

# So Good They Can't Ignore You - by Cal Newport

## 'Why Skills Trump Passion In The Quest For Work You Love'

Cal Newport is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University, teaching Computer Science. He has written books about study hacks and improving your grades, then transitioned to writing career books like *So Good They Can't Ignore You* and *Deep Work*. As the subtitle suggests, this book is about finding work you love, but it takes almost the exact opposite approach of every other self-help book, which focuses on 'finding your passion' and 'following your dreams'. Instead, Newport strongly advocates getting 'good' and constantly developing your skills, so that you can one day trade in this 'career capital' in return for great work that is creative, impactful, purposeful and autonomous.

Enjoy!

# Introduction

Cal begins the book with the story of one of his friends. His friend was working a rather traditional job, but he wasn't enjoying it. He believed that there was more to life, he believed he should be able to do what he loved, and he believed he knew where his passions lay. He had discovered philosophy and Buddhism and wanted to explore the world. He decided to quit his job, sell all of his possessions and move to a monastery. After an initial few days of excitement and contentment with 'doing what he loved', he started to realise he didn't love everything about being a monk. And after a few weeks of meditation and koans, he came to realise that living the life of a monk was not his passion whatsoever.

I'm sure we all know someone who has hated their job and decided to quit and follow their passion (or in some cases - like my own - that person may be ourselves). Stories like these prompted Cal to ask a question led him on his own quest and forms the basis of this book: "*Why do some people end up loving what they do, while so many others fail to find this?*".

# Rule #1: Don't Follow Your Passion

Some of the most common career advice you'll hear today is: 'Follow your dreams'. According to Cal Newport, this is utter bullshit.

Steve Jobs's famous Standford commencement speech features the popular line: "You've got to find work 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". Other popular advice this book disagrees with include:

- "Follow your passion - life is for the living"
- "Don't settle"
- "Passion is the engine of living life"
- "The most valuable lesson is to find your purpose and follow your passion"
- "Do what you love - the money will take care of itself"
- (And so on, you get the picture)

## 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 that passion". This is common advice in a lot of self-help books, but Newport says that this is the exact wrong approach. There are (at least) three issues with this idea:

### Issue #1: Passion is rare

Very few people have this 'passion' laying dormant within them that is just waiting to be awoken. It is an unintelligent risk to bank on the fact that you'll one day discover this overwhelming passion that will show you the light and guide you toward exactly what you 'should' be doing. Moreso, to decide what your 'passion' is at the very beginning of your career is not a wise move either: you know so little and you are so far away from it, and it changes over time - what you THINK is your passion and what IS your passion may be very different things.

*"Compelling careers often have complex origins that reject the simple idea that all you have to do is follow your passion"*

### Issue 2: Passion takes time

A current passion may be fleeting and you will soon be bored of it. A greater passion may emerge later in life, but you could not possibly foresee that now. At the same time, there is a distinction between different types of work you can engage with:

1. A JOB - something you do day to day in order to pay the bills
2. A CAREER - a path towards increasingly better work
3. A CALLING - an important part of your life and a vital part of your identity

It would be nice to skip straight to our calling, but often we need to build towards three by making our way through a job and/or a career before we even discover a calling.

### Issue 3: Passion is a side-effect of Mastery

Put simply, you enjoy the things that you're good at. We you get better at something, you begin to enjoy it more. At first, when you don't know what you are doing and you aren't proficient, it's hard to love what you do. But once you develop your skills and start to improve, you'll gradually begin to like it more and more.

Instead of seeking work that fits our passion, we should seek work that is well-designed for enjoyment, engagement and motivation. According to Self-Determination Theory, the common Keys to good work are:

- **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

## Passion is DANGEROUS

Newport argues that 'follow your dream' or 'follow your passion' is not only bad advice, it is actually *dangerous*. Not only will it not lead you to where you want to go, it can actually lead you away from your goals and send you in the exact opposite direction.

People can be convinced that the 'perfect' job is out there, and they believe that they'll immediately recognise it when they see it. This is dangerous because bad things can start to happen when they fail to find that certainty - it leads to incessant job-hopping and crippling self-doubt. "*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*". Given passion is rare, takes time, and is the side-effect of mastery, you are unlikely to stumble upon the perfect work by simply hoping you'll magically find it or by jumping from job to job.

"*For most people, 'follow your passion' is bad advice*".

## Rule #2: Be So Good They Can't Ignore You

### (Or, The Importance of SKILL)

It is important to know the difference between the ‘Craftsman Mindset’ and the ‘Passion Mindset’ (and obviously, once you know the distinction, you should pick the Craftsman).

#### Craftsman Mindset

The story goes that Steve Martin, the world famous comedian and actor, was asked how you break through in a tough industry like comedy. His answer: “*Be so good they can't ignore you*”. ‘Sure it’s scary,’ Martin said, ‘but even more, I find it liberating’. It means that it’s all on you. It’s not up to anyone else but you - yes, luck and chance play a role, and yes, you may need some people on your side, but if you’re good enough, those things will work themselves out.

It’s up to you to create something meaningful and present it to the world. Don’t wait for your opportunity or ‘the perfect time’, because those things don’t seem to come along. Instead, hone your craft and create things that are worthy of getting lucking and being given the opportunity to flourish. The work and the craft come first, the luck and the opportunity come second. If you’re not focusing on becoming so good they can’t ignore you, you’re going to get left behind.

“*Irrespective of the work you do, the craftsman mindset is crucial for building a career you love*”.

#### Passion Mindset

Someone who has a Passion Mindset focuses on what the world can offer them, not what they can offer the world. A focus on what their work can offer them leads to a hyperawareness of what they *don’t* like about it, which in turn leads to chronic unhappiness.

Someone with the Passion Mindset is constantly asking big, existential questions: Who am I? What do I *truly* love? What is my passion? Unfortunately, these questions are hard to answer and are essentially impossible to confirm. The Craftsman Mindset offers clarity while the Passion Mindset offers a swamp of ambiguous and unanswerable questions.

“*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*”.

## Career Capital

In addition to the elements that SDT listed as vital to good work (autonomy, competence and relatedness - as listed in Rule #1), other components of great work include: creativity, impact and control. A new college graduate probably does work that doesn't involve any of these aspects, whereas if people imagine their 'dream job', it probably contains some combination of these elements.

In order to obtain these valuable elements, you need to offer something in return. As an employee, the thing that you can offer is skills that are **rare** and **valuable**, so you need to develop these skills then exchange them for good work.

### 'The Career Capital Theory of Great Work'

1. The traits that define great work are **rare** and **valuable** (creativity, impact and control)
2. The laws of Supply and Demand state that you therefore need to offer **rare** and **valuable** skills in return
3. You can offer these skills you've accumulated as **career capital**
4. The **Craftsman Mindset**, with its relentless focus on becoming so good they can't ignore you, is a strategy well suited to acquiring career capital (if your goal is to find or create work you love, the craftsman mindset always trumps the passion mindset)

*"You need to get good in order to get good things in your working life".*

## Three disqualifiers for the Craftsman Mindset

1. Job presents very few opportunities to distinguish yourself by developing relevant skills that are rare and valuable
  - a. Skill growth isn't possible, thus you would violate step 2 of the 'career capital theory'
2. Job focuses on something you think is useless (or even harmful).
  - a. Even though you *could* grow rare and valuable skills, you won't stick around long enough
3. Job forces you to work with people you really dislike

## Becoming a Craftsman

In order to become a Craftsman and foster the Craftsman Mindset, we need to go through constant cycles of strain and feedback.

### Strain:

Strain is the discomfort of doing something beyond your current level of expertise. Strain is the constant stretching of your abilities, leading to improvement and leveling-up. This is the difference between 'playing' and 'practicing' - playing is running through what you already know, practicing is straining to learn something new.

### Instant Feedback:

The second piece of the improvement puzzle is the importance of getting quick, regular feedback. As part of your practice, you need feedback loops built in.

One aspect of this is the idea of ‘Deliberate Practice’, initially conveyed by K. Anders Ericsson, and the ‘10,000 Hours Rule’ popularised by Malcolm Gladwell. You need to put in the hours of stretching and straining and discomfort in order to grow. Another element of deliberate practice is striking the balance between ‘tournament play’ and ‘serious study’. In the 1990s, there was debate in the chess world as to which training strategy was more effective: playing under the pressure and competition of tournament play, or spending hours pouring over books and utilising teachers to practice the intricacies of the game in concentrated serious study. At the commencement of the study, the participants believed that those focusing on tournament play would probably outperform those who concentrated on serious study over the long term. They were wrong. Hours spent in serious study was the greatest predictor of eventual success, and it dominated all other factors. The research showed that players who made it to Grand Master ranking spent five times as many hours on serious study as those that plateaued at an intermediate level. Anders Ericsson defined this ‘serious study’ as an “activity designed, typically by a teacher, for the sole purpose of effectively improving specific aspects of an individual’s performance”.

*“If you just show up and work hard, you’ll soon hit a performance plateau beyond which you fail to get any better. To successfully adopt the craftsman mindset, there, we have to approach our jobs... with a dedication to deliberate practice”.*

## 5 Habits of a Craftsman

1. Decide what type of capital market you are in
  - Winner take all = only the best in the field will reap the rewards. There is only one type of skill and only the best will be compensated.
  - Auction = there are multiple different types of skills, and you can bid with the skills that form your own personal strengths
2. Identify your capital type
  - Seek ‘open gates’ - these are opportunities already open to you that will allow you to build career capital. These may be specific projects you could work on, specific individuals to collaborate with, or specific opportunities that will allow you to develop valuable skills
  - Skill acquisition is like the momentum of a freight train: “*Getting starting requires a huge application of effort, but changing track once it’s moving it easy*”
3. Define ‘Good’
  - Now that you’ve identified the skill you need to build, you need to know what ‘good’ is (as in ‘so good they can’t ignore you) and set goals along the way that will take you from your current ability to ‘good’
4. Stretch and Destroy
  - “Deliberate practice is above all an effort of focus and concentration”
  - “Deliberate practice is often the opposite of enjoyable”

- You need to strain and stretch your abilities in order to grow, and in the process, you destroy your previous idea of what ‘good’ was and form a new, higher level of what you need to achieve
5. Be Patient
- Developing ‘good’ skills is hard. Because of this, we need to look into the future for the payoff, not expect it to happen quickly.

# Rule #3: Turn Down A Promotion

(Or, The Importance of CONTROL)

Often we don't know what we love when we're first starting out. Instead of expecting to *know* what we love or hate straight away, a more reliable approach is to go into something, get really good at it, then learn to love it. "*You have to get good before you can expect good work*". I personally think I'm pretty good and that I would be more than capable of doing good work, so it's tough to admit that I haven't built the required career capital yet - so I'm stuck with doing mundane low-level stuff for now. The only way to get good work is to become so good they can't ignore you.

If you recall, Rule #2 told us that great work comprised of creativity, impact and control. "*Giving people more control over what they do and how they do it increases happiness, engagement and sense of fulfillment*". An easy way for organisations and managers to increase the sense of control is to give them autonomy over task, time, technique and team. Of course, within almost every role, there are certain tasks that HAVE to be completed. But allow employees to choose when they do it, how they do it, and who they do it with, can boost morale and employee engagement (this is taken from Dan Pink's book '*Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*' - I'd strongly recommend giving that one a read too!).

**The First Control Trap:** Control requires capital.

"*Control that is acquired without career capital is not sustainable*". The best way to obtain control is by building up your career capital, then trading it for more control. You need something valuable to offer in return for the powerful trait of control. An example of this may be getting good, building career capital, then exchanging that for working remotely a day or two each week.

A common mistake is cashing in your career capital for a promotion - **this is a bad idea**. Any promotion is almost guaranteed to be work over which you have less control, and you will need much more career capital to make any changes. Instead of taking another step up the ladder, cash your capital in for control, which will then allow you to explore wider and deeper in what you're already doing (discussed further in the next section about a 'mission').

**The Second Control Trap:** Control generates resistance.

"*The point at which you have acquired enough career capital to get meaningful control over your working life is exactly the point when you've become valuable enough to your current employer that they will try to prevent you from making the change*". Once you're good enough to be given the control over your work, your employer will be worried that they won't be able to cope with your change.

## Rule #4: Think Small, Act Big

(Or, The Importance of MISSION)

*“To have a mission is to have a unifying focus for your career”*. Of course, this requires career capital. A good mission is waiting for you at the ‘adjacent possible’. That means, it is something in line with what you are already doing, but it is out at the edges of your field. In order to discover this ‘adjacent possible’, you need to be at the cutting edge, and in order to get to the cutting edge, you need to get good enough at what you are doing in order to get to the boundaries and see past the horizon.

The first step of finding and channelling your mission is to build career capital and get ‘good’. Next, you cash that capital in for control. This allows you the time and flexibility to pursue your career mission. Don’t confuse this ‘mission’ with ‘passion’. As we discussed earlier, the pursuit of passion leads to severe dissatisfaction. In order to uncover your mission, you should place a series of ‘little bets’. That means exploring new things and testing out potential ideas. You should be focusing on a niche, an ‘adjacent possible’ within your field of expertise. Whilst you are trying out these little bets, you’re actually building more career capital along the way because you’re getting better at starting things, your developing your initiative, and you are doing a lot more than most of your peers are doing. While they’re watching TV at night and partying on the weekends, you’re exploring niches and developing skills along the way. Once you have decided on your mission, you can cash in your career capital and go all in in pursuit of a grand vision.

Newport references Seth Godin’s book *Purple Cow* (another book you should definitely read by my all-time favourite author): “*You’re either remarkable or you’re invisible*”. Most employees aren’t stretching to develop their skills, they aren’t building career capital, they aren’t placing little bets and choosing a mission... and as such, they’re unremarkable. Instead, you should be doing things that are so compelling that other people can’t help but remark about (as well as doing remarkable things, it helps to spread them in a venue or environment that supports these kinds of activities and enables remarks).

# Conclusion

This book is half delighting and half defeating for me. Having read a bunch of business books and tried my own entrepreneurial projects and tasted a bunch of ‘get rich quick’ schemes, I have a warped view of traditional employment. On one hand, this book is saddening because it suggests that in order to do good work, I need to put in the hours and the years of slowly building skills and career capital whilst doing mundane, unintelligent work. On the other hand, it’s liberating in that it puts all of the responsibility (and potential blame) solely on your shoulders: if you’re not willing to put in the work, do the deliberate practice, develop your skills, build your capital, discover a mission, then it’s your own damn fault.

I’d love to hear your thoughts on this - it’s something I’m still battling today.