

AEI PREMIUM

The “Too Hard” Box
Ideas that make us better

Warren Buffett famously said: **“I have three boxes on my desk: In, Out, and Too Hard.”**

The Too Hard box is where Buffett puts things that are outside his circle of competence. It's an approach that most of us have used from time to time. In fact, AEI co-founders Brent and David admit that sometimes their Too Hard box gets so full that they have to dump it into a drawer.

But even if that box overflows from time to time, it's quite a useful tool. It helps us recognize the ideas that push us beyond our comfort zone. It also keeps our focus on the tasks that are most achievable, right now.

There are two things to remember about the Too Hard box. First, it's important to **capture your big-picture thinking as it occurs**. But recognize that it is easy to get caught up in those big ideas... and sometimes they can take you down a rabbit hole. So use the Too Hard box as a way to hit pause on a new, overwhelming idea so you can stay on track with your current goals.

But once you place an idea in the Too Hard box, **don't forget about it completely**. The ideas that last, the really important ones, are those that stand the test of time, whether it be six months or six years.

In fact, one of the nice things about this strategy is that time will inevitably address some of the items you placed in the box. Some things just aren't going to seem as important or interesting as they once did; others may resolve themselves on their own. (We like to call that phenomenon the pocket veto of the Too Hard box.)

The ideas that survive that pocket veto process are the good ones.

Apple's [journey in developing the iPod](#) provides a perfect example of this concept at work. While the original iPod was released in October 2001, the idea for the product came long before the technology that was needed to make it possible. The iPod concept sat in the Too Hard box until the company's hard drive and flash memory capabilities caught up. Once it was released, the iPod, of course, revolutionized the MP3 market. Good things come to those who wait!

But of course, Apple didn't just wait while the iPod idea sat in the Too Hard box. They sought out the right experts to make the company's vision happen.

So, after you hit “pause” on an idea and add it to your personal Too Hard box, remember that your work isn't done. We have a responsibility to ourselves to develop our thinking and as

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Warren Buffett would say, [expand our circle of competence](#). We should always be sharpening our tools to help us tackle things that were once overwhelming.

That starts by recognizing when to put an idea in the Too Hard box. But it also means being aware of landscape shifts or changes in your own expertise that occur while you have stepped away. Progress often comes when we revisit an idea after conditions change.

Think about it: what ideas are currently in your Too Hard box? Have any received a pocket veto?

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