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Craftsmanship—The Alternative to the Four Hour Work Week Mindset • Daniel Tawfik

6-8 minutes

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Often times when I attend a conference or a networking event I am surprised how many people operate at the periphery of the tech industry. Social media gurus, SEO ‘ninjas’, bloggers, etc. It’s a coterie of tech ‘club promoters.’ The hype men of the industry.

‘Hack your way to success.’ ‘Meet the right people.’ ‘Become a business superstar.’ They’ve found their silver bullet. They boast of building a passive income from a web business, all while traveling the world as the rest of us mortals are slaving away at our 9–5 jobs.

In a world where we are searching for silver bullets, these people seem to have amassed an arsenal of them. Moreover they’ve found audiences to sell their silver bullets to en masse.

The most blatant example of this are some of the disciples of the 4 Hour Work Week, by Tim Ferriss. The book itself is not really the issue. Ferriss indeed outlines some interesting tips on managing resources to get the highest ROI on your work. What is objectionable, however, is the hack-your-way-to-success mentality it has spawned in entrepreneurial circles.

It’s a mindset that is antithetical to everything I know about entrepreneurship. A mindset that I see when I hear people talk about having an amazing idea that they want to farm out to a young college student who can code or outsourcing development of a product to a cheap dev house. It’s a mindset that assumes entrepreneurship is a series of networking events and fundraising meetings, or even some silver-bullet business connection they have in lieu of a real distribution strategy. It’s taking a passive approach to a very difficult undertaking.

What is missed in all of this is the mindset of craftsmanship; that one’s expertise and deliberate focus on one’s craft is actually the primary driver for success and not some crapshoot of a series of hacks.

What happens on the periphery — whether it be the towel slapping we see on Twitter from tech celebrities or headline gossip out of TechCrunch — is not actually meaningful as a foundation of a business or a profession. Neither are the number of coffee meetings you have scheduled or the amount of networking meetings you attend. These things are tertiary at best, and at worst, just plain old distractions.

To be successful over the course of a career requires the application and accumulation of expertise. This assumes that for any given undertaking you either provide expertise or you are just a bystander. It’s the experts that are the drivers—an expertise that is gained from a curiosity, and a mindset of treating one’s craft very seriously.

A startup is by nature a crash course in developing expertise. What makes startups unique is the sheer dearth of resources. This dearth of resources forces founders to rapidly adapt their skills to meet the demands of the project.

‘I didn’t know how to do x, so I just had to figure it out.’ This is what I regularly hear from successful founders, whereas ‘I couldn’t find someone to do X, so I had to reconsider whether to pursue it at all’ is a common refrain from unsuccessful founders.

If you step up to the challenge, you’ll realize that the startup is nothing more than a teacher. It in fact is a great teacher for no other reason than it demands the accumulation of knowledge quickly for the startup to survive.

A technical founder, whose experience may relegate her or him to a specialist role in a large company, for example, has to adapt and take on more expertise in adjacent technical areas. There simply aren't the human resources to hand off these tasks to another specialist.

This is true for taking on tasks in other domains, whether that be sales, finance, marketing, management or design. You have to take an interest in these domains because there is no one else to fill these roles in your early stage company.

It's in exploring these unknown territories and facing the headwind of startup challenges that it becomes clear that the startup is merely a force of catalytic professional and character growth. With actual success of any given venture subject to the whim of outside forces, this growth is the non-monetary dividend that makes the experience priceless.

That is why the passive, 4-Hour Mindset is so self defeating. To lounge on a beach or travel the world and not actively engage in building your arsenal of expertise is professional malpractice.

It's also not practical. No serious company has been created passively—the passive mindset that leads people to say “I've got a great idea. I'll hire a team to build it out” or “I have this great connection who will drive sales,” while I play armchair visionary. Startup graveyards are full of visionaries without expertise or the proper skills to execute, for no other reason than ideas are not self executing, but are rather made into being by intense engagement by skilled operators.

Most importantly, to think of a business as a series of hacks and transactional relationships, you'll never amass the expertise that your future self and future businesses need to succeed. Startups fail withstanding founder expertise, of course. It is certainly not sufficient to be an expert. However, expertise does make it possible to traverse the struggles of creating businesses over the course of a career. You're not simply working on the idea in front of you, you're building the knowledge to succeed at your next projects as well.

It is the expertise and the mindset of craftsmanship that allows someone like Elon Musk to jump from project to project and sector to sector with the knowledge of how to execute on the highest level problems. It's not simply his ability to find interesting ideas. It's his command of the domains of the business that allow him to execute the way he does. He is the epitome of interdisciplinary student of his businesses.

If you are to optimize for anything, optimize for the long term. Use the challenges of your business today to build mastery in your craft. There is no guarantee that any one venture will succeed, but that mastery will bend luck in your favor over the long course of your career.

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Kudos

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Kudos