

# Notion encourages busy-work and I'm tired of it

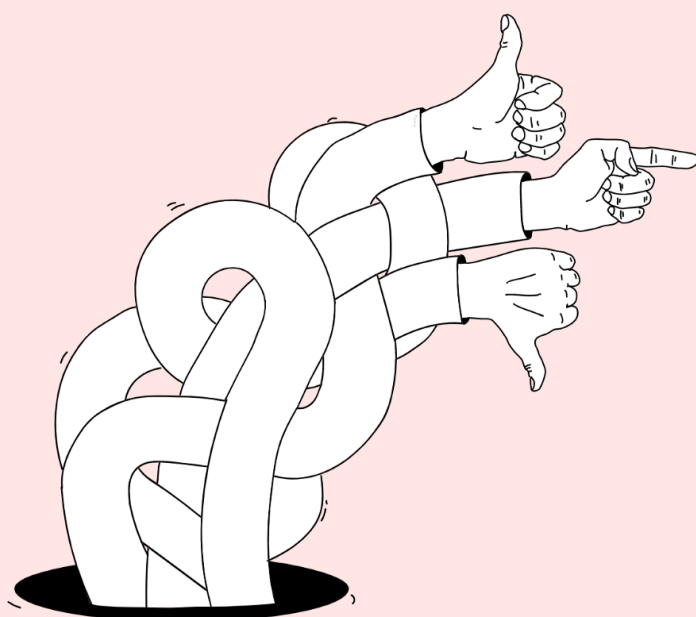
Why has everything become so needlessly complicated?



Harry Keller

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*“Write, plan, collaborate, and get organized. Notion is all you need — in one tool.”*

This post contains my observations on Notion, the no-code champion that’s eating up the productivity tool space. If you don’t know what Notion is or haven’t used it before, then this post is probably not for you. I should mention that as a company at [diesdas.digital](https://diesdas.digital), we love Notion and have been using it so extensively that it has made most other tools we previously used redundant — it’s become our operating system and I don’t know how we would run the company without it. So this post is very much about a love/hate relationship.

Notion is a meta-tool: a tool to build tools and it’s so malleable and makes inventing your own workflows so easy, you can’t help, but marvel at it: It’s an incredibly impressive

achievement to allow people to build databases and relations without writing any code. It also excels at the media-heavy blank-page collaboration environment — it's better at that than Google Docs, it's better than Dropbox Paper, it's better than any wiki.

So, what's not to love?

## **With great power comes great responsibility**

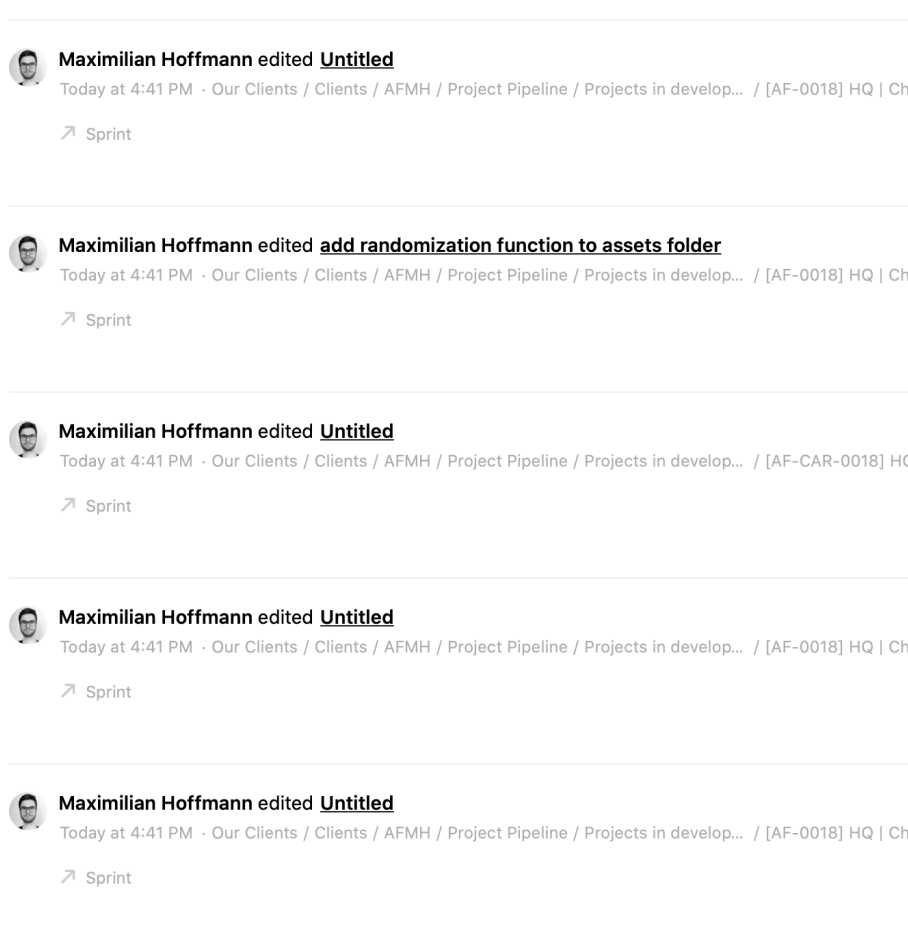
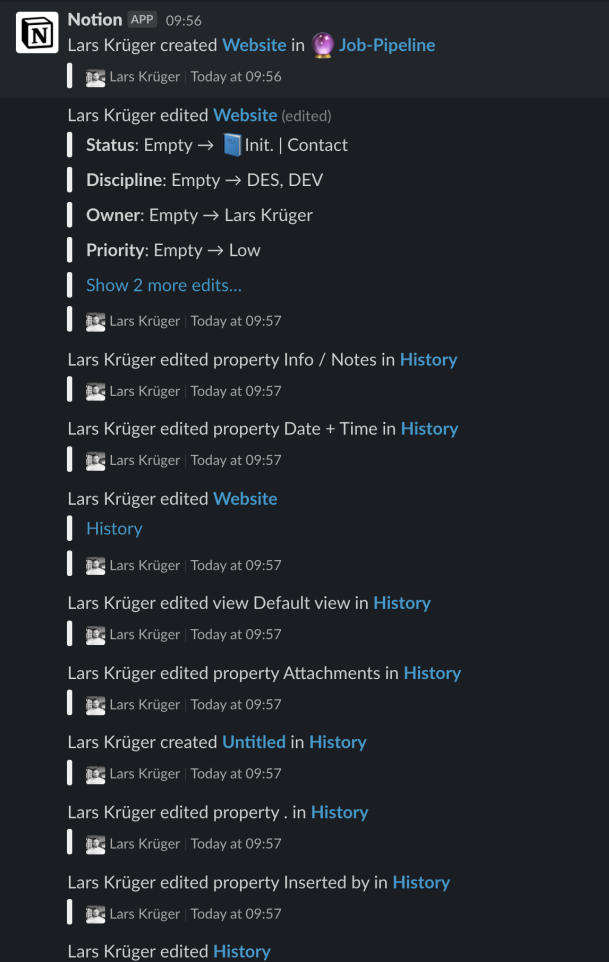
It's all sunshine and rainbows at the start: You get going with a few pages; meeting notes here, a to do list there, a trello-esque board over there; it's fantastic, finally all your moving data targets converge in one place! Then you start putting more things together: You discover custom views, relations, databases. Mind blown, all the possibilities! Over night Notion becomes your company's project management tool, project documentation tool, internal wiki tool, lead tracking tool, CRM tool, intranet tool, HR tool, shared todo lists tool, meeting minutes tool, roadmap tool, event organisation tool, GDPR compliance tool, maybe even your website. The list is endless. It encourages you to use it for everything, because it can do everything ... but should it?

Sorry Notion, but I need a break ... because your immense flexibility is also your biggest weakness.

## **Notifications become useless**

First of all: Notifications don't keep up. If you've built a ton of different tools in Notion, then notifications simply aren't useful anymore ... you receive emails that list 86 changes all across the board(s); they are not organized and they don't correspond to mental buckets, like separate apps would. Your CRM notifications are suddenly bundled with your current product development sprint updates. And how could they be separate? Notion doesn't know *what* it is storing, for all means and purposes a contact in your CRM tool is the same thing as a development story in your backlog. That's a problem because it creates mental overhead of sifting through all the important places manually, finding out what is important. Or you hook Notion up to Slack channels and pipe the updates there ... but then it overwhelms all regular chat in those channels.

I never thought I'd say this, but I miss the times of receiving a JIRA notification and the icon's color, the formatting and the phrasing tell me immediately and exactly its context and what it is about.

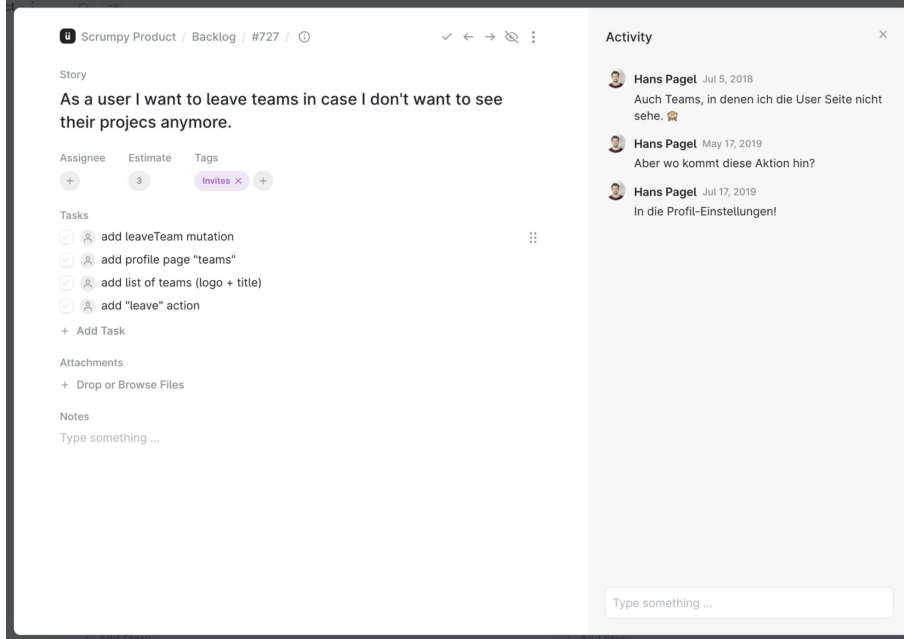
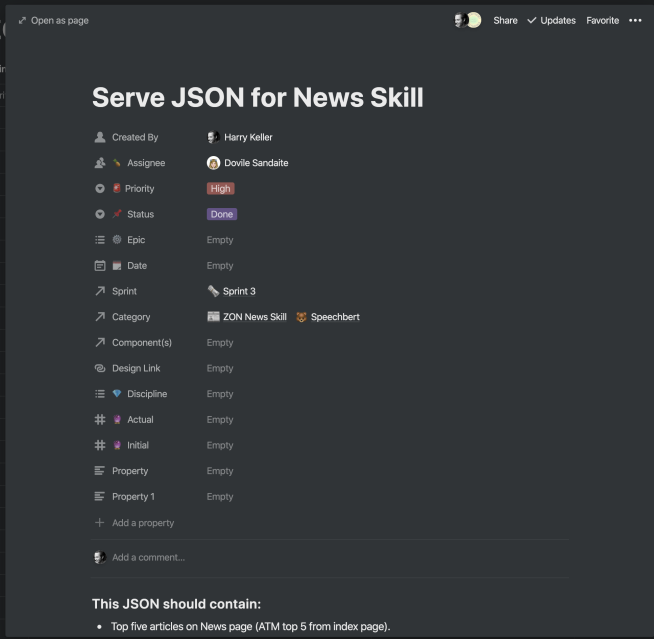


Left: Notion's Slack integration, right: email notifications. What is happening here? Nobody knows.

## Everything looks lowest common denominator

And while it's impressive that Notion can handle all of these different use cases, it's not particularly good at any of them. It doesn't invite discussion because its comments are tiny and hidden. You also can't call attention to certain properties of a card/page because all meta-data becomes one long list of properties. If you were purposefully designing a tool for one use case, you'd emphasize common/important functionality and hide more obscure features. In Notion everything is the same, because it doesn't distinguish between e.g. a due date and a last updated timestamp, which are of wildly different importance. The only chance of visual hierarchy is ordering properties from top to bottom.

Judged as a standalone tool, e.g. a project backlog, Notion is simply not well designed for that task. It's almost undesigned due to its forced genericness. Everything is a compromise. Everything becomes its lowest common denominator. Nothing has purpose or is easy to scan visually. Being generic forces generic design onto everything.



Left: a Notion story card, right: a functionally similar, but much more purposefully designed view in [Scrumpy](#).

## Notion encourages busy-work

**By far the biggest gripe I have is that a tool should be a means to an end and get out of the way—but with Notion building the tool often becomes the end in itself.**

Too often people can't handle the great power Notion gives them: they frequently build the most sophisticated, most complex solution for a problem because that makes them look smart. Gardening Notion boards becomes an activity in itself ... Notion doesn't get out of the way, it's malleability always invites you to tweak your boards further, to add another property, to connect another relation, to add another view, to go through your board and complete data on all cards. It has become a perpetual joke within our team to “create a Notion board” for any problem we encounter.

But make no mistake: All of this busy-work has little value. Of course better tools provide efficiency gains, but in Notion you usually reach a “90% there” level quite early—but that's not when people stop. People revel in activities of diminishing returns and make everything unnecessarily complicated. A card in a table on a card in a board on a page? Sure!

Most times a mundane bullet point list would have been fine. Maybe a to do list. Maybe adding those todos to a calendar. But that wouldn't make you look smart, would it? A Notion board with 5 views, 3 relations to other databases and 20 properties per card does ... it shows you've really thought of all the edge cases! Good job!

Not only is the initial time spent on this busy-work wasted ... you end up with solutions that need a manual to comprehend and use them. This is not a joke, we've actually been there: We've seen endless Slack messages explaining how a new Notion board is

supposed to be used. This needless complexity slows everyone down who needs to use these tools later on.

Now ... of course all this is not Notion's fault — of course it can be used sensibly and responsibly. This whole post is a bit like criticizing a programming language for the bad code beginners write with it. Maybe we simply haven't grown our Notion legs yet. But the reality is that not everyone on your team will want to become an expert tool builder: The flexibility that Notion offers simply invites you to use it for the wrong things and make everything too damn complicated. It invites excessive gardening. And worst of all: With Notion an even better, even more refined setup is always possible, always just around the corner, so people never settle ... they simply won't stop tweaking their tools, instead of focusing on the actual work.

### **The final stage of galaxy brain might simply be ... Basecamp**

Observing this makes me feel really drawn to tools like Basecamp, which are very rigid, very opinionated, funneling you through workflows that make sense, because they've been proven over time and iterated upon. Somebody decided, after careful consideration, that this is the feature set the tool should offer and that's it. Somebody thought about how it all connects, how it's designed and how it all comes together. The feature scope is fixed. No adding of stuff. No rearranging the core interface. No more obscure properties for edge cases. No discussions about relations. One way to do things! Focus on your work, not the tool!

Notion is the opposite and that flexibility makes it incredibly useful in *some* situations, but sadly also distracting and mediocre for *most* use cases. Maybe we had to go down this way, to see the benefits of more opinionated software again — to embrace constraints and to focus on the actual work. Understanding usually comes in sine waves ... we've been at the top of the flexibility hill and now it might be time to bounce back.

But that's just my opinion. Even in my team people will probably strongly disagree. Maybe someone will write a follow-up blog post with a counter take? That'd be great, I'd like to have that conversation!

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