



Book

So Good They Can't Ignore You

Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love

Cal Newport

Business Plus, 2012

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Climb the ladder and force people to notice you by becoming great at your work.

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Rating ?

8

8 Applicability

9 Innovation

7 Style

Recommendation

Cal Newport, an assistant professor of computer science and frequent author, discredits the popular myth that following your passion will lead automatically to a successful, fulfilling career. He suggests that developing valuable skills and becoming “so good they can’t ignore you” is far more effective. He says pursuing your heart’s desire can lead to disappointment, including a lack of jobs in your chosen field and an underdeveloped skill set. He draws on the success of such notables as Steve Jobs, who perfected his skills as part of his relentless efforts to refine his craft. Newport frequently revisits the theme that nothing replaces hard work and persistence. He believes that if you become great at what you do, passion will follow. Using case

studies, he highlights ways to focus your professional efforts and to create a meaningful career by working toward a mission. *getAbstract* recommends his advice to anyone intent on developing the right skills for career advancement.

In this summary, you will learn

- Why following your passion can be a bad move,
- How to find work you love by developing valuable skills, and
- How to gain control and autonomy in your career.

Take-Aways

- Workers may pursue their passions in hopes of success. Alas, failure often ensues.
- You do not need passion to find happiness at work; you do need an opportunity to gain the crucial “career capital” of “rare and valuable” skills.
- The longer you do your job, the more likely you are to excel at it and to develop good relationships with your colleagues, both factors that contribute to job satisfaction.
- Follow four rules in the quest for work you will love:
 - First, “don’t follow your passion.” Instead, take a job with growth opportunity where you can develop unique skills that are valuable in the market.
 - Second, become “so good they can’t ignore you.” Don’t settle for being good enough; constantly push yourself to learn new skills and to improve.
 - Third, consider a nontraditional route, such as refusing a promotion to gain lateral experience or taking an internship.
 - Fourth, “think small, act big.” Take incremental steps to achieve your mission.
- You will become more engaged at work if you gain more control.

- Before engaging in a new venture, figure out what the market will pay for it.

Summary

“Most jobs don’t offer their employees great creativity, impact or control over what they do and how they do it.”

“Working right trumps finding the right work.”

“How can we follow our passions if we don’t have any relevant passions to follow?”

“Become good at something rare and valuable, and then invest the career capital this

Be So Good

To become “so good” at your job that no one can ignore you, follow a simple program based on common sense and hard work. The program involves adhering to only four rules, but hewing to them with energy and focus.

“Rule 1: Don’t Follow Your Passion”

At some point in life, many people seriously consider quitting their jobs and pursuing careers that fulfill their passions. Scholars and writers have influenced generations of workers by encouraging them to pursue their passions and promising that success will automatically result.

Alas, this illusion underestimates the value of hard work and neglects the importance of developing a valuable skill set. The reality of following your dreams rarely aligns with the fantasy. It can lead to “chronic job-hopping” and self-doubt. Common wisdom for several generations – beginning with the baby boomers – taught members of the workforce that pursuing your passion equates to success because you will be doing what you love to do. “Passion-centric” generations sought their dream jobs without understanding how to turn their visions into reality. However, Steve Jobs, for one, turned that truism on its head. Jobs identified his skill set and made a prosperous career out of his abilities rather than his passions.

Workplace longevity is directly related to happiness: The longer you do your job, the more likely you are to become excellent at it, which greatly influences whether you enjoy what you do. Holding a job for a long time offers a greater likelihood that you’ll

generates into the type of traits that make a job great.”

“When deciding whether to follow an appealing pursuit that will introduce more control into your work life, seek evidence of whether people are willing to pay for it.”

“If you want to identify a mission for your working life...you must first get to the cutting edge – the only place where these missions become visible.”

“Once you have the capital required to identify a mission, you must still figure out how to put the mission into practice.”

develop relationships with your co-workers, another contributing factor to loving your work. Having control and feeling competent, both of which come with time, also help determine job satisfaction. This discredits the theory that happiness at work results from following a pre-existing passion. Gaining expertise through practice while developing relevant skills fuels passion for your work.

Many authors – such as Richard Bolles of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* fame – encouraged generations of young people to identify their passions and seek related employment. This caused countless individuals to doubt their choices, frequently switch jobs and spend years unhappy in their professional lives. Many individuals might think of their ideal job but lack the capital and skills to turn such prophecies into fulfilling careers. Myriad entrepreneurs attempt to open their own restaurants or exercise studios, for example, and fail because they lack the skills to run a business. This rule does have exceptions. Athletes and musicians who have always loved their sport or instrument can turn their pre-existing passions into successful careers. But this is not the norm. Even those with rare talent invest years of disciplined hard work into developing skills.

Rule 2: “Be So Good They Can’t Ignore You”

People who want to follow their dreams often crave independence and creativity, but gaining that level of autonomy takes hard work and sacrifice. Employees rarely receive license to do what they want, especially when starting out. Job freedom often comes only at the highest levels and then to those who have developed their skills and proven that they can lead. To achieve such autonomy, you must first become so adept at your work that those who promote employees and foster their growth cannot ignore your achievements or hamper your well-deserved advancement.

Individuals generally think about work in one of two ways: the “passion mind-set” and the “craftsman mind-set.” The passion mind-set focuses not on what the world offers you, but on what you offer the world. This attitude is counter-productive because it leads you to think of your job only in terms of what you don’t like about it. This is

“The more rare and valuable skills you have to offer, the more interesting opportunities will become available.”

“Giving people more control over what they do and how they do it increases their happiness, engagement and sense of fulfillment.”

“People who feel like their careers truly matter are more satisfied with their working lives.”

“A lifetime accumulation of deliberate practice... again and again ends up explaining excellence.”

particularly hard if you are still in an entry-level position, which, by definition, isn't “filled with challenging projects and autonomy.” Identifying what you truly love can be difficult. Workers who adopt this mind-set make themselves vulnerable to being unhappy with their careers over the long-term.

The craftsman mind-set focuses on “what you can offer the world” and assumes that hard work leads to success. Artisans are realistic about competition. They know that they must concentrate on output and quality. They understand that even if their job doesn't link directly to a pre-existing passion, becoming good at it lays the foundation for captivating work. When you undertake the craftsman mind-set, you operate with the understanding that if you become great at your work, people will notice. If you produce work of excellent quality – which builds “career capital,” meaning “rare and valuable” skills – you will position yourself to evolve professionally.

Craftspeople seek feedback and take suggestions constructively. Acquiring career capital isn't always glamorous. It might mean furthering your education and networking ceaselessly. For example, if you are interested in opening your own organic farm or winery, you may have to harvest your own crops or pursue an advanced degree in horticulture. Unique, valuable skills are the most precious career capital. As a craftsperson, you should be highly motivated and persistent about achieving your goals through practice. Focus on output and improvement using “deliberate practice.” Recognize that hard work is the essential ingredient. Become more effective by documenting how you spend your time and by setting workday goals. If you must spend your days dealing with meetings, conference calls and work assignments, consider allocating only one hour a day to answering emails, so you can complete your other tasks more efficiently.

Time for a Change

Even if you are following your passion, never stay at a job you find miserable. To determine if you should seek a new career, answer three telltale questions: Do you lack opportunity to develop your skill set? Do you find your work useless or even harmful?

“If you’re not in control of your career, it can chew you up and spit you out.”

“Think about skill acquisition like a freight train: Getting it started requires a huge application of effort, but changing its track once it’s moving is easy.”

Do you hate what you’re doing? If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, the time for a change has arrived.

Best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell examines the habits of successful people in his book, *Outliers*. He asserts that success does not rely on natural talent alone, but depends more on combining work and talent with being in the right place at the right time to gain the most practice. Some theorists assert that becoming a “grand master” at your work requires practicing and developing your skills for at least 10 years. Many successful actors, for example, started working on their craft as young children. Top scholars rarely achieve success based solely on talent or intelligence. Musicians, doctors and even writers must practice a long time to succeed.

People often hit a wall or a “performance plateau” in their professional lives because they do not improve their skill sets. Avoid this problem by identifying the skills that you need to refine. Learning never stops. Don’t settle for being good enough; constantly push yourself to improve. Acknowledge that becoming great takes deliberate practice, time and effort.

The type of market you work in also can greatly influence your career. In a “winner-take-all market” you may be competing with many other people for the same career capital. For example, television writers work in a winner-take-all market by competing to have their scripts considered. An “auction market” offers more options. Bloggers work in an auction market; they have a limitless platform and endless subject areas to pursue.

Rule 3: “Turn Down a Promotion”

You will become more engaged at work if you gain more control over your job. But your company won’t give you any independence if you lack valuable skills. Acquiring the relevant skills is the road to professional freedom. Once you gain expertise in your field, you will be able to take risks because you will be more valuable to your employer. When you have sufficient career capital, you’ll have more flexibility about deciding how

to invest your time. Don't expect to earn professional freedom until you have so much experience that your employer deems you too valuable to lose. Your employers will support your efforts – particularly along less-traditional paths – if they perceive you as a valuable asset. So prove your skill and dedication before asking your boss if you can work part-time while you pursue an advanced degree, for example.

If you make nontraditional career decisions, expect skepticism and well-meant advice from your friends, family and colleagues, especially if, say, you reject a promotion to go back to school, take a lower position to build career capital or turn down a paying position for an internship that provides great experience. You will encounter resistance if your methods are unorthodox. Others may think that you are moving backward, but you will know that building career capital sets you up for long-term success. Avoid the trap of investing your time in the wrong pursuit. Choose a career that gives you opportunities to practice your current skills and to learn and grow. Consider “what people are willing to pay for.” Just because you see a career option as valuable doesn't mean that others do. Consider the bottom line before you embark on any professional venture.

Rule 4: “Think Small, Act Big”

Having a calling makes even hard work meaningful, rewarding and worthwhile. Know the value of your mission. Pursuing it can be the engine of building a career you love, but first you must ensure that you have the right skills and capital. The challenge lies in creating a viable job that matches your ambition. Study the most current research as a guideline to what is possible in your desired field. Approach your work methodically. Determine how to carry out your mission. Rule out trying to discover the next big thing. Focus instead on the “adjacent possible,” the next step beyond what you've already achieved.

Beginning with a big idea is a common mistake. Scientists working on finding a vaccine don't start from scratch; they build on the most up-to-date research. Work on smaller ideas and let your mission or big idea take shape. Make “little bets” – that is, explore

your area of interest without committing to a big idea that may fail. Small chances lead to small successes and failures, which lead you to your bigger mission. Tackle several minor projects, rather than one large project. Make sure other people will see your work as valuable. To determine if your project is worthwhile, ask the crucial question: Will others pay for the resulting goods or services?

Your mission must capture a cause that others care about. Choose an undertaking that interests people and garners attention. Aim to make your product or project remarkable. Find an appropriate setting to launch your endeavor to give it maximum exposure.

The Real World

In most cases, people's careers do not align with their passions. Don't take a job because you are passionate about it. Take a job with growth opportunity where you can develop unique skills that are valuable in today's market. You do not need a calling to find happiness at work, but you do need an opportunity to gain career capital.

Working hard in your pursuit of this career capital is the one reliable constant. Push yourself to become better so you don't stagnate on your career path. Set concrete goals, allocate your time to tasks that matter and keep records of your accomplishments. Refine your skill set and explore new experiences. Take on projects that let you enhance your performance. Always ask yourself how you can work better. Seek feedback about how you can improve and follow the advice.

Putting a mission at the epicenter of your work lets you cultivate a career you love, once you ensure that you have the skills and "financial viability" to pursue it. Do your research, and let the next step "beyond the cutting edge" be your guide. Lasting happiness in your career depends on how you approach your work. Acknowledge that hard work has no substitute and that the market may not offer a job that matches your

pre-existing passion. Don't be afraid to use others' experiences as stepping-stones on your journey. Practice your craft, refine your skills and become so good that you are impossible to ignore.

About the Author

Cal Newport is an assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. He also wrote *How to Become a Straight-A Student*, *How to Be a High School Superstar* and *How to Win at College*. His blog, *Study Hacks*, discusses his efforts to “decode patterns of success.”

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