***So Good They Can’t Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love***

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**Introduction**

*Why do some people end up loving what they do, while so many others fail at this goal?* When it comes to creating work you love, following your passion is not particularly useful advice.

During the summer of 2010, I was a postdoctoral associate at MIT, where I had earned my PhD in computer science the year before. I was on track to become a professor, which, at a graduate program like MIT's, is considered to be the only respectable path. If done right, a professorship is a job for life. In other words, in 2010 I was planning what might well be my first and last job hunt. If there was ever a time to figure out what generates a passion for one's livelihood, this was it.

I had set up a meeting with my advisor to discuss my academic job search. “How bad of a school are you willing to go to?” was the opening question. The academic job market is always brutal, but in 2010, with an economy still in recession, it was especially tough.

To complicate matters, my research specialty hadn't proven to be all that popular in recent years. The last two students to graduate from the group where I wrote my dissertation both ended up with professorships in Asia, while the last two postdocs to pass through the group ended up in Lugano, Switzerland, and Winnipeg, Canada, respectively. “I have to say, I found the whole process to be pretty hard, stressful, and depressing,” one of these former students told me. Given that my wife and I wanted to stay in the United States, and preferably the East Coast, a choice that drastically narrowed our options, I had to face the very real possibility that my academic job search would be a bust, forcing me to essentially start from scratch and figuring out what to do with my life.

This was the backdrop against which I launched what I eventually began to refer to as “my quest.” My question was clear: *How do people end up loving what they do*? And I needed an answer. This book documents what I discovered in my search.

I didn't get far in my quest before I realized that the conventional wisdom on career success-*follow your passion*- is seriously flawed. It not only fails to describe how much people actually end up with compelling careers, but for many people it can actually make things worse: leading to chronic job shifting and unrelenting angst, one's reality inevitably falls short of the dream.

With this as a starting point, I begin with Rule #1, in which I tear down the supremacy of the *passion hypothesis*. But I don't stop there. My quest pushed me beyond identifying what doesn't work, insisting that I also answer the following: **If “follow your passion” is bad advice, what should I do instead?** The narratives in this book are bound by a common thread: the importance of reality. The things that make a great job great, I discovered, are rare and valuable. If you want them in your working life, you need something rare and valuable to offer in return. In other words, you need to be good at something before you can expect a good job.

Of course, mastery by itself is not enough to guarantee happiness: The many examples of well-respected but miserable workaholics support this claim. Accordingly, this main thread of my argument moves beyond the mere acquisition of useful skills and into the subtle art of investing the *career capital* this generates into the right types of traits in your working life.

This argument flips conventional wisdom. It relegates passion to the sidelines, claiming that this feeling is an epiphenomenon of a working life well lived. Don't follow your passion; rather, let it follow *you* in your quest to become, in the words of my favorite Steve Martin quote, “so good that they can't ignore you.”

It's my hope that the insights that follow will free you from the simplistic catch phrases like “follow your passion” and “do what you love”- the type of catchphrases that have helped spawn the career confusion that afflicts so many today- and instead, provide you with a *realistic* path toward a meaningful and engaging working life.

**RULE#1: DON’T FOLLOW YOUR PASSION**

**Chapter One: The “Passion” of Steve Jobs**

**The Passion Hypothesis**

In June 2005, Steve Jobs took the podium at Stanford Stadium to give the commencement speech to Stanford's graduating class. About a third of the way into the address, Jobs offered the following advice:

*You've got to find what you love… The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking, and don't settle.*

Many of the millions of people who viewed this speech on YouTube we're excited to see Steve Jobs-a guru of iconoclastic thinking- put his stamp of approval on an immensely appealing piece of popular career advice, which I call the passion hypothesis:

**The Passion Hypothesis**

*The key to occupational happiness is to first figure out what you're passionate about and then find a job that matches this passion.*

This hypothesis is one of modern American society's most well-worn themes. Those of us are lucky enough to have some choice in what we do with our lives are bombarded with this message, starting at an early age. We are told to lionize those with the courage to follow their passion, and pity the conformist drones who cling to the safe path.

If you doubt the ubiquity of this message, spend a few minutes browsing the career-advice shelf the next time you visit a bookstore. Once you look past the technical manuals on resume writing and job-interview etiquette, it's hard to find a book that doesn't promote the passion hypothesis. They promised that you’re just a few personality tests away from finding your dream job.

These books, as well as the thousands of full-time bloggers, professional counselors, and self-proclaimed gurus who orbit these same core issues of workplace happiness, all peddle the same lesson: *to be happy, you must follow your passion*. As one prominent career counselor told me, “do what you love, and the money will follow” has become the de facto motto of the career advice field.

There is, however, a problem lurking here: When you look past the feel-good slogans and go deeper into details of how passionate people like Steve Jobs really got started, or ask a scientist about what actually predicts workplace happiness, the issue becomes much more complicated. Your begin to find threads of nuance that, once pulled, unravel the tight certainty of the passion hypothesis, eventually leading to an unsettling recognition: “**Follow your passion” might just be terrible advice**.

**Do What Steve Jobs Did, Not What He Said**

If you had met a young Steve Jobs in the years leading up to his founding of Apple Computer, you wouldn't have pegged him as someone who was passionate about starting a technology company. Jobs had attended Reed College, a prestigious liberal arts enclave in Oregon. Unlike other technology visionaries of his era, Jobs wasn't particularly interested in either business or electronics as a student. He instead studied Western history and dance, and dabbled in eastern mysticism.

Jobs dropped out of college after his first year, but remained on campus for a while, sleeping on floors and scrounging free meals at the local Hari Krishna temple. He eventually grew tired of being a pauper and, during the early 1970s returned home to California, where he moved back in with his parents and talked himself into a night shift job at Atari.

In the months leading up to the start of his visionary company, Steve Jobs was something of a conflicted young man, seeking spiritual enlightenment and dabbling in electronics only when it promised to earn him quick cash.

**The Messy Lessons of Jobs**

I shared the details of Steve Jobs story, because when it comes to finding fulfilling work, the details matter. If a young Steve Jobs had taken his own advice and decided to only pursue work he loved, he would have found himself as one of the Los Altos Zen Center's most popular teachers. But he didn't follow this simple advice. Apple computer was decidedly not born out of passion, but instead was the result of a lucky break- a “small time” scheme that unexpectedly took off.

I don't doubt the Jobs eventually grew passionate about his work: If you've watched one of his famous keynote addresses, you've seen a man who obviously loved what he did. But so *what*? All that tells us is that *it's good to enjoy what you do*. This advice, though true, borders on the tautological and doesn't help us with the pressing question that we actually care about: *How do we find work that we’ll will eventually love*? Like Jobs, should we resist settling into one rigid career and instead try lots of small schemes, waiting for one to take off? Does it matter what general field we explore? How do we know when to stick with a project or when to move on? In other words, Jobs’s story generates more questions than it answers. Perhaps the only thing it does make clear is that, at least for Jobs, “follow your passion” was not particularly useful advice.

**Chapter Two: Passion Is Rare**

**The Roadtrip Nation Revelation**

It turns out that Jobs’s complicated path to fulfilling work is common among interesting people with interesting careers. In 2001, a group of four friends, all recently graduated from college, set out on a cross-country road trip to interview people who “[lived] lives centered around what was meaningful to them.” The friends sought advice for shaping their own careers into something fulfilling. They filmed a documentary about their trip, which was then expanded into a series on PBS. They eventually launched a nonprofit called Roadtrip Nation, with the goal of helping other young people replicate their journey. What makes Roadtrip Nation relevant is that it maintains an extensive video library of the interviews conducted for the project. There is perhaps no better single resource for diving into the reality of how people end up with compelling careers.

When you spend time with this archive, which is available for free online, you soon notice that the messy nature of Steve Jobs’s path is more the rule than the exception. In an interview with the public radio host Ira Glass, for example, a group of three undergraduates press him for wisdom on how to “figure out what you want” and “know that you'll be good at it.”

“In the movies there's this idea that you should just go for your dream,” Glass tells them. “But I don't believe that. Things happen in stages.”

Glass emphasizes that it takes time to get good at anything, recounting the many years it took him to master radio to the point where he had interesting options. “The key thing is to force yourself through the work, force the skills to come; that's the hardest phase,” he says.

Reviews in the archive promote the same idea that it's hard to predict in advance what you'll eventually grow to love. The astrobiologist Andrew Steele, for example, exclaims, “No, I had no idea what I was going to do. I object to systems that say you should decide now what you're going to do.”

**Compelling careers often have complex origins that reject the simple idea that all you have to do is follow your passion**. This observation may come as a surprise for those of us who have long basked in the glow of the passion hypothesis. It wouldn't, however, surprise the many scientists who have studied questions of workplace satisfaction using rigorous peer-reviewed research. They've been discovering similar conclusions for decades, but to date, not many people in the career-advice field have paid them serious attention. It's to these overlooked research efforts that I turn your attention next.

**The Science of Passion**

Why do some people enjoy their work while so many other people don't? Here's the CliffsNotes summary of the social science research in this area: There are many complex reasons for workplace satisfaction, but the reductive notion of matching your job to a pre-existing passion is not among them.

To give you a better sense of the realities uncovered by this research, here are three of the more interesting conclusions I've encountered:

**Conclusion #1: Career Passions Are Rare**

A research team led by Canadian psychologist Robert J. Vallerand administered an extensive questionnaire to a group of 539 Canadian university students. The questionnaire’s prompts were designed to answer two important questions: *Do these students have passions? And if so, what are they?*

At the core of the passion hypothesis is the assumption that we all have pre-existing passions waiting to be discovered. This experiment puts that assumption to the test. Here's what it found: 84 percent of the students surveyed were identified as having a passion. Here are the top five identified passions: dance, hockey, skiing, reading, and swimming. Though dear to the hearts of the students, these passions don't have much to offer when it comes to choosing a job. In fact, less than 4 percent of the total identified passions had *any* relation to work or education, with remaining 96 percent describing hobby style interests such as sports and art.

Take a moment to absorb this result, as it deals a strong blow to the passion hypothesis. How can we follow our passions if we don't have any relevant passions to follow? At least for these Canadian college students, the vast majority will need a different strategy for choosing their career.

**Conclusion #2: Passion Takes Time**

Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor of organizational behavior at Yale University, has made a career studying how people think about their work. A *job*, in Wrzesniewski’s formulation, is a way to pay the bills, a *career* is a path toward increasingly better work, and a *calling* is work that’s an

important part of your life and a vital part of your identity.

Wrzesniewski surveyed employees from a variety of occupations, from doctors to computer programmers to clerical workers, and found that most people strongly identify their work with one of these three categories. Wrzesniewski looked at a group of employees who all had the *same* position and nearly identical work responsibilities: college administrative assistance. She found, to her admitted surprise, that these employees were roughly evenly split between seeing their position as a job, a career, or a calling. In other words, it seems that the type of work alone does not necessarily predict how much people enjoy it.

She surveyed the assistants to figure out *why* they saw their work so differently, and discovered that the strongest predictor of an assistant seeing her work as a calling was the number of years spent on the job. In other words, the more experience an assistant had, the more likely she was to love her work.

In Wrzesniewski’s research, the happiest, most passionate employees are not those who followed their passion into a position, but instead those who have been around long enough to become good at what they do. On reflection, this makes sense. If you have many years’ experience, then you've had time to get better at what you do and develop a feeling of efficacy. It also gives you time to develop strong relationships with your coworkers and to see many examples of your work benefiting others. What's important here, however, is that this explanation, though reasonable, contradicts the passion hypothesis, which instead emphasizes the immediate happiness that comes from matching your job to a true passion.

**Conclusion #3: Passion Is a Side Effect of Mastery**

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), is arguably the best understanding science currently has for why some pursuits get our engines running while others leave us cold. SDT tells us that motivation, in the workplace or elsewhere, requires that you fulfill three basic psychological needs:

* **Autonomy**: the feeling that you have control over your day, and that your actions are important.
* **Competence**: the feeling that you are good at what you do
* **Relatedness**: the feeling of connection to other people

The last need is the least surprising: If you feel close to people at work, you're going to enjoy work more. It's the first two needs that prove more interesting. It's clear, for example, that autonomy and competence are related. In most jobs, as you become better at what you do, not only do you get the sense of accomplishment that comes from being good, which you’re typically also rewarded with more control over your responsibilities.

Of equal interest is what this list of basic psychological needs does not include. Notice, scientists did not find “matching work to pre-existing passions” as being important for motivation. Competence and autonomy are achievable by most people in a wide variety of jobs- assuming they’re willing to put in the hard work required for mastery. This message is not as inspiring as “follow your passion and you'll immediately be happy,” But it certainly has a ring of truth. In other words, working right trump's finding the right work.

**Chapter Three: Passion Is Dangerous**

The passion hypothesis convinces people that somewhere there's a magic “right” job waiting for them, and that if they find it, they'll immediately recognize that this is the work *they were meant to do*. The problem, of course, is that when they fail to find this certainty, bad things follow, such as chronic job-hopping and crippling self-doubt.

**The passion hypothesis is not just wrong, it's also dangerous**. Telling someone to “follow their passion” is not just an act of innocent optimism, but potentially the foundation for a career riddled with confusion and angst.

**Beyond Passion**

Before continuing, I should emphasize an obvious point: For some people, following their passion works. The Roadtrip Nation archives, for example, including an interview with *Rolling Stone* film critic Peter Travers, who claims that even as a child he used to bring notebooks into movie theaters to record his thoughts. The power of passion is even more common when you look to the careers of gifted individuals, such as professional athletes, you'd be hard pressed, for example, to find a professional baseball player who doesn't claim that he has been passionate about the sport as far back as he can remember.

Some people I’ve talked to about my ideas have used examples of this type to dismiss my conclusions about passion. “Here's a case where someone successfully followed their passion,” they say, “therefore ‘follow your passion’ must be good advice.” This is faulty logic. Observing a few instances of a strategy working does not make it universally effective. It is necessary instead to study a large number of examples and ask what worked in the vast majority of the cases. And when you study a large group of people who are passionate about what they do, as I did in researching this book, you find that most-not all- will tell a story more complex than simply identifying a pre-existing passion and then pursuing it. Examples such as Peter Travers and professional athletes, therefore, are exceptions. If anything, their rareness underscores my claim that for *most people*, “follow your passion” is bad advice.

This conclusion inspires an important follow up question: Without the passion hypothesis to guide us, what should we do instead? This is the question I take up in the three rules that follow. These rules chronicle my quest to figure out how people *really* end up loving what they do.

**RULE #2: BE SO GOOD THEY CAN’T IGNORE YOU**

**(Or, the Importance of Skill)**

**Chapter Four: The Clarity of the Craftsman**

**The Craftsman Mindset**

Charlie Rose was interviewing the actor and comedian Steve Martin about his memoir Born Standing Up. They talked about the realities of Martin's rise. “Nobody ever takes note of [my advice], Martin said. “What they want to hear is ‘Here’s how did you get an agent, here's how you write a script,’ … but I always say, ‘**Be so good they can't ignore you**.’”

Irrespective of what type of work you do, the craftsman mindset is *crucial* for building a career you love. The craftsman mindset focuses on *what you can offer the world*, whereas the passion mindset focuses instead on *what the world can offer you*.

There are two reasons why I dislike the passion mindset (that is, two reasons beyond the fact that, as I argued in Rule #1, it's based on a false premise). First, when you focus only on what your work offers you, it makes you hyperaware of what you *don't* like about it, leading to chronic unhappiness. This is especially true for entry-level positions, which, by definition, are not going to be filled with challenging projects and autonomy- those come later. When you enter the working world with the passion mindset, the annoying tasks you're assigned or the frustrations of corporate bureaucracy can become too much to handle.

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

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

I am suggesting that you put aside the question of whether your job is your true passion, and instead turn your focus toward becoming so good they can't ignore you. That is, regardless of what you do for a living, approach your work like a true performer.

**Regardless of how you feel about your job right now, adopting the craftsman mindset will be the foundation on which you'll build a compelling career**.

**Chapter Five: The Power of Career Capital**

I justify the importance of the craftsman mindset by arguing that the traits that make a great job great are rare and valuable, and therefore, if you want a great job, you need to build up rare and valuable skills- which I call career capital- to offer in return.

The radio host Ira Glass was given the opportunity to create his genre-defining radio show *This American Life* only after he had proven himself as one of public radio's best editors and hosts. Glass started as an intern and then moved on to become a tape cutter for *All Things Considered*. There are many young people who start down the same path as Glass: landing an internship at a local NPR station and then moving up to a low-level production position. But Glass began to break away from the pack when he turned his focus on making his skills more rare and more valuable. The crispness of his segment editing eventually gained him the opportunity to host a few of his own segments on air. And even though Glass has a voice that mocks everything sacred about what a radio personality should sound like, he began to win awards for his segments. It's possible that a latent natural talent for editing may be playing a role here, but recall from Rule #1 that Glass emphasizes the importance of the hard work required to develop skill. “All of us who do creative work… you get into this thing, and there's like a ‘gap.’ What you're making isn't so good, okay?... It's trying to be good but… it's just not that great,” he explained in an interview about his career. “The key thing is to force yourself through the work, force the skills to come; that's the hardest phase,” he elaborated in his *Roadtrip Nation* session. In other words, this is not the story of a prodigy who walked into a radio station after college and walked out with a show. The more you read about Glass, the more you encounter a young man who was driven to develop his skills until they were too valuable to be ignored.

**Chapter Six: The Career Capitalists**

This chapter demonstrates the power of career capitalists in action with two profiles of people who leveraged the craftsman mindset to construct careers they love (The content is too lengthy to summarize. This is the only chapter that is not summarized)

**Chapter Seven: Becoming a Craftsman**

**The 10,000-Hour Rule**

The “10,000-hour rule,” has been bouncing around scientific circles since the 1970s, but was popularized more recently by Malcolm Gladwell’s best-selling book, *Outliers*. Here's how he summarized it: *The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: 10,000 hours.*

*In Outliers,* Gladwell pointed to this rule as evidence that great accomplishment is not about natural talent, but instead about being in the right place at the right time to accumulate such a massive amount of practice. Bill Gates? He happened to attend one of the first high schools in the country to install a computer and allow their students unsupervised access- making him one of the first in his generation to build up thousands of hours of practice on this technology. Mozart? His dad was a fanatic about practicing. By the time Mozart was being toured around Europe as a prodigy, he had squeezed in more than twice the number of practice hours that similarly aged musician contemporaries had acquired.

As hundreds of follow-up studies have shown, deliberate practice provides the key to excellence in a diverse array of fields, among which are chess, medicine, auditing, computer programming, bridge, physics, sports, typing, juggling, dance, and music. If you want to understand the source of professional athletes’ talent, for example, look at their practice schedules- almost without exception they have been systematically stretching their athletic abilities, with the guidance of expert coaches, since they were children. If you instead turned the tables on Malcolm Gladwell, and asked him about his writing ability, he too would point you toward deliberate practice. In *Outliers*, he notes that he spent ten years honing his craft in the *Washington Post* newsroom before he moved to the *New Yorker* and began writing his breakout book, *The Tipping Point*.

When experts exhibit their superior performance in public their behavior looks so effortless and natural that we are tempted to attribute it to special talents. However, when scientists began measuring the experts supposedly superior powers… no general superiority was found. In other words, outside a handful of extreme examples- such as the height of a professional basketball player and the girth of football lineman- scientists have failed to find much evidence of natural abilities explaining experts’ successes. It is a lifetime accumulation of deliberate practice that again and again ends up explaining excellence.

**RULE #3: TURN DOWN A PROMOTION**

**(Or, the Importance of Control)**

**Chapter Eight: The Dream Job Elixir**

Control over what you do, and how you do it, is one of the most powerful traits you can acquire when creating work you love. Decades of scientific research have identified this trait as one of the most important you can pursue in the quest for a happier, more successful, and more meaningful life. Control has been found to lead to better grades, better sports performance, better productivity, and more happiness.

The more time you spend reading the research literature, the more it becomes clear: **Giving people more control over what they do and how they do it increases their happiness, engagement and sense of fulfillment.** It's no wonder, then, that when you flip through your mental Rolodex of dream jobs, control is often at the core of their appeal.

**Chapter Nine: The First Control Trap**

The first control trap, which warns that it's dangerous to pursue more control in your working life before you have career capital to offer in exchange. To give an example, at the age of twenty-five, a blogger, explaining, “I was fed up with living a ‘normal’ conventional life, working 9-5 for the man [and] having no time and little money to pursue my true passions… so I've embarked on a crusade to show you and the rest of the world how an average Joe… can build a business from scratch to support a life devoted to living ‘The Dream.’” The “business” he referenced as is the case with many lifestyle designers, was his blog about being a lifestyle designer. In other words, his only product was his enthusiasm about having a “normal” life. It doesn't take an economist to point out that there's not much real value lurking there. Or, put into our terminology, enthusiasm alone is not rare and valuable and therefore not worth much in terms of career capital. This lifestyle designer was investing in a valuable trait but didn't have the means to pay for it.

Not surprisingly, things soon turned out bleak on this fellow’s blog. After three months of posting several times a week about how to fund an unconventional life through blogging- even though he wasn't making any money himself from his own site- some frustration crept into his writing. In one post, he says, with evident exasperation, “What I noticed is that [readers] come and go. I've put in the hard yards, writing quality posts and finding awesome people… But alas many of [you] just come and go. This is as annoying as trying to fill up a bucket with water that has a bunch of holes in it.” He then goes on to detail his ten-point plan for building a more stable audience. The plan includes steps such as “Bring the ENERGY” and “Shower Your Readers with Appreciation,” but the list still excludes the most important step of all: giving readers content they're willing to pay for. A few weeks later, the posts on the blog stopped.

This story provides another clear example of the first control trap: If you embrace control without capital, you're likely to end up enjoying all the autonomy you can handle but unable to afford your next meal.

**Chapter Ten: The Second Control Trap**

**Courage Revisited**

There are a growing number of authors and online commentators who promote the idea that the only thing standing between you and a dream job is building the courage to step off the expected path. Courage is not irrelevant to creating work you love. The key, it seems, is to know when the time is right to become courageous in your career decisions. Get this timing right, and a fantasy working life awaits you, but get it wrong by tripping the first control trap in a premature bid for autonomy, and disaster alerts. The fault of the courage culture, therefore, is not its underlying message that courage is good, but its severe underestimation of the complexity involved in deploying this boldness in a useful way.

**Chapter Eleven: Avoiding the Control Traps**

Not long into his TED talk on creativity and leadership, Derek Sivers plays a video clip of a crowd at an outdoor concert. A young man without his shirt starts dancing by himself. The audience members seated nearby look on curiously.

“A leader needs the guts to stand alone and look ridiculous,” Derek says. Soon, however, a second young man joins the first and starts dancing.

“Now comes the first follower with a crucial role… the first follower transforms the lone nut into a leader.” As the video continues, a few more dancers join the group. Then several more. Around the two-minute mark, the dancers have grown into a crowd. “and ladies and gentlemen, that's how a movement is made.” The TED audience gives Derek a standing ovation. He bows, then does a little dance himself on stage.

No one can accuse Derek Sivers of being a conformist. During his career, he has repeatedly played the role of the first dancer. Throughout Derek’s career, however, there always ended up being a second dancer who validated his decision, and then eventually a crowd arrived, defining the move as successful.

Here's what interests me about Derek: He loves control. His whole career has been about making big moves, often in the face of resistance, to gain more control over what he does and how he does it. And not only does he love control, but he's fantastically successful at achieving it. I asked what criteria he uses to decide which projects to pursue and which to abandon. Fortunately for us, he had a simple but surprisingly effective answer to my question. “I have this principle about money that overrides my other life rules,” he said. “**Do what people are willing to pay for**.”

Derek made it clear that this is different from pursuing money for the sake of having money. “Money is a neutral indicator of value. By aiming to make money, you're aiming to be valuable.” When it comes to decisions affecting your core career, money remains an effective judge of value. “If you're struggling to raise money for an idea, or are thinking that you will support your idea with unrelated work, then you need to rethink the idea.”

His first big move was to become a professional musician in 1992. As Derek explained to me, he started by pursuing music at night and on the weekend. “I didn't quit my day job until I was making more money with my music.”

In hindsight, Derek’s bids for control remain big and non-conformist, but given his mental algorithm on only doing what people are paying for, they now also seem much less risky.

*When deciding whether to follow an appealing pursuit that will introduce more control into your work life, seek evidence of whether people are willing to pay for it. If you find this evidence, continue. If not, move on*.

**RULE #4: THINK SMALL, ACT BIG**

**(Or, the Importance of Mission)**

**Chapter Twelve: The Meaningful Life of Pardis Sabeti**

Pardis Sabeti is a professor of evolutionary biology at Harvard University. She majored in Biology with a perfect 5.0 GPA at MIT where she played varsity tennis. She received a Doctor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. She is also a medical geneticist and evolutionary geneticist.

She has mastered one of the more elusive but powerful strategies in the quest for work you love. One of the first things you'll notice if you spend time around Pardis is it that she enjoys her life. Biology, like any high stakes academic field, is demanding. Because of this it has a reputation for turning young professors into curmudgeons who adopt a masochist brand of workaholism, from which relaxation becomes a sign of failure and the accomplishments of peers become tragedies. This can be a bleak existence. Pardis, for her part, has avoided this fate.

Not five minutes into my visit, for example, a young grad student, one of ten people Pardis employs in her eponymous Sabeti Lab, pokes his head into the office. “We’re Heading down to volleyball practice,” he says, referencing the lab’s team, which evidently takes itself seriously. She promises to join them as soon as our interview ends.

Volleyball is not Pardis’s only hobby. In a corner of her office she keeps an acoustic guitar that serves as more than decoration: Pardis plays in the band called Thousand Days, which is well known in Boston music circles. PBS featured the band in a *Nova* special called *Researchers Who Rock.*

It's clear that Pardis has avoided the grinding cynicism that traps so many young academics, and has instead built an engaging life (“It's not always easy,” she once said in an interview, “but I truly love what I do”). *But how did she pull off this feat*? As I spent time with Pardis, I recognize that **her happiness comes from the fact that she built her career on a clear and compelling mission**- something that not only gives meaning to her work but provides the energy needed to embrace life beyond the lab.

Pardis’s career is driven by a clear mission: to use new technology to fight old diseases. This research is clearly important- an observation emphasized by the fact that she's received seven-figure grants for her work from both the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the NIH. Her mission provides her a sense of purpose and energy, traits that have helped her avoid becoming a cynical academic and instead embrace her work with enthusiasm. Her mission is the foundation on which she builds love for what she does, and therefore it's a career strategy we need to better understand.

**The Power of Mission**

To have a mission is to have a unifying focus for your career. It's more general than a specific job and can span multiple positions. It provides an answer to the question, “What should I do with my life?” Missions are powerful because they focus your energy toward a useful goal, and this in turn maximizes your impact on your world- a crucial factor in loving what you do. People who feel like their careers truly matter are more satisfied with their working lives, and they're also more resistant to the strain of hard work. Staying up late to save your corporate litigation client a few extra million dollars can be draining, but staying up late to help cure an ancient disease can leave you more energized than when you started- perhaps even providing the extra enthusiasm needed to start a lab volleyball team or tour with a rock band.

Plenty of people are good at what they do but haven't reoriented their career in a compelling direction. Missions are hard. Hardness scares off the daydreamers and the timid, leaving more opportunity for those like us who are willing to take the time to carefully work out the best path forward and then confidently take action.

**Chapter Thirteen: Missions Require Capital**

**Mission Failure**

When Sarah wrote me, she was stuck. She had recently quit her job as a newspaper editor to attend graduate school to study cognitive science. Sarah had considered grad school right out of college, but at the time, she worried that she didn't have the right skills. With age, however, came more confidence, and after she signed up for and then aced an artificial-intelligence course that would have “scared a younger version of myself,” Sarah decided to take the plunge and become a full-time doctoral candidate.

Then the trouble started. Not long into her new student career Sarah became paralyzed by her work's lack of an organizing mission. “I feel I have too many interests,” she told me. “I can't decide if I want to do theoretical work or something more applied, or which would be more useful. Even more threatening, I believe all the other researchers to be geniuses… What would you do if you were in my shoes?”

Sarah desperately wanted a Pardis Sabeti style of life-transforming research focus, yet her failure to immediately identify such a focus led her to rethink graduate school. As Sarah learned, just because you really want to organize your work around a mission doesn't mean that you can easily make it happen. After my visit to Harvard, I realized that if I was going to deploy this trait in my own career, I needed to better understand this trickiness. That is, I needed to figure out what Pardis did differently than Sarah. The answer I eventually found came from an unexpected place: the attempts to explain a puzzling phenomenon.

**The Baffling Popularity of Randomized Linear Network Coding**

As I write this chapter, I'm attending a computer science conference in San Jose, California. Earlier today, something interesting happened. I attended a session in which four different professors from four different universities presented their latest research. Surprisingly, all four presentations tackled the same narrow problem- *information dissemination in networks*- using the same narrow technique- *randomized linear network coding*. It was as if my research community woke up one morning and collectively and spontaneously decided to tackle the same esoteric problem.

This example of joint discovery surprised me, but it would not have surprised the science writer Steven Johnson. In his engaging book, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Johnson explains that such “multiples” are frequent in the history of science. Consider the discovery of sunspots and 1611: As Johnson notes, four scientists, from four different countries, all identified the phenomenon during that same year. The first electrical battery? Invented twice in the mid-eighteenth century. Oxygen? Isolated independently in 1772 and 1774. In one study cited by Johnson, researchers from Columbia University found just shy of 150 different examples of prominent scientific breakthroughs made by multiple researchers at near the same time.

Big ideas, Johnson explained, are almost always discovered in the “adjacent possible,” a term borrowed from the complex-system biologist Stuart Kauffman, who used it to describe the spontaneous formation of complex chemical structures from simpler structures.

The adjacent possible also explains my earlier example of four researchers tackling the same obscure problem with the same obscure technique at the conference I attended. The specific technique applied in this case- a technique called randomized linear network coding- came to the attention of the computer scientists I worked with only over the last two years, as researchers who study a related topic began to apply it successfully to thorny problems. The scientist who ended up presenting papers on this technique at my conference had all noticed its potential around the same time. Put in Johnson’s terms, this technique redefined the cutting edge in my corner of the academic world, and therefore it also redefined the adjacent possible, and in this new configuration the information dissemination problem, like the discovery of oxygen many centuries earlier, suddenly loomed as a big target waiting to be tackled.

Understanding the adjacent possible in its role in innovation is the first link in a chain of argument that explains how to identify a good career mission.

**The Capital-Driven Mission**

Scientific breakthroughs, as we just learned, require that you first get to the cutting edge of your field. Only then can you see the adjacent possible beyond, the space where innovative ideas are almost always discovered. Here's the leap I made as I pondered Pardis Sabeti around the same time I was pondering Johnson’s theory of innovation: **A good career mission is similar to a scientific breakthrough-it's an innovation waiting to be discovered in the adjacent possible of your field**. If you want to identify a mission for your working life, therefore, you must first get to the cutting edge- the only place where these missions become visible.

This insight explains Sarah’s struggles: She was trying to find a mission before she got to the cutting edge (she was still in her first two years as a graduate student when she began to panic about her lack of focus). From her vantage point as a new graduate student, she was much too far from the cutting edge to have any hope of surveying the adjacent possible, and if she can't see the adjacent possible, she's not likely to identify a compelling new direction for her work. According to Johnson’s theory, Sarah would have been better served by first mastering a promising niche- a task that may take years- and only then turning her attention to seeking a mission.

In hindsight, these observations are obvious. If life-transforming missions could be found with just a little naval-gazing and an optimistic attitude, changing the world would be commonplace. But it's not commonplace; it's instead quite rare. This rareness, we now understand, is better because these breakthroughs require that you first get to the cutting edge, and this is hard- the type of hardness that most of us try to avoid in our working lives.

**Chapter Fourteen: Missions Require Little Bets**

**Leaping the Gap Between Idea and Practice**

My time with Pardis Sabeti convinced me that career capital is necessary to identify a good mission. But even with this understanding solidified, a nagging thought kept spoiling my intellectual satisfaction: *Why don't I have a personal mission driven career*?

When I met Pardis, I had a PhD in computer science from MIT and close to two dozen peer-reviewed publications to my name. I'd given talks on my work all over the world. I had accumulated career capital, and this capital allowed me to identify many potential missions relevant to my skills.

*Many* people have lots of career capital, and can therefore identify a variety of different potential missions for their work, but *few* actually build their career around such missions. Once you have the capital required to identify a mission, you must still figure out how to put the mission into practice. If you don't have a trusted strategy for making this leap from idea to execution, then like me and so many others, you'll probably avoid the leap altogether.

**Chapter Fifteen: Missions Require Marketing**

Great missions are transformed into great successes as the result of finding projects that satisfy the law of remarkability, which requires that an idea inspires people to remark about it, and is launched in a venue where such remarking is made easy.

“You're either remarkable or invisible,” says Seth Godin in his best seller, *Purple Cow*. As he elaborated in a *Fast Company* manifesto he published on the subject: “The world is full of boring stuff- brown cows- which is why so few people pay attention… A purple cow… now that would stand out. Remarkable marketing is the art of building things worth noticing.

**The Law of Remarkability**

A good mission-driven project must be remarkable in two different ways. First, it should be remarkable in the literal sense of compelling people to remark about it. What's nice about remarkability is that it can be applied to any field. Take book writing: if I published a book of solid advice for helping recent graduates transition to the job market, you might find this a useful contribution, but probably wouldn't find yourself whipping out your iPhone and tweeting its praises. On the other hand, if I publish a book that says “follow your passion” is bad advice, (hopefully) this would compel you to spread the word. That is, the book you're holding was conceived from the very early stages with the hope of being seen as “remarkable.”

Return to my example of writing the career advice books, I realized early on in my process that blogging was a remarkable venue for introducing my ideas. Blogs are visible and the infrastructure is in place for good ideas to quickly spread, through, for example, linking, Tweets, and Facebook. Because of this conduciveness to remarking, but the time I pitched this book to publishers, I not only had a large audience who appreciated my views on passion and skill, but the meme had spread: Newspapers and major websites around the world had begun to quote my thoughts on the topic, while the articles had been cited online and Tweeted thousands of times. If I had instead decided to confine my ideas to paid speaking gigs, for example, my mission to change the way we think about careers would have likely stagnated- the venue would not have been sufficiently remarkable.

To help organize our thinking, I'll summarize these ideas and a succinct law:

**The Law of Remarkability**

*For a mission driven project to succeed, it should be* ***remarkable*** *in two different ways. First, it must compel people who encounter it to remark about it to others. Second, it must be launched in a venue that supports such remarking*.