BUILDING A SECOND BRAIN

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Ali (00:00):
All right. So one of the most annoying problems that I face in my life is information overwhelm. I read all these books, listen to all these podcasts, watch all these YouTube videos, and consume all this stuff, but I end up information overloaded and don't really know what to do with that information. And that is what this book claims to solve. This is Building a Second Brain, by Tiago Forte, which is what we're discussing in this episode of Book Club, the ongoing series, where we distil and discuss highlights and summaries from some of my favourite books. And the whole idea is that this system,

the second brain system, helps you solve that problem. Now, I've been using this system for the last several years. I took Tiago's course, Building a Second Brain. And so in this video, we're going to be talking about why you should build a second brain and then how to build a second brain using the code framework. And I'm going to share a bunch of examples about how this kind of thing has helped my life so hopefully, it can help yours as well. Ali (00:41): All right. So let's start with the question of what is a second brain and why should you have one? And to answer this, we need to start from

the root problem, which is this idea
of information overwhelm. We all
have these dozens and dozens,
apparently,
34 gigabytes a day of information
is what we consume. There was
this other news article that said
we consume the equivalent of 174
full newspapers every single day of
our lives with all of
the content that we get deluged
with. Now, the easy solution to this
problem of
information overload is to write
things down. And honestly, this is
the first step that
most of us don't even take. We
don't bother to write things down.
If you listen to something in a
podcast or
you come across a quote, or you

have an interesting thought, or you think of an interesting story that happened in your life or an anecdote, we tend not to default to, I should probably write this down somewhere. Ali (01:21):

We tend to think, oh, I will just remember the thing. If it's from a podcast or a video, you think, yeah, I'm going to apply it to my life, and you never end up applying it to your life. Now, if we do decide to write things down as a way of combating information overload, one old school way of doing that is called a commonplace book. This is the sort of thing that the great artists in our time, and before, used to use to write their thoughts down.

You've got people like Taylor Swift, who talk about how, whenever they have an interesting thought in their day-to-day life, they write it down. You've got comedians like Jerry Seinfeld, who say that whenever they think something interesting or a funny little quip in the shower, they make sure to write it down on a piece of paper. This is a standard part of the creative process for so many people. Jerry Seinfeld (01:55):

I know you think people are going to be interested in this, but they're not. Ali (01:58):

Even back in the day, people like Leonard DaVinci used to

apparently have a commonplace book where, as he was kind of going about his life, he would gather inspiration and he would do these little sketches and he'd put them all into a single book. And then, that book became the source of his creativity. It's where he would generate those ideas from. Now, I do, in fact, carry a physical journal with me at all times to try and do this commonplace book type thing. But it's just doing it in an analogue system is pretty inefficient. You can't search. You can't organise. It's a bit of a faff. And so thanks to this tech-enabled world that we live in, instead of making an analogue commonplace book, we

can make a digital commonplace book. So hypothetically, we could have a single
source where anytime we come across inspiration from anything at all in our lives, internally
or externally, so externally might be books or movies or podcasts or quotes, or a friend
says something, and that sparks an interesting thought in you, you have a place where you
write it down in a digital kind of system. Ali (02:45): Internally, it might be a random
musing that you have, or you're in the shower and you
think of something or you're on a car journey and you think, oh, this would be a cool thing
to do. It might be related to your

job. It might be related to your family. And you think, you know what? I should probably write this down. And it goes into a digital system. And this digital commonplace book is what Tiago Forte calls a second brain. But why should you have a second brain in

the first place? What is the point of writing all this stuff down? Now, again, if you are in the creative world, it's really abundantly obvious. If you're a songwriter, if you're a poet, if you're a book writer, if you're a YouTuber, if you're a podcaster, you need a place to capture ideas from all the world around you, because it really helps

you express your creativity. Ali
(03:19):
Because now, it's not the case that
you are sitting down and thinking,
shit, what do I
write this week for my book or for
my blog or for my newsletter?
You're thinking, I have all these
abundant
ideas and I can just go through my
little second brain and I can decide
what I want
to write about this week. And this
is how basically all creatives have
done it since the beginning of time.
But the question is, what if you're
not? What if you're one of those
people that does
not want to be a "content creator"
in some capacity, you'd have no
aspirations of writing

a book or starting a podcast or a newsletter or anything obviously creative that requires you to do this kind of stuff. Well, the thing that Tiago argues, and I fully agree with him on this, is that basically every job in the world these days involves knowledge work of some kind. Ali (03:56):

Bertrand Russell, back in the day, used to say that a job is moving matter at or above the Earth's surface, which I think it's quite funny. In the world that we live in today, there is a third form of job and that's moving knowledge, moving information. Getting information as inputs, doing something

with it. Are you processing it and then turning it
into outputs of some sort? Even something like being a doctor involves
information. You've got this profound amount of information
as inputs, i.e. from medical journals and textbooks and things,
that turns into a knowledge bank in your head, but also externally. And then you do stuff with that information
and it gives you a result, i.e. tells you what to do with your patient or what dose
of drugs to prescribe or anything like that. If you're working in a more normal job, like,
I don't know, investment banking or consulting or anything that

involves making loads of PowerPoint slides, it's really all about information input, processing, and output. And that's basically what every single job involves. Ali (04:39):
We're now going to talk about the four parts of the methodology for building a second brain, which is the code system, C, O, D, and E. And once we've done that, I'm going to share with you some of my personal use cases, so you can see what effect a second brain has had in my life, and then you can decide if you want to build one for yourself, you want to get the book, any of that kind of stuff. Ali (04:56):
Now, the key insight here is a

quote from David Allen, from the book, Getting Things Done, amazing productivity book, which is that your brain is for having ideas, not for holding them. We spend so much of our kind of mental brain space trying to remember random stuff, whereas, if we were able to capture all that random stuff into a note-taking app or a second brain or into even pen and paper, any kind of system, it frees up our own brain to do the important things, like be creative or make connections or self care or relaxation, or just having fun, rather than having to remember what was on my calendar, what's on my to do list. Now, the easy way of solving

this problem
for most people, and this is sort of
the standard part of any
productivity system, is to have
a calendar and a to-do list, so that
you don't have to remember what
you're supposed to be
doing at any given minute of the
day. Ali (05:36):
And also, you don't have to
remember what all those random
tasks were, your shopping
list, that kind of thing. That would
be a real faff to remember in your
head. But one step beyond that,
which is what the
second brain talks about, is about
how we should capture any kind of
idea that resonates
with us and put it into this note-
taking app. If you're interested, that

the app that I
use these days is actually Apple
notes. I use Apple notes for most
of my second brain
use cases. I use Notion for all the
team-based stuff,
when it comes to making videos,
podcasts, and things, because it's
very good for team
collaboration, but Apple notes is
my second brain. I just capture
everything. Anytime I have a
thought, it just goes straight
into Apple notes. And basically,
the idea is that anything that
feels resonant, anything that
resonates with me personally, is
something I'm going to write
down. Ali (06:11):
So this could be highlights from a
book, for example. It could be an

interesting quote that I've
come across on a podcast or in real
life. It could be a website that I've
liked, and
I'm like, oh, this is a sick website. I
really want to remember this
website or
I really want to remember this blog
post from this website. Let me just
save it into Apple notes. It could be
notes from a meeting. So for
example, anytime I have a
coaching
call or if I have lunch with an
author or a creative friend, often
we talk about interesting
stuff and often I'll just think, you
know what? Pause for a second.
That was really good point. I'm just
going to write that down. And then
I open up Apple notes and I write

it down. Oh, and speaking of capturing, quick thing. If you have any video ideas that you'd like me to make on this channel, you can submit them in a form that's linked down in the video description. Ali (06:43):

And if you submit an idea and we make the video, we will pay you $100, either in U.S. dollars or in Bitcoin, depending on whichever one is easier to send to you, depending on where you are in the world. So $100 for video ideas, little competition envelope. The other thing that I capture as well is, for example, my own thoughts. So often, if I'm on a train journey, I'll just bust out the iPad, I'll open up

Apple notes and I'll just think, okay, what are some thoughts I've had in the last week that I just want to write down? And one of the learnings that I've picked up over the last couple of years is really recognising that my own perspective is actually quite valuable. And now that I'm, for example, writing a book, I'm coming across thoughts that I saved into my note system a year ago, two years ago, and thinking, oh, this thought was actually pretty reasonable, and this could actually form the basis of a few paragraphs or even a whole book chapter. Ali (07:26):

And I completely forgot that I had

the thought. It wasn't in my first
brain, because my brain
is bad at remembering things. It
was in my second brain. It was in
my note-taking system, and then
I could expand on that and it could
become kind of material for my
book. Within capturing so far,
we've talked about
manual ways of capturing stuff,
like writing things down, but
there's also automatic ways
of capturing stuff. I've got a video
up there about five apps
that changed my life, and that talks
about an automated way of
capturing highlights from
books and articles and podcasts,
and I use that as well. And so, over
the last, I don't know, many,
many, many years, I've built up

hundreds, if not thousands of
highlights from all of
the books and all of the articles that
I've ever read. Ali (07:58):
And that's been incredibly valuable
for, again, my own book project,
but also for me thinking,
I read this book about this thing
and I know I want to apply some of
the insights from
that to my life, but I can't
remember what those are, so let me
revisit my highlights
from that. And people often ask,
Ali, how are you so
productive, et cetera, et cetera.
How do you seem to do the things
without worrying
about it so much? Oh, to be honest,
a big part of it is having
a decent productivity system,

having a way to capture things into a digital system, so that my own brain does not have to remember it. And when you can free your own brain up of having to remember all the crap in your life, then it really kind of reduces your own stress levels. Ali (08:31): All right. So the next step of the code framework is organised. Now the idea here is now that we've captured all this stuff into this big-ass inbox, we now want to organise it in some capacity. Now, the wrong way, as Tiago says, the wrong way to organise notes is in terms of where you found them. So people will be tempted to be like, I want to have a book notes folder. I want

to have a podcast notes folder. I
want to have a lesson notes folder.
And the problem with that is that
it's just
not particularly useful. Unless you
decide one day, I just want to
happen to look through my book
notes, you're probably not going to
look through your book
notes, because we don't have that
much time in our lives to revisit the
stuff that we
once thought was useful. Instead,
what Tiago suggests, and he talks
about it extensively in the book,
which kind of gives a whole
system for this, is to organise
things by actionability. Where will
I potentially use this information?
Ali (09:11):
So I've taken this onboard, and

now anytime I come across anything at all, whether it's a quote or a blog post or a podcast or whatever, and it's relevant to the book that I'm writing, it goes straight into my book project folder. And then I don't bother categorising and tagging and doing all of that crap. I'm pretty messy in the way I do things. I just chuck it into the book folder, knowing that it will be resurfaced whenever I need it. And knowing that, the nice thing about a digital system is that I can always use control F or command F if I need to. I can always search. And search is now so good these days that you almost don't need a specific hierarchical organisational system.

I'm, at the moment, really interested in the
idea of longevity, really interested in how do we live longer? Ali (09:47):
And so I've been reading books like Lifespan by David Sinclair, listening to David Sinclair's podcast, listening to Huberman Lab's podcast, and initially, I was tempted to organise it
by topic. Oh, these are my notes about health or about longevity. But I know that's not particularly useful. Instead, I'm organising it by actionability. So I'm working on the script for a video called
How I'm Trying to Live Forever, the Basics of Anti-Ageing, and as I'm reading stuff,

it's going into that particular
project, which means it's organised
by this unit of output,
the fact that I'm making a video
about it, or I might be writing a
newsletter or sharing
a blog post about it. And even if I
never end up making the thing,
the fact that I'm organising it based
on that project rather than based on
a topic means
that I'm far more likely to be more
targeted in my approach. Ali
(10:23):
This is the advice I give to students
at university and students in school
of writing essays. It's actually not
very helpful to think I'm
going to study philosophy today, or
I'm going to study biochemistry
today, because how do

you know? What are you going to do? What are you going to work on? It's really hard to figure out what that means. But if you organise your notes in the sense of, I need to answer the question of what is the structure and function of the sodium

potassium pump? At that point, when you do your reading, it's very targeted. You're looking for stuff around the sodium potassium pump. It goes into that particular essay. And now, as you're doing that, you're building up a mental map of the subject as a whole, within this specific niche, rather than thinking

I'm going to study physiology. Ali (10:58):

So it's the same concept, organised

by actionability rather than by
topic. It can sound pretty
complicated. It's sort of hard to
explain this in a video,
but you can get the book. That'll be
linked down below, if you want
it. At this point, we have captured
loads of stuff. We've organised it
by actionability, but now
we're left with this mess. There's
random quotes, random highlights,
random blog posts. How do we
know what the important essence
of that thing is? And that's where
distilling comes in. Basically,
Tiago talks about this whole
method
called progressive summarization,
which is basically highlighting, but
highlighting on
steroids. Loads of us used to

highlight in stuff when we were in school. It's not particularly effective for retention in your own personal brain, but it is effective for flagging up the areas which are particularly important. Ali (11:35):

And in the book, he's got a bunch of specific examples about how to do this. He also talks about this in his really expensive online course. I took this course and I was a mentor on that course. I'll put a link down below, if you want it. And then the final method of the code framework is E for express. And the idea basically here is you want to show your work. Now, what am I doing? Here, I am expressing. I am converting my knowledge of

personal knowledge
management and reading this book
and my favourite highlights and
stuff from this book into a
video. This is me expressing, this
is me showing
my work. But if I wasn't making a
video, if I wasn't
a YouTuber, there are loads of
other ways to express work as well.
And really, that's the whole point
of this
second brain system, at the end of
the day. It's all well and good,
hoarding ideas and
keeping them in a note-taking app.
Ali (12:13):
But unless we're expressing those
ideas in some way, unless we're
sharing those ideas
with the world, unless we're using

them to create something or make
something of value,
they're kind of useless. I mean, I
guess you could just sort of hoard
the knowledge and then you could
apply it to your own life, but it's
way nicer if you
can share it with other people. And
basically, the point that Tiago
makes
is, again, almost every job involves
expressing, in some capacity. If
you're a management consultant
and you're
making a PowerPoint slide deck,
you are expressing. You are
creating something. That is your
output from all of that information
you've inputted and then you've
then processed. If you're an
investment banker, you are

creating
something like your trading
strategy. If you're a musician,
obviously you're creating
stuff. An artist, a writer, or a
photographer, you
are creating these tangible units of
output. Ali (12:48):
And that's the whole idea behind
this whole framework, capturing,
organising, and distilling,
ultimately helps us express. It
helps us show our work. It helps
share our creativity, share whatever
the thing we've been working on
with other people, and being able
to do it with a digital
commonplace, a second brain, a
digital note-taking system that
brings all the ideas together,
makes it way easier, way less

friction, and way less stress to do
all of that stuff, which
is an important part of our jobs
anyway. Ali (13:09):
I want to now just share a couple
of ways in which the second brain
has really helped
me in terms of helping me be more
productive, but also be more
creative and help my life
become basically a lot less
stressful. And the first one is the
idea of slow burns
versus heavy lifts. Before I
discovered this system, when it
came
to making YouTube videos, for
example, or when it came to
working on any kind of project,
at the time I was working on a
bunch of publications that I was

trying to go for, because I was applying for medical specialty training, et cetera, et cetera. Ali (13:33):

I used to think of those things as a very heavy lift project. It was like, okay, I need to sit down and make a video this week. What's the video going to be? All right, let's do it. I need to sit down and bash out this presentation

I'm doing for the European Society for Gynaecological Oncology, and figure out what I'm saying about this thing. But one of the things that the course taught

me, and he talks about this in the book as well, is the idea of slow burns. What you can do is work on multiple projects

in parallel. So right now, I've got

about eight video ideas
that I'm slowly tinkering with and
working on. I've got various book
chapters that are in
various stages of completion. Back
in the day, when I was in medicine,
I
had a bunch of medical projects
that were at various stages of
completion. Ali (14:06):
And the idea is as I'm going
through my life, as I'm coming
across interesting information
that I can put into these projects,
it's going into my system and it's
going into the projects,
and therefore, all of the projects are
on a bit of a slow burn and they
sort of simmer
away and get slowly, progressively
more cooked over time, which

means when it comes to sit down and actually turn it into a book chapter or turn it into a video or turn it into a presentation or a poster for a medical conference, it means most of the work has already been done. And now, my job is to just assemble things. And secondly, the system has also really helped with my own teaching work. I enjoy teaching. Teaching is my jam at the end of the day, whether it's making videos or going on podcasts or doing workshops in real life. Ali (14:40): The other day, I was doing a real-life talk for 100 students of a part-time YouTuber academy. And I had about, I don't know, two minutes

to prepare the talk. And I just went through my app thing. Off the top of my head, I came up with a few bullet points, found some supporting evidence in the second brain, and now the talk was ready within two minutes, while I was in an Uber on the way to the conference venue. And if you like this video, you might like to check out this over here, which is my long-form interview with Tiago Forte on my deep dive podcast. That'll be on the deep dive YouTube channel. Or, alternatively, if you're interested in building your own productivity system, you should check out this video over here, where I break down how mine works and talk about how second brain

physically and digitally
ties into that productivity system.
So thank you so much for
watching. Do hit the subscribe
button if you're not
already, and I'll see you in the next
video. Bye-bye.