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What the Smartest People I Know Are Quietly Learning

Because hustle isn't (always) enough.

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Ever since I can remember, everything about my upbringing has been about making money. “If you don’t study hard, you will never get a job.”

And it’s not just me.

In most Indian households, survival itself is worshipped as success.

So we are pushed to a familiar path of working hard, getting degrees, and finding a job.

But today, familiar is outdated.

Because when information is everywhere, knowing stuff is not good enough. You need to know *what to know* and *how to make an impact with it*.

But who’s teaching you that?

Your boss wants you productive, not wise. Social media wants you scrolling, not thinking. And schools? They’re still busy preparing kids for jobs that no longer exist.

The world isn’t just changing. It’s accelerating. Blink, and you’re already behind.

That’s why the smartest people I know don’t spend their time overglorifying stuff they learned back in the day.

They’re quietly mastering a different set of skills that are much more likely to compound into unfair advantages.

Here are the five that matter most.

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1. How to Use AI Like a Human (and Not an Ape)

Most people use AI the way a caveman might use fire. They wave it around, burn their fingers, and before they know it, the whole village is on fire.

The smartest people I know? They treat AI like a lab, not a toy.

They start with research.

When most people are typing “best prompts for productivity” into Google, they are actually following the people building, breaking, and bending these tools.

They read case studies. They watch the weird experiments on Twitter or Discord. They’re not just *using* AI. They’re learning how others are pushing it to the edge.

And here’s the difference. An average user latches onto one tool like it’s gospel. ChatGPT for everything. Midjourney for everything.

But people who are actually scaling fast focus more on layering the process with multiple tools.

They know which model writes better drafts, which one summarizes faster, which one generates visuals without smudged hands. They test, compare, and then deliberately delegate tasks.

Yes, it takes significant *focused* effort upfront. That’s why the outcome cannot be replicated by anyone with a \$20 subscription to ChatGPT.

But here’s the thing about tools. They don’t talk back. People do.

And no matter how advanced your tech stack is, sooner or later, you’ll have to deal with a human across the table. That’s where the game really begins.

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2. How to Negotiate Without Negotiating

The smartest people I know don’t try to “win” the negotiation. They make the value so obvious, there’s nothing left to argue about.

That’s the key.

When the other side can *see* exactly what’s in it for them, they stop pushing back and start leaning in.

- **For a startup**, it might be proof that your product saves clients 30% in costs. Pair it up with real-life data that makes the case undeniable.
- **For a job candidate**, it's showing how your track record lines up with the company's goals.
- **For a freelancer**, it's stacking small case studies where your fee is paid for itself ten times over.

So, your resume, your pitch deck, your portfolio must also be a bridge between their problem and your solution.

Do that, and negotiation shifts before it begins. The conversation stops being about *price* and becomes about *access*.

But, it is after all, a two-way street. And some parties might have a tight budget or want to squeeze the lemon a little too hard.

In the first case, you need to pay attention to the type of business you are dealing with. If it can be a great case study down the line, a slight price reduction will lead to a stronger portfolio.

And in case of the second scenario, a bad client often is worse than no client at all. So, save yourself the bad review and point them towards the nearest lemonade stand instead.

Yet even if you can bend the terms in your favor, it won't matter if you're spending your days drowning in work that doesn't move the needle.

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3. One Skill Without Which Focus Is Useless

You might have noticed it already. Everyone is busy. Only a few are getting results. And why so?

If you think about it, time is the only currency we all receive equally. So at the end of the day, it all comes down to how well you spend it. The difference isn't discipline or

focus. It's **prioritization**.

Think about it. CEOs don't just grind harder than everyone else. They decide *what not to do*. Investors like Warren Buffett are found saying:

"The difference between successful people and very successful people is that the latter say no to almost everything."

But how does it work?

- **Strategic thinking:** separating what feels urgent from what actually moves the needle.
- **Dynamic adjustment:** knowing when to shift focus as priorities change.
- **Resource allocation:** recognising when "good enough" is enough, and when something deserves deep effort.
- **Stakeholder judgement:** balancing competing demands based on real business impact.

Research backs this up. Employees with strong prioritisation skills deliver **23% more high-impact work** and experience **40% less workplace stress**.

That's not just a cheap productivity trick. That's a real performance multiplier. Without prioritisation, focus is just tunnel vision. With it, focus can move mountains.

Now that you know what actually deserves your time, you need to learn how to make your presence known without trying too hard.

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4. Gathering Digital Leverage (Without Becoming a Creator)

Here's something most people don't realize.

Industries play it differently from individual creators. Working at a marketing company, I see it every day. Just like influencers, brands too obsess over their social media presence.

But the reward they're going for is on a completely different level.

While one just wants to get stuff without a 9-to-5, the other is after brand image, market trust, and ultimately valuation.

That's why the stakes are brutal. One wrong post doesn't just flop; it can cost millions in stocks.

And the scale is staggering. Carousels, infographics, podcast cuts, collabs. Too many platforms. Too many formats. Too many pipelines. And who manages all these?

Now, you might be surprised to know, it's not always run by a committee.

The core functions are actually run by only a handful of highly capable individuals, making surgical calls on what flies, what dies, who to align with, and when to drop the hammer.

Sometimes, it's as simple as one well-placed thought piece on a platform like Forbes.

It might not go viral on TikTok. But it can shape your perception of the right people at the right time.

That's the real leverage. A single signal, choreographed by a few masterminds, supported by a team of creatives, multiplied in reputation and trust.

And people behind these strategies often have one thing in common.

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5. How to Not Flinch First

What I've noticed is that the sign of a truly self-made successful person is how well they operate in complicated high-stakes situations.

The ability to fly the plane through turbulence without getting wet. A quality that makes you as much as 4 times more valuable in leadership roles.

People who don't make a lot of money, even after being handed opportunity after opportunity, are often emotional train wrecks.

They fall apart at the slightest inconvenience.

And even the once successful people, when they lose the edge of their extreme emotional maturity, start spiraling down.

Harvard Business Review defines it as the ability to recognise, understand, and manage your own emotions and also those of others.

And people who master it earn, on average \$29,000 more per year than others.

That's why the smartest people I know train this like a muscle. They don't lash out at subordinates, admit when they are wrong, and are open learn from anywhere they can.

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Notice what's missing? Not a single one of these skills is about working harder. Success has shifted from sweat to strategy, from effort to edge.

And the funny thing is, none of these skills feels urgent until it's too late.

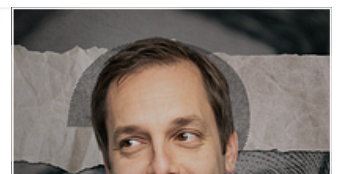
You can only get so far by following the hype. But the real value is built somewhere else.

That's why you need to look past traditional wisdom and adapt according to the market.

And these skills can help you do that.

Now that you know what the smart people are learning, maybe you should also pay attention to what the dumb people are falling for.

Most Popular Pieces of Business Advice That Are Secretly Dumb



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Notice what's missing? Not a single one of these skills is about working harder. Success has shifted from sweat to strategy, from effort to edge.

The takeaway! Enough of hard work, we need smart work. Instead of relying on tools we must make them allies.



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alikhhan

Oct 3



Because hustle isn't (always) enough.

Well done



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Joanna Anthony

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You might have noticed it already. Everyone is busy. Only a few are getting results.

Two years ago I set up as a consultant & coach. It has involved me having to learn a wide range of new skills and softwares that I never envisaged.

So yes, I am flat out busy working at working. It is insane. Whilst all this tech means we have... [more](#)



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