

Insights from So Good They Can't Ignore You by Cal Newport

In 2010, author Cal Newport received a PhD in Computer Science from MIT. Before starting his career, he became obsessed with the question: “**Why do some people end up loving what they do (for a living), while so many others fail at this goal?**”

Cal Newport interviewed people who loved their work to find out how they got there. The people who loved what they did for a living had a craftsman mindset, not a passion mindset.

The Passion Mindset:



The passionate mindset thinks: “What can the world offer me? What job can sustain my pre-existing passion?”

“First, when you focus only on what your work offers you, it makes you hyperaware of what you don’t like about it, leading to chronic unhappiness. This is especially true for entry-level positions, which, by definition, are not going to be filled with challenging projects and autonomy—these come later. When you enter the working world with the passion mindset, the annoying tasks you’re assigned or the frustrations of corporate bureaucracy can become too much to handle.”

“Second, and more serious, the deep questions driving the passion mindset—“Who am I?” and “What do I truly love?”—are essentially impossible to confirm. “Is this who I really am?” and “Do I love this?” rarely reduce to clear yes-or-no responses. In other words, the passion mindset is almost guaranteed to keep you perpetually unhappy and confused.” – Cal Newport

The Craftsman Mindset:



The craftsman mindset thinks: “How can I improve and have something uniquely valuable to offer the world? Am I willing to stick with this, despite how boring and tedious the process may be?”

“It (the craftsman mindset) asks you to leave behind self-centered concerns about whether your job is “just right,” and instead put your head down and plug away at getting really damn good. No one owes you a great career, it argues; you need to earn it—and the process won’t be easy.” - Cal Newport

“Regardless of how you feel about your job right now, adopting the craftsman mindset will be the foundation on which you’ll build a compelling career. This is why I reject the “argument from pre-existing passion,” because it gets things backward. In reality, as I’ll demonstrate, you adopt the craftsman mindset first and then the passion follows.” - Cal Newport

Why a ‘Craftsman Mindset’ is prerequisite for passion

People who love what they do for a living consistently experience these three work traits:

- **Impact:** the quality of your work has a noticeable and positive impact on people you care about (teammate, customer, etc.).
- **Creativity:** you have an opportunity to improvise your work and implement your ideas.
- **Control:** you have some say over how, when, where you work.

“The things that make great work great (creativity, impact, and control), are rare and valuable. If you want them in your career, you need rare and valuable skills to offer in return.” - Cal Newport

The process of developing rare and valuable skills is hard, and this is why having a craftsman mindset is so critical. Unless you find a way to stick to the process of improvement, despite how much your passion dips, you’ll fail to develop skills that are rare and valuable, and you won’t have enough leverage to demand these rare and valuable work traits.

How to become rare and valuable

Start volunteering for challenging projects at work, and start initiating challenging projects at home. Select your projects based on the skills they force you to develop. Here are three questions to find the rare and valuable skills you need to develop:

- **What particular skill does my team, company, or industry lack at the moment (ex: specific domain knowledge, software program, etc.)?**
- **What technologic expertise is in high demand in my industry (ex: SQL programming, Facebook advertising, etc.)?**
- **What skills do the people at the top of my profession seem to have (ex: clear business writing, public speaking, time management, etc.)?**

When you’ve found a skill you want to develop, use the principles of deliberate practice to develop that skill:

- Carve out periods of undistracted focus.
- Push yourself to the edge of your ability; cycle between comfort and discomfort.
- Seek immediate feedback and mentorship.

Always be asking: Am I becoming increasingly rare (how long would it take me to train a college graduate to do what I do) and incredibly valuable (how badly would people miss my contribution if I quit)?

“If you’re not putting in the effort to become, as Steve Martin put it, “so good they can’t ignore you,” you’re not likely to end up loving your work—regardless of whether or not you believe it’s your true calling.” – Cal Newport