Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 068: Alan Henry
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Our guest this week is Alan Henry. Alan is the editor in chief of LifeHacker, a site that offers tips, tricks, and downloads to help people live their best, most productive, and most fulfilling lives. He's also a recovering physicist, music lover, and self-proclaimed lover of dorky and niche hobbies.

Mark:	Welcome to the Cool Tools Show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, editor in chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at cool-tools.org. I'm joined by my co-host, Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools. Hey, Kevin.
Kevin:	Hey, it's good to be here.
Mark:	In each episode of the Cool Tools Show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite uncommon and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about. Our guest today is Allen Henry. Allen is the editor in chief of LifeHacker, a site that offers tips, tricks, and downloads to help people live their best, most productive, and most fulfilling lives. He's also a recovering physicist, music lover, and self-proclaimed lover of dorky and niche hobbies. Hey, Allen, how's it going?
Alan:	It's going well. How are you?
Mark:	Doing really well. Kevin and I are huge, long-time fans of LifeHacker, ever since the early days when Gina Dupronti was the editor of it. When did you take the helm over at LifeHacker.
Alan:	I guess I've been editor in chief really only about 6 months now, since the beginning of 2016. I've been writing here since 2010 or 2011. I've been reading since the Gina Dupronti days. I too am a long-time fan. I just get to run the show these days.

Mark:	Before we talk about LifeHacker, because I want to find out more about what's going on there, you have a selection of 4 tools. I would love to have you tell us about them. Why don't you start by talking about the AKG Headphones?
Alan:	Oh, yeah, so I'm kind of a headphone nerd, not in probably the most extreme sense. I have a lot of headphones. I'm a big believer in spending just a little bit of good money on a superior listening experience, because I love music. The headphones that I use every day are the AKG K7XX headphones. They are available at this site called Massdrop. If you don't want to sign up for any of that, it's like a collective buying site. If you don't want to sign up for it, the Q701s are pretty much the same headphones. They're widely available at Amazon and places like that. They're a pay of open-backed headphones that, for other people in the room, may be a little annoying because some of the music leaks out of the backs of the headphones.
Mark:	Interesting.
Kevin:	When you say open back, I don't know what that means.
Alan:	There are really 2 major types of over-ear headphones. There's open back and closed back. Open back are headphones that look kind of like they have a little speaker on the outside, but that really is is just a way of opening up what we call, what headphone nerds call, sound stage. That feeling that when you're listening to music you can hear where the instruments are around you and each individual instrument that's playing. They're great for a very immersive listening experience. Now, closed back, on the other hand, are the kind of headphones that you've probably seen, like you have Beats headphones or those headphones that are really just big old cans that are solid on both sides. They're really good for isolation, so I want to listening to music privately or I'm on the subway or someplace like that. Closed back headphones are best for that.
Mark:	Okay. One thing I notice about these, Allen, is that the ear part, the can or the cup, it looks like it's a large diameter like larger then usual.
Alan:	Oh, yeah. They go all the way ... The best ones are kind of big like that. They're called circum aural headphones. They go all the way around your ear, and they kind of have a velour, a soft ear pad, which makes them comfortable to wear for long periods. At least, this particular pair are very comfortable to wear for long periods. I have other headphones that I've had more anticipation of buying, but these ones are probably the most comfortable.
Kevin:	Then there's a whole other realm of the ear buds. Are they even considered like a viable alternative by people like yourself who are trying to, I guess, optimize the sound experience?

Alan:	Oh, yeah, absolutely. There are a lot of earbuds that are molded to your ears. There's a difference between the earbuds, a $25 earbud you'll pick up at a gas station; or like in-ear monitors by a company like Shure or Etymotic, where they put a lot of science, a lot of real research, into designing the drivers that go into these tiny things, as long as you have a good fit in your ear of course, for a really good listening experience.
Kevin:	Okay.
Mark:	One thing ... I'm sorry Kevin. I was just gonna say, going back to that diameter of the part that goes over your ear, my friend has a pair with giant diameter, and when I put them on I was able to keep them on for over an hour without any pain on my ear. Most headphones, after a while, my ear, the cartilage part, starts to really ache. I imagine that these are really comfortable kind of a headphone.
Alan:	Yeah, and that's one reason I love them so much. Between that and the headband, you'll notice that there's these 2 little bands that go over and a little leather strap in the center. Those kind of self-adjust when you put them on your head, which is another reason I love these so much. You don't have to do that kind of clack, clack, clack thing that you do with a lot of headphones to try and get them on your head. They're perfectly designed for long, long listening sessions. I use them to listen to my turn tables or my MP3s in my computer or even when I play video games. I just keep them on. They're much superior then a lot of "gaming headphones" that will get uncomfortable over long periods.
Kevin:	So, I know we're talking about headphones in general, but the time i wear headphones the most is when I'm traveling on a plane. I've used the noise-canceling version, which is really not what we're talking about here, but that's in the same class. I would wear them to Asia for 13 hours. They were uncomfortable, Mark, as you said, because I didn't have the kind that fit around the ear like we're talking about here. I have gone to the Bose player comfort ones that are these somewhat molded inserts into earphones, and I will wear and sleep with them for 12 hours at a stretch. I get on the plane. I put them on, and then I'll take them off when I get out. I have those actually more comfortable for long-term then the earphones, particularly if I'm sleeping. I guess the sound quality is probably okay, but it's not necessarily being optimized for your sound quality like these are presumably.
Alan:	Presumably, but Bose is really good about sound quality. I mean, the quiet comfort, the ones they just released, the 25s I think. They're fantastic, and I love noise-canceling headphones specifically for what you described. Traveling on a plan or a bus or a train, there's nothing like them.

Kevin: Okay. But these ones, that you're selecting here are ones that ... You wouldn't use those, because you don't need a noise-canceling aspects. These would be better for your general purpose, listening to music. Okay. Great.

Mark: You're next one is actually something that I was considering getting, and so I'd love to get your take on it. It's a cold brew ice coffee maker.

Alan: Yeah, the Takeya Cold Brew, not that Takeya particular makes great ones, I just find that this is really a big bang for the buck pick for me. They're not terrible expensive. I think retail they're like $25, and I got mine on sale at Amazon for like $15. It's probably the simplest cold brew maker I've ever used. You just dump the coffee into the filter in the center, and you fill it up with cold water and put it in the fridge. Just wait overnight. When you're ready for coffee, you just take the filter. You dump out the grounds. You rinse it out and let it dry. Meanwhile, you have this pitcher of cold brew coffee that's still in your fridge. It just tastes delicious for no fuss at all. It was a no-brainer. Well, I'll admit, I was skeptical, because cold brew I could just put it in a pitcher and then strain it out or something. You don't have to do that. Even when I picked it up, I realized that this is probably the cleanest cold brew I've ever made in my life, and I've tried many cold brew making techniques.

Kevin: There's no pressure. It's just osmosis basically or something.

Alan: Absolutely. It just brewed and infuses a lot like tea would, just in your fridge overnight. You should leave it in there like 8 to 12 hours just to get really good flavor.

Kevin: Then, you have this brew and then you would ice it or sweeten it as you care to. That's all you have to do?

Alan: Yeah, absolutely. I put mine in just a plain old tumbler with a littler sweetener in the bottom and some ice, and I pour a little bit over and stick a straw in it. That's pretty much it. It's not even like cold brew concentrate where you would want to kind of dilute it with a little water. This is great. My only thing that I don't like about it is that it's only a quart. I get like maybe 2 cups out of it, and then I have to make it again and wait another night.

Kevin: It looks like the top is kind of a screw. You might be able to find a similar screw to fit a gallon jar.

Alan: That would be wonderful.

Mark: Tell me a little bit about the coffee that you use with it and what kind of grind you use.

Alan:	So, I am one of these coffee people. I use a coarse grind that would be suitable for like a french press or someplace like that. You've got some movement between the grounds, but the coffee that I use actually, my daily brew, is not very complicated at all. It's Kicking Horse, it's a dark brew. I think it's their "Kickass" brew that I can get at Amazon. It's just a full-bodied coffee that I like to start the day with. If I'm feeling special, there's this brewery in Pennsylvania called Royal Mile, and they make a variety of really, really beautiful coffees. If it's a special occasion, I will take one of their bags down, and I'll grind it up, and I'll put it in the cold brew maker and I'll have a treat the next day.
Mark:	That sounds really good. Okay, well thank you for letting me know about that. With your recommendation, I'm gonna pull the trigger.
Alan:	Oh, please do. Let me know what you think.
Mark:	Okay, I sure will. The next one you have a keyboard that you wanted to talk about, and not musical keyboard but a computer keyboard.
Alan:	Yeah, so I'm a writer. I spend all day in front of a computer, so the keyboard I use is intimately important to me. A Das keyboard is a long-standing manufacturer of keyboards, of mechanical keyboards specifically, for writers, coders, and just general all around geeks. The Das Keyboard 4 is one of their most recent keyboard models. I particularly like it, because it's a mechanical keyboard ... I've gotten waist deep into mechanical keyboards recently. This keyboard uses Cherry MX Brown Switches, has media controls, has a nice volume knob. It look nice on your desk. The beautiful thing about MX Brown Switches, specifically, is that they're quiet, so you get the tactile feeling of using a mechanical keyboard, that very kind of clicky sensation while you're writing, but it's also not so loud that it would annoy everyone else in an office with you. I work in an office with other people, so it's nice to not make enemies while I'm trying to write articles.
Kevin:	You say mechanical. I'm a little confused about mechanical. I'm not even sure if the keyboard I have in front of me is mechanical or not. How do I know?
Alan:	Well, how thick is the keyboard? That's probably the best tell.
Kevin:	Is it the amount that the key is traveling when you press it? Is that what -
Alan:	It's really about the switch inside each key. Keyboards like the Apple keyboard or the Keyboard on a laptop or honestly most commercial keyboards are membrane keyboards. There's a circuit board on the bottom and a little rubber membrane that's laid underneath all of the keys. When you press the key, the rubber membrane makes contact with the board, and then it sends a signal to the computer that says "Oh, you pressed s".

Kevin:	That's not considered the mechanical one.
Alan:	No, they're inexpensive to make and that's part of the reason they're so popular. They get the job done. Mechanical keyboards, on the other hand, have individual switches for each letter. You can usually tell you have a mechanical keyboard if type on it kind of sounds like a typewriter. That's really the big tell. They're very, very loud. They're often heavier, and they're often more expensive. The reason they've had a bit of a resurgence is really among gamers and people who miss those old IBM Model M keyboard days, where every key sounds like ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk. That nostalgia has propelled them forward. They're also just a lot of fun, and they're really satisfying to type on.
Mark:	Now, I noticed that there are 2 flavors of this keyboard. There's a soft tactile version and the clicky version. Which one do you have?
Alan:	I have the soft tactile version. That's the version that uses those Brown Switches. Cherry MX is just a company that makes these switches and sells them to keyboard manufacturers. They make different colors. There's reds, blues, clears, black, brown. The important thing, in this case, and that's why Das tries to demystify it, the soft tactile versions give you that feel but not the sound. The clicky ones are really loud. You will know walking around a corner that someone's using this keyboard. At the same time, a lot of people like them, because the switches use a little less pressure to type on. You feel like you can type really, really fast, or they just like the sound of them in action.
Mark:	Does it work with a MAC as well as a Windows machine?
Alan:	Absolutely. I am a cross-platform person myself, so I have used these keyboards in MAC OS and Windows with great success.
Kevin:	I'm trying to get out of it besides a nostalgia, because maybe for some people there is no nostalgia because they've never used anything but the current crop. There's a sound ... How do we call it? The confirmation of the sound, and then there's a feel to it. The feel that you get with the mechanical versus the modern membrane ones is that you ... Tell me about what the benefit of the feel is.
Alan:	It's very personal. I wouldn't recommend mechanical keyboards to everyone, because for a lot of people, like the Apple keyboard and Apple wireless keyboard, is very ... It's portable. It's easy to use. That very quick fingers over the keys feeling works very well for them. For the people who like mechanical keyboards beyond the nostalgia, it is that very connected sense of I'm really ... Almost like a pack in the Gibson. I'm really, really working this keyboard. I'm really, really writing this thing. One of the reasons that gamers particularly like it is because, depending on the switch you get, the actuation point, or the place where you press the key down, will vary depending on the type of switch. If an actuation point is high, that means that I

can just barely touch the inner key, and I will fire my weapon or I will execute whatever move I'm doing in a game. Versus when it's really, really low, it takes more time, more force, to really press that key down and do the thing that I want to do. Depending on the type of games you play, it can make a difference. It's a matter of milliseconds, honestly. I've heard people who really, really care about that kind of thing.

For me, it's really just hearkens back to the first computer I ever had kind of feeling. Of when I started writing way, way back when I was youngster on a Apple 2C, or an Apple 2E sorry, when I was just using Beegle write to write my little short stories. It makes me feel good, that's all.

Mark: That's cool, and I love the large volume knob on there. That looks handy as well as the little media buttons like the fast forward, play, pause, reverse. Those look super handy.

Alan: Honestly, when I was using it on a MAC, I used them all the time, because it was so much easier to do that then to mouse up to the menu bar or even when I just had an Apple keyboard, actually press, press, press the volume up or down keys.

Mark: Yeah, that looks cool. You've got another one for us, and this is a to do list. It's called Todoist.

Alan: Yep. No LifeHacker editor would be complete without their favorite to do app. Todoist is my favorite. It's not the prettiest. It's not the flashiest. The reason I particularly love it is because it's the smartest I've used. It will recognize things like pick up the laundry every 2nd Thursday at 10 p.m., which is something that back in the early days of the Web lots of To do apps used to know. As we've progressed forward towards more design forward free apps, they've dropped that. A lot of Todoist competitors that I've tried that are great apps and they're [inaudible 00:18:32], have also dropped that smart, recurring ability. The nice thing about Todoist also is that they have plug-ins and apps for every platform: IOS, Android. They have plug-ins for Chrome and Firefox. They have plug-ins for Outlook and Thunderbird and any tool that you've already used most likely, Todoist will have some kind of integration with it, so you can say "hey, this website was really interesting. I want to write about it. Let me add it to Todoist", and I will click one button and there it is as a reminder to myself.

Kevin: They're are synchronized presumably.

Alan: Absolutely. They all synchronize with each other.

Kevin: Just for the benefit of others who may have a To Do List app, what are some of the other [inaudible 00:19:18] apps that you have used that you think is superior to? As a comparison.

Alan:	Sure. I used to use Wonderlist very often. Wonderlist is free. It's great. I really like Wonderlist. It was recently acquired ... Well, not recently, I guess its been a year or so now, acquired by Microsoft, and luckily for them, business as usual since then. Wonderlist is great. It's free. I know the team behind it, and they work really hard at making sure it works. Any.anydo, I think it's called AnyDo and not Any.Do which is their URL, they also have a great free to do app. Also cross-platform just like Wonderlist and Todoist. There's is a bit more design forward. They have a neat feature called AnyDo moment, where at the beginning of the day it will prompt you with all the things you want to get accomplished today, and it will give you the opportunity at the start of your day to either reschedule them for later at another time or say I've already done it or I don't need to do it or pick a specific time during the day to do it; which is really great if you're the kind of person like me who likes to review your tasks, get that 10,000 foot view before you really dive into the busy work of the day.
Kevin:	Does Todoist, does that show up in your calendar?
Alan:	It can. Todoist has ... It's not native, but Todoist can integrate with Google calendar, for example. I'm not sure if it integrates with Ical, but I would ... Considering the sheer number of plug-ins they have, I wouldn't be surprised if they did.
Mark:	I use something called Workflowy for the last year or so. How about ... Have you used that?
Alan:	I have not used Workflowy. I've read about Workflowy, because we've covered it at LifeHacker, but I know more then a few people who are Workflowy devotees. It's great as far as I know.
Mark:	It's just really simple text based. For me, as soon as I started using it, I'm like this is the way that I'm gonna do it. I also liked Wonderlist. I just felt ... It felt like it was too much like maybe putting together Lego bricks and moving this around, like little moving modules around and stuff. This is kind of like creating outlines of lists and a lot of power is kind of under the hood waiting for you as you need it.
Alan:	That's the one thing I like a lot about it, but at the same time you hit a really good point there. The best productivity app is the one you use. If you try something and you feel like you're spending more time trying to be productive then actually being productive, then it's a wash. Just go back to pencil and paper if you have, which is perfectly great.
Kevin:	That sounds like a LifeHacker tip.

Mark:	Very good one. Speaking of LifeHacker, like I said Kevin and I are long time fans and followers. You've been making some interesting changes at LifeHacker recently. Maybe you can talk about what's going on there.
Alan:	Sure. A lot of what's happened at LifeHacker is ... A lot of it has changed under the hood. Most people won't notice a ton of radical differences when they come to visit the site, but one thing that we've been trying to do a lot since I took over, at least, is make sure that we reach out into different aspects of peoples lives that "LifeHacking" used to not really touch. Life hacks as a category have become this almost Pinteresty, jokey thing around the internet, where people are like "I will hack my life by going outside and getting fresh air" or "I will go outside for free smells". That's a life hack, right there. To a certain extent, you kind of have to own that, because Life hacking is a relic of the 2006-2008 internet where we combined Hints from Heloise with technology and did it in a way that, at the time, no one had done before. Now, everyone can do that.
	We are a little less focused on binder clips, and we're a little more focused on psychology, and a little more focused on living your best life or sleeping your best sleep. We're a little ore focused on parenting and health and beauty or grooming in a way that isn't hokey, which is something that is aplenty around the web. We want to kind of grow old a little bit with our readers, because a lot of them started reading us when they were in high school or they were in college or like me, I was in college when I started reading LifeHacker, or I was getting out of college when I started reading LifeHacker. Kind of touch on the aspects of their real, everyday lives that they feel like they're trapped in or they feel like they could use a helping hands with, not necessarily a binder clip hack to keep their phone upright while they work, although we will totally post that if one comes across our desk. Also, I feel trapped in this dead end job. What can I do about that? How can it make it better, or what should I do to make sure that I'm prepared if I want to leave?
	Those are the kinds of more grown-up questions, or more pressing, more difficult questions, the things that keep people up at night that we want to be able to help out with.
Kevin:	There's a, I guess, kind of assumption almost among the media companies, the ones that are particularly out front like BuzzFeeds and [inaudible 00:24:57] and stuff and even Facebook, that we're moving to a media that's gonna be centered around video. Are you guys on board with that? Is that something you're kind of going against, or you're gonna go full throttle? What's your take on that?
Alan:	I don't know whether or not ... I'm not an old media person. I'm saying I used to work in an office. I was a project manager back in the day. Before that, I was working in science, and I was working with computers. The way it comes off to me is that video is probably going to be more important later then it is now. Now, we have the bandwidth. We have the data. We have the resources. People, if anything,

they're centralizing their eyeballs on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and they're not leaving anymore to go to the blogs. They're not going to their bookmarks to read long, long articles. They want things explained to them in 30 seconds, 45 seconds, 90 seconds, in video. That's fine. We are making that video play. We are pushing towards let's do some interviews. Let's show you how to make this recipe that is going to ... You can put it on anything. You can put the sauce on anything. We're gonna show you how to make it. We'll do that.

LifeHacker's a really small ship. We've always been a really tight knit, close team of writers, and we probably will continue to just write good articles that we hope people will come and read. On the bright side, around here we do have a great video team who is eager to help us with short, animated features about why we share internet videos, like psychological reasons that we share internet videos whether it's shame [inaudible 00:26:41] or it's anger or it's another mental or emotional reaction that a video elicits from us or it's something that's longer or more entertaining like the Weird 10 Weirdest Olympic Sports, which is another video we just did. I think we're kind of straddling the line. I recognize that most media companies are making that big, big video play. I think ours is too, whether or not it carries us specifically along with it. It's yet to be seen.

Kevin: I think one of the things about video is it's just to make a good one takes a ton of time to do.

Alan: Absolutely. When you're trying to do both ... Not all the time, not often are great writers also great video producers. If for no other reasons then you already have a full-time job. You can't say I need you to do all the blogs today, but also spend half the day in Adobe After Effects. It's just very difficult to do.

Kevin: Somebody else that ... I have a question about as both as a reader, as a fan, and also as a producer here at Cool Tools, which is how are you doing with the fact that you have this huge [inaudible 00:27:58] of stuff, of years and years, decades, of really great material and much of it evergreen in a sense that it's still useful. Are you thinking about how you can resurrect ... I don't mean resurrect, but give people like readers like me access to this and even best practices or in some way synthesize that? Do you have a plan for that?

Alan: Absolutely. You've hit on probably the biggest thing that, from a historical perspective, as someone who's read the site as long as I have and as you guys have. That's one of the things most important to me. The old tips ... There's a lot of things we don't write about, because we've covered them before.

Kevin: Right, but no one remembers that.

Alan: Exactly.

Kevin:	They weren't reading it 10 years ago.
Alan:	Exactly. It is both a technological solution and a writer solution to kind of go back into those archives and resurface those old posts. From a technological perspective, that's a lot about our CMS and making sure that we have a way to float those great old articles up to the top whenever we cover something that's relevant or related. For me, personally, I would love nothing more then to say I'm gonna give you a search box at the front of LifeHacker, and have you type binder clips and you'll find all of them over the course of 10 years. I wish there were an easier way to do it; but, for me, the best thing I have been doing lately is really just resurface those old posts. Go back into the archives. Clean them up. Put some new images on them, and say "Hey, here's this thing that you may not have seen before" or "a blast from the past". This great project that we did 5 years ago that is still very relevant to you today.
Kevin:	Are you looking at AI?
Alan:	I don't think so. Mostly, because ... Not for any bad reason or not because I have anything against AI. Mostly, because the technological aspect of our content management system is completely out of the hands of editorial. For as much as I love those guys, I think that they have some [inaudible 00:30:07] on their own that they are taking my input on. To some extent, they kind of know what they want to do. It's constantly a struggle to say "hey, what's more important to you guys? The newsy stuff that we break today or the evergreen stuff that people are finding on the first page of Google?" It's gonna be a process.
Kevin:	I think you guys have some great treasures that would benefit from a little easier access and even some intelligence in terms of promoting those things that I would consider best practice, not just the fact that you did them but these are the ones you want to pay attention to.
Mark:	Well, Allen, this has been really fun talking to you and finding out what some of your tools are, learning about LifeHacker. I just want folks to know that you can find out more about everything that Allen picked at cool-tools.org. We'll have show notes there. If you want to learn more about LifeHacker, it's very simple. Just head on over to lifehacker.com. Allen, thank you so much.
Alan:	Thanks for having me on. I really appreciate it.
Kevin:	It's great meeting you, and hope to have you again. Give some more great picks.
Alan:	Absolutely. Any time.