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## Josh Klein: A Benevolent Hacker

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# PROFILE

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### The Business of Hacking

New York-based digital strategist **Josh Klein** is a frontrunner in the global hacking scene and has presented at Davos, **TED** and **SXSW** on the topic. He has hacked everything, from institutions' computer networks to systems that analyse human and animal behaviour. A self-confessed 'meddler', Klein is a firm believer that hacking can better both business and society, through altering systems in order to make them more efficient. Through his work with the FBI and CIA and with companies including **Microsoft** and **Oracle** advertising agencies like **BBH** and **BBDO**, Klein has developed mobile and social applications, healthcare-related systems and other tools that improve the way people live by offering them more streamlined ways to achieve their goals or tasks.

The term hacking has not always enjoyed such affirmative associations. Traditionally linked with malicious and anti-social activities, such as phishing and phone-hacking scandals, it is now thanks to principled hackers that this nefarious perception is being turned on its head.

Klein is quick to spotlight a legion of talented hackers that have gone before him, making indelible contributions to society: "The internet was created as a result of Sir Tim Berners-Lee trying to improve document sharing, penicillin was invented through mucking about with mould and even democracy is an ongoing experiment. All of these phenomena are hacks - improvements on old systems that were reworked to produce something substantively better."

However, rather than considering himself unique in his compunction to modify things, Klein believes all humans are innately programmed to hack: "I think it's as natural as breathing. If you've spent time with kids you'll know what I mean; hacking is that same sense of curiosity and wonder, that urge to meddle and improve that all kids have. I sometimes suspect that some of us have just had it stamped out of us by institutions. That said, you can always learn it again. It's like falling off a bike."



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## A Society of Hackers

The pursuit of hacking has penetrated mainstream social consciousness. From brands inviting enthusiastic consumers to customise their product or packaging, to companies hosting in-house 'hackathons' or opening up their APIs (application programming interfaces) to external tech-enthusiasts.

For example, social networking site **Facebook** regularly hosts 'hackathons', where employees can design fringe concepts – the site's Facebook Chat function and Like button were created in this way.

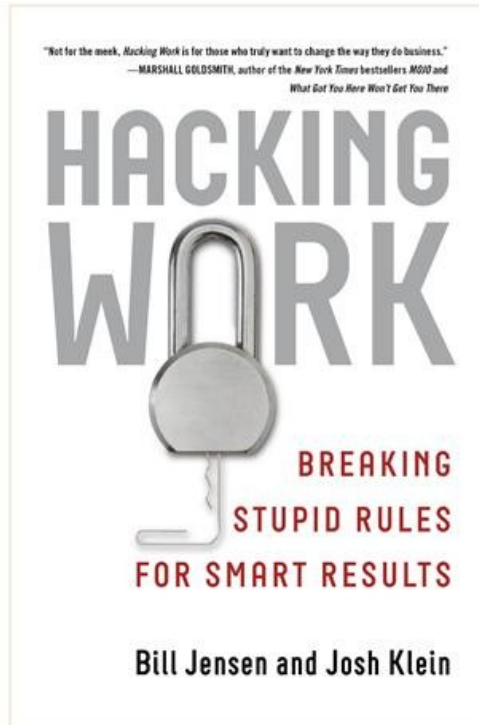
However, in order to effect *positive* social and cultural development, Klein maintains that hackers need to act as benevolent rule breakers. This involves following a stringent code of morals and ethics when executing any hack. Klein says: "Always ask yourself if anyone is getting hurt. If they are, work out how to mitigate that – being nice to others can have career benefits. Ultimately, benevolent hacking is for the good. It's not aimed at being damaging, but rather at improving things for all involved parties."

**Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, HP** and **NASA** recently partnered to facilitate a **Random Hacks of Kindness** event that brought civically-minded hackers together to develop apps that addressed issues such as crisis management and waste reduction. Even the city of New York hosted a hackathon (late 2011) in order to mine ideas from its inhabitants regarding how to improve its website **NYC.gov**.

Rather than seeing this mass adoption of hacker mindset as a threat to the purist hack culture, Klein believes that it is a step in the right direction.

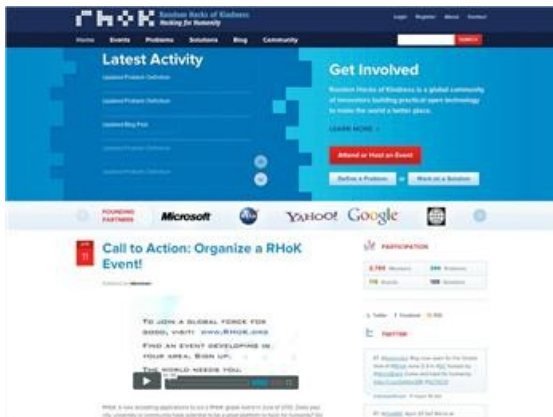
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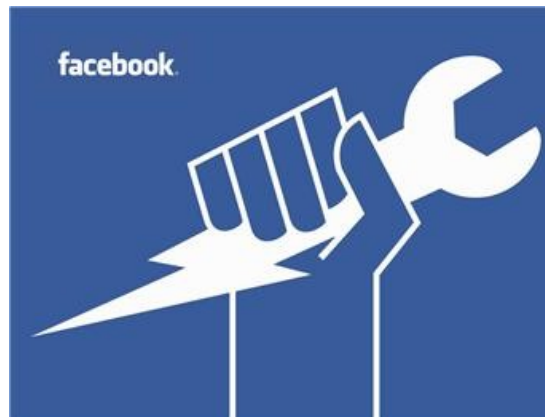


Hacking Work

Along these lines, Klein's industry-defining book **Hacking Work: Breaking Stupid Rules for Smart Results**, co-authored with consultant Bill Jensen and published in September 2010, is an easily-digestible blueprint for would-be hackers, particularly in the workplace. The volume discusses strategic ways in which to work around tedious bureaucratic processes that hamper personal performance. It also encourages individuals to keep plugging away when faced with resistance from the powers-that-be, as often the most rigid companies are the ones that most require a shake-up.



Random Hacks of Kindness



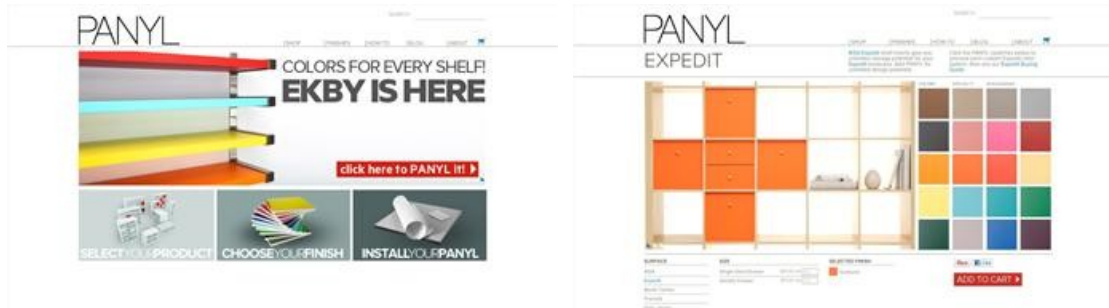
Facebook Hackathon

## Gaining Innovative Advantage

In order to compete in an ever-changing consumer marketplace, Klein believes that a hacker mindset can be a powerful weapon for leading brands and retailers: "I'm puzzled by brands that haven't jumped on this bandwagon. It's cheap, creates hardcore followers, leverages those followers to create more followers and generates major new revenue streams, product innovations and consumer insights."

In Klein's view, Swedish flat-pack furniture company **IKEA** is a brand that is thriving within open source culture – through allowing itself to be hacked by others. He admires how a diverse ecosystem of third-party initiatives have sprung up around IKEA's core products, creating enterprise for the contingent companies, while boosting IKEA's bottom line and providing the retailer with critical insights regarding how its fans and followers actually use its products.

Examples of IKEA's third-party initiatives include: US-based company **O'verlays** – a business that retails decorative fretwork panels, which are compatible with many IKEA lines; **Panyl** – a website that offers patterned self-adhesive vinyl sheets that affix to IKEA products; and **Semihandmade** – a furniture company that creates bespoke doors and facing to fit IKEA product shells.



Panyl



Semihandmade

Klein adds: "The more hacking becomes popularised, the better for all of us; it means that people are taking responsibility for themselves as consumers and as participants in consumer culture."

Although not suitable for all brands or retailers, this approach can create a rich and robust identity for the catalyst brand. Klein, however, cautions brands and retailers to think carefully before plunging into the world of hacking. Today's savvy consumer will only choose to invest themselves in projects that feel authentic, honest and worthwhile.

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## Stylus Summary

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Novice hackers should start with a straightforward quick-win to boost confidence. Klein advises: “Start by finding something you want to fix or improve. Google answers to make positive changes. Learn, implement, evaluate and repeat.”

Systems in most need of adjusting will often be most resistant to change. This doesn't mean hackers need be unnecessarily forceful or harmful. Smart and subtle workarounds work well. Hackers can be nice!

Brands that allow *themselves* to be hacked can demonstrate confidence and bravery. This strategy, however, is not for the faint-hearted as the results may not always be desired ones.

By allowing consumer hackers to customise their offer, brands can gain insights into what makes their fans and followers tick. These learnings are invaluable for future product development.