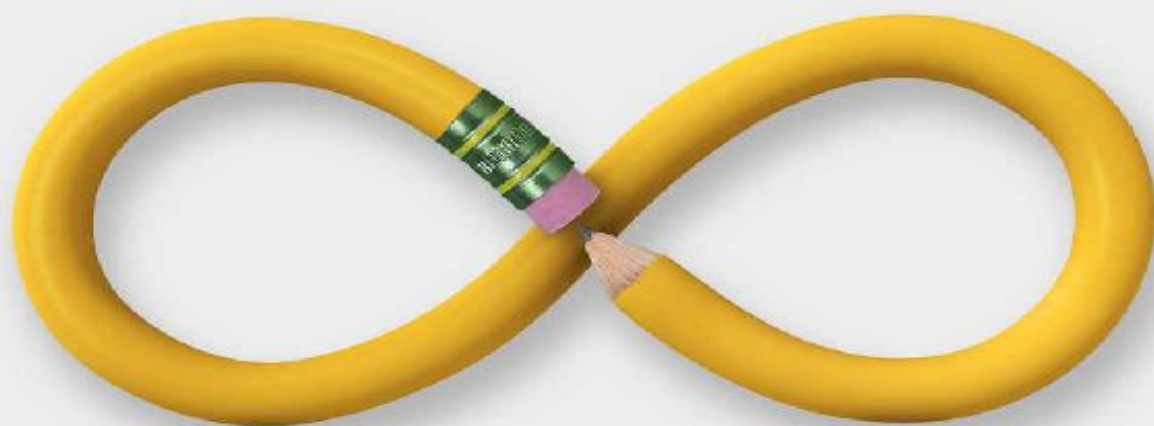


FOREWORD BY DORIE CLARK

FOREVER EMPLOYABLE



How to Stop Looking
for Work and Let Your
Next Job Find You



JEFF GOTHELF

FOREVER EMPLOYABLE



*How to Stop Looking for Work
and Let Your Next Job Find You*

by Jeff Gothelf

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40 17 Paterson Street

Fair Lawn, NJ 07410 USA

+1 201 775 4090

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FOREWORD



by Dorie Clark

Executive Education Faculty, Duke University

Who hasn't dreamed of being forever employable-of carving out your own unique place in the world and being able to make a living doing it? Today, more people than ever are doing just that, taking their big ideas and building thought leadership, vibrant communities, and engaged and active followers around them.

But thought leadership can also be extremely valuable in a business context. According to a recent Edelman-LinkedIn survey, fully 89 percent of decision makers report that thought leadership can be effective in enhancing their perception of an organization. Surprisingly, however, just 15 percent of decision makers said that the thought leadership they read is either very good or excellent. That leaves 85 percent of thought leadership rated at either good, mediocre, or very poor.¹

This is a surprisingly large gap-and a tremendous opportunity for you. People are hungry for expert advice and for trusted sources of information, expertise, and knowledge.

While it may seem counterintuitive, you don't have to be an established expert-a university professor, a longtime industry insider, a technical whiz kid-to have the kind of big idea that you can build something significant out of. You can (and should) draw from your own personal life and experience. In fact, that is often where the best ideas come from.

But then what? Once you've got your big idea, how do you turn this into something useful, something that has value for others?

That's what *Forever Employable* is all about. In this book, Jeff Gothelf lays out for you a five-step approach to becoming forever employable. The foundation of this approach is built on becoming an expert-a thought leader-in whatever topic it is that you decide. Whether it's becoming an expert in UX, or a leading authority on beekeeping, or the go-to guy or gal when it comes to how to make

the perfect martini, Jeff's recipe can work for you. But while having a recipe is great, it takes more than that to become forever employable.

It takes *you*-your willingness and commitment to putting in the hours required to build your expertise, your knowledge, your platform, and your standing in the community that you are gathering together.

And make no mistake about it, becoming forever employable takes hard work. It's not the path of least resistance, not a one-shot deal, not something you take on casually-hoping (or praying) for a viral moment to launch you into the stratosphere. Like a garden, it requires your time and attention, it requires constant tending, and it requires love and devotion to bloom and prosper over the long run.

As you embark on this path of becoming forever employable-whether your path takes you in or out of your current organization-I hope you'll keep in mind that you're building a community in the process. This community will be filled with people-human beings-with hopes and dreams of their own. When you build community, you're creating a sacred trust between you and the members of your community-they will come to rely on you for valuable information and perspectives that they can put to work in their careers, businesses, and lives.

They will give you their trust.

And trust isn't something you either have or don't have. Trust is something you earn, every day of the week. As Stephen Covey explained, "Contrary to what most people believe, trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or don't; rather, trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create." Do what it takes to build trust. Cherish it. Nurture it. And once you have it, do everything in your power to keep it.

As you build your community, remember to find ways to give back to it-to the people and organizations that support you. I personally make a point of finding opportunities to elevate the people and organizations in my own community. I suggest that you can and should do the same. Build case studies around the companies you work with, interview and feature members of your community who

are innovating new solutions to long-standing problems, and shine a spotlight on people and organizations in your community that are getting it right.

You have the power to become forever employable. With this book, you now have the tools you need to get it done.

Use the tools Jeff has given you.

Get it done.

INTRODUCTION



Why We're Gathered Here Today

A little over a decade ago, my life changed profoundly and forever, in ways that I never expected. I was at a major crossroads in my life, and I knew I couldn't continue on the same path I'd been on for so many years. But what path *should* I take? That was a question I wasn't yet sure how to answer.

Before I tell you my story, however, why don't you tell me a little bit about yours. Here's a question for you:

Is your career on the right track?

Chances are, this is a question you've asked yourself more than once or twice-I know I have. Earlier in your career, promotions and accolades might have come fast and easy, but you may now find yourself plateauing. Or you may realize that, after pursuing a particular career path for years or even decades, you really don't like the work you're doing after all-you're bored or it no longer fits you. Or you might simply want to shake things up and radically alter the trajectory of your career, exploring something new and exciting.

In my experience, there's one more good reason to ask this question: You're worried that you might become obsolete or redundant in your current job and that your employer may decide to ease you out of it-and into the unemployment line.

It's often said that most of us are just a paycheck or two away from bankruptcy, and if you look at the data, that's probably not hyperbole. The typical American family has an average of just \$8,863 of cash squirreled away in the bank or credit union. If your employer let you go tomorrow, how long could *you* survive? A month? A few months? A year?

But it doesn't have to be like that.

You can become forever employable-gaining a level of independence and freedom that few people ever get to experience. Not only that, but you can do all this while doing work that is more fully aligned with your life's purpose.

If you would like to step off the corporate ladder-if you would like to build your *own* ladder-then this book is for you.

If you're in the middle of your career, maybe 10 or 15 years into your working life-following a traditional path-and you see change coming quickly in your business environment, then this book is for you.

If you're seeing younger folks coming into your organization who are better than you and cheaper than you and faster than you-who have all sorts of new skills and tools and technologies that you don't have-then this book is for you.

And if you're just starting out in your career-maybe fresh out of school, trying to figure out what path to take and how to get started-this book is for you, too.

So, why did I write this book?

The simple answer is that I want to provide you with the tools you need to step off the traditional career track you're on and to help you become forever employable. I want to help you ensure that your career will be stable and secure far into the future-to *future-proof* the work you do and the income you earn. And I want to help you find the vocation that is aligned with your authentic life's work-a career that fulfills you. If I can help you do that, then I would consider that to be a tremendous win.

But what if you *like* the career path you're on, and you don't want to step off it? What if you don't want to forge your own path outside the company that currently employs you, but you want to future-proof your career *with* that company?

This book is for you, too.

This isn't just a manual for how to quit your job and jump into the wonderful world of self-employment. It's also a guide for those of you who want to future-proof your career with your *current* company. If this is the path you want to take, then be sure to check out the "Future-proof Your Career" chapter where I'll show you how to apply the tactics and techniques in this book to become more valuable to your current employer.

So, how did I get to where I am today-how did I get off my old path and onto my new one? My answer is actually pretty simple. Part

of the career I have built for myself was deliberate and part of it was unplanned. In this book, we'll dig deep into exactly how this mash-up of deliberate and unplanned worked for me-and how it can work for you.

In the pages that follow, we're going to explore some very simple, but highly effective tactics for becoming forever employable. Underlying these tactics, however, is a firm philosophical foundation built on these five ideas:

Entrepreneurialism. I had never thought of myself as an entrepreneur. My dad worked for years as a systems analyst for big financial firms: JP Morgan Chase, Citibank, Hanover Trust. He was a tech guy who brought other people's visions to life, and in his own words, not an entrepreneur. That was the model I followed for much of my own career-until I kicked that point of view to the curb and became forever employable. To successfully make the transition required me to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset-to seek opportunities, land them, and turn them into successful ventures. This is your life, your business, your employment. And so, you've got to think like an entrepreneur.

Self-confidence. Becoming forever employable requires that you tap into the deep vein of skills and expertise that is unique to you. When you're standing at a crossroads in your life, know that you bring something unique to the table-something that no one else has. Embrace it, own it, be it. Your experience has value, your knowledge has value, and you have something valuable to add to the conversation. No one has *your* story. Be confident in what you know and build on that knowledge as you take on new projects. If you don't feel confident right now, then once you determine the path you want to take to becoming forever employable, do small projects that-as you successfully complete them-will build your confidence for doing even larger projects. Your confidence will quickly snowball, becoming the flywheel of your success.

Continuous learning. Everything is changing-all the time. The only way to keep up-or even better, stay ahead-is to keep learning. You do this by reading blog posts and books and listening to podcasts

and audiobooks created by people who can help illuminate your path forward. You do this by talking with people who can explain what they did to achieve the success they wanted in their lives. You do this by building communities of expertise and practice. You do this by constantly experimenting and trying new things. Sometimes your experiments will succeed, and sometimes they won't. But as long as you learn something from every experiment, you haven't truly failed. Stay curious. Keep your mind open to the possibilities laid out before you. Experiment constantly, learn from your results, and try again. Like your old ski instructor (and mine) told you, "If you're not falling, you're not learning."

Improvement. If you're learning continuously, and you're applying the outcomes of your experiments to inform your future actions, then you're always going to improve and get better at whatever it is that you have chosen to do in order to become forever employable. In his popular TED Talk, Astro Teller, Captain of Moonshots at X (Alphabet's innovation laboratory), explains that you should be enthusiastically skeptical of everything that you're doing. In other words, you should always want to figure out a better way to do something. "Enthusiastic skepticism is not the enemy of boundless optimism," Teller says. In fact, it's the perfect partner. We want to be optimistic that there's always a better way to do whatever it is that you want to do.

Reinvention. Ultimately, becoming forever employable is all about reinventing yourself. It's about transforming yourself from the person you are today into the person you want to be tomorrow. I was a designer, and then I was a design manager, and I was going to be a super-duper design manager-or at least that's where I was headed. But other opportunities walked into my life, and I was ready to seize them. Since then, I've reinvented myself on an ongoing basis. Nothing stands still, and the pace of change today is faster than ever. Almost a decade ago, Amazon was updating its codebase every 11.6 seconds-the company was essentially reinventing the way that it served its customers five times per minute. By 2015, Amazon got faster-way faster-pushing code to production every

1 second.² Imagine what that figure is today. In 2018, Google revealed that it runs over 500 *million* tests a day, which equates to more than 4 million relaunches of existing and new systems every day. That's the modern pace of change. If you want to stay forever employable, then you've got to be ready to reinvent yourself with the times. And that is coming in shorter and shorter cycles.

Look, the future is going to be ok. You're going to be fine. Yes, sometimes it's going to feel like you're on a rollercoaster-and at times you *will* be. There will be lots of highs followed by plenty of lows, often when you least expect them to arrive. I've had more than my share of failures along the way, but when something wasn't working for me, I quickly discarded it and tried something else-usually, something better.

I've achieved my goal of being forever employable. I've built a sustainable business that pays me well, and I travel the world-teaching my methods to teams and leaders who are hungry for my content. I'm convinced you can too. But you've got to be intentional about where you're going, and you've got to be prepared to act-immediately and without hesitation-when the right opportunity presents itself.

This book is all about helping you do that, and much, much more. Now let's get started.

MY STORY



Scared Shitless

On the morning of my 35th birthday, January 31, 2008, I woke up in a cold sweat.

At that point in my life, I had achieved all of the things I was supposed to. I was happily married to the love of my life, with two beautiful children-5 and 2-and a house in the suburbs of New Jersey with a white picket fence (I'm not joking-I personally painted that picket fence!), two cars, a cat, and a dog. I had a stable, nine-to-five job that paid well-I was employed by a company in New York City called TheLadders, where I served as director of user experience (UX). I had clawed my way up into middle management, and I was responsible for a team of 14 people.

I was living the dream.

Funny enough, when I graduated from college in 1995, the last thing I imagined being was a manager in UX design-a relatively new field where we ensured the customers and users of websites, apps, and software could easily use and enjoy these services. My dream was to be a professional musician-a rock star-and I pursued that goal for several years. I landed a six-month internship at Soundtrack Studios in New York City, and I quickly found out that interns rank one step below the janitor-my job was to do everything the janitor didn't want to do.

I worked the night shift-from 11:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m.-which meant that I reverse commuted into the city. I was just getting to work when everyone else was going to bed. I got to know the bus driver from the Port Authority station to the New Jersey neighborhood where I was living with my parents. I'd always sit in the front seat of the bus on the ride home and fall asleep, and the driver would wake me up at my stop. We were tight.

I was working 50 hours each week and getting paid just \$150 per week for my time. As I learned more about the music production business and its various facets, I found out that the career path was

brutal, job opportunities were scarce, and the pay was minuscule. Assistant engineers-guys who had been in the business for years-were making only six bucks an hour. In short, it was unsustainable. So, I decided to leave my professional music dream behind and find a real job-one that would actually pay the bills. Fortunately, as that career path reached a dead end in the late '90s, a brand-new one opened up for me: the internet.

I had already been building websites for my band, and for other bands I was hanging out with, which allowed me to make a seamless transition into a tech career. I got a job with a company called iXL doing front-end development and graphic design. Front-end development in 1999, at the height of the dot-com craze, was basically being able to spell "HTML." That was literally the qualification for getting a job back then, which was perfect for me.

As that job evolved, I started reading some very transformational books. One book in particular-*Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* by Louis Rosenfeld and Peter Morville-absolutely changed my life. I'm grateful to have met and gotten to know both of the book's authors over the years and tell them in person what an impact they had on me. All of a sudden, this book put me on track to become a UX designer and an interaction designer, and my career began to move forward in this new direction.

I bounced around several jobs during the dot-com bubble-they were turbulent times, but I always managed to land a gig. I worked at AOL for a few years, and I learned a lot there about being a designer. I progressed to building a design team with a company on the West Coast called Webtrends, which at the time was the granddaddy of web analytics providers. And then I found my way back to New York City, where I landed a job leading and building a design team at TheLadders-an online executive job search firm.

So, why the cold sweat on the morning of my 35th birthday?

To be honest, I was scared shitless about the career path I was on. I thought I was doing everything I was supposed to be doing, but I began to notice that not everything was going according to plan. My salary was going up, but my expenses were also increasing. When I woke up that fateful morning, I realized I was screwed. I was

screwed because in five years I would be overpaid and unemployable. Positions that paid the money I was making would be very few and far in between.

The farther up the ladder you go, the fewer positions there are—it's just the nature of the corporate beast. There are very few C-level, chief design officer jobs. In fact, I recently did a search on LinkedIn to see how many I could find. I got just 156 results, and no surprise, most of those weren't even chief design officer positions. I did get a few of those—a handful—but mostly everything else: chief operating officer, chief digital officer, chief experience officer, chief learning officer, chief people officer, and even chief wellness officer. Chief design officer? Not so much.

My career was anything but future-proofed. It was future-screwed.

If you're a fan of the comic book-based TV show *The Walking Dead*, which follows the survivors of a zombie apocalypse—always just a step or two away from becoming someone's lunch—you can probably imagine how I felt. I was a target, and hordes of hungry youths were soon going to come after me and my job. They were younger, faster, hungrier, smarter, and more technically capable than I was, and they were being paid considerably less. If I was going to have to fight these up-and-comers the rest of my life, I was going to lose. And if it wasn't the younger designers who had their sights on my job, it was the non-vacation-taking AI-enabled bots that would soon be after me.

I had already seen this happen to designer friends of mine who were a few years older. They were expensive. They were slow compared to the younger designers. They weren't up to speed on all the latest technology and tools. When they left their jobs, they couldn't find new ones. And, even if they did find a job, it never seemed to last more than nine months or a year and then they were back on the market again. Eventually, most were forced to drop out of the corporate world altogether and go freelance because no one was willing to pay them the salaries they demanded.

I could see this very thing happening within my own team. You always hear that great managers make a habit of hiring people who are smarter and work harder and better than they do. I took that

advice to heart and made a habit of hiring up. I, of course, knew that I was paying these smart, hardworking people a lot less than I was making. I hadn't had any problem getting jobs up to that point, but I could see a time when it would become considerably more difficult. And I estimated that time was no more than five years away.

Thus, the sweaty bed.

I was terrified, and I didn't know what I was going to do about it. I was a really good designer, but I was replaceable-interchangeable with thousands of other people. Whenever the CEO of the company I worked for years ago would get pissed off at us, which happened a lot, he would roll out his favorite Charles de Gaulle quote: "The graveyards are full of indispensable men." Wow. Okay. Thanks for the motivation, boss. Long story short, I felt replaceable. I was becoming a people manager, which are a dime a dozen, and I was doing less and less design as I progressed in my career. I knew that my hard skills-the heart of my craft-were atrophying, and that actually made me feel less valuable.

So, on that fateful morning-January 31, 2008-I made the most transformational resolution I've ever made in my entire life. And this was it:

I was no longer going to look for jobs.

Jobs were going to look for me.

I was not going to look for another job in my life-there were fewer of them anyway, and they were going to be harder to get. As someone who was working at TheLadders, which is in the jobs industry, I had seen the desperation in the eyes of the people who were older than me, and who had clawed their way up to middle management like I had. They were ready to take any gig, no matter how bad it was. And I had felt the pain of my older friends and colleagues who had already been forcibly thrown off the corporate ladder. I didn't want to be like them. I would do everything I could do to make sure I didn't end up like them. Whatever it took.

My new resolution became a turning point in my life because it shifted my perspective about how I approached the next 10 years of my career. As you'll see in the following chapters, being able to shift

your perspective on what you're able to do with your existing body of knowledge and a little extra effort is the key to becoming forever employable.

The evening of my 35th birthday, we all went out to dinner to celebrate. I've got photos of the occasion-me blowing out the candles on my birthday cake, the kids giving me my birthday cards, all of us wearing pointy birthday hats. It should have been a very happy occasion, but all I could see was that the countdown to my obsolescence had already begun. Ticktock, ticktock. I had five years to get it together-to figure this out. On top of everything else, we were basically living from paycheck to paycheck despite my ample income. I knew that if I lost my job, we could probably make it just three or four months at the most. There was no safety net after that.

It was a scary realization.

But, after having my epiphany-that I would stop looking for work, and work was going to find me-I knew there was no turning back.

Even so, a big wave of self-doubt was beginning to well up inside me.

I had made this powerful resolution-that I would quit looking for jobs, that they were going to look for me. That was great and all that, but what does that even mean? What came next? What steps would I take to actually turn this resolution into reality?

Does anyone know who I am? If people are going to come looking for me, how do they know *me*? Where do I exist for these people, if anywhere at all?

Why would they look for me? What problems were they trying to solve that would make them look for someone like me?

How would they find me? Sure, we had the internet and Google and LinkedIn and all those things, but realistically, everyone else had them, too. There are a million designers out there. What would set me apart from the rest of the crowd?

What kind of work do I want? So, if people are starting to find me and they've got problems that need to be solved, what kind of work do I want to do? And where do I want to take my career? I knew I didn't want to be a plumber, and the night shift at 7-Eleven didn't really float my boat. Finding the right future career meant being

deliberate about my career choices and not just falling into whatever job was available at any given moment, which is what I had been guilty of in the past.

To get past these roadblocks and start putting my new resolution to work, I realized I needed to first answer these three questions I asked myself:

- Does anyone know who I am?
- Why would they look for me?
- How would they find me?

To answer these questions and solve this problem, I was going to need to create a *personal brand*-a career choice that didn't really exist at the time. I didn't know how I was going to do it, and I didn't know what I would do. I didn't even know what that meant. I'd seen others do it, and that served as inspiration, but I didn't know where to start. But I decided I would do it anyway, confidently embarking on this new path while activating my nascent entrepreneurial spirit-and even getting excited by the opportunity to reinvent myself. As I moved forward on this new path, I would answer the three questions.

Before we go any further, I would like to dig a little deeper into the idea of having a personal brand. While I believe most people today consider the idea to be a positive thing, and maybe are even creating one for themselves (this is especially true for millennials and younger), there will always be a few naysayers in your life. "Oh, Jeff's creating his *personal brand*-he's going to be a *thought leader*. Shouldn't he be a thought *doer*?"

Don't fall into this trap. Naysayers will always be there, no matter how successful you may be. So, my advice is for you to ignore them. The only way to become forever employable is to build a platform for yourself, and that starts with creating a personal brand. So long as you're building your personal brand based on real experience, authenticity, and generosity, then pay no heed to those criticizing it or you.

So, then, what kind of work would I build my personal brand

around?

In 2008, I knew two things cold-things I could talk about and write about. The first thing was music. As an almost-famous professional musician, I was a big fan of vintage electric pianos. I had a collection at home that included two Fender Rhodes, a Wurlitzer A200, and several others. I was really knowledgeable about the topic and could talk about it all day long, every day of the week.

And, of course, the other thing I could talk and write about all day long was design. I had 10 solid years of experience in the field, and I was really good at it-both as a designer and as someone who could build and manage design teams.

If I was going to build a personal brand around something-to create the startup of Jeff-it would have to be something with a future. It would have the potential for me to scale it over time into something much bigger than myself.

Based on my previous experience in the music business, I knew that likely wasn't going to be the something I was looking for. Although I felt confident I could build a viable personal brand around the topic of being a professional musician, I realized I would have to work twice as hard or even harder to make the same amount of money I could in digital design. And I did have that wife, two kids, the house in the Jersey suburbs with a white picket fence, two cars, a cat, and a dog to think about.

So, design it was-*that* had potential. I could talk about it. Make presentations about it. Write a book about it. Build a business around it. Make a life from it.

The startup of Jeff.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, I embarked on this new career path. I wasn't going to wait to get laid off to get started. I was going to get ahead of the curve and be ready for whatever might happen next. I've broken this path down into five steps, which are the heart of this book. In the chapters that follow, I'll describe each of these steps in detail and explain how you can apply them yourself-to become forever employable.

And have jobs find you instead of you finding them.

STEP 1



Plant a Flag

The first step to becoming forever employable and future-proofing yourself is to plant a flag. And what do I mean by “plant a flag”? A flag is a topic, an expertise, or a point of view that you’re going to own, and then go all in on. Because of the success of my first book, *Lean UX* (a tactical tech book about software design), and because of the thought leadership and intellectual property I’ve developed around the topic, I’m the Lean UX guy. That’s my flag.

We’re really looking at two things when we talk about planting a flag.

One, you have to have an opinion—a strong conviction about some topic, whether it’s eating a plant-based diet, the most lucrative side hustles, or how to get people to continue to use a social media app on their iPhones. We all have opinions, but when you plant a flag, you build a platform on top of your informed opinion about a very specific topic.

Two, you have to have a story—something that gets people interested in what you have to say, and then keeps them listening. Many people freeze at this point. You might think you don’t have a story to tell, or at least nothing unique. Not true. Your experiences *are* unique, even in a crowded profession. Most important, no one else has *your* story. Your story might focus on how you ended up in your industry, or how you got your first job in the space. Or it might be something surprising you realized about your profession, or all the horrible attempts and failures early in your career, or the most ridiculous things you’ve seen in your industry. The possibilities are endless.

So, what flag are you going to plant, and where are you going to plant it?

I’m a huge fan of British comedian Eddie Izzard. In addition to just being a very funny person, he has set himself apart from the rest of

the crowd by sometimes doing his stand-up comedy act in drag. In 1999-about the same time that I was leaving behind my rock-star dreams and embarking on a new career in web design-Izzard did a legendary performance of his show "Dress to Kill" in San Francisco. The show covered a lot of ground-from a history of religion to the building of Stonehenge to how Engelbert Humperdinck got his name (I dare you to take a guess). In his act, Izzard also explained how Britain colonized the world using flags as a tool:

We stole countries, that's how you build an empire.

We stole countries with the cunning use of flags.

You sail round the world and stick a flag in them.

"I claim India for Britain!"

They're going, "You can't claim us, we live here.

A million of us."

"Do you have a flag?"

"We don't need a bloody flag. It's our country, you bastard."

"No flag, no country, you can't have one.

That's the rules that I've just made up."

While I'm definitely not promoting the idea of colonialism or suggesting that you row your boat across the Hudson River and claim Manhattan as your own, as Izzard pointed out, hundreds of years ago the British used to set foot on some piece of land, plant the Union Jack on it, and claim the land as *their* own. That's all it took.

Today, people do much the same thing, but they plant a flag to stake out their *ideas*-their areas of expertise-not a piece of property. Think about people who have built a name for themselves while creating public personas that are instantly recognizable. When Michelle Obama was first lady (and her husband, Barack Obama, happened to be president of the United States), she launched an initiative that addressed the epidemic of childhood obesity. With her initiative-called Let's Move-Michelle Obama planted a flag with a very specific goal: to solve the problem of childhood obesity within a

generation, so that children born today will grow up healthier and better able to pursue their dreams. She became a highly visible spokesperson for this initiative-encouraging parents and caregivers to offer healthier food choices to the children in their care and to increase opportunities for kids to be physically active.³

Steve Jobs was the product visionary and marketer extraordinaire, Brené Brown is the courage guru, Eric Ries is the Lean Startup guy, Oprah Winfrey is the queen of all media, Seth Godin is the king of marketing. Each of these people picked a domain, gained expertise in it, then planted a flag to claim it as their own. Then they solidified and built on this claim by continuing to provide value to an ever-larger group of people-some becoming rabid fans who actively recruited others to join with them.

To become forever employable, you've got to first decide what your flag is going to be and then plant it. There needs to be a level of consistency in your messaging so that people know who to turn to when they need to know about product management, baking a cake, investing in cryptocurrency, climbing Mount Everest, leading a team, or whatever the topic might be. When you plant your flag, *you* have the opportunity to be the person who owns that space. People will seek you out because they know they can get real value from the content you create and distribute to the world. And because you are basing your insight on *your* experience, *your* story. No one else in the world has that.

Think about someone like Anthony Bourdain. He started out as a chef-one of thousands of cooks working the restaurants of New York City. That all changed when his book *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* was published in 2000. The book pulled back the curtain on an industry rife with sex, drugs, paranoia, and unethical owners who look for any way to cut corners and boost profits. While he probably didn't realize it at the time, Bourdain planted a huge flag with his book. It became a *New York Times* best-seller and launched his new career as a celebrity chef and TV star-mixing his love of food and travel into a delectable confection that delighted millions of viewers. He became famous not

because he was a chef, but because he was a great storyteller-he shared the stories behind the food and who made it in a very entertaining way.

And planting that flag changed Anthony Bourdain. As he wrote in the updated edition of *Kitchen Confidential* (released in 2007): “Things are different now. I’ve changed. I’ve had to.”⁴ When you plant your flag, be prepared to follow a new path in your life-one that will set you apart from the rest of the crowd.

Doughnuts are a dime a dozen (ok, more like \$8 or \$10 a dozen). You can go to most any town in the United States and find a doughnut shop that sells pretty much the same thing: glazed doughnuts, cake doughnuts, old-fashioned doughnuts, doughnuts with sprinkles, doughnuts dusted with powdered sugar, bear claws, Boston cream doughnuts, jelly-filled doughnuts, twisted doughnuts, and on and on. Most of them are round with a hole in the middle and deep-fried in boiling-hot oil. Pretty generic fat-and-sugar bombs. Close your eyes and take a bite, and you could be anywhere in the United States.

But there’s a doughnut place in Portland, Oregon, that stands out from the rest of the crowd. Two Portlanders-Kenneth “Cat Daddy” Pogson and Richard “Tres” Shannon-planted a really big flag when they opened Voodoo Doughnuts in 2003, next door to a historic adult film theater. Shannon was owner of the popular, counterculture music venue X-Ray Café, which attracted national acts such as Green Day and Bikini Kill and was named one of the best rock clubs in the nation. Pogson had distinguished himself in his job as announcer for the Portland-based Rose City Rollers roller derby team.

Voodoo Doughnuts continued this alternative approach to doing business (their flag!)-showcasing ingredients that were not in any way generic, including bacon (a big winner), oysters (a big loser), peanut butter, orange-flavored Tang drink powder, Cocoa Puffs breakfast cereal, crushed Tums heartburn-relief tablets, and even NyQuil (quickly banned by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration). And Voodoo doughnuts have been given names that are just as

unique: Old Dirty Bastard (with peanut butter and crushed Oreos); Oh Captain, My Captain (with Captain Crunch cereal); Maple Blazer Blunt (with glowing red sprinkle “embers”); and the iconic Voodoo Doll (complete with a pretzel stake pierced right through its doughy heart, which bleeds red raspberry jelly).

This attitude of irreverence extends to the pink sign that reportedly hung next to the employee schedule in the back of the original Voodoo Doughnut store in downtown Portland (the chain has since grown to nine locations):

**TALKING SHIT ABOUT HALL & OATES
WILL RESULT IN IMMEDIATE DISCIPLINARY ACTION**

Although the shop in Oregon is open 24/7, there’s almost always a line out the door and down the street, and the company has attracted lots of national media attention-the kind of attention you can’t buy. The *Today* show, Travel Channel, *Top Chef*, ESPN, *Good Morning America*, an episode of Anthony Bourdain’s show *No Reservations*, and many others have all turned a spotlight on these trendsetting doughnuts.

So, again, what flag are you going to plant, and where are you going to plant it?

Take a look deep inside yourself. What are you passionate about? What are you an expert in? What path do you want your future to take? What aspects of your whole person has value to others? As you consider the answers to these questions, I’ll offer what I think is some sage advice: Becoming forever employable and future-proofing your career doesn’t mean abandoning the things that have made you successful up to this point. In fact, quite the contrary. Your experience and expertise-both professional and personal-are *exactly* where you should be looking (and mining) to determine the flag you’re going to plant.

So, instead of throwing away your experience, *build* on it. When I changed the trajectory of my own career after waking up in a cold sweat on my 35th birthday, I didn’t kick the legacy of my 10 years of design work to the curb. I built on it by picking out the parts I had an opinion on, planting my flag, and then focusing all my efforts on that.

For example, I know a team of designers of South American origin who aren't just great designers, but are also thought leaders in the space. Their focus is on advocating for design in Latin America and building their communities. They're constantly evolving and improving and upgrading their skills in that area-delivering more value and attracting more people to their business and their cause. Their flag, in this case, is a variation on the design theme-design in South America. This is their strength, expertise, and passion.

"Design" is so broad and saturated (like almost any other domain) that you could easily get depressed about how to carve out a niche for yourself. This team of South American designers clearly shows that it's possible to slice a broad and saturated domain into a more narrowly focused version that (a) has broad appeal and (b) leverages your expertise. Don't hesitate to take the first step in your journey to being forever employable because you think "it's all been said before." It hasn't. Even the most overexposed domains can still be turned into compelling flags.

I recently met a business coach who, for good reason, is super passionate about the global climate crisis. So much so that she makes active lifestyle and work choices to reduce her carbon footprint, which impacts, deliberately, how she sells and delivers her work. But, instead of becoming just a commodity, which is what business coaching has become, this flag separates her from the pack-bringing attention (and business) to her. This is another way to slice a domain into a version that has broad appeal while leveraging your expertise.

There might be thousands of project managers out there, there might be tens of thousands of accountants, millions of marketers. That doesn't matter. No one has *your* story. No one has been where you've been, has experienced what you have experienced, has worked with the people and organizations you've worked with. Keep in mind that there's an evergreen need for basic content-not just the kind of information or advice of interest only to C-level executives or those at the very top of their game. Everyone has to start somewhere-usually at the bottom-and they need the benefit of your expertise.

So, as you set out to build an audience around your expertise, be comfortable knowing that there's always room for entry-level content because no one has done the work exactly like you have done the work. Your experience is valuable to others because they can learn from how you did it. Or, even if how you did it is exactly the way they have done it, that can validate that they're on the right track.

This brings us to a very important question: Just how large of an audience do you need to grow to build a financially viable content-based venture? 1,000? 100,000? 1 million?

Li Jin, a partner at Andreessen Horowitz, a well-respected venture capital firm, suggests that the number is surprisingly lower: just 100 True Fans. To be more specific, if you build a committed group of 100 True Fans, who each are willing to pay you \$1,000 a year, then you've got a financially sustainable platform funded to the tune of \$100,000 a year. This has been made possible, says Jin, because "The global adoption of social platforms like Facebook and YouTube, the mainstreaming of the influencer model, and the rise of new creator tools has shifted the threshold for success."⁵ Those "influencers" she mentions are people who did not hesitate to plant a flag and build their own personal brands.

Jin backs up this assertion with facts. On creator platform Patreon, says Jin, "Since 2017, the share of new patrons paying more than \$100 per month-or \$1,200 per year-has grown 21 percent."⁶ In addition, almost 500 course creators on the Teachable online course site made more than \$100,000 in 2019.

To build a sustainable community of 100 True Fans, Jin suggests a three-part model in the form of a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid is a large, free audience cultivated by way of opt-in email lists or horizontal social platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook. The middle of the pyramid-which comprises a smaller group of people-includes members of the free audience who have been converted into donors and patrons who are willing to pay a nominal amount of money to help keep your venture afloat. At the very top of the pyramid are the subscribers and high-value purchasers-your 100 True Fans-willing to pay \$1,000 a year or more

to personally interact with you and have access to exclusive and extra content that provides them with meaningful value. The first step to building this pyramid? Plant your flag.

On the morning of my 35th birthday, when I decided to figure out how to stay forever employable, the first roadblock I hit was one of my own making: “What am I going to talk about?” At that point, it felt to me like everything in digital design had already been discussed ad nauseam. As far as I could see, there was no room for my story. I had nothing unique or interesting to say, and no one would care. And it’s no joke-getting past that feeling is a massive obstacle.

But you’ve got to start somewhere. Tap into your experience and get out there and start telling your story. Maybe it’s “10 things I learned while building my social media marketing team” or “25 secrets for writing an awesome LinkedIn profile” or “How I make thousands of dollars every month selling my novels on Amazon” -or even something as mundane as “How I convinced my boss to give us half days off on Fridays.” Whatever you’re good at. After some refinement, your focus becomes very specific and people with similar challenges become so hungry for this content that they will seek you out. And when you find that audience-the base of your pyramid-build it, nurture it, expand it.

Consider the example of Heather Monahan.

Monahan was the high-flying chief revenue officer for Beasley Broadcast Group, which now owns 69 radio stations across the United States. Life was good-until it wasn’t. After leading her team to more than double company-wide revenues-from \$100 million to over \$200 million-Monahan was unexpectedly terminated.

Monahan was, of course, devastated by this turn of events, but it turned out to be the opening she needed to completely change the trajectory of her life and become forever employable. She has used her own story and experience to plant a flag around helping others gain confidence and live their best lives. Monahan published a book-*Confidence Creator* (which shot to #1 on Amazon’s Business Biographies and Business Motivation best-sellers lists the week it debuted)-and landed a show-*Creating Confidence with Heather Monahan*-on PodcastOne, the largest podcasting network in the

nation. Guests have included entrepreneur Gary Vaynerchuk, hedge fund manager and best-selling author James Altucher, Barbara Kavovit of Evergreen Construction and *The Real Housewives of New York*, and *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit issue cover model Hunter McGrady. Monahan has built an impressive social media presence (more than 46,000 followers on Instagram) and is constantly sought out for advice on how to build confidence in career, business, and life.

All of this and more because she was fired from her job. Today, she's building a following of people who are hungry for her content.

In 2011, Rodney Habib opened a pet shop-Planet Paws Pet Essentials-in his hometown of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, a city of about 65,000 people. Habib's goal in starting his business was to provide people with the healthiest food options for their animal companions-including raw, organic, local, and all-natural varieties-in lieu of the widely available big bags of corporate kibble made with ingredients from questionable sources.

Not long after starting his business, however, something happened that Habib had neither planned on nor anticipated. One night, he gathered the different ingredients in a typical bag of commercial dog food-such things as chicken by-products, corn gluten meal, propylene glycol, and food dyes-and placed each ingredient on a separate white plate. He then took a photo of the plates and posted it on his Facebook page, along with a written description of what he had found.

The next morning, Habib was shocked when he checked to see if anyone had liked his post. Says Habib: "I kept scrolling and scrolling. It was endless. I was like, What is going on? I looked down at the counter and saw half a million shares and thought, Oh my God." This was the beginning of Rodney Habib's transformation from pet store owner to leading pet health expert, influencer, and internet celebrity.

In 2017, Facebook informed Habib that his Planet Paws Facebook page had become the most popular pet health page in the world. Today, the page has more than 3 million followers and his pet nutrition and health vlog posts have an average reach of 20 million people. Habib's "How Rawhide Is Made" video-which revealed the

unhealthy process used to produce the popular pet treat-alone has earned more than 52 million views. That's a pretty big flag if you ask me.

Wondering how to get started and plant *your* flag? The next section-Do This Right Now-explains exactly what to do.

∞ DO THIS RIGHT NOW ∞

As you decide what flag to plant, keep in mind that whatever path you take has an inherent, built-in risk of failure. It might become a fabulous success, or it might go down in flames. But every idea you have right now is your best guess about what you should do and what results you're going to see from that activity. You can't predict the future. You can only base things on the experience and expertise you have today. And it's this current experience and expertise on which you'll base your forever employability. However, you've probably never used that experience and expertise in this way before.

Here's a tip: Your thinking at this point shouldn't be, "I'm going to quit my job today, start writing a blog, and then I'll become famous." Your thinking should instead be to ask the question, "How do I start to test which portions of my expertise will resonate with a target audience, and how can I learn that with as little risk and investment as possible?"

This is a process that we in the product design and development business do all the time to de-risk our choices-while still (hopefully) leading to successful products and happy customers. Here's the simple, three-step process that I personally teach. It will help make sure the flag you decide to plant is the right one. Also, be sure to visit my website (www.jeffgothelf.com)-there you'll find a variety of tools to help you work through these exercises.

1. Declare your assumptions.

Anybody I ever talk with about this tells me, "I don't know where to start!" You start with your aspiration: to be forever employable-to have your next job find *you*. And you'll accomplish this by monetizing your expertise in ways you've never done before. More specifically, you've decided to do that by creating content, sharing knowledge,

and teaching workshops or classes in your specialty, whether it's electric pianos or cake making or web design or marketing or whatever it might be.

Let's say you've decided you want to plant your flag on making cakes-something you've got a vast body of knowledge and experience about. You're an amazing baker and all of your friends and relatives are always begging for your recipes. What's your audience hungry for? Should you teach the basics-Cakemaking 101-or target advanced pastry chefs? Should you focus on whimsical cakes for children, or on serious cakes for weddings and other formal events? Or should you try to stake out a new frontier in vegan or paleo cake making?

Whatever your idea might be, you've got to declare your assumptions about your target audience. Who do you believe your target audience is? Who do you *want* to talk to-people who are at the same level as expertise as you, or maybe a novice cake maker? Once you've got an idea of who your target audience is, you'll next decide what you believe you're going to help them with-what is the thing that you are going to help your audience improve? What are you going to teach them? And you need to decide how you're going to reach these individuals.

Remember: These are all assumptions at this point-you're making educated guesses about what success looks like. Ultimately, you'll need to figure out what is a good enough indication of success for you personally. What will give you enough confidence so that you can say, "Hey, there's something here-I'm going to pursue this direction." You'll use all these assumptions as you move to the next step, which is writing hypotheses.

Specifically, you need to declare the following four assumptions:

- **Topic.** In what field will you plant your flag and what will your unique angle be?
- **Audience.** Who will be your target audience? Beginners? Experts? Hobbyists? Be specific because creating content for "everyone" means creating it for no

one. You'll make some guesses about this target audience and that's ok. We'll test those guesses later.

- **Format.** How will you reach your target audience? Videos? Blogs? In-person events? Podcasts? Choose one or two formats initially. If you don't know, take a guess.
- **Measures of success.** How will you know you're reaching your audience? How will you know your content is resonating? The key question to ask yourself when declaring this assumption is, "If my content resonates and reaches my audience, what will they be doing differently?" You're looking for changes in behavior as your measures of success. For example, you get more followers or inbound requests to speak at meetups or other events. While it may feel like victory to launch your podcast, finish your manuscript, or publish that blog post, at the end of the day this is not success. Having motivated others to pay attention to you, evidenced by changes in their behavior, is the true measure of success.

2. Write hypotheses.

Once you've declared your assumptions about the idea you've got for your flag, just like a scientist, you'll write hypotheses that you'll then use to test them. A *hypothesis* is a testable statement that tries to predict how things are going to be, and it has a clear measure of success.

Maybe you've decided to become the guru of plumbing-repair videos on YouTube. You're pretty sure you've got a well-defined target audience (homeowners who don't want to pay for a plumber and don't mind getting their hands dirty), and you know what you want to teach them (the most common plumbing repairs), how you'll reach them (via YouTube), and what success looks like (1,000 YouTube subscribers by the end of the year).

Here are those assumptions in the form of a hypothesis statement

that you can test:

I believe that by providing basic plumbing videos to home-repair enthusiasts on YouTube on a monthly basis, I will build a strong audience that will continue to grow. I will know I am right when I have at least 1,000 subscribers by the end of the year and at least 50 percent of my videos are shared a minimum of 100 times.

This hypothesis is based on a simple template that you can use once you have your assumptions:

I believe that _____

[this tactic/content/idea/service/etc.]

provided to _____ [target audience]

will _____ [achieve this outcome].

I will know I am right when I see _____.

[these quantifiable changes in the behavior of my target audience].

You've got an area of expertise you'll specialize in-your flag-you've got a very specific bit of content, you've got a target audience, you've got a very specific way you're going to target them, and you've got a success threshold based on the behavior change in your target audience that gives you enough confidence to say that there's something here and you're going to keep doing it.

Going through this exercise forces you to think this through. It forces you to not just say, "Ok-I'm going to go out and give talks about plumbing." *Who* are you going to talk to about plumbing? *What* aspects of plumbing are you going to talk about? *How* do you know that's what they want to hear?

As you decide where to plant your flag, you need to de-risk the best way to get your message out to the market. And hypotheses enable you to do that.

3. Run experiments.

Now that you've got some hypotheses, you can take the next step, which is to run experiments. Experiments answer the question, "What's the most important thing I need to learn first about my

hypothesis, and what's the least amount of work I need to do to learn that thing?" We run experiments to test that. The goal here is to do the least amount of work we need to-to invest the least amount of our time and money because the less we invest, the easier it is to be wrong.

If I go out and buy a \$3,000 camera and special lighting equipment, and I build a studio in my garage, and I make videos, and no one ever watches them, that's going to hurt and that's going to suck, and that's going to discourage me from doing that thing I thought I should do. But if I spend just \$10 on a little tripod that I can stick my iPhone into, use that rig to record a short video about a DIY plumbing fix, do a couple of extra takes that show the actual repair in progress, and then edit it all together using iMovie and upload it to YouTube, my investment is very low. A few hours of my time and \$10 out of my pocket versus a month's salary and many weeks building my studio. If no one watches those videos, it hurts a lot less. I can then focus on figuring out *why* they're not watching them and try something different. That helps me get a sense of where the traction is for my expertise.

So, as you go through the process of figuring out what flag you're going to plant, and then plant it, how do you keep it fresh and current? My advice is to constantly pay attention to what's going on in the world around you. Here are five specific things to keep an eye on:

- **Trends.** What trends are going on in the world right now? The most important ones to pay attention to include geopolitical, economic, social, and environmental trends. I can guarantee that the business coach who is passionate about the climate crisis is keenly aware of environmental trends and she's building this knowledge into her business and personal life.
- **Technology.** It's no secret that technology, despite being in a state of constant flux, is taking over more

and more parts of our lives. This means you need to stay on top of it so you can tell your story in a way that helps people succeed in this increasingly more technical world. You don't have to be technical, but you should recognize technological trends—for example, social media, privacy and security, ethics, machine learning, and artificial intelligence. Keeping up with technology trends will help you make your story as relevant as possible when you tell it. You want consumers of your content to say, “That’s great—I learned something new that I can apply in my day-to-day work *and* to help me future-proof my own career.” The best online sources for the latest technology trends are always changing, so seek out sites that are current and active. You can visit their websites for a deep dive or just occasionally monitor their social media accounts.

- **Opportunities.** As you look at the world around you, making sure you’ve picked the right flag and building your following, consider what Albert Einstein once said about opportunities: “In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity.” There will always be new problems to solve. This creates an unlimited source of fresh opportunities for you to tackle and build on. Look for pain points that businesses and their employees and customers endure, then seek solutions that have the potential to resolve them.
- **Your expertise.** You might ask yourself, “If I stop practicing the work I do and become a thought leader instead, won’t I get bad at my job?” Maybe. But if you’re going to be a thought leader or expert in a particular area or topic, then you’ll need to keep your expertise up to date, too. Fall behind, and others will take your place. So, then, how will you keep up to date? Will it be through consulting? Or by providing

alternative perspectives on your domain other than daily practice? Sure. Those things and more. Don't give the people who consume your content a reason to seek out other sources of it. Ultimately, you've got to provide value over the long run to attract and retain a group of followers.

- **The intersection of all these things.** Sometimes, all the above events occur at the same time, overlapping parts of one another like a Venn diagram. When I started exploring what flag I should plant back in 2009, there was a confluence of events in the works. The business world was increasingly using a methodology called Agile as its preferred product-development process while, at the same time, digital design was becoming increasingly important. Technology was rapidly evolving, and design was becoming a key differentiating factor for success-this was just a couple of years after the introduction of the iPhone. Companies were struggling to figure out how to integrate these two trends successfully, which created an opportunity for me-no one had solved this problem. This is where I decided to plant my flag-because I had the expertise, the opportunity, a real problem to solve that many people were dealing with, and the credibility to speak to it. I decided to work on solving this challenge and to bring everyone willing along with me on my journey. My teams and I started experimenting, trying different ways of working. We often failed, but as we were going through our ups and downs, I was sharing-publicly writing and giving talks about-what we were trying to do. Turned out I wasn't the only one struggling with this issue. The more I wrote and the more I presented, the more widely I became known out in the world as someone who was not only working to solve this issue, but who was a source of ideas,

honesty, and inspiration. So, when I left TheLadders, I had already planted my flag. I had found the thing I wanted to be known for and the work I was passionate about.

A QUICK WORD OF WARNING...

Success on this path is a double-edged sword and you should approach this process with eyes open. The flag you plant today may very well be with you for the rest of your life-especially if you build widespread credibility on the topic. It's going to follow you wherever you go and define you. No matter what else I do out in the world, I will forever be Jeff Gothelf-the Lean UX guy. Eric Ries will forever be the Lean Startup guy. Oprah will always be-well, Oprah. Believe me, there are worse problems to have. But it's something to keep in mind as you decide what flag to plant, and where you decide to plant it.

So, now that you've chosen a flag to plant and you have begun thinking about ways to validate its relevancy, resonance, and popularity, what's next? In the next chapter, we'll dig into Step 2: Tell Your Story.

STEP 2



Tell Your Story

Once you decide on the flag you're going to plant, the next step is to tell your story. Why is it important to tell your story? It's important to tell your story because this is how you start to develop a voice and build credibility about your flag. And telling your story provides you with a golden opportunity to experiment with a variety of different paths and tactics to find the one that resonates best with your target audience. With this feedback, you can continuously improve the way you tell your story while building your self-confidence and reinventing yourself.

It took me a couple of years after I woke up in that cold sweat to figure out what flag I was going to plant, and then how to do something with it. Using the process in Step 1, I found the things that I wanted to be known for and the work that I was passionate about. And then I started telling my story all the time to anyone who would actually listen. For me, this story was around Lean UX because of who I was at the time. I created a pitch based on design for designers, by designers, to change the way that they were working. And I honed that voice and that tone and that dialogue by telling the story over and over and over again using blog posts and articles and eventually in-person talks.

The first talk I ever gave as a part of my new professional trajectory was on August 12, 2010. I told the story about how we solved the problem of integrating UX into Agile at TheLadders. And then the timeline started to accelerate from there. A month later, on September 24, I gave my first talk about Lean UX and it was in Paris. I was communicating about this topic publicly, and people were saying, "Hey, come give us a talk about it." And I was writing about the topic in any publication that would actually listen to this kind of thing.

I kept speaking and writing and making presentations, and as I got my ideas out into the world and put them into play in any way I

could, on March 7, 2011, I finally hit the jackpot. This was three years after I had my 35th-birthday epiphany and the pressure was on-I knew I had just two years left before I was going to become obsolete, an also-ran. I hit the jackpot when I managed to get an article published in *Smashing* magazine. At the time, *Smashing* had a million readers online, and so the scale of my conversation was growing and growing because I was becoming known as the guy who had some answers to this question.

That was a massive break for me because the article provided me with a global audience for the first time. Obviously, anything you publish on the internet is global and distributed, but the bottom line is that, if the platform you choose or that chooses you has a built-in audience, you stand a much bigger chance. *Smashing* magazine had an audience. The article, titled “Lean UX: Getting Out of the Deliverables Business” became very successful, and that’s where I planted my flag-providing solutions to the Agile and design problem with a real-world tested solution nicely packaged and labeled as Lean UX.

Make no mistake about it-the path from my 35th birthday to the publication of the *Smashing* article entailed a significant amount of time, patience, and perseverance. But it paid off.

When *Smashing* magazine published my article and took my ideas global, everything started to change. All of a sudden, people were asking about this content, they were commenting on it, they wanted to hire me to talk with them about it. I started giving a lot of talks about this particular topic in a variety of different places, and to maintain the momentum, I used all the channels available to me: I tweeted, I published on LinkedIn, I started a newsletter, I posted on Facebook and Quora and Medium. I went fishing where the fish were. You could try to create your own blog, and I have one now. But when you’re just starting out, it’s not easy to get people to come to your platform. It’s easier and far more effective to bring your content to the platforms that already have readers.

I figured out how to leverage these channels in a variety of different ways. And as I did that, I learned a lot about how to get my story heard. Which brought me to this question: *Why* did my story

resonate? This is something that I've attempted to replicate multiple times over the years since then. Here's what I figured out:

- First and foremost, if you're going to plant your flag, **solve a real problem**. My story was resonating because I was solving a real problem many people had—really, a global problem.
- I had **real-world experience** with this, so there was a level of authenticity to everything that I was saying. I wasn't just making stuff up—I had done the work, I had the experience to share.
- I was **humble** about it. I shared the wins and I shared the losses. I talked a lot about the things we tried that didn't work, some real disasters, and what we learned from them. And when we won, we were thrilled that we won. I shared those wins as well.
- I provided **practical and tactical advice** for people to use. I always gave my audience something to try—something they could actually put into practice today, tomorrow, next week, next month. I made sure that this advice wasn't overwhelming and that it clearly communicated how readers were supposed to do it. This approach is part of the reason why my book *Lean UX* was so successful.
- I forged an **authentic connection** with the audience that I was starting to build. People were actually paying attention because this was a real-world person talking about how to solve a challenge that they themselves had. I wasn't just someone vying for their attention to sell them something. I had gone through the same challenges they had, and I was openly sharing what I learned in a humble way. That creates the kind of authenticity that you can't fake. And it captures people when you tell your story.

One thing I discovered as I continued to tell my story was that doing so helps you define and refine a vocabulary around the topic. That's really important because, if you can speak clearly about the area where you've planted your flag with a consistent and refined vocabulary, there's brandability in that-you can *own* that vocabulary.

Here's an example from a daylong presentation I made to a client in Silicon Valley. At the end of the day, after I finished the presentation, the woman who was in charge of the company's transformation into a modern software company stopped me. She said, "This was great. I knew these concepts before, but what you really helped me with was a vocabulary that I can use to tell stories."

And so, when I tell stories today about digital transformation and organizational agility and customer centricity, I use a vocabulary that is very consistent and very refined. It is one of the tools I have available to tell my story effectively. I talk about assumptions. I talk about hypotheses. I talk about outcomes as a measure of customer success. I talk about outcomes as a measurable change in customer behavior. I talk about outcomes over outputs, experimentation, continuous learning, and ship, sense, and respond. The more you tell your story, the more you can refine your language into your trademark or brand-what you're most known for.

For example, baseball great Yogi Berra was famous for his Yogi-isms-sayings like "You can observe a lot by watching" and "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." It's not just a hook or catchphrase, it helps tell the story as well. For *Lean Startup*, a best-selling book on corporate innovation written by Eric Ries, the words were "build," "measure," "learn." Jeff Patton, a colleague of mine, uses the phrase "the differences that make a difference." And he talks about bets as a way of testing confidence levels. He'll ask, "What will you bet me that your idea is good? Will you bet me lunch? A day's pay? Your 401(k)?" These words are not only their vocabulary. They are their brand.

That's one of the benefits of storytelling and telling those stories continuously. As you refine your language, the people who are beginning to pay attention to you start adopting that language, and then that becomes *your* thing. So, even if somebody else says it,

you'll think, "Yeah, he got that from Jeff Patton."

But, of course, there's a right way and a wrong way to tell your story-a right and a wrong way to stand out from the rest of the crowd. The simple fact is that, when you're first starting to tell your story, nobody really cares about it-they don't care about your ideas. Why not? Because *everyone* has ideas. And since they've got ideas, they think they have more important things to do than listen to *your* ideas.

And then there are the usual internal, organizational reasons why they don't want to listen: "We don't have the budget for it." "We need to hit our numbers." "We have a deadline." "So-and-so already tried that years ago and it didn't work."

You're going to hear all sorts of reasons why people don't want to hear your story; it's your job to get them to listen. Without a compelling story, convincing your colleagues, executives, partners, and target audience to invest their time (and sometimes money) in your idea, to read your articles, to watch your talks, or to attend your session will be very difficult. In fact, it may be impossible. You've got to convince them that it's worth their time.

So, what makes a story compelling?

There's a great Pixar video about telling stories. The video-"Pixar in a Box"-featured Pete Docter, director of the films *Inside Out*, *Up*, and *Monsters, Inc.* According to Docter, the power of story is that "it has an ability to connect with people on an emotional level." He gives a bit of advice that I think is worth keeping in mind when you create a compelling story: Write what you know. Says Docter, even though you may be writing a story about explosions or monsters or car chases, "put something into it that talks about your own life-how you feel.... Something from your own life will make that story come alive."

Every good story has three elements:

- **Characters.** In a work situation, that might be you, your teammates, your customers or clients, and your boss. Who is in the story? Get your audience to feel an emotional investment in the characters.

- **Plot.** This could be, for example, the process of digitally transforming your business. A good plot keeps your audience engaged, wondering what's coming up next.
- **Story arc.** This is the movement of the story from beginning to middle to end. You've got a problem and, through much trial and tribulation, you find a solution and become the hero of your team.

Every story you tell-even if you're writing about a technical problem, or starting your own business, or whatever it might be-needs to have these three elements. If you do this right, then people will care about your story. They don't care about features, they care about the benefits of your idea-how what you're pitching makes them better, smarter, more successful, happier, more fulfilled, more respected, and so on. They want to feel like a hero. And if you can make your audience feel like heroes, they will be engaged in your story and deeply connect with it on an emotional level.

Andrew Stanton is an American film director, screenwriter, producer, and voice actor who also works at Pixar. His credits include *A Bug's Life*, *Finding Nemo*, *Wall-E*, and *John Carter*. At TED2012, Stanton explained that storytelling is joke telling: It's "knowing your punchline, your ending, knowing that everything you're saying, from the first sentence to the last, is leading to a singular goal, and ideally confirming some truth that deepens our understandings of how we are as human beings."

To design a good story, you need to know four things:

- Who you are speaking to: the personas of your audience
- What they care about: why they attended your presentation
- What language they speak: Are they finance people? Technical people? Customers? Partners?
- What makes them heroes: What makes them

successful? To themselves? To their boss?

If you don't have these four things, and if you're just going to say, "I'm writing for anyone in business" or "My presentation will be of interest to anyone who has ever been in love," then you run the risk of watering down your work. It will be too generic and not practically applicable.

I wrote a blog post a while back called "7 Tips for Giving the Best Presentation of Your Life." Here they are:

1. Have an opinion. Pick a theme and have a point of view. Ask yourself, "Why am I telling this story? What am I trying to get across?"

2. Stay practical. Teach your audience something they didn't already know. Practical content is more interesting than their mobile phone notifications. Do some signposting by being explicit about what's coming up in the story, for example: "I'm going to share with you three ways we're going to improve _____ [something the audience cares about]." You want people to know what's coming.

3. Keep it genuine. Passion for a topic comes from experience—let it shine through. Be humble; recount the successes as well as the failures. Poke fun at yourself a little. Is there a personal anecdote you can add to your story? For example: "I was trying to FaceTime with my grandmother and..."

4. Write it down first. First write down your story as an essay; your audience won't read it, but it's a critical step in working out *how* to tell the story. What is your story arc—the beginning, middle, and end? In the beginning, you set the context. In the middle, you present your idea and then back it up. At the end, you make "the ask," which could be something like, "Follow me on Twitter" or "Buy my book."

5. Imagery over text. Your audience is there to see *you*, not your slides. Your slides enhance the story that *you* are

telling. Not only that, but it's good to keep in mind that people learn differently. Some will respond better to your spoken or written word, while others will respond better to illustrations or visualizations of your concepts. Jeff Patton is famous for drawing illustrations live during his presentations. If you need reference material to be distributed to attendees, send it in advance of the presentation so everyone has copies. Highlight just the important data/text, not all of it. And if you're publishing blog posts or other written material, make sure you include images. They are imminently more shareable than text.

6. Be funny (I believe in you). Anyone can be funny (yes, even you). Humor—especially self-deprecating humor—shows humility and it allows your audience to connect with you personally. A personal connection means your audience will be more inclined to want you to succeed (and think about how they can help). I tell a lot of stories in my presentations and writing—often funny ones. When I talk to tech folks, I often use Instagram as a case study, describing how my teenage daughters use Instagram—what I know and what I don't know about their usage. And people connect with that. They'll think, "Oh, he's a dad, he's got kids. He's going through that and I'm going through the same thing." Building any kind of personal connection you can with your audience will make them more inclined to want you to succeed.

7. Practice! There's honestly no substitute for knowing your material—*cold*. The more you practice, the easier (and better) your presentation will be. Practicing helps you refine your timing and transitions, and it pokes holes in your story and timing. It will save your ass when technical difficulties come up (and you can be sure they inevitably will—probably when you least expect it). When the technology fails, you'll still be able to tell your story. When I wrote the second edition of *Lean UX* with Josh Seiden, it was so

much better than the first edition. Why? Because I was writing more and getting more practice at it. I wrote weekly, I wrote monthly. I wrote newsletters and blog posts and presentations. Throughout, I refined my language, I got better at telling stories, and I got better at connecting with readers.

The number-one rule of storytelling is to speak the language of the people you are trying to influence. This is key. Though my background is in tech, I often speak in front of nontechnical audiences. The material I teach is drawn heavily from tech and I use a lot of tech concepts. But if I got up in front of a nontechnical audience and started to talk about DevOps, continuous deployment, continuous integration, automated testing, and other tech concepts, I would lose them immediately. If I'm talking to a group of HR people, then I know I need to talk about what they care about as HR people. So I do.

One thing I've learned is that it is perfectly acceptable to tell the same story to different audiences, but in the language they understand. One of your goals as you tell your story is to broaden your reach, and if you can retell that story in language that resonates with a broader audience, then by all means do so.

Keep telling your story. When you tell your story, it's not even so much practicing, it's actually doing it. When you're a musician, whether solo or in a group, the first time you gig in front of some real people, there's a good chance you'll be pretty nervous. That's a natural reaction for that first gig. But when you keep playing in front of people, all of a sudden that fear goes away. You stop worrying about messing up your performance and you start enjoying the experience.

It's the same with public speaking. Imagine talking in front of a group of 1,000 people. You might be totally paralyzed by the thought. And why not? It's a scary thing. But you work up to it. Your first presentation probably won't be in front of 1,000 people; it might just be in front of two people (far more terrifying, in my opinion). And you keep doing it-growing your audience in stages. Maybe you try to get

yourself booked on podcasts. Or maybe you try to do some videos and post them on YouTube. Keep telling your story all the time, in different ways, and get yourself in front of as many people as you can. You'll be the kind of storyteller people want to listen to.

∞ DO THIS RIGHT NOW ∞

After you've decided what flag you're going to plant, you'll next want to tell your story in a variety of different media and scale your ideas and your target audience. Here are five things you can do right now to start building traction for your story:

1. Follow leaders in your field. Who else is talking about this, and who already has a platform? Who are the thought leaders there, who is leading that conversation? Follow them on social media and keep an eye on what they're talking about and how they're talking about it.

2. Join their conversation. I inserted myself into conversations that established thought leaders were having with their communities. Always being polite and contributing to the conversation—not trying to take it over. The internet makes this quite possible, and indeed, relatively easy.

I've been watching someone who has been particularly impressive doing this exact thing over the last four or five years. The first thing that he did was inject himself into the conversations of thought leaders in the product management space. He was initially ignored a lot, but he was persistent, he engaged intelligently and challenged respectfully, and he offered up his own perspective regularly. And when he found things that resonated with people, he doubled down on them—multiplying his visibility and interest.

3. Share your work regularly. I created a consistent pace for sharing my materials. There was always something new coming from me every couple of weeks or every month, whether it was a blog post, tweet, or article.

4. Provide value, not just noise. I always tried to provide something tangible my audience could do. I would explain something someone could try or do differently.

5. Scale the ideas that resonate. As I got my ideas out into the world, some resonated with people, and others did not. I doubled down on the ones that resonated and started to scale these ideas—turning them from tweets to blog posts to presentations. Maybe I should have tried *Lean UX* the musical. No—probably not.

STEP 3



Follow the (New) Path

As you begin to tell your story, you'll use your expertise to build a foundation. And as you build your foundation, you'll start to attract an audience and create a following. You become part of the conversation, which will attract even more people to you and your content. Forever employability is an outcome of your willingness, flexibility, and agility to follow new paths as they reveal themselves. Get an offer to speak? Take it. An offer to write a book? Write it. Don't know how? Learn how. That's how I did it.

The content I was publishing solved a problem for software designers in a continuously changing software development world. The more popular my ideas got, however, the less design work I was actually doing, which was an entirely different place for me to be—it was both fascinating and a bit scary all at the same time. I knew that if I didn't practice my design craft on a daily basis, my skills would start to atrophy. I would become outdated and obsolete, speeding my headlong plummet to the outcome I foresaw the morning of my 35th birthday. I was intentionally going to put myself in a position to be passed up by those younger, cheaper, designers I was so worried about.

Strange times indeed.

I was a pretty good designer and manager of designers, but people weren't asking me to do that anymore—they were asking me to do other things that I hadn't done while I was on my old path. I was getting invitations to make presentations at conferences. I was being asked to speak at events and do workshops. "Come to Korea..." "Come to Iceland..." "Come to San Francisco..." "Come to Tel Aviv..." "...and tell us how you did this." I was more than happy to do it, because it was fun and interesting and it was building the conversation.

I wasn't doing much actual design work. Instead, I was talking about modern software design—how you build the design process. I

was being asked to teach what I was writing and speaking about. I was at a pivot in my life-straddling the fence between doing public speaking, training, teaching, and writing and the career that I absolutely knew I was good at and that would provide me with a reliable paycheck every other week. I still wasn't getting paid for the new stuff, which made me even more nervous.

Instead of fighting to stay relevant and up to date, I was going to voluntarily become obsolete. This was a big dilemma for me-I knew that if I was going to succeed in the long run, I would need to go all in on my new path. I couldn't do both, and I couldn't hesitate. In the short run, I would have to get comfortable with being in an uncomfortable place. The clock continued to tick, and that horde of young, inexpensive designers was on my doorstep-hungry for something good to eat and getting ready to break down my door. If I didn't go all in on that new path soon, I would be eaten alive.

I was standing at a crossroads in my career and my life. Taking the new, unfamiliar path was terrifying. But staying on the old path and risking the wrath of that fast-approaching horde was even more terrifying.

To help ease my fear, I talked with some senior designers who were also thought leaders-they were already well down the new path I was planning to take. I said, "I'm getting ready to start talking about design instead of doing it, and I'm terrified about losing my design skills. What do you think I should I do-what's your advice?"

And I remember getting advice from one senior designer, a guy that I respected and who had been in the business a long time and was well known in the field. He told me, "If everything goes to shit, at the very least, you can *always* do design work. You may not go back to your big manager job, but you can design. You've got an opportunity staring you in the face right now that isn't always going to be there. I say do it."

I took his advice and I did it.

I left my old path behind and fully committed to my new path to reinvention. I would make my own luck along the way. In his book, *Gary Player's Golf Secrets*, the golf champion told this story about fellow professional golfer and champion Jerry Barber:

Once Jerry Barber, a great sand player, was practicing bunker shots. He hit one ball near the flag. The next shot went in.

A person watching Jerry told him: "Gee, you sure are a lucky trap shot player."

"Yes, I know," Jerry replied. "And the harder I practice, the luckier I get."⁷

I knew there was no small amount of risk in the path I had decided to take-I might lose my slice of the American Dream I had worked so hard to attain. But I thought the potential rewards were worth the risk. And, as it turned out, I was right.

When you put your work online, it's distributed broadly. If you're lucky and you work hard and smart, you have an opportunity to reach a nearly infinite audience. And if your content is good, people will amplify you. For example, there are lots of conferences now in most any field you can imagine-from medical technology to comic books to musical instrument retail to product management (check out Mind the Product-one of my favorite groups in the product management space). These events are always starving for content and they're constantly looking for fresh faces-especially those that are diverse and under-represented.

I didn't know it at the time but I discovered that book publishers often attend these conferences, too. They're looking for fresh faces speaking on hot new topics in a particular domain-people who are authorities in the field-and they often find them there. In fact, I was discovered by Wiley at a conference where I made a presentation on Lean UX, which was a hot topic at the time. Soon after, in 2010, Wiley offered me a book deal. I was ecstatic-a book! With a real publisher! On Lean UX!

But it wasn't the only offer I received to write a book. Before I signed the deal with Wiley, I happened to bump into Eric Ries at a meetup in New York City. Ries had been speaking on the topic of Lean Startup, and he was becoming well known in tech and business circles. His new book *Lean Startup* was on the verge of being published. When I saw him, I mentioned that I was about to sign an agreement with Wiley to publish the Lean UX book.

He replied, “Hey, wait a second. Before you sign anything, you should know that I’m launching a series of Lean books with O’Reilly. I’ll get you a meeting with them.” So again, luck happens when opportunity meets preparation. Ries got me a meeting with O’Reilly immediately. I told the editor that I already had a deal in hand with Wiley. O’Reilly offered me pretty much the same financial deal as Wiley plus the opportunity to work directly with Ries and ride the Lean Startup wave as it surged upward. So I agreed to the deal and signed a publishing contract with O’Reilly.

Awesome.

There was just one big problem: I didn’t know how to write a book.

To me, the same as it is for most other first-time authors, writing a book is the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest. It is monumental. Awe-inspiring. Intimidating. Completely 100 percent off-the-hook insane. I had never written anything more than a thousand words. And my contract said I had to deliver a 50,000-word manuscript. In six months.

I was never going to get there.

I didn’t know how to write a book, and I didn’t know where to start. But I decided that, like anything else, I could learn how-I could figure it out. And I would improve and get better along the way. Right? Well, sort of. It ended up taking me two years, three different editors, and four complete versions of the manuscript-the first three of which sucked badly. *Really* badly. To be perfectly honest, it was hard work and I almost gave up. This was a new path for me-one I hadn’t explored or even considered before. But by being entrepreneurial and wanting to learn new skills, I confidently walked down this new path. I was fully prepared to take the risk of failing.

When I finished the first version of the manuscript, I was ecstatic. I had faced Mount Everest, looked it square in the eye, and conquered that sucker.

What I didn’t realize is that the editors at tech publishers don’t do a whole lot of manuscript review or editing themselves; that’s not their job. Instead, they solicit technical reviewers-experts in the field-to read the manuscripts and give a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down. As

it turned out, the technical reviewers who read the first version of my manuscript weren't as impressed with it as I was. The comments went something like this:

"This is incoherent."

"I don't get it-this doesn't make sense."

"It's incomplete-where's the rest of the manuscript?"

The feedback was brutal. It's not like I didn't try. I did. But I had to sandwich working on the book into the rest of my life. I was still commuting to New York City every day. I wrote for 45 minutes during my commute into Manhattan and 45 minutes more on my commute home. Then I would beg my wife for a couple of hours on the weekends or get up at 6:00 a.m. and write for a few hours before everyone got up.

I wasn't happy with the response to the first version of my manuscript, but I forged on. Getting this book done and published was really important to me. We brought in a second editor-a colleague of mine at TheLadders who did a lot of writing as part of his job. The second version of the manuscript was better, but it still wasn't there yet. The editor's style didn't jibe with what O'Reilly was looking for and the publisher rejected it.

By the time I began the third version of the manuscript, I was starting to really doubt that I had the right stuff to be a book author. Oh, crap-maybe I took the wrong path. I was putting myself out there, putting my livelihood on the line, and it wasn't going well. How many more chances are they going to give me get this book done, and done well? I knew they wouldn't wait forever. My self-confidence had taken a real beating.

So, I did what I needed to do. I quit my job so I could focus on writing the book.

Then I went through another reinvention as my entrepreneurial genes started to kick in. I decided to start my own business (along with Josh Seiden, a digital product designer I had met in 2008, and Giff Constable, a serial entrepreneur). It would be a proper digital product studio to design and develop digital products-where we would use the thought leadership as a marketing channel for the business. The plan was, people would see us speak and they'd say,

“Oh my God, this is amazing-I want to bring these guys in to help me design my next thing.” We launched Proof, and within nine months we sold it to a large conglomerate of agencies called Neo and we became Neo’s New York City office. We didn’t do any marketing other than our publicly facing content, which was the stuff that I was already doing. And by then, I was doing a lot of it.

As I mentioned before, my partners and I decided to build strong thought leadership channels to market our business. The more we worked together on that, it became obvious that Josh needed to become the third (and hopefully) final editor on my book. He gets the content and he’s a good writer. I remember when we were on a trip to Boston to do client work. We sat next to each other on the Acela high-speed train from New York City, and we tore the book down to the frame. We had been teaching this material together for a while, so we broke the book down into the way that we teach it and we knocked it out. We submitted the revised manuscript in December 2012 and O’Reilly accepted it. Much celebration ensued.

On March 11, 2013-five years after my early-morning epiphany and the deadline I had set for myself-my first book, *Lean UX*, was published. The good news is that O’Reilly’s Lean series had Eric Ries’ name on it, and he helped promote it. And, of course, the book itself was well written despite my many attempts at it. In my case, the fourth time really was the charm.

I learned a big lesson from all of this: that one of the best ways to figure out how to tell your story is to practice it. And then you can translate that narrative into a variety of different formats, including books.

As soon as I got the book deal, I started telling everybody that I got it. I wrote about it, I talked about it at conferences, and I built an email list around it. The fact that it took me two years to get the book published gave me two years to talk about the book in a variety of different channels while building interest in it. The longer it took me to finish the damn thing, the more people were excited about it coming. So, even though writing the book took far longer than I expected, it became a great opportunity to create buzz.

What I didn’t realize is that I would need to create most of that

buzz myself.

When you write a book and get it published, even with a large, established publisher, you need to be prepared to do a lot of the marketing yourself. Your publisher is not going to do much for you beyond sending out a press release, creating listings on Amazon and Barnes and Noble, and sending out review copies of the book to some select media outlets and reviewers. Other than that, you're the one who will need to figure out how to get the book into as many hands as possible.

If you decide to publish a book as a part of your content-creation efforts, here are some particularly effective ways I have found to get copies of your book into the hands of readers. This will help you start to build and grow a platform and a foundation for your thought leadership:

- 1. Get paid in books when you do speaking engagements, workshops, or other public or private events.** Instead of taking a check in the amount of, say \$5,000, for an event, ask the organizer to buy copies of your book for every attendee. When you do that, you may lose a little income, but every book in someone's hands is a seed that may become an opportunity for you later in the form of consulting, collaborations, partnerships, workshops, speaking, and other appearances.
- 2. Always bring a box of books along with you.** Use copies of your book as giveaways for speaking and other events. After *Lean UX* was published, I was like Santa Claus-handing out free copies of the book and getting them into the hands of people who might later reach out to me for workshops, consulting, or other work.
- 3. >Send copies of your book to influencers.** Make sure every influencer in your field has a copy of your book. This will dramatically increase the probability that it will get mentioned in that influencer's own social feeds. If, for example, Marty Cagan-the guru of Product Management-says something nice about your book on his blog and

you're in product management, that's a really good thing-both for you and your book.

4. Ask everyone you know to review your book on Amazon. While the veracity of Amazon reviews has taken a hit over the past couple of years, people do still rely on them before they make a buying decision. The more positive reviews your book has, the higher the probability that people will buy it. According to a study published by the Spiegel Research Center at Northwestern University, the purchase likelihood for a product with five reviews is 270 percent greater than the purchase likelihood of a product with no reviews.⁸

5. Trade bulk purchases for services. For example, you can offer to do a two-day workshop for a large company if they'll buy 1,000 copies of your book. Remember: Your goal isn't to get rich from publishing a book; it's to get your book into as many hands as possible.

If you're going to try to create a forever-employable mindset to future-proof your work, you're going to have to take some risks. Opportunities will start to present themselves, and you need to be willing to make the leap. And there *will* be a cost. One cost is the atrophying of your skillset. But you're constantly learning and you're constantly improving. Maintain your state of enthusiastic skepticism but keep moving forward. Day by day, one step at a time.

When I started my own company with Josh and Giff, I was following a new path. So, why would I even believe that I could even start an agency? It was because I started to build my thought leadership platform. When we launched Proof and then became part of Neo, our purpose was to build and design digital products and services, using thought leadership as the marketing funnel. What's interesting is that, as Neo grew, so did the revenue from the thought leadership-not just from the design and building of software products. So, I inadvertently developed a secondary income stream for the business.

We were generating leads and we were making money for the

company at the same time, and it wasn't an insignificant amount of money. The nice thing that happened while I was at Neo was that I learned how to build a content, education, and thought-leadership business-all while I had the safety net of Neo to fall back on. Before we sold Neo in 2015, I was able to validate my hypothesis that I could forge a new path in thought leadership. I was able to make the leap knowing that I had a very solid chance of success.

As you forge *your* new path to becoming forever employable, you're going to pull double duty. There's going to be some moonlighting. You're going to work early mornings before everyone else gets up, lunchtimes, nights after everyone goes to bed, weekends, whatever it takes to test your ideas and see what has legs. And when you do figure that out, you can commit to something that stands a better chance of success as the opportunity arises.

∞ DO THIS RIGHT NOW ∞

Following your new path means actually taking action. You'll never get where you want to go if you stay where you're at. Here are some things you can do right now to get moving forward on the new path you've decided to pursue:

1. Take the risk. Change is exciting but it can also be a bit scary. Understand that taking a new path-or even just *thinking* about taking a new path-is going to make you feel uncomfortable. That's normal; it's expected. I recently took on one of my biggest jobs ever, working with a large enterprise with thousands of employees that would depend on me to deliver. Was I nervous that I was being set up as some sort of heroic savior by this company? You bet I was! Would I live up to the hype? I hoped so. But did I take the risk anyway? You bet I did! The more you practice taking risks, the more comfortable you'll be taking the next risk-and the next, and the next.

2. Make bold asks. You don't need to reinvent the wheel-others have already done what you're about to do. You can and should reach out to people in your field who are on the path you want to get on and ask them for their advice. This

often requires putting aside your nervousness about asking a big name in your field-for me it was Eric Ries, for you it might be FC Barcelona star forward Lionel Messi or YouTube beauty sensation Michelle Phan-for a few minutes of their time. Once you've got their attention, ask how they made their decisions, what worked for them-and what didn't-and what they learned along the way. You might be surprised at how many people-even at the top of their profession-are happy to help. But to get that help, you'll first need to make the bold ask.

3. Reciprocate. One important thing to do as you follow your path and build your personal brand is to *reciprocate*. When someone does something nice for you, be sure to do something nice back. Call it good karma or just good business, whenever someone features me in a post, or refers a client, or does something else that benefits me and my company, I make a point to pay back the favor. Depending on the situation, the payback can range from simply liking a tweet or LinkedIn post to suggesting we team up on a project or workshop. I also strongly suggest that you make a point of *elevating* your followers in your content. Dorie Clark, who has carved out a niche as an expert and keynote speaker on the topic of personal branding, is really good at this. In her videos and other content, she's always lifting up the people who are doing what she recommends people do.

4. Don't be afraid to kill your darlings and reset.

Renowned author and Nobel Prize laureate William Faulkner once said this about what it takes to succeed in his chosen profession: "In writing, you must kill your darlings." You might think, for example, that you have the best idea ever for building your target audience. However, as you roll out your new initiative, you measure the results and for whatever reason your initiative isn't creating the behavior change you want. In fact, it's a total flop. If, after a

reasonable amount of time, it's apparent that things aren't going to get any better, it's time to kill your darling-bid it goodbye-reset, and try something different.

STEP 4



Teach

As you get farther down the new path you've set-future-proofing yourself and becoming forever employable-you're going to gain even greater expertise in whatever topic it is that you've decided to pursue. It's just natural to get better at something the more you practice it. However, if you really want to make a significant leap in your expertise, then I have a suggestion for you: *teach*. When you teach a particular topic, you'll be surprised at just how much more you understand it. As my hero, physicist Richard Feynman once said: "If you want to master something, teach it." But not only will you master your topic, you'll also continuously improve how you teach it, building more self-confidence along the way.

To be honest, this is the shift in my own career path to becoming forever employable that has both most surprised me and most pleased me. If you would have asked me 10 years ago to teach something, I would have had no idea how to do it. I didn't even think I would be good at it. But, when you start following your new path and people start asking you to speak and to make presentations, and when you start generating content and publishing it in books or on the web, you're naturally becoming a teacher whether or not you realize it. Every one of these opportunities is a chance to teach your material. The more you teach, the better you'll get at it, and the better you'll get at telling your stories.

It took me some time to realize that I had become a teacher as I generated, presented, and published my content. I've been doing this for about a decade now, but the realization that I'm teaching didn't hit me until very recently. And I think that had I recognized this fact sooner, I would have approached this differently. Instead of jumping into these engagements and trying to build the airplane while I was flying it-my entrepreneurial nature on full display-there was actually a better way to do this.

People have been teaching for at least several thousand years, so why not do a scan of what's out there to improve my teaching skills? In my search for teaching tools, I ran across the book *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* by James Lang. I love this book. It's like Lean Teaching Improvement. Lang looked at all the research papers and a thousand years of teaching practice and boiled it all down to a bunch of little things you can do to improve every class. In today's rapidly evolving realities, the sooner you get feedback on whether or not your tactics worked, the sooner you can course correct to better tactics. Normally, teaching changes take full semesters and large cohorts of students to assess their benefits (or lack thereof). What Lang shares are small changes you can make in each and every class to improve your communication with your students and then to assess that impact and adjust course.

Understand that you can learn how to teach, and you can learn how to more effectively express the value of the flag that you've planted when you realize that you're teaching. This is true whether you're creating videos, writing blog posts or books, making presentations to large groups of people, conducting workshops, or whatever it is that you do to distribute your content to the world around you. The better you are at teaching the material, the more you understand it. I can tell you that after a decade of doing this, every week I discover a better way to say the thing I've been saying for a decade. I find a more compelling visual. I find a more compelling anecdote. I find a better joke (my favorite teaching tool).

This is the realization: The more you can simplify your material and teach it and make it clear, the more successful you'll be. And if you don't know how to do that, you can read books like *Small Teaching* or find a ton of material online.

However, even easier is to go find the leaders in your space and see what *they* do. When I wanted to become a better public speaker, I asked other people in my field, "Who gives great talks at conferences, particularly the kind of conferences where I speak?" And people pointed me to Guy Kawasaki. Now, I don't love Guy Kawasaki-I don't love his content, I don't even know why he's well known besides the fact that he used to work at Apple. But Guy

Kawasaki is an excellent public speaker. So, I decided to see if I could learn some of his public speaking secrets firsthand and maybe incorporate them into my own approach.

I stalked Kawasaki to South by Southwest in Austin and watched him give some talks even though I didn't much care about what he was talking about. I came for the master class in public speaking-to watch what he does and how he does it. It was definitely worth the price of admission.

Jared Spool is another excellent public speaker who I followed for some time to extract lessons that I could adopt. Spool is a well-known UX leader who I've respected for a long time and, today, I consider to be a friend. He taught me a ton about how to do this and I'm grateful to him. He's funny, he's entertaining, he's smart. Just like Guy Kawasaki, Jared Spool can be in the moment teaching you something, then step out to do a quick, *Family Guy*-style tangential vignette on some topic, then come back to the story without missing a beat.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) expert Rand Fishkin used to do something he called Whiteboard Friday. Fishkin started an SEO company called Moz, which originally started as a blog that turned into a consulting company and then a software business. Every Friday Fishkin -a hipster dude with a funky mustache and beard-would post an entertaining video in which he made a (surprise!) whiteboard presentation teaching some aspect of SEO, and people ate it up. The series grew to millions of views. Whiteboard Fridays became so popular that, even though Fishkin left Moz in 2018, the company continues to post new episodes every Friday-without him. He had his thing and he was good at it.

So, if you've decided you want to learn more about how to become a better teacher of some topic, find the person who's doing kickass video instruction on it, whether it's accounting or leadership or advertising or marketing or whatever it is that you're doing. Watch their stuff and ask yourself, "What's good about it?" What do you like about the videos and what do you think is resonating most with their target audience? Consider going one step further and reaching out and interviewing three or four of their followers to get a real sense,

beyond just your intuition, of what's resonating. In the end, you may be focusing on the quality of the production when their followers just care about a specific tip, trick, or teaching style. Do a few YouTube, Twitter, or Google searches to track down content from the thought leaders in your space.

And if you're curious about how one of your heroes actually put together that killer YouTube video, ask them. Especially if you're like, "Wow-that was awesome! I *love* your videos. Did you just use an iPhone and a tripod, or did you have a couple of cameras? What did you do for audio? It sounds great and I don't hear the room echo. Did you wear a wireless microphone?" Creators love that kind of interest-they love to hear that people love their stuff, and 99 times out of 100 they'll be happy to tell you all about it.

As you'll soon see, you don't have to be employed as a professor at your local college or university to be a teacher. As you pursue your path to forever employability, you'll find that you can teach in all sorts of venues and forums. For example, I regularly teach by way of...

- Workshops
- Conferences
- Meetups
- Webinars
- Podcasts
- Guest articles and interviews

I take every opportunity I can to teach, whether it's via the written word, live in front of people, audio, video, live online, or whatever medium I can find. When someone asks me, "Hey Jeff, would you like to be on this webinar?" or "Do you have time for a 10-minute interview about your book?" my answer is "Absolutely." Take every opportunity you can to teach because you'll get better at the material.

Let's take a closer look at each of these teaching forums.

WORKSHOPS

While I teach in most every possible format and medium you could imagine, I probably do most of my teaching in workshops. Workshops are an opportunity for you to literally stand in front of people and teach what it is that you do and how you do it. In my experience, doing workshops offers you a lot of opportunities to grow your reach and your business. Because of the way they work, workshops give you the opportunity to teach your ideas to lots of people.

In addition, workshops...

- **Are a great way for you to exercise your ideas.** When you try out your ideas in a workshop, you'll quickly figure out the good ones to keep and expand, and the ones that don't hold up that you should discard. Workshops give participants a chance to challenge your ideas and ask you questions no one has asked you before. As a result, you'll get better.
- **Improve your storytelling.** The more you tell your story, the better you are going to get at telling it. Eventually, you'll know your story cold, and you can focus on the nuances-bringing in humor, a fun facilitation technique, or dramatic flair. And, if you're nervous making a presentation in front of a large group of people, there's no better cure than to keep making presentations in front of large groups of people. Eventually, your nervousness will fade away and you'll wonder why you were nervous about giving presentations in the first place.
- **Generate revenue.** Workshops can be a really good source of income, both as a side hustle or as a full-time gig. Some of my colleagues have built entire businesses around giving workshops.
- **Generate leads for other business.** I can't tell you how many times someone has said to me, "Hey-I went to your workshop and I like what you did. I would like to

have you come into my company and work with us in house.” If people like what they see and hear in your workshops, don’t be surprised if they contact you to do workshops for them, too.

- **Create new opportunities.** Plenty of other opportunities can spin out of your workshops, including collaboration, content partnership, and more.

There are two major ways to conduct a workshop: in-person and live online. The scope of an in-person workshop can be as short as a couple of hours or as long as a multi-day event. I personally teach workshops up to five days in length if someone is willing to make that level of commitment.

In-person workshops come in two flavors. The first includes public events that you can sell tickets to. It’s easy to sell tickets using an online event-ticketing service like Eventbrite. You create a page for your workshop on Eventbrite, you set your ticket prices, and you push the button and you’re in business. Then you just have to get people to go to that page, which may be a challenge-especially when you’re just getting started out. As you start to build your community, which we’ll talk about in Step 5, you’ll let people know that you’re running a workshop by posting it on your social media. Or, if you want to go super old school, you could literally print out flyers, cut little tabs at the bottom with your phone number on each tab, and then stick the flyers up at the water cooler, break rooms, meetup spaces, coffee shops, or anywhere else your new community likes to hang out.

The second kind of in-person workshop is private-usually paid for by a client. There are a couple of nice things about private workshops. First, you only have to sell it once-to your client-and not to each and every ticketholder like you do for a public workshop. If you want 25 people to come to your public workshop, you’ve got to sell it 25 individual times. Secondly, since you’ll likely do your private workshops at the client’s facilities, which could be anywhere in the world, you’re not at a disadvantage if you live in a small town or out

in the middle of nowhere.

Let's say you're an accountant, and there's a new piece of accounting software and you're an expert at it. Maybe you could do a two-hour, working lunch workshop for a local accounting firm as professional development for their employees. This is a fantastic way to build credibility and really start practicing your teaching. And if you've published a book, you can bundle copies of it into the cost of your workshop, too. This is where we start to amplify everything else that we're doing. Buy my workshop and get a "free" book. If it works and you start to see success, then you have the option to take your workshop on the road.

One major benefit of giving workshops is that you start to hear from your audience and you research things that will lay the groundwork for the next thing for you-your next new path. In the years since *Lean UX* was published, I've taught many workshops on the topic. Probably the one thing I've heard most often-over and over again-is this phrase: "I love *Lean UX*, but my boss won't let me work this way." Once you get a taste for this kind of feedback, what you *should* start to see is *opportunity*. And remember, luck is when opportunity meets preparation.

Here's what I mean. My first book *Lean UX* had been out for a few years and people liked it, but they couldn't get their companies to try the changes Josh Seiden, my co-author, and I advocated. That led me to the following insight:

Insight:

People like *Lean UX* but they struggle to get their companies to try it.

This insight caused me to realize that there was an opportunity waiting for me here:

Opportunity:

Create a conversation with the bosses.

I didn't see creating a conversation with the bosses as an obstacle; I saw it as an opportunity to build a relationship with the decision makers and leaders who had the power to bring me into their organizations. So, I created a hypothesis that I could test:

Hypothesis:

We believe we can write a business book for leaders and aspiring leaders of digital product development teams that will create these conversations. We will know we are right when we sell 10,000 copies of this book and receive three invitations every quarter to speak or consult with organizations that have read the book.

I realized that Josh and I could write a business book that would create the conversation with the bosses who needed to be convinced that they should have their companies try the ideas in *Lean UX*. That was a big hypothesis for us because, if you looked at our résumés at the time, both of us were designers and not business book authors. But we knew if two designers like us could get published by a business book publisher, we could increase the scope of the conversation and build the next reinvention, the next conversation.

Sure enough, we were able to do this when we wrote our next book, *Sense & Respond*, which was published by Harvard Business Review Press in 2017. Writing *Sense & Respond* was a far different process than writing *Lean UX*. Writing *Lean UX* was writing about what we did—we knew that material; it was the way we were working every day. Writing *Sense & Respond* required us to do a lot of research and we needed help to get signed by a business publisher. Harvard Business Review Press wouldn't even talk to us at first. It turns out, we learned the hard way, that business book publishers don't take unsolicited proposals. We had to go find an agent who would get us in front of an acquisitions editor to pitch our book idea—not a very lean process to say the least.

Sense & Respond proved our hypothesis. In the years since its publication, it has helped us grow the conversation and our audience and made clear the next step forward.

If you want to de-risk your hypothesis, ask yourself this key question: What's the most important thing I need to learn about this hypothesis right now? In other words, what's the riskiest part of this

idea? It could be the topic, the target audience, the way you're considering delivering the content ("Do corporate lawyers watch webinars?"), or any other part of your idea.

Then, ask yourself one more key question: What's the least amount of work I can do right now to learn that? Your goal is to spend as little of your precious time on early-stage ideas in case they end up not working. You could, for example, start with small workshops that are intentionally short in duration—two hours, three hours, maybe half a day max—where your risk is low and the cost is minimal. If you do a two- or three-hour workshop, and people pay you a hundred bucks a head to be there, and 15 people show up and it sucks, no one's out too much—including you. No one's going to be furious. "Yeah" they might say, "I lost three hours but I must've learned *something*."

I have found workshops to be the most effective way to hone my material for teaching and then to expand its scope over time. They are also an excellent way to validate demand for your content.

CONFERENCES

Every discipline in the world has conferences, and there are thousands of them every year. Is your thing linguistics? Then you've got the International Conference on Linguistics, Literature, and Arts. If your thing is interventional cardiovascular medicine, there's the annual Transcatheter Cardiovascular Therapeutics conference. Or if you're an entrepreneur and a woman, then there's the annual Inc. Women's Summit. Each one of these conferences has many presentations given by experts in the field, and they're always looking for people to give talks.

In addition to gaining you additional exposure to people in your area of expertise, they are a great networking opportunity and a terrific way to test your ideas in short formats. You'll need to put together a 30- to 45-minute talk, and you can experiment with your content and how you tell your story, while being entrepreneurial, building your self-confidence, and seeing if you've chosen the right themes. Conferences often have long lead times for submitting an application, being selected, and then actually making the

presentation-especially for large conferences that are planned many months in advance. Check the conference sponsor's website for details.

And once you're selected to present at a conference, all of a sudden, you've got a deadline to meet. It's a forcing function that gets you to say, "I've got to give a talk about this topic in June, so I better start getting it ready right now." The entire process of preparing for a conference is an experiment in how to present your content.

The other massive benefit about conferences is the ability to create new opportunities that you might not have planned for or expected. To measure how much opportunity I've created for myself by giving a presentation at a conference, I simply multiply the number of minutes I'm on stage by the number of people in the room. When I give a 30-minute talk in front of 1,500 people, that's 45,000 minutes of opportunity-a pretty significant number. If I'm in front of 200 people for an hour, that's still 12,000 minutes.

When you make a presentation at a conference, you have an opportunity to look smart and drive interest in your work. And many conference presentations are recorded and made available afterward-either to members through the sponsor website or to the public on YouTube where they will be seen many times more, for many years to come. A colleague of mine had a relatively obscure video of one of his talks end up on the laptop screen of the ninth-richest man in the world. Later that week, my colleague was on a plane to meet that man and begin a multi-year consulting engagement with his organization. You never know where opportunity will take you.

MEETUPS

Meetups-local, monthly, less-formal gatherings of like-minded folks-are the minor leagues of conferences and another option to consider. They are the safest place for you to practice your talks and to get them to a point where you're comfortable giving them in front of larger crowds. Since the audience will be small, you'll see right away if the material resonates with your audience, and you can tweak it as

you go-even in real time as you present. Once you're happy with your talk, you can submit your presentation topic to a big conference.

The good news is that meetups are starving for content. Every month, meetup organizers have got to put together a program that will be interesting to the audience, and they need entertaining speakers who know what they are talking about. So, the field is very fertile for your presentation.

To build your local community, I suggest you make meetups a part of your strategy. In an article in *Forbes*, Sophia Matveeva offers four keys for a hosting a successful meetup. Here's how to do them right:

- a. **Have a focus.** In my case, the focus of my meetups is going to be the case study that I've chosen for that month, which will determine the local product and tech people that I invite.
- b. **Make them regular.** People like consistency, so be sure that you have a regular cadence for your meetups. I have decided that monthly is a good frequency for my own events. Says Matveeva: "As you continue hosting events, your contacts will bring their colleagues, and your reputation at the center of your professional community will grow."
- c. **No fortunes necessary.** After once scheduling a dinner event to which no one showed up-leaving her with a \$450 charge with nothing to show for it-Matveeva now sends out a registration link to attendees who pay a fee to cover food and drink. I'm personally not a fan of charging for attending this type of event, which is part of my "give it all away" philosophy (more on that in Step 5).
- d. **Enjoy yourself.** Have fun and take time to ensure that your guests do, too. Be sure to spend some time with each guest and introduce them to one another. The relationships you build during your meetups may be

instrumental in landing new business.⁹

WEBINARS

Webinars are simply live online presentations-usually an hour long or maybe 90 minutes max. They're often free, though some people try to build an income stream from them. I like to think of them more as a marketing tool for your position as a thought leader.

So, why would you want to give webinars for free? First, they're a great way to start building your email list. When someone signs up for your free, 45-minute webinar, you're collecting their email address and building your email list. You can then use this list to send out a monthly newsletter or offers for your workshops, books, and other paid content.

Second, you can record your webinars, which enables you to start to build an archive of content to which you can provide access in the future-for a fee. Plus , the software to run webinars is available for free or very cheap.

There's a website I found called Reedsy, a marketplace for services for authors and publishers. They recently pinged me with an email marketing campaign that said something along the lines of, "Hey, we're doing this free webinar where we'll critique your book cover. Upload your book cover and a professional book cover designer will give a free critique of as many books we can get through in the time that we have." That's a super compelling offer for most any book author. So compelling that I signed up and now they've got my email address.

PODCASTS

Podcasts are super popular today. According to a *New York Times* article, more than 50 percent of Americans have listened to at least one podcast, and almost 33 percent of Americans listen to at least one podcast every month.¹⁰ And while I haven't put in the effort to start my own podcast yet, I will never turn down the opportunity to be on someone else's podcast.

I know many people who do their own podcasting, which is sort of the audio equivalent of a meetup. You create the scene, you create

the atmosphere, you create the format, you decide on the music, you solicit and book the guests. There are services that can make this process very easy to do. Obviously, the more effort you put into it, the more professional your podcast will come across to listeners.

To get into the podcasting game as a host, you'll need to invest maybe \$100 in a nice microphone with a USB connector to plug into your computer. Podcasting software is available online for free. Of course, you'll also need to invest a significant amount of time deciding on topics for each episode, booking guests, producing the finished product, and then promoting your podcasts on social media and your website.

If you're serious about doing your own podcast, you've also got to be consistent. People have to expect an episode from you every month, every week-whatever cadence you decide to commit to-and they expect some kind of consistency with your formats so they know what kind of content to expect from you. All in all, podcasting is a great way to build an audience but it is not an insignificant amount of work.

The other option is to be a guest on podcasts. This is the path I decided to take since I personally have neither the time nor the desire to put in the effort to create my own podcasts. To get booked on podcasts, you can pitch yourself to the podcasts that you like and that are easy to find on iTunes or Spotify. Remember, content creators-especially those who have guest speakers-have an editorial calendar to fill. There's no reason they won't fill it with you. You just have to ask.

In addition, the more popular your content gets, the more invitations will inevitably start to come in from podcasters. If you've got the money and you feel like it would be a good investment for you, you can hire a booking agent to get you placed on popular podcasts. Using a booking agent is definitely an expensive experiment, so you'll want some kind of validation that this is a direction you want to go in. I did it once, and I didn't see a tremendous return on my investment; your mileage, however, may vary.

Many people believe that making an effort to get booked on

podcasts is worth your time. It adds to your catalog of content and listing all the podcasts you've been on helps build your credibility.

GUEST ARTICLES AND INTERVIEWS

It's not easy to get attention when you start blogging on your own platform-say on your website. If you're growing your blogging effort organically through your email list and through just your website, it can take many months or even years to break through into numbers that are at all significant. An easier route to getting visibility for your content is to offer to write a guest post on a blog that is already popular and attracts lots of visitors and clicks.

Just like meetups, people who blog and write articles on popular sites like Forbes, HuffPost, and Inc. are always looking for more content and for sources for their own posts and articles. They might seem impenetrable from the outside, and you might ask yourself, "Why would they hire me?" But I guarantee they need you-and your content. The key is to specifically offer content that is timely and relevant to whoever it is you're targeting. Do your homework and look at what they're writing about. Someone who is writing about leadership topics is not going to be receptive to your pitch about your new cannabis startup, unless it has some sort of leadership angle.

If you do decide to try blogging yourself, then here's a warning: Initially, it's going to feel like you're shouting into the void. The internet is vast and provides a channel for literally every person online. Don't think about that. Instead, keep writing, keep using the keywords that make sense. Be consistent. Stay on topic, and as I've said before, tell *your* story. Eventually your stuff will start getting picked up in Google searches. People will start showing up and sharing your content. So, make it easy to share, make it easy to like, and make it timely and relevant.

Disregard the folks who decry "clickbait," and instead fearlessly write those catchy headlines that grab attention. One of the most effective things I've learned for getting people to click through a headline to the post is to declare a thing not a thing. Some of the most successful pieces I've ever written asserted that things didn't exist or were no longer relevant. For example, I wrote a widely

circulated piece titled, *There's No Such Thing as a UX Strategy*. Wow. That one triggered conversation. It made people who are practicing UX strategy, writing books about it, and putting together conferences on it absolutely *furious*. And when people are fired up, they're going to comment on your material and share it with their friends and colleagues-if only to point out their own disagreement with your assertions. Remember Oscar Wilde's wise words: "There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

SUSTAINABLE FOREVER EMPLOYMENT

If you want to be *sustainably* forever employable for years or even decades to come, you've got to be agile and constantly keep your finger on the pulse of what your market wants and then make adjustments accordingly. But sustainable forever employability isn't only about what your market wants, it's also (perhaps more importantly) about what *you* want.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about.

I love the work I do, but the work I do requires a *ton* of travel. And I've got to be honest, that much travel begins to wear on you after a while. One morning I'm meeting with a client in Sydney and the next day I'm jetting to Hamburg to give a presentation. Then after a day or two in Hamburg, I'm on a flight to Tokyo to do a workshop. I know my family would like to see more of me, and I know I would like to see more of them, and less of distant hotel rooms, taxicabs, and airport lounges.

Sustainable forever employability requires that *you* are satisfied and happy with the path you've taken. If you're not, then you'll need to figure out what you can do to adjust your path in a way that brings you the long-term happiness and income you seek.

Sustainability for me at this point in my life means traveling less and staying home more. This means generating more local client leads in a city that is only somewhat aware that I live and work here. So, instead of waiting for clients to find me (which they may never do), why not create a community that brings me to them? I have a whiteboard in my home office where I write things that are important

for me to think about. On the board I wrote a goal for this year:

I will generate five local leads in 2020.

Note that this goal is an *outcome*-a change in the behavior of my target audience-and not an *output* (a thing I made or published). I didn't say I will publish 10 articles in the local paper. I said I will have five people interested in working with me. Whether it takes 10 local articles or 20, or five meetups, or me standing on the corner wearing a sandwich board, that doesn't really matter as long as it's on brand and gets the behavior change-the outcome-to happen.

So, how would I create a community to generate these five local leads? I would host an exclusive, monthly meetup of local product and tech leaders with the stated purpose of improving their knowledge while networking with other local product and tech leaders. This idea was inspired by an article I read online about how to host events to grow your personal brand. (We'll dig into the idea deeper in Step 5.)

I would find a cool space to host the meetups and provide good food and drink. In addition, each month I would source a case study that I could use as content to be distributed through my various channels. I would select invitees each month based on the topic of the case study. I wrote out everything to get a sense of what the measure of success should be and how it would work.

Here's what the insight, opportunity, and hypothesis looked like around my goal of generating five local leads in 2020:

Insight:

Sustainable forever employability requires that I travel far less than I do now.

Opportunity:

Create a community with local product and tech leaders.

Hypothesis:

I believe I should host monthly meetups targeted exclusively at product and technology leaders in my city to build the community and generate local leads. I

will know I am right when I generate five local leads and see attendance at my meetup go up 10 percent month over month.

So, how'd I do? Check out my blog posts at the end of 2020 to find out.

∞ DO THIS RIGHT NOW ∞

One of the best ways to learn how to teach is to watch great teachers teach, and then do the kinds of things they do. To become a better teacher, do these five things right now:

- a. **Identify key thought leaders in your space.** Do Google searches for the leading thought leaders in your area of interest. Check out and follow their Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook feeds.
- b. **Watch their videos, listen to their podcasts, read their articles and blog posts, and see them present in person.** Consider each of these sources to be a master class in teaching. Be a good student and pay close attention to what they teach and exactly how they teach it.
- c. **Make a list of the techniques you find to be most effective.** Some teaching techniques are better than others. Which ones does the audience respond to? Which ones do *you* respond to?
- d. **Eat your own dog food by teaching your material in the real world with real people.** Start small by making presentations to local meetups where you can test your material. If your material resonates with people, then build a presentation around it that you can take to a conference or turn into a workshop, podcast, blog post, article, or book.
- e. **Rinse and repeat.** Remember: The more you teach, the better you'll get at it. So, teach lots.

STEP 5



Give It All Away

The last step I want to share with you is something that I've most recently figured out. If you look at this new path of mine as a roughly decade-long journey since my 35th birthday, over the past five years I've gotten very comfortable with giving it all away. If you go to my website right now, you'll find a collection of free videos of my keynote addresses. You can get the team together put them in a conference room, put my video up on the screen, and play it-no charge. And despite the fact that I give away these videos, I still get hired to come in and give keynotes and to speak at conferences.

Why?

I'm convinced that the more you give away, the more success you'll drive for your business. I know-it's unintuitive, but I've done a lot of testing and it works. You might be thinking, "If I'm an expert in my field, and I have a unique story and in-demand expertise to plant my flag on, shouldn't I monetize it from the beginning?" I understand that perspective-I initially asked myself the same question. There are many other consultants who sell similar work to what I sell and who charge just a third of what I do. Why would anyone pay for me if they can get the same services for one-third the price?

It's because people value expensive things. Then there's also the fear of missing out: If this guy's three times more expensive and he gets those rates, then what am I missing out on? What am I *not* getting with the one-third guy?

So, to answer your question, "Shouldn't I monetize it from the beginning?" the answer is no-not yet. The very first thing you need to do is build a following and credibility. You might recall during the heady dot-com years that the goal of most every online business was to quickly capture eyeballs and market share, not make a profit. Amazon, which was founded in 1994 and went public in 1997, didn't have its first profitable year until 2003. In essence, Amazon "gave it all away" by shaving its margin razor thin-passing savings on to

customers while building a following. As founder Jeff Bezos once said, “Your margin is my opportunity.”

The counterintuitive thing to do is to give it all away. Your blog posts, your podcasts, your webinars, your articles, your templates, your recipes, your blueprints, your unique method of achieving success, your unique method of completing a task-*everything*. Remember: The key to becoming forever employable is to shift your perspective on what you’re able to do with your existing body of knowledge and some additional effort on your part.

Next, the more easily you can make your work and yourself findable and accessible, the more it will come back to you in new business and added revenue.

For years, my stuff has been located all over the place. I had blog posts on Medium, videos on YouTube and Vimeo, articles over here, event listings over there, and so on. To make myself more easily findable and accessible, I recently put everything under my own name and in one place-my website jeffgothelf.com. Everything is right there and it’s free-there’s no paywall, no online store, no PayPal donation request. Obviously, I charge money for events, but the content is always free and it’s always there for people to take.

Let me take a moment to talk about where you should consider publishing your content-I have very mixed feelings about it. The upside is that you can publish your content on popular public forums for free. Today those forums include LinkedIn, Facebook, Medium, Twitter, and many others. There’s value there in distribution and reach. You have an opportunity to use the network effect within those communities and the service’s recommendation algorithms to build your foundation, your platform, and ultimately your following.

The downside is that you no longer control your content at that point. Tomorrow, Facebook could turn you off, Medium could block you, and YouTube could delete your account for whatever reason they decide to do it, good or bad. These services are in the business of user-generated content, so the odds of them turning you off are low-especially if you’re not posting content that’s illegal, unethical, or immoral. But it could happen, and there’s nothing you could do about it. What if someone-maybe your arch business rival, or your ex-

spouse-reported you as inappropriate content because they simply don't like you or want you out of the picture? You could be off Medium or YouTube or Facebook for a month, and that is going to cost you potential business and perhaps even your reputation.

In an interview, tech investor Fred Wilson said, "Don't be a Google bitch, don't be a Facebook bitch, and don't be a Twitter bitch. Be your own bitch."¹¹ In other words, if you build on top of another platform, you're at the mercy of that platform. So, the more that you can own your own domain, own your own platform, own your own content, the more power you have to decide what to do with it.

While you may want to start on a large, popular platform at the beginning, my advice is to eventually bring everything in house and under your own brand. So, building your own web presence is absolutely crucial from day one. No matter who's searching, the number-one search result for your name should be your website. Ideally, your website URL is your name: first name last name.com. That's of course easier done for those of us with more unique names-there aren't too many Jeff Gothelfs out there in the world.

And building a website today is easier than ever. You can easily build a website with WordPress-about one-third of the internet is powered by WordPress. Squarespace, Wix, or any other website-in-a-box service will get you up and running in a day. They'll help you buy your domain, and you'll quickly have a home on the internet that will always be yours. Ultimately, as you build your foundation and your platform, you're going to want people to move to your site. Now, jeffgothelf.com is the hub for all of my activities.

I'm self-employed and I've been doing this for the better part of 10 years now. To me, the most difficult part of my job is staying relevant in a fast-changing world. And you might remember in Step 3 that I mentioned I used to be worried that I would become irrelevant as a design thought leader as I moved out of actually doing design myself and started talking about it. Indeed that could have been a problem if I had become inactive in the design community, but I haven't. I've stayed active and I've engaged in the conversation on the latest tools, the latest challenges, the latest topics of discussion,

and the latest design trends. I'm continuously learning, and I'm continuously improving my knowledge of the subjects that I'm an expert in. And then I am using that modern context as I deliver more content. It's a virtuous cycle of consumption and then production. I consume new ideas, and then I use my expertise and my experience from the current consulting work that I'm doing to produce new material, which then gets consumed.

This cycle of activity and relevance puts me in a unique position. When somebody says, "Gosh, we're really struggling with these digital transformation challenges. Who's the person I should go talk to?" It's Jeff. They read my freely available content every month-my newsletters and my blog posts. They've watched my videos. They've used some of the tools that I give away for free on my website. They know that I have the up-to-date expertise and experience to help.

Staying relevant means staying active, which means that you're publishing regularly, that you've got a newsletter in which you share material, that you're participating in conversations publicly, and that you're present in the discussion because the more present you are, the more relevant you are to the conversation as it moves forward. My followers know that I will publish a newsletter once a month. They also know that I will publish a new article every month, and that it's always going to be on a topic related to digital transformation, business agility, product management, or design-one of those four things. I'm like the Old Faithful of on-target content.

I also make a point of always giving back to the community. So, wherever I am, around the globe, if I'm doing a paid event during the day, I'll do a free community event that evening. I do this as a way to give back, and there's also the opportunity to build connection with a new community and improve my material. Every single time I get in front of people, it's an opportunity to try a new angle or some new approach.

In Step 4, I talked about meetups-the minor leagues of conferences-and how I plan to start hosting a monthly meetup in my own town to help me achieve my goal of generating five local leads in the coming year. In her book, *Stand Out*, marketing and strategy consultant Dorie Clark explains that there is something better than

having a strong personal brand: becoming a recognized expert. And how do you do that? According to Clark, there are three key elements: content creation, social proof, and your network. Hosting these monthly meetups will build and strengthen my network while hopefully generating local leads for my business.

You can also offer to speak for free at businesses in your town. Not only will you get the opportunity to practice speaking, but you'll also gain a sense of which content your audience responds to most, and you'll build your self-confidence. You're building goodwill, you're building community, you're building a following, you're building a foundation, and you're improving your material and your pitch. Ultimately, as you start to grow, you can then begin to monetize your content after you've given it all away.

Jeff Bezos is obviously a very smart guy-maybe even a bit smarter than me. I really like what he says about change:

I very frequently get the question: "What's going to change in the next 10 years?" And that is a very interesting question; it's a very common one. I almost never get the question: "What's not going to change in the next 10 years?" And I submit to you that that second question is actually the more important of the two-because you can build a business strategy around the things that are stable in time.^{[12](#)}

You don't need to invent something new to be successful, you don't need to change the world to make a difference. Think about the things that aren't going to change-the things that people are going to need consistently time and time again. That's going to be good process, good collaboration, good places to work, good leadership, and a feeling of fulfillment at work. If you can focus on those particular things, I'm confident you can maintain the kind of relevance and the kind of authenticity that's required to grow into a sustainable thought leadership role and to become forever employable.

∞ DO THIS RIGHT NOW ∞

It's easy for me to tell you to "Give it all away." However, there's a right way and a not-so-right way to give away your content. The right

way ensures that when you give away your content-or your time or anything else of value-you create a positive outcome for building your personal brand. Just randomly giving away your content is not a sustainable brand-building strategy.

Here are five things you should do right now as you get ready to give it all away:

1.Follow leaders in your field. Who else is talking about this, and who already has a platform? Who are the thought leaders there, who is leading that conversation? Follow them on social media and keep an eye on what they're talking about and how they're talking about it.

2.Join their conversation. I inserted myself into conversations that established thought leaders were having with their communities. Always being polite and contributing to the conversation—not trying to take it over. The internet makes this quite possible, and indeed, relatively easy.

I've been watching someone who has been particularly impressive doing this exact thing over the last four or five years. The first thing that he did was inject himself into the conversations of thought leaders in the product management space. He was initially ignored a lot, but he was persistent, he engaged intelligently and challenged respectfully, and he offered up his own perspective regularly. And when he found things that resonated with people, he doubled down on them—multiplying his visibility and interest.

3.Share your work regularly. I created a consistent pace for sharing my materials. There was always something new coming from me every couple of weeks or every month, whether it was a blog post, tweet, or article.

4.Provide value, not just noise. I always tried to provide something tangible my audience could do. I would explain something someone could try or do differently.

5.Scale the ideas that resonate. As I got my ideas out into the world, some resonated with people, and others did not.

I doubled down on the ones that resonated and started to scale these ideas—turning them from tweets to blog posts to presentations. Maybe I should have tried *Lean UX* the musical. No—probably not.

FUTURE-PROOF YOUR CAREER



In the Introduction to this book, I told you I would provide you with the tools you need to step off the traditional career track you're on and help you become forever employable. I also told you that-for those of you who don't want to step off the traditional career track you're on-you can use the tactics and techniques in this book to become more valuable to your current employer. And, the more valuable you are to your employer, the better position you'll be in to justify your next pay raise or your next promotion-future-proofing your career.

You see, the philosophical foundations that I described in the Introduction apply to anyone in business, whether you're working for an established business large or small, or out on your own. To jog your memory, the five ideas that comprise this philosophical foundation include:

- Entrepreneurialism
- Self-confidence
- Continuous learning
- Improvement
- Reinvention

If you adopt this philosophy, you will be much more valuable to your current employer-and your future ones-and you will go a long way to becoming forever employable. In addition, each of the steps that I outline in this book can also be applied regardless of whether you work for an established business or you are your own boss.

You can plant a flag by becoming *the* go-to person-the expert-in some aspect of what your business does or how it does it.

You can tell your story to people both inside and outside your company-solving real problems using your real-world experience and then sharing your work regularly in a humble and practical way while

building authentic connections.

You can be prepared for new opportunities in your organization as they arise, then follow the new path wherever it may take you.

You can teach others in all sorts of different venues-from workshops to conferences to webinars, blog posts, and much more.

And you can give it all away, offering the wealth of your knowledge and expertise freely to those with whom you work, and to your entire organization and industry.

This is tremendously valuable to your current employer. What you're doing is you are creating transparency into how the organization works. Now, some organizations are going to be uncomfortable with that. But what you're doing is you are building the hiring brand of the organization and you are opening a window into the kind of culture that exists there and the kind of people who might thrive there. You're creating a ton of goodwill for your organization from a hiring perspective.

In addition to that, you are creating a level of expertise in the public discourse for that organization as well. Eventually somebody will say, "Well, who's the expert on this topic or that topic? So and so from IBM or Bank of America is putting out these amazing blog posts about how they built their mobile applications, how they scaled it nationally, and how they marketed it. We need to do the same thing."

In the tech space, the CRM-focused startup Intercom is fabulous. They encourage their people generate content and be present in the public discourse of everything: entrepreneurial digital product development, design, product management, venture capital funding, and more. And they use the context of their services as the storyline for each one of those public conversations, so that everybody knows what Intercom does and how they do it. They're constantly present in the conversation-generating tremendous buzz and tremendous inbound leads for their business.

InVision-one of the leading prototyping services-is another amazing organization. The content that InVision puts out is amazing and it's broad. And the company is always putting on free webinars, highlighting designers out there in the field, building platforms and communities. And if you can lead like that, you become invaluable to

these organizations. Your name is associated with the content simultaneously promoting you and the company. MailChimp does the same thing-generating tons of content. This has the triple benefit of making you forever employable, improving the hiring brand of your organization, and then ultimately increasing its credibility and its mindshare and awareness for what it is that you do and how you do it in the field.

Before you run off and start building your platform inside your company, I strongly suggest that you make sure you're doing it in a way that isn't going to cause problems for you or for your employer. For starters, be sure to get your boss in the loop-let him or her in on your plans and what you've got in mind. Ask for their support. And depending on your particular organization, you may need to involve your human resources or corporate communications department. If other people in your company are already planting their flag inside the company, then this should help ease your own efforts to do the same.

But what if, even after approaching your employer with your idea, the powers-that-be aren't thrilled with you doing this? What if they would rather that you just focus on getting your work done and keep your insights to yourself? Maybe you work in a regulated or secretive industry. Maybe the culture is not one to support this or the corporate communications team feels like you're stealing its thunder. Or the higher-ups might be afraid that your own brand will outshine your company's brand. There are a lot of different reasons why you might get shut down.

I once ran into a situation like this as I was writing a case study for the second edition of *Lean UX*. Because the case study was drawn from our personal work with the company, we needed to get the company's approval for the finished case study that would appear in the book. Unfortunately, after the company's corporate communications department got through with it, the case study was not nearly as effective as we originally planned for it to be. It was watered down and made much more generic and "corporate" in the process.

If your employer wants to water down your content, or outright

keep you from producing it, then you'll have a decision to make. Forever employability requires the kind of experimentation and risk taking we have discussed throughout this book. If your efforts to become forever employable are going to actually threaten your longevity at your current firm, you may want to consider making the move to an organization that will support you. If your goal is to keep climbing the ladder, great. You may just have to do it at another company.

IN CLOSING



So, you may wonder by now, “Did Jeff actually achieve his goal of becoming forever employable?”

The answer is yes.

Through a lot of hard work, trial and error, false starts, dead ends, occasional panic-and more than a few successes along the way-I have been self-employed for nearly a decade. I’ve attracted, built, and nurtured a sustainable group of people who are interested in what I have to say. And some of them pay me for it. As a result, I have achieved the financial goals I have set for myself while allowing my family to realize our dream of moving to Europe. I don’t worry about where my next paycheck is coming from.

You can do what I have done. Remember: I’m a one-time professional rock musician who, after failing to make it big in the music biz, decided to hook his dream onto a different star.

The path I’ve described in this book is mine-yours may (and likely will) be different. This is a cookbook of sorts, filled with recipes for you to follow. As with every recipe, you start by following the instructions exactly, then-as you gain expertise and self-confidence-you begin to improvise, adding your own unique touches. Finally, like a Michelin-starred chef, you throw away the recipes and work from your instinct, skills, and experience. This is no different. Start with my recipes and grow.

One thing I didn’t realize as I started my journey was just how much work I would have to devote to creating content, and that this effort would be ongoing-not one and done. To be completely honest, I do a tremendous amount of work today to maintain my forever employability. I need to constantly nurture my community, generate new content to maintain my thought leadership, and continue to build and strengthen my personal brand.

You’ll need to do the same to maintain your forever employability over the long run.

Today, delivering my actual work-the consulting with clients, the workshops, the keynote speeches-is maybe just one-third of what I

do. I devote the other two-thirds to content creation and the distribution and sharing of that content. Maintaining your forever employability is an ongoing process-it's hard work. But the upside is tremendous.

And, while my self-confidence in this chosen path is quite strong, I'll admit that there are times-usually toward the end of the year-when I start to panic just a bit about where my next project is going to come from. I think that's typical of many people who are self-employed. Our projects usually wrap up by the end of one year, and there's often a gap before our next round of projects start in the new year. As I'm wrapping up my own projects, I'll start to worry that no one is ever going to hire me anymore. Fortunately, they do hire me, but that doesn't keep me from getting anxious about it.

One thing you'll also discover when you become self-employed is that you'll probably work harder-putting in more hours-than you ever did working for a company. When you're your own boss, there's no such thing as a 9-to-5 schedule and long-planned time off can become disrupted at moment's notice. This can be difficult-not only for you, but for your loved ones. I have personally found myself stealing time away from my family to respond to immediate client needs or to feed the content machine I've built. This can create an entirely different level of stress.

If you're a single parent, transitioning to self-employment is going to be difficult. If you and your spouse or significant other is also transitioning to self-employment, that's going to make it even more difficult. But I have seen single parents and couples who are both pursuing self-employment succeed.

To make this work for me, I make a point of creating solid firewalls between my personal life and my business life. When I promise to do something with my wife or kids, I do it. When I make plans to take time off for vacation or a holiday, I let my clients know in advance that I'll be gone and I set up autoresponders with the name and phone number of an assistant who knows how to reach me-and who knows that only the most urgent of client calls should be sent through to me.

Remember: You'll never look back wishing you had done just one

more project, lost one more hour of sleep, or made one more euro or dollar. What you will look back wishing you had done was watch your daughter play one more game of football or your son catch one more fish, or look into the eyes of your significant other over a romantic dinner and glass of wine. The work will always be there-the time you spend with loved ones won't.

As you embark on your journey to becoming forever employable, remember that you will forge your own path. The steps I've spelled out are guardrails to help you achieve your goal, and the more you follow them the more valuable you will be. This is hard and it takes time. Don't expect overnight success. Perseverance and resilience are the keys to forever employability.

Your audience is out there, and they will find you if you stay on task, on message, and on brand. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Continuous improvement and reinvention mean always learning and engaging in new, risk-taking entrepreneurial experiments. You'll get better at running lower risk/investment experiments over time. I know because it's worked for me.

I hope you'll tell me about your journey and where it's taken you. Reach out to me with your stories and ask for help. I'm serious. My email address is jeff@gothelf.co. I'm rooting for your success! I look forward to hearing about it.

ENDNOTES



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JEFF GOTHELF helps organizations build better products and executives build the cultures that build better products. He is the co-author of the award-winning book *Lean UX* and the Harvard Business Review Press book *Sense & Respond*. Starting off as a software designer, Jeff now works as a coach, consultant and keynote speaker helping companies bridge the gaps between business agility, digital transformation, product management and human-centred design. Most recently Jeff co-founded Sense & Respond Press, a publishing house for practical business books for busy executives. www.jeffgothelf.com

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