

DES L T A G



MARSHALL & ZAU

11 Interviews on the Topic of Personal Evolution in the Resources Needed for Success

As told to and edited by Sebastian Marshall

This collection of exclusive interviews is a bonus for purchasing the book Gateless. Please feel free to share this particular interview series with friends, family, coworkers, mentors, mentees, students, teachers, etc.

If you were sent these interviews and haven't yet purchased the book Gateless, welcome. We hope that you enjoy the stories and insights contained within, find tangible value for your own life, and decide to pick up Gateless for yourself.

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Introduction

In a rooftop garden cafe overlooking one of Taipei's famous night markets, Kai and I were sitting and trying to make sense of the universe.

The conversations had started in Beijing a few years previous.

Kai's four currency model looked to answer key questions about building an amazing career and live in the modern world.

It was clear that major shifts had happened, but nobody could quite put their finger on it. The *relative* importance of cash had declined vs more intangible things like having a great network and being highly credible. That, plus a demonstrated competence, and you could get cash whenever you needed. Whereas high salary jobs seem to both be created and then evaporate rapidly and unpredictably these days.

Likewise, the relative weighting of credentials seemed to be up-ended — traditional certifications that might take a six month course to get are seen as somewhat passé in much of the fast innovation world. It's never a detriment to show competence and a desire to learn, of course, but a single great testimonial or case study seemed to straight-up outperform many traditional certifications.

The original working title was *Postcareer*, but we eventually shifted — even if you were doing a path that hadn't been heavily disrupted by the current state of affairs, something like civil service, you could still have a much more thriving life and much more impact by understanding the shifts that had happened in the world.

Eventually we settled on *Gateless* as the title — yes, it references the Zen Mumonkan, for the perceptive student of philosophy, but it also looks at the fundamental shift that happened in the world.

We went from a world that had *clear gates* — graduate high school, graduate college, get first job, join the trade association, join the local clubs, get first promotion, volunteer for first civic role, move up in civic roles, get promoted again, get married, become a manager, have first child, have second child, become senior manager, move into senior leadership roles in civic society... retire... be taken care of.

There's still some clear gates in some professions — would-be doctors go to pre-med undergraduate, medical school, and residency — but this is becoming the exception more than the rule.

Entire professions are changing over night. What's needed is not a knowledge of how to manage a linear path that might not still be there when you get to the end of it, but instead a way to manage all the opportunities and resources of life.

This led to Kai pioneering his Four Currencies model, which with refinement, eventually become 4+1:

Capacity: The generalized ability to effect results and make things happen. Arguably the most important and valuable thing in today's world, of which every other resource can flow from.

Network: The sum total of all your relationships. (We pioneered both a few ways to measure this based on Intimacy and Relevancy — how close you are to the people you know, and how well they fit with your missions in life — and also shared tactics on how to do it from scratch.)

Signal: Everything you're consciously and unconsciously broadcasting about yourself into the world. We made a hierarchy of how credible various aspects of signal are — claims you make are the least credible, third-party endorsements and artifacts of work you've completed are higher, and the person's own derived impressions from meeting you are highest.

Assets: The most straightforward of the four — there's financial assets like cash and cash flows and such, and there's tools and general patterns around spending, earning, and investing.

Meaning: What the 4 Currencies should aggregate to; what matters to you. With distinct approaches to select Meaning if you don't have clarity here, and how to actualize in different situations where you know what you want to do.

Kai and I do lots of science-y stuff when we get together: exploring operations, teamwork, technology, statistics, really whatever is interesting to either of us at the moment.

In that rooftop garden overlooking the night market, we broke through to some really useful conceptions and I suggested — hey, Kai, you want to write a book about this?

He agreed, and we set a (foolish in retrospect) timeline of writing full-time for two weeks in the French Concession of Shanghai. Almost a year later, after traveling the United States together for nonprofit work, we criss-crossed the Atlantic on a ship, writing with no internet, got a house in Morocco to finish the book, and finally got it done in Istanbul while planning out work for MIT's Global Startup Lab with the team leader, Bryan Hernandez there. We managed to avoid not getting tear-gassed during the Taksim Square thing, too, thankfully, despite living right there off Istikal.

After finishing, we got a barrage of near-perfect reviews which warmed my heart. There was one last thing I wanted to do — get interviews from fantastic people who were really living various aspects of Capacity, Signal, Network, Assets, and Meaning. Real-life case studies from people doing amazing and varied world-class stuff.

Here's those interviews — I'm proud of them, and proud of bringing this work to you.

Sebastian Marshall
Saitama, Japan
February 2015



Get Your Copy of Gateless

Lots of insightful writing. Clear discussion on abstract concepts like meaning and motivation. It was very illuminating for me, really helped me to take a look at why I do what I do. There was tons of helpful, actionable advice—it ranged from: things like exercises (with examples from one of the author's own life) for deciding on goals; better ways to manage your resources, including money; and even how to overcome your inherent disadvantages.

— Huan, Amazon.com Reviewer

Click this link or copy it into your favorite web browser:

<http://www.amazon.com/Gateless-Sebastian-Marshall-ebook/dp/B00QANG7GM>

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The Right Way To Get Attention: Be Competent

by Jason Shen

Jason Shen is a marketing manager at Percolate, a business-to-business software company. He was previously the founder of the Y Combinator-funded startup Ridejoy, won an NCAA Championship as a Gymnast at Stanford, and was selected by the White House to serve as a Presidential Innovation Fellow at the Smithsonian. Today Shen is well-known and respected for his athletic, business, and writing accomplishments, but it wasn't always this way. In this interview, Shen talks about how he made the shift from looking for attention for its own sake — and not getting the kind of attention he wanted — to being known as a leader and the kind of guy who gets things done.

Today I'm a marketing manager at a fast-growing very successful growing software company called Percolate. I'm respected for my writing skills, managing projects basically autonomously, and generally really being valuable and helpful in a variety of ways that are not directly related to my role as a marketing manager but respected in general. I'm the go-to person if there's no one to ask about something, being asked, "What do you think about Jason, can you make this happen?"

Outside of work, I get respected pretty-well as someone into fitness as a gymnast for 16 years, winning an NCAA championship, marathon running, and I set a Guinness world record in a type of pushups.

I started a YC company... we raised over a million dollars in funding and had some really happy users. We didn't exit and didn't become the next Facebook, but generally — people look to me these days as a guy that can get things done.

It wasn't always like this. When I was younger, I was probably better-known for someone who was being clumsy, forgetful, made jokes but maybe at inappropriate times, and a little bit like a space-cadet: a little out of it, doesn't really get what's going on, low on the competency rating. Fun, a nice guy, and maybe somewhat harmless — not at all a force to be reckoned with.

To be more specific about the space cadet thing, was always the guy on high school who took the inside joke too far and was super-nerdy and over-the-top, or I'd be the guy kind of willing to do anything when challenged.

I was a gymnast, and people would say “go to do a backflip” — I'd do it. I'd never back down from a dare; sometimes I'd embarrass myself.

Similar story in college. I was on the gymnastics team, and I had a couple antics early on — I shaved my head on a dare during Freshman year, and people said “That's so weird.” I was looking for attention and getting it, but it wasn't the kind of attention I wanted. And I didn't know how to do better.

My first glimpse of something better was when I was training at a difficult gymnastics move on the parallel bars called the “heely” — you have to do a blind catch when you come down and it's easy to jam your fingers or hit your heel in a painful way; there's a number of things that can go wrong.

But I went hard at it. You could easily bail out of the move if you were afraid to do the blind catch, but I'd never bail. Sometimes I'd get hurt or jammed, but I'd never bail.

I remember a senior on the team, kind of a bully, a really big guy. But at one point he said to me, “Hey, when you go for that and don't bail out, that encourages me to go for it.” Seeing a freshman never bail out on this dangerous move, it emboldened him a bit.

That was a small thing, but it started to change my identity. I'd been a bit of a goofball, I always somewhat didn't know what was going on... and now I saw a different kind of more genuine respect.

I didn't learn right away, though. After an underwear-on-top-of-pants party, I was dared to wear the same outfit again — of course, I did it. Of course, it backfired: “I can't believe you did that!” Again.

The way our team worked, you had to wear a formal suit if you were a freshman or if you broke dress code or did something stupid. But after your freshman year on the team, you could wear Stanford apparel if you dressed and behaved well... well, I was always being required to wear a suit because I kept doing stupid stuff.

But soon, things were to change dramatically.

My junior team at Stanford, I got a very bad knee injury. I'd just added a double-twisting vault — a very difficult move — to the moves I'd do. The second meet of the season, I landed short and at a severe angle: I ripped my ACL, MCL, and just about my whole leg up as my knee collapsed.

It was a 12 out of 10 on the pain scale.

That changed my trajectory. I was out for that season. I had to get a number of knee surgeries, and the doctors worried at first that I might not be able to do more than basic walking ever again.

Each year in gymnastics, there'd be two or three season-ending injuries on the team. Most of the time, those people stopped coming into the gym as often. It makes sense: they're not competing, they have lots of homework to do, why would they come in every day?

But I came in probably 75% as much as a regular competing gymnast would. I was there over 15 hours out of the 22 practice hours each week. There was only two coaches, so I'd help by watching people's moves, giving corrections and adjustments when I saw them.

A year later I was back. I never competed vault or floor again, only parallel bars or pommel horse, but I was voted "Most Inspirational" that year. Going through a devastating injury and working my way back.

People would think, "Why am I complaining about this little cut I have after seeing Shen go through that huge injury and come back?" You see the human ability to recover from deep wounds, and it shows you how much pain we can handle and how far we can go.

That made a big difference in my identity. I stayed at Stanford a fifth year and competed, and I was elected captain that year. Freshman year, I was the most space cadet-ish of the incoming Freshman, and my final year I was elected captain. I'd earned the respect of my teammates.

In the meanwhile at college, I'd joined other student organizations where there wasn't that sort of "bro" and "jock" culture.

After one semester at the on-campus magazine, I was invited to lead the design team — and all of sudden, I was asked to organize meetings, to make sure there's a deliverable at the end of the meeting, and so on — and that pushed me to be more organized, to plan ahead, to make sure I was checking in with people.

Being put in that position of leadership made my behavior come together much more.

It's what I'd recommend to anyone looking to be better-respected: taking a leadership role of any kind, no matter how small. It forces you to be competent.

Back in middle school and high school, my parents encouraged me to be more of a leader. I didn't know what that meant and it felt intimidating. I thought, "How can I do that? People don't respect me, I'm kind of a goofball."

But the answer started coming through: be competent and take leadership roles.

Once I started to figure this out, I started to take more roles on. On the gymnastics team, every year the outgoing team organized quotes and advice for next year's team. I volunteered to take the lead on that and led it to good results: in the process, I had to become more competent again.

At the Stanford magazine, the editor in chief believed in me and pushed me into a leadership role, but once I was in it, I started to embody it. Either someone puts you into that place or you put yourself into that place.

If no one offers to put you in charge of something, just find some work that needs to be done and lead it.

Doing this unofficially in gymnastics and officially in the student organizations I was in meant that I had two distinct sets of friends in college: gymnastics teammates who saw an evolution from goofball to more competent and organized, and folks at the student organizations who only knew me as someone more organized and on top of things.

When I was younger, I had a drive to try to make people laugh and try to be accepted. What led to being accepted was the opposite of what I'd previously thought to do: I saw that just making people laugh wasn't creating the results I wanted — I was looking for attention and making people laugh, but that wasn't leading to respect. I got laughs by being ridiculous, but it wasn't what I wanted.

For anyone who is in the shoes now that I was then, here's what I recommend: ask if your behavior is leading to the results you want. If not, evolve.

I didn't do it systematically, but it's very clear how it happened. I started doing the things that were respected in the groups I was a member of.

That's important: with your social group, figure out what earns their respect. With gymnastics, it revolved around things like having sharp witty comebacks to things — which I was never really good at — or being a really good gymnast and contributor to the team.

I was always a pretty good gymnast, but never so good to win people over on my merits as an athlete alone. By working hard through injury and rehab and continuing to help the team win even when out, this earned real respect.

You always need to be going further than what you feel ready for — you might not feel ready for a leadership role, but take it and you'll start to embody it. No one has to give you a leadership role to get started; you just start taking the lead on things.

It's definitely possible to go from feeling “not competent” — even being perceived as kind of a loser — into being someone well-respected, highly competent, and who gets things done.

But it does take time and effort. Somedays, you won't feel like you're making any progress — but as you keep moving forwards, you'll see flashes of getting better.

Don't look for attention — look to be effective in general. To be effective, yes, you need to be respected and listened to, but don't go directly for “trying to be respected” — simply look to be effective.

That might mean working through someone else who already is highly respected and has high credibility to just make things work out.

Everyone has different motivations, and you have to realize that if you want to gain respect, you have to understand the worldview of people who you care about — what's important to the people you care about? If you don't acknowledge that and adapt to that, you won't get anywhere. If your group values the jock sense of humor and you don't have it (I didn't), then you'd better get better at helping the team win.

I started to gain respect by getting away from looking for attention — and instead focusing on doing things that were competent. You can too. And remember — you'll never feel fully ready for anything, so make sure you're getting into new leadership positions and evolving into them.

More from Jason Shen:

Blog: <http://www.jasonshen.com/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/jasonshen>

Book: <http://www.amazon.com/Winning-Isnt-Normal-Meditations-Ass-Kicking-ebook/dp/B00FL2CXEI/>

Technical Surfing

by Jay Bobzin

Jay Bobzin is a Senior Android Engineer at Uber, one of the dream companies he wanted to work for — and he explains precisely how he got there. In addition to various triumphs in coding, he’s a black belt, kickboxer, and Shodan in Go.

In the last four years, I’ve doubled my salary and gone from working somewhere that no one had ever heard of to having my pick of top companies to work for.

Literally, the two top companies I wanted to work for, I applied to both, and both were fighting to get me. The primary difference between me then and me now isn’t that I “buckled down” and “worked smarter” or “worked harder” — it’s because of a process I consciously ran and habits I started to develop. I didn’t realize that it would have this massive impact at first — but looking back, if I hadn’t done these things, nothing would have come together the way I did.

I call the whole process “Technical Surfing” — and it’s about choice and ambition: it improves the amount of money you make and the amount of respect you have in your career. It’s about finding the edges that can get you above the people who have the same level of skill and intelligence as you. No matter how good you are, at some point you climb to a rank where you can’t just use skill and intelligence to get ahead, because everyone at that level is as skilled and intelligent as you are. And that’s when you need to find other advantages. This is where technical surfing comes in.

The basic idea is simple: you get on an emerging technology right when the demand for it peaks, and use that to launch your career forwards.

The reason I call it technical surfing is that you don’t just appear on the top of the wave.

When people think of a great surfer, they think of them standing up on a wave and riding it to shore. But great surfers don't just appear at the top of the wave. That surfer has been planning and training to get up on that wave for a long time. He's waited for things to line up in the right way, he's paid attention to the weather forecast at his favorite beach, he knows which wave to ride and which to pass by — and then has the skills to get up and have a great ride.

When you think of a great programmer, you think of someone sitting at a terminal banging out lines of code. But to have a great career in programming, there's a lot of skills that are never taught to programmers beyond the coding itself.

I knew I wanted to be a computer programmer since before I entered college, but I didn't have much of a sense of what that really meant. I'd written a few programs and I really liked video games, but I kind of just assumed it was like a puzzle you could solve. That's how I looked at programming then, as a puzzle of trying to make these pieces in the machine work together.

In a very real way, that's what programming is like: it's like a lego set in the computer, and you're trying to get them all to fit well together, and it's very hard to get them working right the first time, but you keep puzzling with it and you get it.

In school, I was rather successful with that mindset. But it wasn't until my senior year that I was scheduled to do an open-ended honors thesis where I could do anything.

I'd learned how to play Go in college, and I thought it was this fascinating game with all sorts of interesting puzzles. A friend of mine and I decided to tackle computer-based Go... which turned out to be the most naive thing I started in my life.

We sat down and coded on this thing for weeks — and made zero progress.

It turned out to be a challenge that we were entirely unprepared for.

It was my advisor at the time who said, “The first steps here are to find some people that can help you, because you can’t do this on your own no matter what” — he introduced me to people, one who had done important work on machine learning and actually written the textbook used on it at the time. The other was taking a theoretical, mathematical approach using eigenvectors of n-dimensional manifolds to make sense of arbitrary problem spaces.

These professors who we were introduced to pointed us at easier problems, and we started by doing work on tic-tac-toe. By the end of this project, we were working on tic-tac-toe in a way that we were demonstrating advanced learning concepts that might one day help someone address Go in an interesting way. The project wound up being a huge success academically for us and our advisors wound up being really happy.

That’s the first time I realized that success at programming isn’t just how good you are at writing code, but about knowing what to work on and when, and who you work on it with.

Yet, that lesson didn’t really “take” the first time.

I landed a job out of school in 2006 and the startup scene wasn’t as booming as it had been before or after — so I took a job in the financial sector, working on financial systems, mainframes, very dry work. Really fascinating to someone interested in the workings of the financial world, but it wasn’t my primary drive. But it paid better than anything else offered, so I took it.

I worked at that for three and a half years without very much changing.

It was maybe two years into it that I realized I needed to do something. I started attending a lot of local meetups. I was in Cambridge Massachusetts, and with any technical subject you’re interested in studying, you can find someone who is interested in studying it.

I touched on a number of technologies at the time. And nothing really struck me, but I started to get a sense of what other people were working on in the world.

I started spending a lot of time reading sites like Hacker News, which at the time was maybe 1/1000th of the size it is now — and was made up mostly of people working at startups.

That got me really excited about the business of software, and different ways you can think about using software to build a company.

These are things I'd never really thought about it. No one had taught me these things in school.

A lot of my best conversations and things I learned during those days were with people who were also interested in studying the business of software engineering.

The same lesson I learned about individuals succeeding at programming seemed to apply to companies: a successful technology company did a lot more than just make great technology.

These things didn't immediately change my life, but they started changing the way I thought and the way I approached my career.

In 2010, I made a jump to a company that was a better fit — but ultimately it wasn't the perfect fit either. I was not fully satisfied with where I was and what I was working on.

At the end of 2011, I made a big decision: I decided to quit my job and leave all my friends, and with about \$10,000 in my pocket, move to Washington D.C. and become an Android programmer.

This turned out to be one of the most important decisions I ever made, but at the time it was absolutely terrifying.

Android was not by any means the accepted peer to the iPhone at the time. Some people were thinking it might be here to stay, but in the USA, Android phones were seen as second best, Android apps were almost universally lower quality... it was the phone you bought if you broke your iPhone and couldn't afford a new one.

It was a pretty rough time to do this — so why did I throw away a successful well-paying career to go work for scraps on this new platform?

For the previous three years I'd been talking to people and getting a sense of different communities and technologies, I knew something that most people didn't: I knew that Android was going to be huge.

When I saw the release of Android 4.0 in 2011, I knew this was the time and this was the technology I was going to make my career on.

I knew that so strongly that I left behind most of what I had to base my career on it.

For the first year, I was working for peanuts, but I worked constantly.

I started building a reputation. People started appreciating my work and in the local community, I started being known as one of the most experienced Android programmers around.

Meanwhile, Android starts skyrocketing and it passes the iPhone in the number of global installs — and then starts leaving the iPhone in the dust.

I notice the contracts I'm getting start getting bigger and bigger.

Finally, the founder of a D.C. startup called SocialRadar reached out to me and said, "I hear you're one of the best Android developers around. Want to come to our office and see if there's a fit?"

I became Lead Android Developer there, and found myself as one of the first 12 employees at an exciting company doing exactly what I wanted for the first time in my life.

The year at SocialRadar was amazing, and me and my team launched a great Android app, great enough apparently to attract the attention of one of my favorite companies in the world.

When Uber reached out and said they wanted to fly me to San Francisco and meet me, I wasn't going to say no. I checked the rest of the market and got offers from every company I was interested in, and ultimately accepted a job at Uber. I have an amazing role here that I couldn't have dreamed of landing even three years ago.

I think anyone can do this and it's not as hard as you'd think.

The important thing is that you need to be knowledgeable about more than your job and your skillset — you need to know how that skillset is interacting with the rest of the world.

If you can develop this type of awareness, then you can position yourself in a way that great things just start falling into your lap.

It'll seem like magic to everyone around you, but that's because you did the work to get yourself to the place where the good things would start happening near-automatically.

I call the process for doing this “technical surfing.” I've been presenting about this at companies, universities, and tech meetups — I keep getting told that these are concepts that most people hadn't thought about systematically before.

And that's a shame, because these are crucial concepts to building a great career.

First off, why I call it technical surfing: when someone thinks of a surfer, they think about a guy on the water on his surfboard riding waves. And people ask, “How is that guy not falling down right now?” That's where the glory is.

But that's not how he got there. To be a great surfer, you need to have the skills to ride the wave, but you also need to get to the right wave at the right time.

So let's look at someone who rides an amazing wave. Let's look at what the surfer did that day, that week, even that month to be in a position to hit the wave.

I have five steps I recommend people do:

1. The first step is to know your local beaches.

You need to know what it's in your area. At the highest level, you need to know what's going on around you. What beaches are hot now, what beaches were hot 20 years ago but just don't have anything going on... if you're a technologist, you need to know what's going on in mobile, web, wearables, big data, home automation, open government — all of these phrases should mean a lot to you, whether you're in them or not. These are beaches, and one of them might become the place to be. If you've never heard about it, you might miss a great party and some great waves you could hit.

2. Once you know the beaches, you need to start paying attention to the water.

This is more specifically, what is the forecast for each of these technologies? This is where you're going to start looking to pick a few areas to focus on that might be good candidates for specialization later.

The questions you're going to be asking here are, "Who is using this technology? Who has tried to use this technology and failed, and why did they fail? Who is investing in this technology? And what does that investor have to win or lose based on the success or failure of the technology?"

If you look at these things, if you looked at Google and Apple in 2011, you see that two giant companies are both realizing that mobile is a crucial cornerstone of the modern world, and there's no way that Google is going to let Apple have that whole cake.

If you're not paying attention to these things, the power behind these trends and the specific companies and what influence they're going to have on the forecast of the technology, that's how you get rained on. You show up at the beach and there were clear signs that it's not a day to hit the water and you ignore them.

3. When the forecast is favoring a technology, you need to start to meet everyone using it. I call this "checking out the scene."

It's not enough to look at just the technology and news. You need to go to meetups and get introductions to people already in that business.

This is the single best source of information for predicting the success or failure of a technology.

A lot of times, there's a lot of money and resources spent to try to make something appear a certain way, but you get a different perspective when you get an honest take from someone working with it day-in and day-out.

You start getting a sense of the real issues and snags that could crop up.

You also get a sense of who else is interested in this.

If you're doing the work honing in on something that could get important, you start meeting other forward-thinking people who can be great in your life.

4. Then you get your toe in the water.

You've been following the industry at large, the news, and following the technologies that are most promising, and you're going to meetups and getting introductions to people in those areas.

If you keep doing this, you'll eventually find something that you think is going to take off.

Now, this is where many people fall down.

What you need to do at this stage, before you go all-in, is you need to make sure the technology inspires you and you can really commit to that.

Before you fully commit, you need to build something with that technology. This should be something that feels good to you personally that you like to work with.

When I thought I was ready to quit my job, when I thought about committing to Android full-time, I wanted to get a sense for what it was like to build an Android app.

I reached out to Dave Asprey and asked if he had any work he needed to be done in mobile, I told him I'd be willing to do it for free, and he had no problem sharing the details with me.

That project itself didn't wind up being a tremendous success — I was still entirely new and ran into technical challenges over my head. But on a personal level, it was a tremendous success. I got to work with one of the people I admire most in the world, but I also got to really get a feel for what it's like to work with this technology.

I don't recommend you do this too often, because it's got to be significant. The hard part is that you need to build something really significant; a weekend is not enough to know what it's really like to know the challenges of a new technology.

I feel like a lot of people jump to this step because it seems like a lot of fun, but they do it lightly and never go deep enough with it, so they don't really know on a deep level what it's like and if they're suited for it, and what the true potential of this technology is.

I tried Ruby on Rails and didn't pursue it, in favor of Android, because of this step. When I actually got into Rails and started working in it, I wasn't inspired by it and didn't love its potential for me even though all the other factors were there for it.

Android, on the other hand, with the easy deployment and the Java programming language that I was already strong in, these two things made it resonate with me personally. You can work very fast without servers, and these factors made it a great fit me.

And this led me to commit to it, leading to the final step...

5. The final step is the hard part, the drop and pop.

The essence of Step Five is commitment.

For me, this meant quitting my job, moving to a new city, and spending between 8 and 14 hours per day building Android apps for peanuts.

The entire point of Step One to Step Four is to identify an opportunity that's going to be huge, but that opportunity — by its very nature — will not last.

Finding the right opportunity is hard, but if you find one and you believe in it, you need to get as far out ahead as you can.

This is where the “drop and pop” comes into play — a surfer will “drop” onto a wave when he's found the one he wants to ride, and at the exact correct moment in that wave's potential, he'll “pop” to his feet with incredible power and speed.

While it might only last for two seconds, the quality of the drop and pop determines the entire rest of his ride on that wave.

If that surfer gets up slow, it might be two seconds too early or too late on that wave, and might not go anywhere. And definitely, the surfer ten feet away that dropped on the right wave and popped hard is going to have a better and more impressive ride.

To people watching, the second surfer will look like a better surfer. But it might just be that he popped at the perfect moment.

This is why you can't be relaxed or take your time with this last step. Once you've identified the opportunity, you pop up hard. If this was the right wave, you want to make sure you catch it.

This step looks a little different for everyone. You don't need to do what I did. But the essence here is commitment. You've taken your time and prepared to make the best possible decision, so that when you got here, you could go all-in and do it in a way that is going to bring you success.

If you went all-in on a technology because you heard about it once on the news and thought it sounded cool, you'd probably be making a big mistake. There's a lot of information available to help you make that decision, and this process needs to be going on constantly all the time.

Scout your local beaches: know all the opportunities that are emerging and the current landscape.

Keep an eye on the forecast: with technologies you find promising, keep a close eye on what's happening.

Check out the scene: get to know people who are working with the technology and ask what they think about it and see if they are the kind of people you admire.

Test the waters: Before you commit, get in the water by building something significant over time to see if this technology is a good fit for you personally.

Drop and pop: When you finally find a great opportunity, with a great forecast, a great scene, and the water feels good when you test it, it's time to commit fully.

You want to make sure you achieve mastery of this technology at the exact time when it's in the most demand.

People will think you're lucky when opportunities start falling into your lap easily: career advancement, interesting projects, great pay, cool people, and everything you'd want in your work life are lining up at your door.

But it's not luck — there's a process. If you're not specialized on something that's blowing up right now, I'd recommend you start scouting those beaches.

More from from Jay Bobzin:

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/bobz44>

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Technical Q&A: <http://stackoverflow.com/users/210828/jay-bobzin>

A Daily Practice Towards Authenticity

by Laura Coe

Laura Coe had checked off all the boxes — built a multimillion dollar business and sold it to a Fortune 500, had a loving partner and a beautiful three year old, and “was even teaching yoga classes on the side” — but underneath, something still wasn’t right. Her search led her to pioneer techniques for curing “emotional obesity” — ways to manage one’s emotions, get off “emotional junk food,” and be happier.

I was one of these people who didn’t find anything I really loved when I was in school; nothing academic in the early school structure really fit my personality. I went to graduate school in philosophy and loved it, but I didn’t want to be a professor.

I was looking for something I wanted to do with my life, but I had a very old-school father who thought I shouldn’t be sitting around. He was starting a company in the Health Tech space as an entrepreneur... **I woke up on a Monday morning in an office in downtown Chicago leading a healthcare business and really not having a clue how I ended up there.**

Here I was, on the West Side of Chicago as a health-tech entrepreneur, and I tried to make the best of it. I became the head of operations for the company, did operations and marketing, and we created all sorts of products. I became very good at all sorts of practical and tactical things, but I never found any deep sense of purpose in it. It wasn’t really what I enjoyed.

If you asked what I liked, what I liked to read — healthcare and business were at the bottom of the list. I didn’t like reading about science or business, but somehow here I was.

How did this happen? In school, in my opinion, we’re taught all kinds of tactical points. How to be organized, project planning, how to get things done. Eventually we move on to leadership, discipline, how to follow through.

But no one takes the time to say, “What do you enjoy doing? What do you see as your passion points?” While you’re getting really adept at a lot of skills, they might not be skills you want in your life, and might not be placed in an area that’s rewarding in your life.

I built the company. It was very successful. Sold it to a Fortune 500 in 2006. I left completely externally successful — I had all the boxes checked so that the world would say I’m very successful — but from the inside, I felt depleted and wasn’t feeling very good.

I asked, “How is it possible that I’m successful but not feeling happiness?”

My one goal became: Find something that feels authentic.

That seems like a small sentence, but it became life-changing for me.

I tried a few different things: I almost opened a yoga studio, almost became head of integrated healthcare at Northwestern University, but this time — I kept checking in for myself, and each time I almost took a leap in the wrong direction, I was able to stop myself from taking a position without much thought and without checking in with myself.

That small sentence and small decision kept me in a cycle of trying things and quitting them, because I couldn’t find what I love. As much as I could find what wasn’t authentic, I wasn’t able to find what was authentic for me.

What I learned eventually is that we often discredit our authentic purpose when it comes to mind. It often happens as a nonverbal sensation when you’re thinking about what you want to do with your life — this certain deeper wisdom you have within yourself, you can listen to it, or turn it off. I would turn it off before.

When I stopped doing that, I was able to find what I really loved in writing and coaching.

Before, I started outside-in: Going out into the world and finding what I was good at, and doing that — instead of looking inwards and finding what I was passionate about, and finding a way to make that work.

It was worth it, but I struggled to find my way for several years. I researched and read so many self-help books and went back to my origins with philosophy and spirituality, and everybody was basically saying the same thing, from the ancients all the way to modern-day thinking.

The first step is to really start asking yourself what you want. Deep within you, what do you really crave to do?

As adults, we tend to judge that right away, immediately. The next step is asking how you create space between thinking what you want — even privately to yourself — and that immediate judgment that follows and says it's not possible?

I really recommend to ask what you want, but then learn to avoid the judgment. You can notice the judgmental thoughts as sounding like “I can't” or “I shouldn't” or “What would others think?”

I call these “junk food thoughts” — while we have cravings towards donuts or potato chips, we also have cravings towards these types of thoughts. See if you can withhold yourself from indulging this.

“I'd love to be a writer, but I don't have a PhD” was a junk-food thought to me.

If you can't refrain from thinking it, then learn to how to indulge it *and work through it*.

Eventually, you'll want to replace junk food thoughts with nutritional thoughts. For me, it became “Lots of people become excellent writers without a PhD.”

Similar to how working out gets easier and easier over time, cravings towards negative junk-food thoughts get smaller over time as you practice, daily. **You want to gradually replace all junk thinking with more nutritional thoughts.**

What is critical to this process is that it's not generic: It's not a one-size-fits-all solution. I tried positive thinking, I tried just saying "Be grateful"... it didn't work for me at all.

For me, the general didn't work; it needed to be specific. For me, what got in the way was the idea that I didn't have the capability to write the book I wanted.

And it came even more specific than that, with specific thoughts about why I couldn't do it, that were unique to my background.

People have sentences they rehearse and rehearse and rehearse, that get in their way. Positive-thinking and generic solutions don't work here; you need to find customized responses to the thoughts that get in your way.

I have a client that avoids everything. For her, what became nutritional was, "I'm resilient and get things done." For her, avoidance was related to a lack of resiliency. You need to play around with what feels nutritional.

One thing that was confusing to me was, at first I believed that everything would just be blissful once I found my passion.

"Find it, and it'll be easier, everything will flow from there" — we hear that, but it's not exactly right.

Life can be hard; things can be difficult. Obstacles will come up between you and your goals; things happen in life.

It wasn't, "I finally figured out what I want, and now I'm home free" — no, it's still a daily practice.

After I landed the ship and figured out I wanted to write, I still had to figure out what I wanted to write, what I wanted to write about, who my audience was, what my style is...

These too came with junk-food thoughts. I'd ask, "Who is my audience?" and I'd have junk-food thinking there too, "Well, I want to write for these people, but I *really should* write for these people instead..."

You need to keep navigating and checking in with yourself all the time, even on the positive side of things.

I was offered a huge opportunity by an agent in New York who wanted to take this idea and sell it on QVC and try to get a book deal and movie deal, but I had to stop and check in with myself. For me, I wasn't trying to make this go like that — but I kept questioning myself, saying, “Who passes on an opportunity like this?”

Once you've decided on what you want, things get easier and the sense of dread goes away that came from facing a job or relationship you're unhappy in, but it's still difficult some days.

There's a lightness; the heaviness that came from other people's choices and goals is gone — but there are still challenges to work through every day.

If someone is thinking of making a change, I recommend you do it gradually. You wouldn't wake up tomorrow and run the Chicago marathon if you're not a runner. You'd be sore, in pain, you could actually hurt yourself.

Don't go on an “emotional crash diet” — people get so unhappy that they freak out, quit their jobs, and move on from their relationships in a big panic.

Take the time to play. See if you can enjoy the process. If the stress and anxiety gets too high, take a break — don't take crash action.

Integrate actions coming from your authentic self. Even if it's one action that day, you're learning the skillset to create a life based on an authentic voice.

I'd rather seen someone take one authentic action that leads to an authentic outcome in a day, rather than trying to make a big leap and falling hard.

Once you've got a few successful actions based on your authentic self, your life starts to mirror back what feels right to you. Your life starts to take on the form of what the sense of your authentic self feels like. Maybe it's a decision to sit down and try to paint, and you've always wanted to paint, and you've just bought the paintbrushes and canvases, and you've set it up in a part of your house.

The next day you actually paint something.

Then you're willing to show a friend.

You paint some more... that's how it goes.

Maybe you're wanting to try writing, and you buy the paper or lap[top to write on.

Soon enough, you've been writing every day, or you've been painting every day, or in my case — the whole book is finished.

Every day, make the commitment to find the internal space and take action from there. Even if someone says "Do you want to go to this restaurant?" and you don't want to go, and you turn it down. Or you're asked for a favor you don't want to do and say no, and you do — this doesn't mean be selfish, but it does mean come from where you're authentic.

And if people around you don't appreciate and value that, you can start reconsidering who you spend time with.

The time where it stops being difficult and starts getting easy is when you're getting the successes. Much like losing weight, when you start losing weight, you're exercising and feeling stronger, it's more motivating to come back to it and keep doing.

The same is true for me in my emotional workouts. When I'm taking the time and space to step back, question, come from myself, and do what's right for me — the more times that works for me, the more outcomes I get that feel right, the more motivated I am to do it again.

The tipping point, I feel, is when it becomes extremely addictive. My clients find that if they have 3-5 successes — let's say they have a hard time setting boundaries and they're having coffees with people they don't like and have a hard time saying no because they're pleasers, once they start saying no and setting better boundaries, it becomes freeing and addicting.

I had another client who would always go from shiny object to shiny object, no matter how many times he would find that there was no joy to moving from woman to woman, or job to job, or buying things he couldn't afford — he kept doing it. Once he realized he had this draw from object to object, and started creating a relationship that was sustainable and started saving money — the joy started to build. He wasn't selling out for short-term pleasure and started investing in himself, and it completely transformed his life.

I have another client who finds she can't stand her job. She's making millions and millions and millions of dollars in her work, but if you ask her what she wants, she just wants to be home with her children. She had enough money that she could do that whenever she wanted, but she felt "I have to work" — when we started working together, she got rid of the idea that she needs to please people at the office more than her family.

She was able to quit her job and take care of her children, and quite honestly — as a mom, I had the same experience. I thought, "I should have the job." When my son was 3, I quit my job and stayed home with him for a couple years, and it was one of the best decisions I ever made. I had to get rid of this junk-food thought of, "What woman stays home in this modern era?"

Once I was able to replace this idea of needing to work with, "This is what I want" — I started saying, "This is what I'm doing, I'm staying home with my son, and I love it" — and the judgment that I thought people were going to have against me, it didn't even exist. The one or two people out there who were possibly judging, that didn't matter to me — I had made peace with the decision.

I know it can feel like an insurmountable obstacle to step into the life you desire, but it's incredibly easy.

You can have a life filled with passion and reflective of your deepest self... but take the first leap: Celebrate any win that comes from that authentic space, however small it is, take a moment and take the time to celebrate. Even taking the time to think the word “Win” reminds yourself that you’re on the right track.

That leads to more steps and to the life you want — and you could have the life you want.

More from Laura Coe:

Be happier: <http://emotionalobesity.com/>

Book: <http://www.amazon.com/Emotional-Obesity-Philosophical-Guide-Lighthen/dp/1619613077/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/laurascoe>

Failing Up the Ladder

by Michael Roderick

When Michael went from high school teacher to Broadway producer in under two years people started to ask him how he managed it. Michael began his career as a high school English teacher before producing Off Broadway and then on Broadway. This combination of experience in the arts and entrepreneurship led to Michael starting an arts incubator program to teach more artists about building and growing their own businesses (PLAE). These days, he consults and teaches workshops on communications and leads the popular ConnectorCon conference in New York.

A really big pieces of success for me is what I jokingly call “failing up the ladder” — taking time in those seconds after a big moment of adversity to immediately assess what I need to do next time for better results.

I’ve had so many times where I’ve fallen on my face, and I had I had to sit down and say, “Nothing I’m doing is working. What do I next?”

In each of those instances, when I started to make adjustments, it gave me little wins and some traction, which gave me more motivation that I needed to get through.

Take teaching.

My first year of teaching, I was 22 years old. When you’re 22 and the kids make jokes about whether you’re a high school senior or not, you’ve already got challenges. You’re getting up there to teach the kids and make things happen, but things get in the way. My first year, I broke up numerous fights. I had fights break out in the classroom, crazy things happened... I had one class, my seventh period of the day, where basically I never got to actually teach because the students were so horribly behaved. Whether I tried punishing, sending to the principle, yelling, anything — it didn’t work; I was drowning.

The thing that really changed everything was at the end of the first year, in the summer, I went on a trip to Europe.

I went to a bunch of different places on the Euro-rail and I read books on directing theater, which I really enjoyed reading about.

I realized that everything that had made me successful as a director is what I wasn't doing in the classroom: setting clear boundaries and making sure that whoever crossed those clear boundaries were out of the show. Things like that — I wasn't doing that, I didn't have a solid structure.

I wasn't directing my classroom.

When I came back the next year, I made it a point to have a very structured classroom. If the worst kid acted up and the best kid acted up, the punishment was the same. I made sure things were fair. I stayed on top of discipline, and by the middle of the second year my vice-principal took me aside and said he was amazed at the 180-degree turn my classroom had made; how it was suddenly in control after I'd be totally lost the first year.

By the end of that year, my students actually were learning — and many of them went on to bigger things.

The next seven or so years that I taught, those years were very solid years, to the point where I mentored student-teachers and mentored new teachers who came into the school, and gave them my advice and went very in-depth with that learning.

I think that one thing that was really important — and I think this is important no matter what industry you're in — is setting rules and laws for yourself and for others.

The key is this: if those rules are broken, there is no debate.

Previously, I'd say there was a punishment for breaking a rule, the student would break the rule, but then I wouldn't follow through on whatever the punishment was — and the whole class was lost.

If you set boundaries, no matter how uncomfortable it is, you have to follow through on whatever it is that boundary you set or there is no respect.

Likewise, if I changed my rules or punished one kid differently, then no one would respect that. If you say you're going to do it one way, and then do it another way, it isn't fair and you lose respect.

Sticking to rules and following through on them is very important.

This applies to all of life.

If you create five laws for yourself that you say, "all of these have to be in place when someone comes to me with an opportunity or I'll say no" — then you don't need to use your cognitive thinking and your bandwidth when presented with most opportunities.

A lot of times, we see opportunities — or what we think are opportunities — but if it doesn't fit with your rules, it's not an opportunity; it's a coincidence. **It changes your mindset when you have rules for how to live.**

Setting rules really comes down to the same thing as setting goals.

If you want to set goals for yourself and are having trouble figuring out what goals you want, ask what you *don't* want to happen — and most of the time, you're able to figure your goals from that. So if you say "I don't want to be miserable in my job" — then your goal becomes being happy in your job.

If you realize "I don't want to get less than eight hours of sleep per night", then you set a rule so that you don't wind up on low sleep. Someone comes to you and says, "We'll be out until 4AM" — and you ask yourself, "Does that break my rule?"

The areas that are important to set rules and boundaries on are different for everybody, but a good place to start are around time, connections, and money.

Everybody has a concern around time, connections, and money. Depending on what you're at and what you're doing, the rules can change over time. You don't have to set rules for the rest of your life — that can be really limiting and damaging. **You'll need different rules at different times in your life, so it's more about what's most important right now, or what areas you could use the most help with right now.** Then you set those boundaries around that.

Going back to the classroom, the most important thing was to teach those kids and make sure they learn. Discipline was getting in the way and I couldn't control the classroom, so I set clear rules around that.

I set it up so that when the students first came in, they had to write down the agenda that's on the board while I take attendance. I'd check randomly, and you'd lose points if you hadn't written the agenda down. It kept the class in order while I was getting started. **Thus, I'd created a framework which helped me create order, which is what I needed to teach effectively.**

In your personal life, it's more about what's important to you right now — and that's what you set up your rules about. And someday in the future, maybe that rule doesn't apply any more.

On the other hand, sometimes you'll make a rule that's perfect and stick with it for your whole life.

I have one rule that I never break: I do everything in my power to only introduce good people to good people. That's something I'll never break, because that ties to the core of who I am. I don't care if someone can put you in touch with the most powerful people in the world — if they're a jerk, I won't make the introduction. I want to increase the number of good people in the world; I don't want to help advance anyone's agenda who doesn't care about the people around them.

Sometimes getting what you want takes sacrifice.

If you go back to the teaching example, in order to have an organized classroom, I couldn't just wing it. "I'll teach this today" — nope. Every Sunday, I'd go into the faculty room. There might be one or two people there, but usually I'd be the only person there. I'd figure out every lesson, every test, every quiz for that week — and that way, when I came in any day of the week, I didn't have to think about those.

That was a sacrifice: going in to the office on Sunday morning.

I was running a theater company at the time too, working on evenings and weekends on theatrical projects. So I had to wake up earlier to prep exclusively before the day.

To say "yes" to things, you often have to say "no" to other things. I really had to be strict with myself about what I was willing to do. I knew if I didn't come in on Sunday, it'd be a crazy week for me. That was a sacrifice I chose to make, so I could have a much more structured classroom.

I think if you resist making the sacrifices, whatever happens afterwards, you're going to have that moment where you're literally saying to yourself, "Yeah, I should have done that." The universe will remind you if you go against whatever rules you have and should have.

If you say you're going to do something, you'll get that reminder of why it's so important to do whatever that thing is. It's kind of like drinking water: if you're very good about drinking water, really on top of it, you often don't have headaches because you're not dehydrated. But if you're too busy and things are too crazy and you forget to drink much water for a week, you start to get headaches — and get the reminder of how important water is.

Rules are the same scenario. If you set rules, there's consequences. If you set the right rules for yourself, you'll see the consequences when you break them — and you'll be reminded why it matters in the first place, and you can go back to the core of what you did before.

Failure and stumbling are useful reminders and pointers that there's something different you could be doing. Check the rules you've set, dig into them, and ask if you've broken any. And if you haven't broken any rules, that might be a sign you need some.

Again, if you have no rules and are choosing some first ones to set up, I really am bullish on the idea of TCM — Time, Connections, and Money — and what are your rules and boundaries are around those issues.

The most common one that holds people back is time. **Making rules about how you decide to handle your time is really kind of essential.** I've had instances where I've been awful about taking too many meetings. I love people, and I want to know as many people as possible, and having coffee, and getting to know other people's worlds and lives, but one of the biggest problems when I got started was taking 7 or 8 meetings a day — sometimes back to back.

If you take meetings back to back, you give yourself absolutely no time to reflect on the meeting or do any followup after the meeting. So you wind up with a massive pile of followup to do. Then, cognitively, after the seventh meeting and onto the eighth, you're drained.

Once I hit a point of saturation, I made a rule for myself that I was going to take a maximum of two meetings per day. By doing that, I really changed the flow of my day, I changed the time I had to spend, and that rule really helped.

When you're looking at time, look at how it's being spent, and then make rules to help with the pain points you've got. I was in the meeting trap, so I went on a meeting diet.

From a time standpoint, it's important to look at those things. I know people that take no meetings on Sundays or on weekends, or keep certain times totally free. **Being conscious of your time, handling it well, and treating it with respect is one major area for rules.**

On the Connections side of rules, the strictest one I already shared: the good people rule. You could make decisions based on where you're at in terms of business or your life, and you might decide that there's certain people you want to spend a lot of time with, and maybe there's other people you don't want to spend a lot of time with.

Say you're working with lots of entrepreneurs, and it's going well, but then you start to meet people outside that world and those people are trying to drain you — and your first reaction is that you want to help, but they don't try to help you in return. You can decide not to take meetings with those types of people, decide not to have those people in your network.

You might have to make rules about who you introduce. Another rule I follow that Fred Wilson created is the “double opt-in” intro: I now ask both parties beforehand if they want to be introduced; both people have to say yes before I introduce.

I'll say to both parties, “This is why I think you should meet” — and let people say yes to that or not.

On the money side, you know what you need to make, and where those things fall. If you're an entrepreneur or you're running a business for yourself, whether that be a solopreneur “you eat what you kill” role or if you're the CEO of an enterprise that you're keeping running, you need to set rules about how those resources will come together.

If you're a solo entrepreneur, you might find out if someone is potentially qualified as a client before you talk more about elaborate details about what you do, or sales pitches.

If you're a CEO of a company and one market is doing better for you, you might focus only on B2B instead of B2C for the next six months.

You might check your bank account every morning to become more conscious of what you're spending and earning.

Whenever I look at spending on something in the education space, I ask if it's really valuable and if it's going to really move the business forwards or if it'll really change things, and I realize look at those instances of investments. I really look at it in that way, and look at what the potential return is in that area.

If you don't know how to get started, try this: ask what you don't want. Ask what keeps you up at night, freaks you out, bothers you. You know you don't want those things, and you can come up with some rule or boundary or rule you need to set for yourself so you're not in whatever that position is.

Little wins effect your psychology a lot, so don't create something that you're going to instantly be unable to do. Start with something fairly easy to accomplish, and then you can level-up to other things in terms of rules.

If you're looking at time — say, the meetings example — I might say, “For the next week, I'm only going to take two meetings per day.” I'm not committing to it for the rest of my life. I can try it and see if it's helpful. Either way, at the end of the week I've succeeded, and gotten that little win. I might keep it and solidify it as a permanent rule, or I might adjust it — but either way, I've gotten the little win. If two was too small, I might try three meetings per day maximum the next week.

If you're just getting started, pick something you can probably achieve and I think the time window is a great way to try something: just try it for a week, or even a weekend, and see if the rule helps you in that timeframe. Then you can get the little win, and adjust based on your experience.

More from Michael Roderick:

Training for artistic entrepreneurs + blog: www.smallpondenterprises.com

The Connectors Connecting Conference: <http://www.connectorcon.com/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MichaelRoderick>

The War For Quality In A Small Business

by Nick Gray

Nick Gray is the Founder and Executive Producer of Museum Hack, a new to experience museums that's taken the press and general public by storm. Before that, he worked at his family's business Flight Display Systems doing international sales and marketing.

At the heart of it I enjoy business and I like capitalism and I'm an entrepreneur, though it seems strange to call myself that.

Coming from a lower middle class background, my father as a mad scientist type. He mostly worked for aviation companies, but between that he owned fried chicken restaurants, and we had to hustle as a family.

We would scrape to get by because restaurants aren't lucrative unless you hit massive stages of scale.

Eventually, my father started his own avionics company, and I went to work with him.

Selling avionics was great. Made a lot of money, did big deals, got to travel the world, got to work with my parents — it was my parents' business, and it definitely brought us a lot closer. This isn't a story where it's like "It was terrible, it drained my soul" — it was great, the work was nice, and it was good.

I was doing this museum tours on the weekend as a fun side project. I didn't charge anything for them; I think your fun side projects should be for free until you get really good at them.

One weekend, a blog wrote about us, and the tours got really popular. Daily Candy was the blog, and 1000 people sent me an email and wanted to join these tours.

I started doing these every Friday and Saturday night at the museum.

During the day Monday to Friday, I was selling flatscreen monitors used in private jets and military planes, but Friday and Saturday night I was at the museum. I fell in love with this place that unlocked within me this sense of art history that I'd never known I was interested in.

Not just art history, but where man fits in the whole scheme of things in the world. That's sort of lofty, but that's what museums are for I think.

At the time, I'd been working with an executive coach and I'd gone to a Tony Robbins seminar (I'm an unabashed fan of Tony Robbins), and this got me thinking along the path of, "What would I do if money was no object? If money didn't matter?" And the answer was, "I think I'd hang out and play at the museum all day, lead tours for my friends."

The tours were becoming very popular, a full-time hobby, and about a year and a half ago, I quit my job and started to work on this full time.

The last year and a half, I've been trying to build the business model and prove the business. It's one thing to do tours full time, but that's not a business — that's owning a job. Now, we've got 10 employees and we do 10-20 VIP private tours per week now.

I think the skills I developed at Flight Display Systems were helpful to help me start a business. Skills like sales and marketing, which were really helpful to create a sustainable business in the museum world.

This is what's special, what surprisingly not a lot of people want to talk about — we've created a sustainable business with no debt, no venture capital — we're paying our employees well and paying taxes. We've created a sustainable business in the museum tour world.

This is something that didn't exist — museum tours are given away for free. But we've created a business in a space, a really wonderful experience that people are happy to pay a premium for. The skills in my last job were big in making that happen.

It wasn't about "working in the arts" — in New York City at least, that's often a race to the bottom. There's brilliant people who went to top universities working to study art history who are sometimes working for nothing; there's this weird unpaid internships thing.

We don't see ourselves as "in the art world" — we try to create experiences. We see that as the future of entertainment, live experiences. We all spend all day watching Netflix or playing games on the iPhone, but live experiences are something else.

It's easy to get information overload on my phone and my social news feed. There's so much information. I heard a quote somewhere, "You won't pay for content, but you'll pay to know what content to read." The information will be free, but the curation will be paid for — I thought that was an interesting idea.

Live experiences mean you can meet people, experience a range of emotions, walk, interact, move around.

I think museums are amazing — the purpose is to tell history through objects. But often it's boring and easy to think that all these paintings have nothing to do with me. We do museum tours for people who don't like museums.

I want to tell you something that comes from the hobby world, Japanese hobby world, otaku.

That's the level of obsession I had for my hobby, giving these free museum tours. If I was someone in that place, I would think, "What do you really want to do?" Then I'd start to do it with your friends.

Then I'd give people feedback forms with lots of questions, "What's your favorite part? What's your least favorite part? What didn't seem perfect? What could we cut out? How would you rate this?" I was doing, like, net-promoter scores for my friends.

I had a fanatical focus on being the best guide. It wasn't so I could make money at it; I struggled for so long before I charged for my tours. It was difficult and hard to start charging, and changed everything.

I was obsessed with quality. This probably comes from my father, when he'd get really offended if anyone could even a tiny fault with one of his products. He'd say "it was like calling your baby ugly" — and he'd want to fix it right away. I became obsessed with creating the best product that customers would really enjoy.

Feedback forms gave me good feedback; very rarely will someone give you negative feedback to your face. When someone wrote things down at the end of the tour, that was helpful.

I would religiously take those forms to this Vietnamese Soup Noodle restaurant after every tour, poring over the forms, circling things, and I'd modify things. So on Friday night, I'd be circling and highlighting things, and I'd do things different Saturday based on Friday.

If anyone rated us a "6" or "7" out of 10, usually that meant they didn't like it much. Part of that is, to be honest, we're doing tours at the best museum in the whole world. It'd be disrespectful to not do amazing tours at this amazing museum, a place so majestic and amazing deserves a kick-ass experience.

I did for a year every Friday and Saturday night, roughly 100 tours, assume 10 people on each tour — I got probably 1000 feedback forms. I used to have stacks and stacks and stacks of them around my apartment.

We were always trying new things, and then — for example — one thing we did is start to work with actors. We hired Broadway actors to be in the museum to add a surprise element for the tours. We experimented with having maybe the actor heckle the tour guide a little. Or maybe the actor would be listening to the tour guide, but then — what do you know — the Broadway actor would be an expert on 17th century Flemish painting, who would have known?

Most of the time people didn't like the heckling. Sometimes we'd do something with an actor where 70% of people loved it and thought it was the coolest thing in the world, but 30% hated it... and we'd have to cut those things. When you're trying to grow a business, you have to make sure everyone has a good experience.

Starting to charge was really tough. It was stressful. I wrestled with it for weeks. I got violent feedback from my friends and co-conspirators against it, saying it would change everything. Saying, “this goes against everything you started doing this for.” When I started to hire tour guides, people said it’d never work — said it was all about my personality and no one else could do it.

It was definitely tough for me to do.

Then a friend of mine asked if she could list my tours on her website for sale to tourists. She was selling unique experiences in New York City, and I’d been thinking about it and dabbling in it, but that was really what pushed me over the edge — someone else asking me to do it.

And I did it.

At some point, it stops being only about passion and starts being about the business. You’ve got this amazing idea and you feel so strongly about, but you kind of have to do a 180 and fight for that idea’s life. You make a lot of sacrifices to see the vision come to life.

As one example, where people said “It can’t be anybody but you, you have to be the tour guide” — early on, that’s scary, because of course I’ve already done this 100 times and have the most experience at it. It was great once we worked as a team and other guides got going, because there’s only one of me and I can only serve so many people. And sure enough, true to form, the guides who work with me are now better than me — we got great people and they really invested and worked so hard to create even better experiences, and now behind the scenes I can do a lot too.

When I started the tours, it was 95% about the product. It was all about the museum, the works of art, the experience with people, how much they had, the feedback forms, the surveys. When I converted this hobby to a business, I had to make a shift — I “paused” the product I had. I knew I had a good product I had, and I focused on “the business” side of things: marketing, sales, fulfillment, ticketing.

It’s important to think about the trajectory here. It started with me having a true love for the museum and the space. That’s phase one.

Phase two is building and practicing to build a tour/experience that people would love. It's one thing to like it and try to do it, but I did this for a year on the side while having another job, maybe two years.

Once I had something people loved, it was about sharing that. My friends would tell their friends, and there was enough of a critical mass that people would pay for it — that's step three.

Step one is the true passion, step two is building that into something, and step three is making people love and truly want it, and step four is starting to charge and build a business around it.

I don't think you could just say, "I want to leave my job and start my business." You need to have a mastery; for me, it meant doing this for a long time as a serious hobby. And I wanted to have an extreme mastery. I was begging my friends, for my birthday, not to buy me a present but to instead tell their friends to take one of my free tours. It was hard to give away the free tour tickets for the first year or two.

(As a side note, once I started to charge for the tours, people started to respect and value them more. I heard, "Before, I thought there was a catch or something.")

Being a small business owner is like war. If you're trying to make a small business, at some point you have to shift from focusing on the product from when you go into "making a business" and you want to make this a business a last, not a flash in the pan, not an "art experience" that will fail after six months, and that battle at the end is for their pockets. You have to fight for them to vote for you with their wallets.

What we're doing in the museum world is kind-of unheard-of. If we've been able to create jobs, it's because our guides are relentlessly focused on an amazing experience for the customer — entertainment and experience comes first. Perfecting your craft alone isn't enough — I've seen so many in the arts world get masters and graduate degrees and they're worried about how much knowledge they know, but they need to connect with the customer and learn how to build sustainably around that.

We've taken a very high-level, stuffy, volunteer-driven profession — museum tours — and we've brought the passion back into it. We've got people who love the museum and are so excited by it and can convey the passion to our customers.

More from Nick Gray:

Overview: <http://nickgray.net/>

Museum Hack: <http://www.museumhack.com/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/nickgraynews>

Anti-Escapism; Or, Pain Is A Useful Signal

by Nick Winter

Nick Winter is the founder of the YCombinator multiplayer game CodeCombat, which is immense fun. He's written the marvelous book "The Motivation Hacker." He's done a lot of other amazing things.

Every time I had to make a choice between interacting socially or to escapism, I'd choose escape. Social interactions would go really poorly since I was bad at it, but the escape went well. I could read a fantasy novel or play Everquest and it would go great.

This was the opposite of a success spiral. It made me worse and worse at social skills, and less confident — I had no confidence and no practice, because I wouldn't talk to people.

In high school, there was a period of time where I had four open hours in a row due to study halls. I would go to a table in the common area and just read a book.

One day, I go with my lunch to the table and there's a girl there. I think she had a perverse fascination with this super awkward geek. So I wandered around, not knowing what to do. I couldn't sit down, but the other tables weren't open.

She eventually joked "Come on Nick, sit down, you look like a Freshman that doesn't know where he rooms are."

I sat down, we talked, and it went awkwardly.

That was one of the only conversations I had in high school.

I was so nervous back then that I couldn't order food; at Taco Bell I had to ask someone to order for me, I was afraid of ordering burritos.

I became afraid that I would never find a way out of this situation, that I'd never be able to talk to people.

And I thought I couldn't do anything if it went that way. I couldn't become an engineer if I couldn't talk to people.

Even though I was really smart, I was looking at career paths like medical transcriptionist — something where you listen to tapes and type them out without needing to interact with people. My ambitions got low; I thought I wouldn't be able to do anything that needed interact with people.

One thing I was good at was playing Everquest. I played my paladin like an instrument — and it was one of the few things that made me feel good. **And that let me not fix the problems in my life, because that was something that made me feel good that I could escape to.**

In a certain sense, I think all escapes work like that. If you feel really bad, at some point the effort required to fix the problem is not as bad as continuing to face the side effects.

But when you have a way of ameliorating the side effects, you have this choice: you can keep choosing the escape, instead of choosing to work past being stuck.

You can see this where someone hates their job, but gets an escape drinking afterwards. Or someone in a bad relationship, and they escape into work.

Often people won't change until they can't endure things any more, when things feel that bad. But when the pain is dulled by something external used to cope, things don't hurt as much, you can escape the pain, and not change.

Video games were a great escape I could do all the time, video games and fantasy books.

There's a level beyond that — a strategic level where you don't use pain or pleasure to choose what to change, but I was nowhere near that. There's a hierarchy of ways to pick goals and work towards them — Lawrence Kohlberg has written about the hierarchy of how goals are chosen, and level zero is like strictly pleasure and pain. An animal might do this, or a baby. Anything that causes them pleasure is right to do; anything that causes pain is wrong.

The next level is what are you allowed to do; will someone punish or reward them.

The next level is what their friends to do; social approval.

This is for determining right and wrong — it becomes, “Will my friends think this is cool?”

Moving up one more, the role is authority based, what religion or law says.

And beyond that is what I think is actual morality, and it comes from within. That’s when you’re moral.

So, how are you going to alter your goals, pick your lifestyle? I was at “fix things that hurt bad” but due to the escape, I didn’t feel the pain of the social disaster I’d become.

Eventually I made lifestyle changes by thinking about my values, and saying, “This doesn’t fit my values, it feels good but I’m going to change it because it doesn’t fit my values” — but that was unimaginable to me back then.

Pain is a useful signal, and escapes are anesthetic to that signal. If you’re using pain to drive your life changes and growth, if you’re using pain to drive growth but you also have escapes from that pain, you can’t drive growth from it.

Here’s another example: I was talking at a meet up and talking about how to make work more fun by connecting feedback to it more. You can spend a lot of time working and make things more pleasant.

A guy spoke up and said, “If I’d made programming more fun, I wouldn’t have realized I didn’t like and changed jobs away from programming.” My friend spoke up and said, “You shouldn’t use pain and pleasure to drive your goals; pain can’t replace values and being strategic.” But once you have goals, you can adjust how good and bad you feel.

But if you don’t have strategy and you have an escape from pain, then you lack the basic rudimentary signal that you’re living your life wrong.

I don’t remember the exact cause or moment, but I do know that it was the Spring Semester of Senior Year of High School.

I started taking a journaling independent study with the poetry teacher. In the journaling thing, it's always prompts about how your life is going and what's your goal.

When you're explicitly writing that stuff down, it's pretty hard to escape from the disaster your life has become. I don't know if the journaling thing "saved my life" — but maybe it did.

When I was consciously thinking about it, I realized it wasn't going to keep working.

When I went off to college in the fall, I thought there wouldn't be a great opportunity to change what I'm doing if I kept this up.

I said, "I'm going to college and become a social person" — or "I'm going to go to college and keep playing games, not talk to anyone, and maybe be totally alone."

I knew that I didn't know how to do it, but I recognized that I wasn't going to do it if I keep playing fantasy games and fantasy novels.

I quit playing video games, I quit playing Everquest.

I forced myself to feel the full suckage.

And I thought, "Hopefully this will force me to try, and then I'll meet people."

I psyched myself up — I prepared — for nine months before doing it. It's easy to make that decision to start changing and growing in the future, that delay gave me time to remind and reinforce that I was going to do it, building up motivation and precommitment.

And when I got to college, I forced myself to go out and talk to people. I assumed no one would like me and I wouldn't get along with anyone.

But when I got there, I started socializing for the first time — and it turned out to be much easier than I expected.

Everyone wants to meet new people in a new environment and I didn't need to overcome the high school environment — the college environment was totally different. Everyone was really nice.

I'd force myself to say "Hi" to someone, and not just would they say Hi back, we'd start conversing, I'd get invited to hang out and spend time together.

My confidence went from zero to not-zero. Every day I started doing a little better than before, my confidence started growing, I was now like a person with a life instead of an inanimate Everquest character.

If you look at the retrospective, I had that feeling of mastery when playing Everquest. I killed the most badass god-dragon with 60 people on my team, and I struck the killing blow.

Then it was time to stop playing, and I thought — I should probably shower, since I hadn't showered in days.

I was so unconfident about everything that I didn't want to try anything. I only wanted to do things which I was good at, killing dragons in Everquest.

Fast forward through all the personal growth, a generalized lack of confidence about everything hurts everything. But a generalized confidence does the opposite: starting to get social and make friends lead to starting to get good at business, starting writing, starting a family, and much more.

So much of success is confidence, and that makes you show up, and that makes you likely to succeed.

It leads to things like coming up with the idea to make Code Combat, a game that teaches people how to code. No one had done this well and it was a great opportunity. People hadn't done this before because it was too hard.

We set a milestone of building this type that never moved before. We decided to get on Hacker News and Reddit to spread it out, and it happened. We hacked our way up on stage during startup school, 1700 people in the audience, and many thousands more watching on the Livestream.

At the end of the eight-minute interview on stage, Paul Graham said: “You guys didn’t realize it, but that was your YC interview: you’re in the next batch.”

The difference between that and the guy that had no confidence in high school is that the growing confidence gave me confidence in every area. Succeeding at stuff gives you confidence and builds a success spiral. To get started and start winning, everything gets easier, and you win more, and things get easier.

There’s definitely hope for anyone who is as hopeless and desperate as I was.

Stopping the escape is a last resort — if it’s not so bad, start being strategic about your goals and start succeeding at different areas. But a really great motivation hack is to leave no alternatives, nothing else, except succeeding at your goal — if you make alternatives impossible, you’re bound to win.

More from Nick Winter:

Everything he’s doing: <http://www.nickwinter.net/>

Learning programming by playing a fantasy RPG: <http://codecombat.com/>

Blog: <http://blog.nickwinter.net/>

You Don't Have To Do All The Work Alone

by Spencer Greenberg

Spencer Greenberg is a mathematician and entrepreneur. In 2005, he cofounded Rebellion Research, a quantitative hedge fund that applies machine learning to investing in the markets. Spencer was also the cofounder of AskAMathematician.com, a math and physics site with more than 60,000 monthly visitors. More recently, Spencer founded ClearerThinking.org, which provides online training courses to help people improve their decision making and avoid common cognitive biases.

My background is in math and specifically, machine-learning. I applied machine learning to investing and co-founded a company that invests in the stock market. But I have other strong interests beyond machine learning. One passion of mine is psychology and trying to improve mental health for people who don't have good access to mental healthcare.

If you go back about four years, I had a lot of side projects I was interested in, but I found it was very hard for me to finish them... these weren't my primary thing, and for longer term side projects, there wasn't any reward cycle per se — it was just me in a room working on them for long periods of time.

I eventually came to realize that I cared more about seeing my projects actually get created than whether I personally built them or not. I didn't need to write the code; I just wanted it to exist.

From there, I realized it's far more efficient to get others involved. It creates a reward structure because there's someone to share your work with, show your progress to, and outsource parts of it — just because you're good at something (like coding), it doesn't mean you should be doing it. Even if the person is only 80% of your skill level, the project may still go much faster with their help.

This has been a huge lesson for me. You don't have to do all the work. If you care primarily about getting the thing created, as opposed to doing the creating yourself (which is a different goal) — then getting others involved is huge.

A major realization I had was that there's a lot of people who are not satisfied with what they're doing, but they're interested in doing something that's an intellectual challenge, or has an altruistic purpose... something that matters.

If you're doing something meaningful or challenging, you can get others excited about it. They might not work for free, but you can potentially find someone to partner with you, or you may be able to hire them at a lower cost than they'd do work for normally: they might work for half or a third of the salary of their primary job if it's something that's really appealing to them and that they are passionate about.

That realization was important to me: that there are lots of people who are driven to collaborate on meaningful things.

For example, I've been working on creating an app to automatically treat depression. There's a body of evidence for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy being one of the most effective methods of treating depression; there's literally hundreds of studies showing it's effective, but none of the apps for iPhone implement this in an effective way.

There's known techniques that are effective and proven, but not a good way for consumers to get it on their phone. This inspired me to try to fill that gap, and I was able to build a team of people to help work on that.

I knew I wanted to make an app that helped the user learn the techniques of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, but it was too big of a project for me to do myself, especially as a side project. It was something I'd wanted to do for a long time, but it was overwhelmingly big. Eventually I came to the conclusion that I needed to bring someone else on, and I found the project is intrinsically exciting to lots of people. I was able to hire a great team of really high-quality people who were willing to work at a really reasonable rate due to the intrinsic interest of being part of this.

To do this, you have to give up some level of perfectionism. You have to say, “This doesn’t have to be done exactly the way I want it to be done; effectively, I have to delegate and can’t make every level of decision.” Some people have the sense of “if I didn’t make it with my bare hands, it’s not MY project” — which wasn’t a helpful view to me. You have to accept that there’s almost always going to be multiple creators of one thing if the thing is of any size.

People are looking for something meaningful to do with their time. If it’s really meaningful to you, chances are there are others who would find it meaningful to be a part of.

If you do involve someone else in your project, one of the most important things is finding someone you can actually rely on to do what they say they’re going to do, and at a competence level that’s sufficiently high.

I recommend you take the initial work with someone as a trial. Set it up in a way that if it doesn’t work out, you can part ways easily with low friction. It’s best if you both think of the initial work together as an experiment.

One of the best predictors of how someone is going to work is how they worked in the past. After three months, ask if they did the sort of work that would make you want to keep working with them. Don’t make excuses — don’t say “well, they’re just getting started” if it doesn’t go well. After the trial, if you choose to work together, it will be much harder to make changes, especially if they’re a partner.

If the project is something that might make money, the standard arrangement with your new partner would be to have equity that vests with a cliff. If it’s your project and you’re bringing someone on, they shouldn’t get ownership/equity with the project right away. Before the trial runs out (say, the first three months), they don’t get any equity. After that, each month they should get a constant amount of equity, and they should continue receiving equity for some fixed period — something like three years — so if they stick with it for three years, they get the full amount of equity.

Let's say they're going to own 40%. If they leave before 3 years, it'll be pro-rated for how much time they were there. And then, if they leave or are terminated within 3 months (or whatever time period you're using for your trial), they don't get any equity — so you can sever the relationship without any major consequences if they don't deliver.

The other skill is laying out expectations. They need to know what is expected of them. So if the termination happens at three months, they know why and ideally should even see it coming. So there's somewhat objective criteria as to whether they upheld their end of it.

When starting out, you should be in regular scheduled contact, at the same times each week. A mistake people make is saying “we'll just communicate as needed” — early on, you can't rely on things being said that need to be said because there are no norms. But having a weekly meeting every Friday lets you ask questions, answer questions, track progress, and problem-solve together. Do not assume they will tell you about problems or frustrations or lack of productivity. You have to ask. And it's best to ask at least once a week what's going on so that you can help them and spot problems as soon as they come up.

I've found this model has worked really well of helping me create multiple projects and make progress on them simultaneously. It can create opportunities for others that they find meaningful.

Through this process, I've developed the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy app which is close to completion and I hope to roll it out to the iPhone store in the next six to twelve months, I've created online training programs that teach rational thinking skills (ClearerThinking.org), as well as other projects.

The lesson is that you can do a lot more if you involve other people. If your work is something that's valuable and meaningful to you, chances are there are other people who find it valuable and meaningful. It doesn't have to be a full-time project for others either. You can accomplish a lot more by finding those people, and if you're willing to give up some control and give up the idea that this has to be “your baby,” you can get it done instead of it being a pipe dream that wouldn't ever really be finished.

People say “The number one reason startups fail is because they don't make something that customers really want” but I think an even more common reason that projects fail is because they never get finished at all. That’s the filter you never see, because projects often take too much work for one person to complete, and people don’t consider that they can’t truly do it all on their own.

Look for excellent people to collaborate with, start things as a trial, and communicate regularly — and then give up your perfectionism and need for control. Focus on getting the project created together and you'll be more likely to succeed.

More from Spencer Greenberg:

Overview: <http://www.spencergreenberg.com/>

Free tools on decision making and reasoning: <http://www.clearerthinking.org/>

Artificial intelligence applied to finance: <http://www.rebellionresearch.com/>

Why Aren't You Getting What You Want?

by Stepan Parunashvili

Stepan is at Wit AI as a full-stack engineer. User experiences, building features on back-end, etc. Got offers from Uber and Udacity and was late in the hiring process with Google, AirBNB, and Dropbox before taking Wit's offer.

In my field, if you're really good, it'll show. The investment in being really good is important. I didn't need to invest in talking more persuasively; it wasn't about charisma. To get ahead, I actually needed to know more and be able to do it.

Recently, when I went out for jobs, I got offers from Uber and Udacity and was late in the hiring process with Google, AirBNB, and Dropbox before taking an offer from Wit AI.

This only happened because I started taking criticism seriously and looking at what I was missing.

It used to be, if I didn't know something — say, algorithms — my attitude was like, “Oh, I don't know about that, so I'm going to hide under a bed.”

I moved to starting to think of things like a to-do list: If I didn't know algorithms, I said, “Oh, I can learn that.”

I had to get rid of some weird limiting beliefs to improve. I had reached a point where I think I was more capable in terms of implementations than most other people applying for similar jobs, but I still wasn't able to get the positions I wanted.

I got asked questions about stuff you only could have learned at university about algorithms, optimizing code using C, or something. You never need to use that stuff in real life and you don't need to know the questions they ask you, and I thought it was unfair — they were asking pointless questions I couldn't answer. (I didn't attend university.)

But, instead of getting frustrated, a much better way was asking myself, “Why can’t I answer these questions?” And then learning to answer them.

I went from feeling frustrated and like the process was unfair, to just starting to prepare and confront all my weaknesses. I started reading books on everything that I couldn’t answer a question to.

A lot of weaknesses can be turned into strength.

People are always obviously going to ask me why I didn’t go to university, they’re going to ask me about how I filled my work calendar throughout my life, they’re going to ask me about if I can get a visa to work in the U.S. (I’m Canadian).

Most people don’t prepare or learn when these things go badly — they just keep giving the same answer and hoping.

I shifted my mindset, stopped complaining about things being unfair, and started preparing more.

Through the conversation I managed to turn “didn’t go university” which was a bad story to a better one which was “won a grant to start a business,” and then went through my background about the work I did in Asia.

When asked the question about why I moved back to North America — another obvious question — I eventually prepared a reply.

This is probably most useful for people that might get broken down in the “you’re not normal so that makes you fall through the basket” category.

If you choose to do not-normal things, you *need* to deal with this.

1. Search for gaps in your knowledge, fill those gaps, and prove you can do it.
2. Study your faults; analyze why people might not give you opportunities what you want.

3. Analyze your weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

Be okay asking, “Why aren’t you getting the thing you want? What’s the impediment?” Usually the impediment is fixable but you’re not looking at it. You keep getting bad result, bad result, bad result... then you take the bad result personally, and it puts you in a bad loop.

Instead, be slightly impersonal. Ask why this thing happened, and fix it.

It’s been a pretty big win for me emotionally too. Failures don’t sting for more than a minute now. I analyze them and move on.

If I go to meet someone the first time and say something stupid, I can analyze —

“Why did I say that? What was my initial intent going in there? What was I thinking when I said that?”

So I can analyze and improve, and it lets me win at life.

If you’re an intelligent person, you should be careful of maxims. People say, “You should never work for free” or “You should never work cheaply” — this only applies if you can’t measure the size of opportunities.

If you’re in San Francisco, you’ll know X Company and Y Company and, if you’re very very good, you know that company is growing terrifically and you could do something with them. You know you’ll learn lessons, you’ll know on basic interactions.

You need to be able to pick wins that seem counterintuitive from the outside, because by definition if you’re going inside the market, you start out essentially have no value.

So how do people become your friends? How do you make the initial jump?

You can search these out too, asking the same types of questions. Don’t rely on doing the same old thing you’ve been doing. Ask what you need to work together with the people you want to work with, ask what you need to hang out with the people you want to hang out with, and then get to building those things.

More from Stepan Parunashvili:

Overview: <http://www.stepanp.com/>

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The Power Law of Interactions

by Taylor Pearson

Taylor Pearson writes at TaylorPearson.me about business philosophy, mindset and productivity. He's accumulated a wealth of expertise across the business and personal productivity spectrum, and become a must-read essayist to a lot of international business thought leaders.

I spent 2 years working on a hospitality business selling portable bars. For the first 18 months, the business never really got a lot of traction; it had up months and down months, but it never really took off, and we couldn't find out why.

Somewhat on a whim and somewhat on a hunch, we went to a trade show 18 months into the life of the business. We saw a massive increase in growth in the nine months following the tradeshow.

We were sitting by the front-entrance door at the massive exhibition hall of the tradeshow, bigger than a football stadium. At 9AM, they open the doors, and people flood in.

We were right by the opening door, and we'd called every two weeks and followed up to try to get the best booth position possible. When people flooded in, for the next hour we were nonstop doing sales and pitching, explaining how the product worked, answering questions about how it was manufactured, what the experience was like for people who used them in different ways, the materials the bars are made out of, etc.

I was working with my colleague Alasdair, and after things slowed down after the first hour, we just smiled: **we'd gotten more done in an hour than we'd done in the last 18 months.**

Partially in terms of sales, but especially in terms of understanding the customer, which is maybe one of the most underestimated aspects of business.

If you look at great businesses, they almost intuitively understand how their customers will react. That empathy and understanding is incredibly difficult to get from a laptop.

That's led me to thinking there's a "Power Law of Interactions" — that's my fancy name for it. What it means is going from email to phone to in-person you get an order-of-magnitude improvement in the quality of communications.

Phone seems about 10 times more impactful than email, and in-person is 10 times more impactful than that.

When thinking about how to invest your time, it leads to some absurd conclusions. Two days in-person might be more valuable than six months over email. That seems crazy, but it's been my experience.

18 months behind a computer and on the phone didn't teach us as much as one hour in-person at the trade show.

I think a lot of people don't go in-person and don't go to the phone because they're afraid, and that was certainly the case with me. Some people have always known they're hustlers and entrepreneurs, guys like Elon Musk or Gary Vaynerchuk and it feels like they wouldn't ever be afraid of the phone or in-person.

But that wasn't me. I always thought of myself as industrious and I could get things done, but I wasn't a hustler.

Going from "I like to put my head down and work" into higher-friction social situations, it was just like the cliché: heart pounding in my throat the first time I tried a cold call, my voice cracked the first time I tried to run a sales script... it was scary.

But there's lots of ways to get through that. One thing that was helpful to me was the caveman analogy: you realize that our evolution is from a tribe of 150 people. In that situation, if you make the wrong person angry, your built-in community is angry. You could get kicked out of the tribe, not get food, literally die...

...but that's not true any more. There's 10,000 people in a market, and people have 10,000 things to do — if you do a bad call, the person you called won't remember you at the end of the day much less next week.

I kept that in mind, and things got easier and easier. Like everything else in life, once you start taking the first step, the momentum picks up and the emotion falls behind you. It got easier the more I did it.

Another tactical hack is writing out scripts — I did this in sales and networking. If you're going to a party and you're scared, having practiced a basic "get to know you" phrase and having that in your back pocket can be a good way to jump in.

It can feel goofy at first, but to me it now feels mundane. When you see someone who knows how to "work a room," they make it look effortless — but it was never effortless for me if I didn't know anyone in the room. (But once you meet a few people, it becomes effortless.)

The returns are so high that it's worth going through the difficulty. The life-changing gains from one new meaningful relationship are so huge that they're worth working through your fear to make those connections.

The Power Law of Interactions doesn't just apply to sales and business: it also applies to improving and getting excellent at anything that requires personal development.

I think it's similar to training for a sport. If you train with people who are good, you start getting better in ways you never expected. If you're training by yourself, even if you're reading the best books and maybe getting coached verbally, just physical presence in the same place can make a huge difference in terms of context.

Many top athletes in their sport train together. Olympic athletes train together even though it can be inconvenient to do so.

I've seen this personally. If you train in the gym with someone stronger than you or further along than you in the domain you want to improve in, your gains are always much faster than if you try to do it alone — and it takes less willpower.

Say you want to be a powerlifter. I've been back and forth between the United States and Asia, and it's much harder to train at powerlifting in Asia. You can try to willpower through it, but there aren't as much people into powerlifting in Asia and not as many powerlifting gyms. If you show up where powerlifters are, you're going to get better faster — with less willpower needed too.

Showing up in person also helps you win mentors. If you show up, you're taken much more seriously. Successful people get lots of emails, but when someone shows up in person, it means you get much more thorough consideration. It's the power law, again. Showing up in-person is maybe 100x more impactful than email.

We already talked about growing a business with sales, but it applies to all sides of business.

Let's say you want to manufacture a physical product. It's very easy to get in trouble if you try to get things manufactured in Mexico or China by sending pictures back and forth and talking on the phone.

I've seen lots of things go poorly if managed from abroad. If you actually show up in Shenzhen, China for a month, you can often get more done in that month than you would in a year abroad.

Travel is getting way more affordable. Go to conferences, go meet suppliers, go meet the smartest people in your field — go meet them where they're at. If you're young and don't have a family yet (and the other traditional responsibilities), you should be taking advantage of this a lot and going to where people are that you can connect with.

The final barrier is that you need to make this into the most discrete and smallest steps possible, and then just get started. **Particularly in areas where there's emotional discomfort, thinking intellectually about this can lead to inaction.** But if you break it down to small discrete steps, it's easy.

That might be to write a sales script quickly, get feedback on it, and then make just one cold call.

The first is always the worse — I've never made just one cold call; after the first, it becomes easy to do a lot more.

Likewise, getting to know people face-to-face might mean going to a small party that feels more comfortable, or just talking to someone in a coffeeshop.

Six months before we exhibited at the trade show, we got tickets just as attendees to a similar show and just walked around getting a feel for it. Actually, we didn't even have to buy tickets: we told them we were thinking of exhibiting at the next show, and they gave us tickets for free. If you really want something, you can usually find or negotiate a way to do it affordably.

It's easy to focus on the apparent barriers, much as it's easy to see all the fog — but once you start walking, the fog breaks in front of you, and then it's one step at a time.

If you want to get better results, connect more. If you're emailing with people, get on the phone together. If you're on the phone, meet in-person. That breaks through barriers a lot more effectively.

If you have a clear vision for yourself in any aspect for your life — health, business, career, relationships, anything — and you haven't gone to meet people in-person who are where you want to be further down the path you're on, this is something I've seen dramatically accelerate other people's trajectories and has done the same for me.

Go meet in person, you'll be amazed at how much faster you make progress when surrounded by people that are where you want to be.

More from Taylor Pearson:

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Newsletter: <http://taylorpearson.me/newsletter/>

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Status Inferiority, Or: I didn't have any empathy for the people in power...

by Ted Gonder

Ted Gonder is confounding CEO of Moneythink, a nonprofit devoted to restoring the economic health of the United States through financial education. Moneythink has been honored by President Obama at the White House and has rung the bell to open the New York Stock Exchange. Prior to Moneythink, Ted served as Entrepreneur-in-Residence at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. His work has been featured in MTV, WSJ, and Crain's; and has spoken at the White House, U.S. Senate, NYSE, TEDx, and at top companies such as PwC, IDEO, Dell, and Allstate. Besides work, Ted enjoys practicing martial arts, admiring wild animals, and writing on his blog.

There were some major turning points for me when I took Moneythink full-time.

The other co-founders were moving on or graduating, and I was going from 1/5th of the responsibility for the organization to now 100% responsibility.

It wasn't like I had a job and a boss and I'd get regular performance reviews that everyone could relate to. I felt I had to uphold certain images or expectations that, in retrospect, weren't right.

I was nervous, self-conscious, constantly flushed in the face. But something about it, there was some positive byproduct of being such a spaz because I cared so much. The challenge my first summer was managing my own psychology through this confluence of really difficult circumstances.

One thing that kept me from going crazy was how I framed my personal identity narrative to myself. In order to launch something you really care about, I had to have a really strong narrative justification for doing what I was doing.

I got a lot of criticism — people said what I was doing was loony. Meanwhile, the financial side didn't look great, but I cared more about doing something really meaningful. You have to tune out the noise — everything everyone is saying to you.

You also know how university career centers are set up to run: encouraging safe stable profession at first. Most advice I got was like that: get a job in a high-paying field out of college, make money and get experience, and then — only later — come back and try to make a difference after being successful in a normal career.

One of the best pieces of advice I got from a mentor was to do the opposite: “If you're forced to choose between Option A in a safe job first, or Option B where you risk failing first (and then go to take a job if it doesn't work out)... always go with Option B.”

He explained your mindset changes, your expenses can easily go up, you can get golden handcuffed. Meanwhile from a security standpoint, if you go on a riskier path first, even if worst-case scenario happens, you're 10 times more likely to get the job you wanted in the first place because you've got a story to tell. Especially if you're entrepreneurially inclined, because you've learned more to navigate uncertainty.

My role at Moneythink meant I needed to fundraise, and one of my biggest barriers was around fundraising and meeting very successful people. **I had — what would I call it? — “a sense of status inferiority.”**

Some of that was actually informed by reality... in the absolute sense, I was one-third or one-half of the age of the people I was meeting with, and one one-millionth of the net worth of the people I was meeting with, so from both a material and seniority status, there's some “inferior”-ness there...

...but at the same time, it took me a while to realize that in the world of business, enterprise, and expansive action, what really matters most is your ability to offer reciprocal value. As a “nonprofit guy” I was nervous at first, I wasn't sure I had something of true value for people.

Here's the thing: when you're fundraising, people might think of themselves as a supplicant on bended knee, where things won't work unless you get money.

That's a terrible framework to seek opportunities from! It makes you desperate, and nobody gets excited by desperation.

I didn't understand how much value I could provide by giving people a way to get more meaning. I realized eventually that people who have money are looking to do things with their money. Some people might have lots of financial currency, lots of assets, but might not have as much meaning or reputation as they want to have. I didn't realize how much value I had as someone who could help them invest in something that helps a lot of people.

Deep down, secretly, I was thinking at the time, "Why would they even take a meeting with me?"

But I didn't see it: I didn't have any empathy for the people in power.

I think most people don't. Society and the media tend to blame people in power — blame the President, blame Wall Street, or say "the people in power don't care about us."

Well, the people in power control resources, and if you want to get anything done, it helps to be able to empathize with them to work with them.

And guess what? Just like everyone else, people in power have the basic needs, goals, self-consciousnesses, and everything else like everyone else. Learning how to empathize vastly increases your success rate and also increases your swagger.

In retrospect, there's two parts to this —

1. Get over yourself.

I was comparing myself to people and felt it wasn't quite right meeting people who were at a high level. I'd compare myself to the people I was meeting and I was afraid I was wasting people's time — why is the CEO of a big company meeting me?

I realized, I had to get over that. People don't take meetings based on credentials or accomplishments or seniority; they do it if they see there's mutual value. So I realized I had to let go of my nerves and stop being nervous. **I think, at its core, nervousness is actually self-absorbedness in a way. It makes it about you instead of the other person.**

Getting over myself was a big part of it.

2. Stop judging.

And then, once I realized I had to get over myself, I had to work through some basic societal stuff that I'd built up that I think a lot of people have but didn't realize. I think we're all a little jealous of people in positions of power without realizing it. If you want to empathize with the President or the Pope, the media makes it hard to do that. When you go to meet someone like that, you almost want to think to yourself, "This person has everything figured out, I don't know what to even talk about."

A lot of people assume people in finance or politics are bad people — but that's being judgmental for no good reason, and we all come from different backgrounds. Look at past the narratives of being a "finance guy" — stereotypes like that make it hard to relate to people and empathize with people. Everyone around are people and you can't pre-judge.

Let go of predispositions and self-absorbedness first, and stop judging second. There's nothing stopping you from connecting people: drop the judging, start empathizing, and see what you have to offer and what others have to offer.

More from Ted Gonder:

Overview: <http://www.tedgonder.com/>

Moneythink: <http://moneythink.org/>

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Doing the Hard and Scary Work

by Tynan Bertuccioni

Tynan Bertuccioni is an adventurer in the Renaissance Model. He's the founder and lead developer of the SETT blogging platform and has gained renown and notoriety in the media for such envelope-pushing experiments as buying an island off the east coast of Canada, pushing an old piano up San Francisco's Twin Peaks inspire improvised sunrise concerts, and traveling worldwide while keeping a mobile RV as his American home base.

My Mom just sent me one of my old report cards from school from 20 years ago. I read it and it says “Tynan seems to have potential, but doesn’t really focus.” or “Tynan seems to do well on one project, but doesn’t follow through on the next one.”

It was the same way with my working life. I’d start work on one project or idea, get to 80% or 90% complete — doing most of the hard work — but I wouldn’t do the unknown and scary work at the end to finish it.

I’d think up another project and switch to that instead.

This is how my life was. Firing on a couple cylinders like this, I was able to support myself and have a decent life. But when I turned thirty, I realized I was never going to have a huge success or make a big impact doing it like that.

Looking at other people who are successful, I noticed they had things like schedules, goals, and structures. So I decided to stop being arrogant and thinking I was above those sorts of structures, and start implementing them.

I started learning how to track goals and progress, and I almost did it as a punishment for myself. It was going to be like “prison time” because I’d been procrastinating too much.

Maybe it's Stockholm Syndrome or something, but I actually loved it. The things we think are going to make us feel good often don't — and sometimes things we expect to dislike turn out amazing. Doing great work and making regular progress turns out to almost always feel good.

People would say, "In life, this is how you should do things" — and I never wanted to listen. And my life turned out pretty well, so I started thinking I knew everything.

For example, I thought I never needed structure, or eating healthy. I was eating McDonalds every day and I was really skinny, so I figured I didn't need it.

I used to think healthy eating was ridiculous. I wasn't open-minded enough to learn why eating healthy matters. Because I was bored, by chance, I read a book called "Live Long Enough to Live Forever" by Ray Kurzweil, and I realized I'd been completely wrong in my old point of view... worse yet, I'd been 100% sure I was right in the process.

This was the first time there was a crack in my certainty that I was right about everything, and — grudgingly, maybe because I'm very stubborn — I started trying advice that successful people often give, and sometimes they're right.

(Not always. I tried "having a job" and it turned out to not work so great, and I got fired.)

Surprisingly, one of the biggest things I did was saying, "No matter what, I'm turning my computer off at midnight."

Before that, sometimes I'd go to bed at midnight, sometimes I'd sleep at 4AM or 5AM.

When I had no sleep schedule, I couldn't plan the next day — but now, I always turned the computer off at midnight, and I always start the next day at 10AM. I make tea first in the day, and chain a bunch of habits together — brush my teeth while the tea is brewing, and look to do everything I wanted habit-wise at either the start or end of the day.

Having that schedule and a short list of things I wanted to do, I'd work much harder all the time. And I didn't feel like I was missing out. I was incredibly satisfied with all of the work I was getting done, and went to bed happy every night.

At the end of the day, I'd write down how productive I felt.

That was very helpful, because during a bad day I could look back at my records, and see that yes, I'd had a random bad day or two every few weeks, and it wasn't a big deal; I always bounced back.

I feel like, for me, when I make a big change, the mental load is upfront.

What I do now is I give myself as much time as I want to make a decision like shifting my schedule dramatically. I get all the resistance out front: do I really want to do this? Is it worth it? Would it work? I kind of "fight it out" with myself ahead of time, and think it through entirely beforehand as long as I want.

And then, I've committed and stop thinking about it.

I decide I'll write every day or program every day, I spend a lot of time thinking it through upfront, but then I don't question it afterwards.

Deciding to get structured was a battle, a very long battle upfront, but then it was easy to execute.

It also got me good results immediately, which was helpful and self-reinforcing.

Making the decision is the hardest part for everyone, not just me. People start things without really deciding they're going to do it.

New Year's Resolutions like "I'm going to lose weight this year..." — they don't think about it, they don't ask what it's really going to take. Is going to the gym enough?

I try to separate out really making the decision from the action and make sure I've really made the decision, and it makes it easier for me.

I don't think my experience is uncommon, by the way. Many nonconformists start getting arrogant and stop listening to people, because the first time we're about to do something different, we're told it's crazy and a bad idea — and then we do it anyways, and it works out great.

The first time I did something crazy was when I bought a school bus. My parents told me it was crazy and it was going to be a very bad idea. That was really scary, because my parents usually knew the best — I didn't rebel much before that.

But then I bought the school bus and it worked out great, it was a great experience.

If you're a nonconformist, you'll get told your ideas are bad ideas, but then when you do them and it turns out you were right, it starts to make it seem like only you know best, and all advice is worthless.

I did that, but I went too far. Now I realize other people's advice comes from their filter, and I consider what their filter is when I consider their advice.

More from Tynan:

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I'm not saying that lightly. I've read my share of "self improvement" books of various kinds, ranging from fitness guides to productivity systems and everything in between. This book covers many aspects of productivity and general success factors that you won't find discussed elsewhere. It's a motivational read, but more importantly it covers techniques you can actually apply in order to get more out of your life.

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