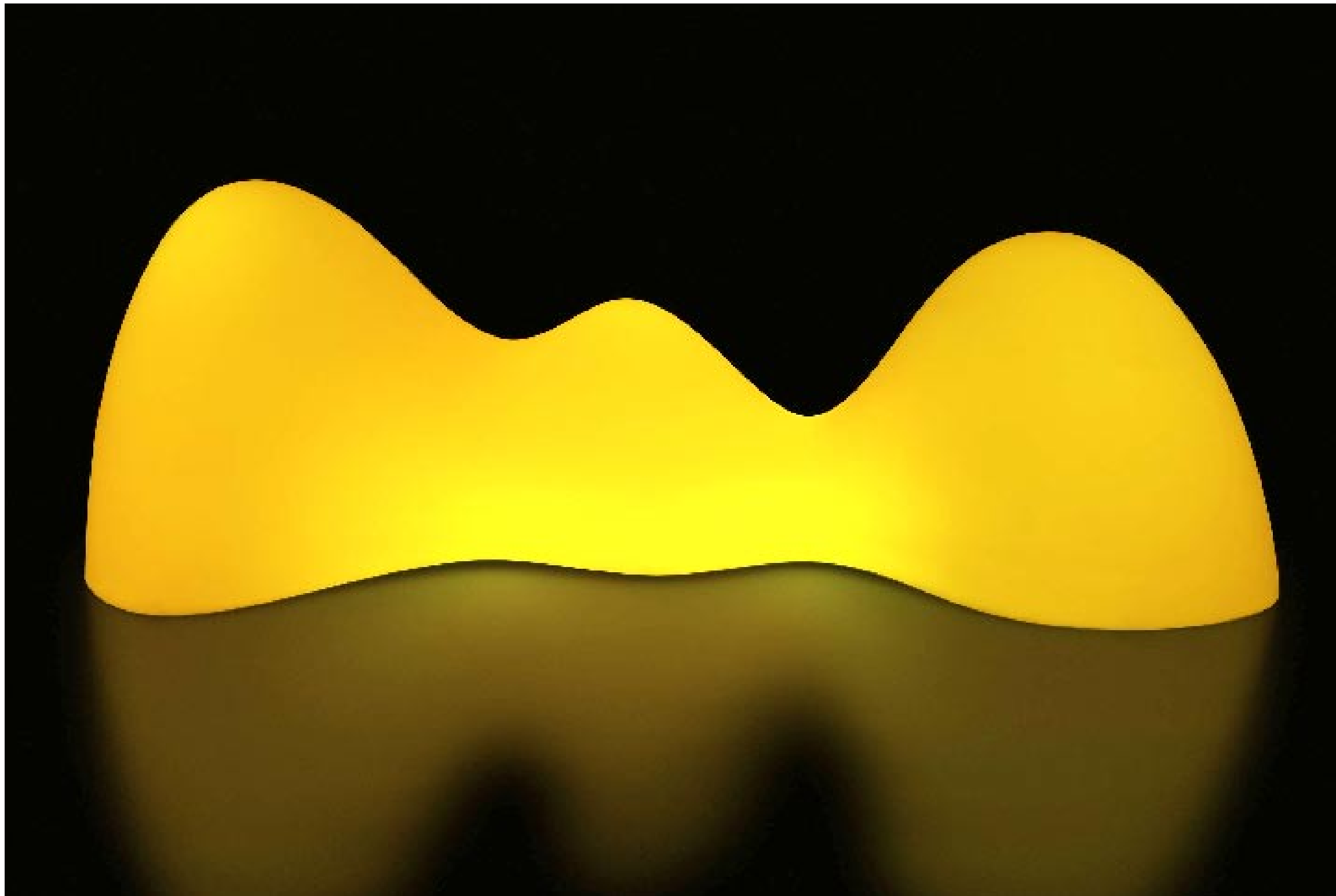




Interview: Karim Rashid, product designer

Karim has moved from teaching design in the US into building a successful portfolio of innovative products that are marketed internationally in partnership with many other manufacturers and companies. He also has a number of his own publications to his name.



What are the hardest lessons you've had to learn in business?

The hardest lessons?

Being a designer and dealing with the business side?

I think, I'm not really sure if it's a lesson or not, it is perseverance. It's very easy to become quickly disillusioned with a client or with a product or an opportunity or a brand, and I think you have to keep at it. When I opened my own practice ten years ago in New York, I basically moved to New York penniless, sleeping on my brother's floor trying to figure out how I'm going to open my own practice. I talked to about a hundred companies across the country and there was a recession, it was 1992. Of the hundred companies, I actually got on trains and travelled halfway across the country just to try to talk to some companies to do work with them, and of about those hundred I managed to get one client. It could have been pretty easy to give up, in a way, and strangely about three or four years after that when I started getting quite known I started getting phone calls, with job offers with salaries that I'd never heard of in my life! But I was determined to clear my own practice because I'd previously worked about ten years for others. Two companies that I was talking to, I sent them a whole load of work, and they just sent it back without even a letter. One company was based in Toronto, and I went up to see them and kept forcing myself on them basically.

So it can be quite demoralising?

It is, very, and it took about five years and actually the first thing I did with them was a garbage can in 1994/1996 – that kind of became one of the most successful things I've done.

What are the character traits that best enabled you to turn your design into the actual business?

I'm not sure if this answers the question in terms of character traits, but I think a knowledge of business and manufacturing in general, so that you can actually communicate well.

That's the thing, when you first come out of college, or higher education – how do you actually communicate with ...

Communication is critical, I think. I also think that the perception that one needs, is understanding of a company's culture, the culture of a brand. I think what happens with many interns and young graduates in my office is that, when they're still working on a project, I give them a client, I show them and tell them what's going on. Generally I end up giving all the direction and the drawings and everything, but sometimes on the smaller projects I'll say, 'Here's a client, here's an opportunity, you know this client wants to do a stool.' The mistake that they all do, all the time, is firstly they start doing design for design's sake. They think it's cool, they can't even really justify it rationally. Second of all, it has nothing really to do with that company that they're working for. When I say a company's culture, a company's culture is made up of four things. One, is their market. Two, is their history – where were they, and where are they today? Where do you want to see them go? The third thing is, let's say if there is an industry, what kind of production methods and materials do they typically use? What kind of tooling and investments do they do? Obviously the fourth thing is to somehow take them from where they are, to where you'd like to see them go, and keep that symbiosis, a kind of continuum so that it's not like all of a sudden – there's a company that produces wood in the mid-west, that makes beautiful things by hand, and you're turning round and proposing to them an injection-moulded plastic chair. This is the most difficult thing, and it's amazing how often with young designers, they haven't quite ... it's like they haven't really done their homework.

What would you say to them or advise them?

My advice always is first of all you do a lot of research, in a very condensed amount of time. Like Raymond Miller used to say, 'Learn everything you can overnight, about a company.' That's the first thing you've got to do. The naive thing to do is to walk into a company and think that you know what you're talking about. You know really nothing about them. There's a tendency to look at the superficial, the surface of the brand. If we take, for example, a company like Alessi, we tend to look at just what they're doing now. If you actually look historically at them, they're really, more than anything, a stainless steel company. It's looking back at how they started: it's basic research really. Have an understanding that when a company comes to you to design something, the chances are that they want to increase their bottom line, and a lot of us designers, as creative thinkers, we don't want to believe that it's about business. In actual fact it is about business, if you're going to produce a commodity, it's about producing quantity, so the understanding is then that they are ready to increase the bottom line. You have to be pretty sensitive to realising that they have to produce something successful. You realise that it's based on an incredibly broad number of issues, not just on some whimsical idea about a form.

Do you find that students or graduates often have such a strong desire just to express themselves, regardless of ...

I've been associate professor for twelve years and I have to say that in watching students, and of course in every country, the students have different levels of education, different elements of culture. In general most students tend to lack all kinds of rigour and the intellectual understanding of commodity and of what products mean.

Do you think about the designers who graduate from higher education now in terms of their attitudes and employability and all those sorts of things?

I know this is a little controversial but my first reaction is that I'm a believer that design should be taught only in a graduate program, not undergraduate. In the United States

most design schools are in art colleges, not in universities, so if you take up a general degree in university you tend to be a well-rounded person, you kind of think better on your feet. When you go to an art school, all of a sudden you're only there for three years, and you come out and you're 'an industrial designer'. I don't think it's enough education. I don't think you're mature enough or old enough to understand social life and behaviour, the way we think and the way we live and business and all these kinds of issues. I think the strongest students I've seen over the years, especially when I was a teaching graduate at Pratt, is students that already have a four-year BA or general degree or degree in sciences, or degree in literature or something. They are older and they are more mature, so they understand the relationship with design, the larger issues. For instance where you just design a thing, you see the connection between the product and humanity.

The difference between design and art, maybe?

Yes, maybe. I think design is not art by any means, and there tends to be a bit of confusion at art schools that I always thought had a great reputation around the world. I'm just shocked at the work; it's just disturbing to me. I think the reason is, when I was at school, if you learn to learn, in a sense, when you get out in the world there's a tendency that you keep learning. And then you spend your life kind of educating yourself, so you never really stop. You have to develop thinkers. I think in general what I've noticed with the educational system, is that it tends to be more vocational or practical than it is thinking. It's all about the making, when in actual fact in design you don't really make anything. Professors hand out syllabi and they say, 'OK, go to the shop and make a chair.' The students spend two months making a chair, and come back to a crit on the chair they made, and it all ends up coming down to their skill level of making rather than the kind of thinking and understanding of industry, production, materials, markets, product dissemination and distribution and all the other things that go along with it.

What do you think of the approach of higher education to the crucial graduates' question of 'What happens next?', and if anything what would you recommend they could change or develop?

I think that design is becoming less about the thing and more about kind of a business strategy. What I mean by that is that if you really want to be effectual as a designer ... This happens to me every day: a company comes and says, 'We'd like you to design a service or some bar ware.' My immediate reaction is to ask myself, 'Do they really want a service, do they really want bar ware, what's the real agenda here?' So I visit the factory and I visit the business and I understand and I talk to the CEOs. I try to understand what they're doing, and what I realise is not necessarily the discussion that has gone on for let's say the last 15 years about what they call post-industrial design – really give them a five-year, ten-year strategy or vision that they can build their business on over the next ten years, rather than let's say a singular product. The reality is that no company, especially if they are struggling, is going to come back and bounce back with a single product. In fact, the single product is almost ineffectual, in a sense of developing your business. You realise it's more to do with brand building, building a line of products, all these kinds of things. There's got to be some indication in there of what graduate programmes should really focus on. We can become as effectual as somebody that could come in and reorganise or rebuild a business. The difference is that we almost do the physical end of it, so our expertise is to walk in and actually build, let's say, the physical business. It's broad because in graduate school there are many directions one could take, but if I really have to say it in a simple way, it's like walking into a business, not really worrying about the actual thing but worrying about the state of the company you are consulting for.

It's much more of a holistic approach
Yeah, much more holistic.

We're looking much more at what it's going to do, where it's coming from ...

I'm a big believer in design that way. Design is becoming less about the singular, and much more about the plural. It is more holistic, finally products and furniture and fashion and architecture are starting to become one. Finally, we're not separating them or creating these schisms between all these things, and that's a kind of wholeism in a way of our physical world.

So how do you manage to adapt yourself over the years to your own success and your international business?

I'm a chameleon with a K. I don't really know how to answer that question. My personal strategy is that I'm quite a kind of pluralist. I tend not always to think about the object, I try to think much more broadly, and that's kind of my point of entry into product development. It's also now because I'm doing hotels and restaurants and all kinds of other things, it's probably my approach with all that: to stay as pluralist as possible, so that I don't find myself becoming specialised, because I don't really believe in specialisation, especially in this time, in the digital age. For example, I could spend my life doing cosmetics, so what I do is turn down a lot of cosmetic jobs to try to make sure I'm working on a line of eyeglasses or furniture or lighting or carpets or interiors, whatever I can. I think by doing that kind of dissemination, this idea of pluralism, that we as designers can kind of cross boundaries. I'm a big believer in that; it has probably helped my career substantially.

That seems to be how you look at life as well, not just the way you approach your work.

Very much so. I think also that the difficult part about this profession is you are generally only as good as the last thing you did, so you have to have a kind of consistency in the work. Your work has to get perpetually better, in a way. There used to be a saying I heard ten years ago, and I'm not sure if it's true any more, that 'you can build a brand overnight, but it takes years to lose it'. Now I've realised, ten years later, that it's the opposite.

I was just thinking that, actually ... Design and designers being more recognised internationally in many different areas, like fashion, products and architecture. What do you think industry can do, if anything at all, to nurture and co-operate more with young talent rather than leaving them feeling like they are kind of missing out or they're not being understood?

When I was in my twenties, I was a little belligerent. I worked in a lot of offices where I couldn't wait to break out and do my own thing. Now what I've learnt looking back at it all, I think this whole idea of young talent, the idea of getting out of school and all of a sudden trying to have something in production is a little futile. The majority of the time, it never happens for them, and if it does happen for them it doesn't also mean that they're going to have a long career either. My advice is to pay your dues, get out of school and really learn, spend five years or ten years or whatever it takes but really learn the profession well, because then you can walk into a company and you know what you're talking about.

There seems to be this trend of short-termism.

Very much so, and I think a kind of naivety also. We see, for example, in the furniture industry a few young stars and people that are quite young, all of sudden getting big, but the question is what's the long term of that, where are they ten, fifteen years from now? It also depends on what you are designing. The furniture industry has become like the fashion industry a bit. It pushes names up quickly. It depends, if you want to be a designer in its broader meaning. Product design is complex – I've been working on six televisions right now and it's amazing what's involved. When I've worked with Toshiba and Samsung, Black & Decker and all these people where, if you really want to get into product, you really need to know what you're doing ...

So for industry, then?

Well, for industry you can understand that industry immediately would be nervous, depending on the typology, right? You won't find IBM going and hiring a 25-year-old who happens to do a hip piece of furniture.

Is there anything they can do, then, because it does take time to mature with lots of things? There seems to be this reluctance from the industry sometimes to allow time to nurture young people. Instead the young people seem to face brick walls, and that learning curve is actually really difficult to maintain once you do graduate.

I think when you graduate though, let's say in a hi-tech industry, if you want to get into the hi-tech industry and you go to work for Sony – Sony has 220 industrial designers in Tokyo, in one room practically. It is never the case that a hi-tech company is going to hire a young designer and take a chance because I think maybe the investments are too great and the risk is too high. It costs about two million dollars to develop a cellphone, for example, so you know you're betting really high. The conservative tendency would be to go to a consultancy that is competent and has the credentials. The problem with that is obviously that they then tend at the same time to look for offices that have already done that typology before, that are already specialised in it. I had Nokia come see me a year ago in my office, and I never received the project. A lot of the time the companies tend to look for somebody that has an expertise in that product. The reality with the people who really engineer and put those things together, like at Sony, is that they are such a competent group of engineers. A designer is very much about the human interface, so they shouldn't really have that attitude because, if anything, younger people are probably more in tune with the digital age than older people are. It would make sense to go towards younger designers. There is obviously the fear of the financial risk. I don't think it's a risk on other levels, actually. I think it all comes down to money when it comes to those issues. If young designers really want to break

into a certain type of industry, the obvious thing is to do something like Jonathan Ives did at Apple. He got in there seven, eight years ago at a young age. He's fortunate to be in a company that has a real vision, but you know he climbed the ladder within a company, within a framework and became head designer there. He would never be doing that work if he had his own consultancy. Again it depends on typology – if you want to do furniture you can always get out of school and start designing furniture. The reality is that I'm still a big believer in real industrial design, which is furniture that is industrially produced. It helps to probably go and be an apprentice, spend two, three years with a furniture manufacturer 'in house'. BNB has a great research lab, you could work in there for a few years – basically put yourself in a position where you can just learn as much as you can.

One of the greatest things is you really learn a lot more in a manufacturing plant than you do in a consultancy. If I graduated tomorrow, I wouldn't work with Ettore Sottsass or even Richard Sacker or someone who does more industrial design stuff like Seymour Powell or something. I would learn a lot more if I went and worked in-house as a designer at Nokia, or Sony, or Nike, because you're surrounded by the people who really make the stuff happen. When I was 19 or 20 I got a job whilst I was an undergraduate in a telephone company in Canada. They had 6,000 employees and sadly enough there were three designers and we were designing telephones. All of a sudden I found myself 20 years old, doing an amazing amount of drawings for injection moulding of telephone pipes. Because we had all the printed circuit boards and the elastomers for the buttons being designed in-house, I really understood the product. Now if I went and worked for a consultancy, chances are I'd only be involved in the conceptual part of the design.

That's a really interesting angle on it.

That's the way you learn and sometimes those experiences are painful.

It's not as glamorous from the outside but you learn more.

You learn an amazing amount and you also learn about business because when you look at a corporation like that you learn all the kinds of business protocols, I mean even down to how you fill out petty cash forms and all that kind of stuff, you really learn what a corporation is all about from the inside, and then one day you're on the outside and you're working for a corporation you completely understand.

That's not the obvious route.

No, of course not.

That makes sense.

Well, you know, the problem is I get tons of people, students and stuff coming and working for me. The way I work, I'm, on one hand, very poetic. There's an artist side of me and the way I think, and the way I draw. They're seeing a kind of poetic side of me, and they're also seeing the other side of me running a small business and being pretty proactive in the world and making things happen. There's a big chunk that they'll never learn from my office, if that makes sense.