through team outings, awards rewarding exceptional performance, and calling out wins publicly to the team. If the team experiences development issues—which is inevitable in any business—management should take responsibility and frame the discussion as a positive opportunity to learn and improve.*

8. Burnout

Burnout can occur to individuals of all ages with points (2-7) being major contributing factors. Management should remain vigilant for symptoms of physical and mental exhaustion. *Symptoms of burnout include chronic fatigue, insomnia, forgetfulness/impaired concentration and attention, physical symptoms, increased illness, loss of appetite, anxiety and depression. If any of these symptoms occur in the workplace, management should be supportive and review whether stress at work is a contributing factor and act accordingly, if so.*

9. Staff retention

High staff retention is indicative of a healthy business. The benefits of staff retention include a strong team dynamic and retention of specialist skills and knowledge. It's also a sure sign that staff enjoy working at a particular studio. When team members leave after 1 month, 4 months or a year then these benefits are lost and significant time and energy must be invested to recruit and integrate replacement team members. Such a business model wrongly assumes that there is an endless pool of developers to replace the leavers, and ignores the fact that the studio's reputation will eventually stifle its ability to recruit talented developers or developers at any level. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) provides a median annual turnover rate of 15%, and states that the cost to replace an employee can be 6-12 months of their annual salary (or more, depending on the role). The IGDA's 2017 Developer Satisfaction Survey suggests an annual turnover for the game development industry with survey participants reporting an average of 2.2 employers—significantly higher than the norm [please note that the survey does not distinguish between voluntary turnover (quitting a job by choice) and involuntary turnover (being laid off or fired].

POSITIVE ACTION

If a studio exhibits a few or all of the above symptoms, team members are encouraged to print a copy of the Business Sustainability: Best Practise Guidelines white paper and invite their manager(s) or studio head(s) to discuss company policy during a discreet meeting. It is occasionally advisable to invite a neutral third person to the meeting as a silent observer to encourage a balanced and fair discussion. Your request should not be met with hostility or trivialised since everybody's opinion is valuable and sustainability is in the studio's best interests. *In the unfortunate event that management is unresponsive or hostile, the next step is to raise the issue with your local IGDA Chapter or IGDA HQ.* Members of the community should feel confident approaching the IGDA for advice and be guaranteed support wherever necessary without the threat of negative repercussions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The above guidelines have been written by Chris Solarski (Artist-Game Designer and Author, Chair of IGDA Switzerland, and cofounder of the IGDA Game Art SIG), and reviewed by Zoe Bell (Lead Producer at Big Huge Games and an IGDA board member).

The Business Sustainability: Best Practise Guidelines white paper is a work in progress. The authors warmly welcome feedback and contributions.