Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 051: Rose Eveleth

Transcript
April 2016
Visit Cool-tools.org for shownotes

Our guest this week is Rose Eveleth. Rose is a journalist who covers how humans tangle with science and technology. She's the host and producer of Flash Forward, a podcast about the future, and has covered everything from fake tumbleweed farms to sexist prosthetics.

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 great 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 this week is Rose Eveleth. Rose is a journalist who covers how humans tangle with science and technology. She's the host and producer of Flash Forward, a podcast about the future, and has covered everything from fake tumbleweed farms to sexist prosthetics. Hey, Rose. How's it going?
Rose:	Hi. I'm good. How are you?
Mark:	Great. Rose, your podcast Flash Forward is distributed on the Boing Boing Network and it's a really fantastic podcast.
Rose:	Thank you. It's very fun to make.
Mark:	Basically, what it is, is you start out by having thirty seconds to a few minutes of what sounds like a radio drama, where you present these scenarios of news broadcasts or telephone calls or customer interactions ... Things that are happening in the future if something happens, like if suddenly everybody became face blind or

if mosquitoes have been wiped off the face of the Earth. You follow up that kind of mini radio drama with real interviews with real experts who talk about what the future might be like if that scenario actually took place. Is that about right?

Rose: Yeah, that's perfect.

Mark: The format of Cool Tools is that we have a guest on every week and we ask them about four tools that they use and love and recommend that other people use. The first tool on your list is "Top Tracker". Tell us about it.

Rose: Yeah, so on top of doing hosting and producing for that podcast, I'm also just a freelancer, so I wear many hats. As a freelancer, I often say, "Your time is literally your money." What I use ... This is a time tracking tool. Basically, you can tell it projects and you can start and stop tracking. I can say, "Okay ... I spent an hour here and an hour there."

For me, it's also useful because it serves to delineate tasks that I'm doing where I have to be very conscious about, "Okay, now I'm going to do this." I have to type it in and I have to push the start button and then, I push the stop button when I'm done. It's a nice way to keep myself focused on a single task. I'm trying to single task recently, which is really hard, but I think it's better.

At the end, what I do ... I have a spreadsheet that I use to track projects and what I'm working on. The way that I gauge whether a project is worth it financially - and there are other things that I take into account when I decide to do things, not just money - is not necessarily a per word rate, which is what I think a lot of freelancers do and what a lot of people assume freelancers do, but it's a per hour rate.

Something might pay really well, but it takes me a thousand hours, so a great word rate, but a terrible per hour rate. Other things might seem like they don't pay very well, but it only takes me an hour to do it. I keep track. I keep pretty meticulous records about how long everything takes ... In my spreadsheet, I actually have a column that says "rate per hour". That helps too in the future if that same editor comes back to me or if I have another story.

I can gauge, "Okay, how long did this take me last time? Do I think I could do it the same amount of time or faster or is that a good per hour rate?" For me, that's really useful because I think it helps me avoid taking projects, or at least know if I'm doing a project that's going to be a time sink. I certainly still do projects that are time sinks and don't come out on top in terms of the per hour rate, but it's good to know that going in instead of being surprised later.

For me ... It's really, really simple, which is what I like about it. There are a lot of time trackers out there that you can use. There are some of them that follow your mouse

around and keep track of what apps you're using. They give you this break down of, "Okay, you spent fifteen percent of your time in Chrome and you spent twenty percent of your time in Pro Tools."

For me, that's not super useful ... The actual software that I'm using doesn't necessarily capture the task that I'm doing. I like to be able to say, "Here's what I'm doing and then, do it and then, stop." It's a little bit more helpful for me personally, just the way that I work in the kind of work that I do, so that's why I really like it.

I actually just ... Switched over to this one from an old tracking device, or tracking app, that started getting glitchy because I think it stopped being supported. I've been using Top Tracker now for about six months and I really like it, so that is my recommendation. I think in general, even if you don't use this particular time tracker, if you are a freelancer, time tracking is your friend and I highly recommend it.

Kevin: Does it export to your spreadsheets or do you have to manually go in and transfer those numbers by hand?

Rose: It does export as a spreadsheet, but I then go back in because ... My spreadsheet is laid out totally differently, so it can't just directly go to a sheet that I have. It doesn't take super long to just put in the numbers.

Kevin: You said ... You've looked at some of the others. There are a lot of them out there, that's for sure. Besides the fact that this one does not track software, there are still some others out there that are more activity trackers. How is this one better than those?

Rose: I don't know, in the sense that I try to be minimalist in my tools. Actually, I was thinking about this when you asked me to be on the show. I was like, "I'm not really a tool person." There's a blog post that I revisit a lot by John [inaudible 00:05:36], which ... I think it's called something like, "Confessions of Recovering Life Hacker", about how he would obsess about, "Which time tracker is the best one? I'm going to use all of them and I got to make all the folders and do all the things", when it's good enough. It's fine.

For this one, it works for me ... "Toggle" is one that I've used, which works well. That's the one that's a little glitchy. It's a lot harder to get the numbers out of it than with Top Tracker ... It's a little desktop app, but it also syncs to a web version, so I can access it on my phone if I need to, which I don't generally need to. Yeah, I think there's a ton out there. I think a lot of it just comes down to personal preference. I like the colors, I like the way that it looks. I try not to over-think it too much.

Mark: Is it a subscription service or a one-time purchase? What's the cost?

Rose:	It's free.
Kevin:	For now, but [actually 00:06:29], I tell you the truth. I am so ... [Worry 00:06:33] of free things because that means that if another year or so, it won't be free or there ... Won't be supported. It'd go away and then, I'm stuck.
Rose:	Yeah. No, I hear that, for sure. I think this is a thing that is easy enough. If it goes away, I can find a different one and it's probably fine. I'm not going to stress too much about it. Yeah, that's totally fair that soon, it will not be free and then, and/or it will not exist anymore.
Mark:	Will Top Tracker also generate invoices that you can send to your clients?
Rose:	Yeah, so I just use a PDF. I have a very simple form that I have on my computer that I put in the little things for. I find that so many clients have such strange and varied invoicing systems that even if I use a system or use a fancier way of doing it than that, it often doesn't work. I also am very particular about not sending data unencrypted to random finance people in various publications not because I don't trust them, but because I just feel like it's a bad idea to send your social security number via Gmail.
	I just use the command line to encrypt folders and then, send that folder and have them call me for the password is my system, which is not very high tech, but it gets the job done generally without having to teach people too much about encryption and also not spreading my information everywhere.
Mark:	Okay, so let's move on to your next pick. It's the IUD. Are you talking about the intrauterine device?
Rose:	Yeah, so ... I mentioned I'm not a big tools person. I try to be as minimal ... I write a lot on paper still and that kind of stuff. I was trying to think of a technology that I use a lot. Because of the podcast, I often think about, "What are surprising technologies that people forget about a lot of the time?" One of the things that I have inside of me that I use everyday to keep me safe and healthy is an IUD.
	I think that it's interesting to me because when I think about the future ... I do a lot of reporting on bio hacking and people who put magnets under their skin. Whenever I read breathless coverage of that, I remember like, "Three million women in the US have a device inside of them that no one ever talks about as bio hacking or this crazy stuff." It's this little device that they have inserted into them.
	I think that's really funny and interesting because it shows what we think is crazy and totally outlandish and people who do this are weirdos versus a normalized piece of

technology that we put inside of us, which is great ... The US is actually low in terms of the percent of people who use IUDs.

In China and Europe, it's much higher. I think almost forty percent of married women in China have an IUD. Obviously, that's partially because of the one-child rule, but in Europe, it's a really high percent. It's a really popular form of contraceptive that is, in fact, a device inside you, which, I think, is really cool.

Kevin: Yeah. It reminds me of the definition of technology, which is "Anything that was invented after you were born".

Rose: Exactly.

Kevin: This was invented a long time ago, so therefore, it's not technology.

Mark: Rose, could you describe how you actually use an IUD?

Rose: Sure. There are two main types of IUD: There is a hormonal IUD and there is a physical IUD. The copper is usually the one that is not hormonal. They're little Ts. What they do is they fold them up like a parasol when they're inserting them. They go through the cervix into the uterus and then, they open it up like a little umbrella and it makes a T shape. The hormonal ones secrete a low level of hormone.

It's like you're taking a birth control pill every day, but you don't have to remember to take one, which is one of the big advantages. You don't have to remember every day to take something. The copper ones ... They've long known that copper can prevent, physically prevent, the uterus from having an egg implanted ... You mentioned technology is something that ... It's invented after you're born.

The first record of somebody suggesting that if you put something inside the uterus, it might prevent pregnancy is Hippocrates way a long time ago. This is something that people have been doing for a long time, people have used for a long time. The physical, the ones that aren't hormone-based, they are a physical thing inside the uterus and it prevents the egg, a fertilized egg, from implanting on the uterine lining.

Basically, your uterus is slightly irritated. I mean, it's not really irritated, but something is touching it, and so ... It won't accept an implanted egg. They're super safe. They were not super safe for a while. There was one version of the IUD that caused a lot of problems, but that is no longer used. Now ... In a lot of places, in Europe and China for example, it's the preferred form of contraceptive. I think it's great because I don't have to remember to take something.

Mark: I don't imagine that an IUD is something that you can buy on eBay or Amazon and then, insert yourself, right?

Rose: No. You have to go in. It's a procedure. I mean, it doesn't take very long, but it is something that you have to go in. Now particularly because of the Affordable Care Act, many women ... It's covered by your health insurance. If it's not covered, it's not usually particularly expensive. For a medical procedure, I think it's usually between a hundred and five hundred dollars, but that, you should check with your medical provider.

Kevin: Is there a choice of brands, models ...

Rose: Yeah.

Kevin: I mean, do you say ... If you're really good, you want this one versus this kind?

Rose: A lot of it really depends on whether or not you can take hormonal birth control. A lot of the reason people do the copper IUD is because they either are allergic to hormonal birth control or they can't take it for some reason. It's an alternative to that. For the hormonal ones, it's really what your body is used to.

If you're taking birth control pills that are a certain hormone or certain level of hormone, you should probably stick with that. That's something that your doctor will talk to you about. It's less kind of like, "Oh, this is the snazzy model and this is the less good one." It's more just like, "What have you been using? What does your body need and want? What does your body definitely not want inside of it?" That's sort of how you decide between them.

Mark: Your next recommendation is something I've been trying to get Kevin to adopt for Cool Tools. It's called "Slack".

Rose: Yeah ... I think the ideal of "Slack" is that it's business teams. I think when they first started, their motto was something along the lines of: "Less email." It's like a chat room, basically, for your company. You can have different channels. Instead of sending those emails that are just the subject line or just one little thing, or if you have an email chain that goes back and forth forever because it's basically a chat, this takes the place of that.

Really when you're sending an email, it's only for things that need to be a little more substantive and you're sending them outside of your internal team. Now, I as a freelancer am not part of a business Slack or part of a Slack for an organization, but I am part of a couple of different Slacks that are for freelancers and writers to come together. The thing that's nice about it is that it gives you a little space to chat with people, especially when you are like me where you are home alone all day and you don't talk to any other humans.

It's a nice place to talk and you can dip in and out ... I use it a lot for brainstorming. We have different channels where like, "Oh, I have a question about this editing thing" or calling for people who post things like, "Oh, here is a job that someone has open or here is a call for pitches that people need." It's a really great space to be closed off, I think, from some of the more open social media like Twitter and Facebook, which ... To me, feels increasingly difficult to manage, especially Twitter, where anybody can come and talk at you, whereas this is closed off.

For me, that's been really great because it lets me not feel isolated, but also not have to deal with just anybody who wants to say something to me, which is sort of overwhelming on Twitter. Yeah. I think it was started as something for companies and I think more and more, independent people are using it. I know someone, a friend of mine, just started a Slack with her boyfriend so that they can chat during the day. I don't plan on doing that, but yeah.

There's lots of different uses. They have a really fun interface. It's a great desktop app actually and they have a really good mobile app. They also allow for fun integrations, so there's a GIPHY integration where you can just type in keywords and it'll give you little GIFs ... You can make custom emoji and just fun things like that, which make it a little bit silly to play around with.

Kevin: Most of these Slack channels are private, where in the sense that you have to be invited in to participate rather than a public stream that anybody can join?

Rose: Exactly. Yeah ... Depending on what you're doing, there are some places where people will say, "Oh, we have a Slack channel, but it's open to anybody who wants to be in it." There's one that is for people who are coders, but work either by themselves as freelancers or in a newsroom, but they don't have anybody else in the newsroom that's also a coder. Anybody who knows somebody who's part of that or is in, part of NICAR, which is this group of computer-assisted reporters, can join that. It's private, but it's not secret.

There are also, of course, secret ones that ... Just you and your friends or that you wouldn't want everyone to just know about. It runs the gamut. You have to have a password. They're not just open to anybody. Although interestingly, I know there are some government groups that are on Slack and they have interesting rules about, "What can [inaudible 00:16:15] that?" Is that public ... How do you deal with that kind of stuff? That's been interesting to tackle. There was a piece in The Atlantic about that recently.

Mark: Rose, how many participants do you typically have in your Slack groups?

Rose: I have a couple of different ones and they range. Some of them are really small, like fifteen people, and then some of them are big, like a hundred. Some of them are

two hundred. [XO Fest 00:16:35], I think, had one for all of their participants one year. That was, I think, eight hundred or nine hundred people, and then, big companies have thousands. The ones that I'm in tend to be smaller, under a hundred.

Kevin: When it gets to be a couple hundred, do you find that it actually works at that level if you're chatting with a couple hundred people? Can you really chat?

Rose: Yeah. I think it's one of those things where it is technically, there are a couple hundred people in there, but there's never actually three hundred people talking at the same time. There are lots of channels. Some people have different interests. Usually, it can get overwhelming if there's lots of people talking at once.

I know that when I was at The Atlantic - and The Atlantic uses Slack, also - whenever there'd be a new hire, in the general Slack, it would be the announcement and then, it would just be this flood of excited emojis and stuff. That was hard to keep up with, but it also wasn't super important to read every single one.

It mostly doesn't tend to be too difficult. I haven't been in any of the ones that have been over a hundred and fifty, so I don't know that if it that point it gets to be too much. I think the key is that you have lots of channels where you can pick and choose what you want to talk about.

Kevin: I guess the question, for me, is ... Is this a productivity tool or another thing that is eating away at productivity?

Rose: Yeah. I think it probably depends. I think that particularly for companies, it can be productive because it cuts down on just that endless email chain that can be annoying. You can just lose stuff. I think that, for me, it makes me more productive because I'm not wasting time. I am using my social media time there instead and it feels more enriching.

If I'm going to be doing something that isn't directly work, it feels better. I don't feel sad and depressed for twenty minutes after I close the tab or whatever it is like I do often with Twitter. For me ... I mean, it can definitely go into the procrastination/distraction territory, for sure. I think it also depends on how you use it. For me, it tends to be a net positive even if some days, I'm like, "Oh, I spent too much time chatting with people today."

Mark: You've got one more tool for us, Rose. It's a headlamp.

Rose: Yeah. A headlamp is just basically ... It's a sweatband that has a light on the front of it. The one that I listed is the one that I use. I like that one. I think it's also the one

that The Wirecutter recommends, which is my go-to site for anything ever if I ever have to buy anything. It's a great headlamp.

Before I was a journalist, I thought I was going to be a scientist. I actually went to Costa Rica to do some research study abroad stuff and my advisor there was adamant that we always had to have a headlamp on us. If he caught us without a headlamp, we were in very big trouble. I got into this habit of carrying a headlamp around all the time, including when I got back.

It's become a running joke with friends who are like, "Why do you have this always?" I still always have one in my bag. I always enjoy when it does come in handy and I can be like, "Haha. See? I do need to carry this around." It's really light; it's easy to carry. It's not like it's taking up a lot of space. I just have it in the bottom of my backpack. Everything from if my bike light runs out of batteries, I can put the headlamp on the front of my bike.

If the power goes out or if my dog is sniffing something and I want to see what it is because it's dark and I can't quite see if she should be eating that - probably not - it just comes in handy in more ways, more cases than people expect. It is a running joke that I have with people who say like, "Oh, do you have your headlamp?" I'm like, "Yeah, always, and you should, too."

I think they're super useful. Of all the things that you might not want to forget, especially on a camping trip when you get up in the middle of the night and it's dark and you cannot find the bathroom, the headlamp is what you need. It's a hands-free thing. The one downside, especially in Costa Rica, is that it's on your forehead, so the bugs are attracted to your face, which can sometimes be annoying. You can always hold it in your hand if that gets to be too much.

Kevin: Yeah, and it is. I've had different iterations of the same light. The Wirecutter has recommended this one as the go-to these days. It's pretty good and the advantages, as you were saying, of the headlamp version compared to the hand version - except for the bugs - is that you're hands-free, so you can repair a bicycle or do something or carry things and not have to ... Be passing your light in between. That's the advantage.

Rose: Yeah. It's nice. The other danger is that you can blind someone if you look at them.

Kevin: It's true.

Rose: You have to be a little careful with that, but yeah. It's really useful, I think, in general just if you want to be able to use both of your hands. I do think that you can get really bright ones that they're really light. Instead of having to carry a big Maglite or some heavier thing or a big unwieldy lamp, it's just very easy.

Mark: I think this light that you recommend has a red colored light in it, too, right?

Rose: You can flip a red film over it. If you want to [crosstalk 00:21:41]-

Kevin: [Night 00:21:41] vision.

Rose: Yeah, see, if it's going to be too bright. I've also used it in case my back light goes out on my bike ... Usually they have a flashing mode and I can tie that to the back of my backpack, so it flashes to alert cars. It's just very handy to have around.

Kevin: Right. I think the next iteration of this should have face recognition on it so that when you're pointing it at someone's face, it just dims.

Rose: You should patent that right now.

Kevin: Exactly.

Mark: Hey, Rose. Can you let people know where they can go to tune into the Flash Forward podcast and also, where people can go to find out about you and the articles that you write?

Rose: Sure. The podcast is called Flash Forward. That's at flashforwardpod.com. My website where everything else lives is roseeveleth.com. There's only one Rose Eveleth, so if you Google it, you'll find me, for better or for worse.

Mark: Definitely for the better, Rose. Thank you so much for joining us.

Rose: Thank you.

Mark: For show notes and links to everything that we talked about in this episode, go to cool-tools.org.