

THE BIG IDEAS

The 4 Rules

#1: Forget passion.

Self-Determination Theory

Autonomy + Competence + Relating.

Mindsets

Passion vs. Craftsman.

A Deliberate Practice

Time to craft one.

Career Capital

Accumulating it is key.

Right Work

vs. Working right.

*"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."*

~ Cal Newport

So Good They Can't Ignore You

Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love

BY CAL NEWPORT · GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING © 2012 · 304 PAGES

"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 simplistic catchphrases 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."

~ Cal Newport from *So Good They Can't Ignore You*

Cal Newport is a writer and assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown. He got his Ph.D. from MIT and runs a popular blog called *Study Hacks: Decoding Patterns of Success*.

In this book, he decodes the pattern of finding work that inspires you and tells us, as per the subtitle, "*Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love*."

The title of the book comes from comedian Steve Martin's advice to aspiring entertainers to "**Be so good they can't ignore you.**" (<— Love that.)

If you're trying to figure out what you want to do with your life, I think you'll love this book. It provides a really important perspective on the pitfalls of passion and the power of being a craftsman. (Get a copy [here](#).)

The book is packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

THE 4 RULES

RULE #1: Don't Follow Your Passion

RULE #2: Be So Good They Can't Ignore You
(Or, *the Importance of Skill*)

RULE #3: Turn Down a Promotion
(Or, *the Importance of Control*)

RULE #4: Think Small, Act Big
(Or, *the Importance of Mission*)"

Those four rules are the four primary sections of the book.

Each is packed with wisdom and stories of various individuals unlocking the secrets of each rule plus others who failed to do so.

Let's take a quick look at some practical applications of the rules!

"Nobody ever takes note of [my advice], because it's not the answer they wanted to hear," Martin said. "What they want to hear is, 'Here's how you get an agent, here's how you write a script,' ... but I always say, 'Be so good they can't ignore you.'"

~ Cal Newport

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

"When [Dan] Pink talks about 'what science knows,' he's referring, for the most part, to a forty-year-old theoretical framework known as Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which 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—factors described as the 'nutriments' required to feel intrinsically motivated for your work:

- **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"

Self-Determination Theory or SDT.

If we want to understand how to create work we love, it's a good idea to keep the three key aspects of SDT in mind: Autonomy + Competence + Relatedness.

The book is essentially a strategic guide to optimizing our intrinsic motivation—which is essential to having work you love.

Quick inventory:

- Do you feel like you have control over your days and that your actions matter?
- Do you feel like you're good at what you do?
- Do you feel connected to other people in your work?

Autonomy. Competence. Relatedness.

How we answer those questions matters.

Cal encourages us to notice a very important thing: Science does *not* tell us that we need to match a pre-existing passion to our work if we want to find happiness in our work.

That's actually a *really* good thing because that means most of us in most of our jobs can CREATE the right conditions for our autonomy, competence and relatedness to flourish.

As Cal says repeatedly throughout the book: "Working right trumps finding the right work."

MINDSETS: CRAFTSMAN VS. PASSION

"To summarize, I've presented two different ways people think about their working life. The first is *the craftsman mindset*, which focuses on what you can offer the world. The second is *the passion mindset*, which instead focuses on what the world can offer you. The craftsman mindset offers clarity, while the passion mindset offers a swamp of ambiguous and unanswerable questions... there's something liberating about the craftsman mindset: It 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."

The CRAFTSMAN mindset.

I love (!) that.

Now, I think Cal gets a *little* more either/or about it than necessary, but there's NO question that, ultimately, assuming the mindset of a craftsman is where it's at.

“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.”

~ Cal Newport

Bottom line: Even if you happen to be blessed with a sense of purpose + passion, you BETTER be committed to mastering your craft and finding ways to meaningfully create value in the world or you run the risk of winding up broke and bitter.

(Cal shares some stories about people following their passions including a novice yoga teacher running into the problem of thinking passion, by itself, is enough. It’s not. More in a moment.)

And, I absolutely love the distinction between focusing on GETTING value vs. CREATING value.

One of the biggest pitfalls of the passion mindset is the obsessive focus on what’s in it for *you*—how your job is going to make *your* life awesome.

That’s not going to get us very far. Focusing on our passion might inspire us to quit our jobs but if we want to pay the bills and flourish over the long run, we need to shift our focus to getting *really* good at creating value that (important addition!) people will pay for.

As Cal says, “Whereas the craftsman mindset focuses on *what you can offer the world*, the passion mindset focuses on *what the world can offer you*. This mindset is how most people approach their working lives.”

We need to OBSESS about how we’re going to make *other* people’s lives awesome.

Getting value vs. CREATING value.

Where’s *your* focus?

To the craftsman mindset!

P.S. Steve Chandler captures this in his great book *Wealth Warrior* ([see Notes](#)). He tells us: “SORRY: TEMPORARILY OUT OF SERVICE I won’t produce wealth when I’m out of service. Get it? Out of service. Will not work. Because when I am out of service I am out of service. This I mean to whisper to my mind. Every day.”

Plus: “Reminder to myself: money is a reflection of bold and creative service.”

P.P.S. Here’s a great question to reflect on: *How can you serve more profoundly?*

I got that phrase to “serve profoundly” from Steve. That’s the focus of his entire coaching practice: Creating wealth through profound service.

He also introduced me to the word *astonish*—which literally means “to strike with lightning.” That’s the game we want to play—finding ways to ASTONISH the people we serve profoundly.

We create *that* type of value in the world and we’ll get plenty in return.

But we need to get the order right.

Let’s take a moment to capture ways we can serve more profoundly and create more value for people in our lives.

I can serve more profoundly in these ways:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

(Awesome.)

"If you want to love what you do, abandon the passion mindset ('what can the world offer me?') and instead adopt the craftsman mindset ('what can I offer the world?')"

~ Cal Newport

P.P.P.S. Another way to think about the passion vs. craftsman mindset is to look at Steven Pressfield's amateur vs. Pro distinction. An amateur "loves" what he does. A Pro commits his life to mastering his craft.

Here's how Pressfield puts it in *Turning Pro* ([see Notes](#)):

"The thesis of this book is that what ails you and me has nothing to do with being sick or being wrong. What ails us is that we are living our lives as amateurs.

The solution, this book suggests, is that we turn pro.

Turning pro is free, but it's not easy. You don't need to take a course or buy a product. All you have to do is change your mind.

Turning pro is free, but not without cost. When we turn pro, we give up a life with which we may have become extremely comfortable. We give up a self that we have come to identify with and to call our own...

Turning pro is not for everyone. We have to be a little crazy to do it, or even to want to. In many ways the passage chooses us; we don't choose it. We simply have no alternative.

What we get when we turn pro is, we find our power. We find our will and our voice and we find our self-respect. We become who we always were but had, until then, been afraid to embrace and to live out.

Do you remember where you were on 9/11? You'll remember where you were when you turn pro."

Let's Turn Pro and create value like a craftsman.

CRAFTING A DELIBERATE PRACTICE

"Another deliberate-practice routine was the introduction of my hour tally... The sheet has a row for each month on which I keep a tally of the total number of hours I've spent that month in a state of deliberate practice."

~ Cal Newport

"When I first encountered the work of Ericsson and Charness, this insight startled me. It told me that in most types of work—that is, work that doesn't have a clear training philosophy—most people are stuck. This generates an exciting implication. Let's assume you're a knowledge worker, which is a field without a clear training philosophy. If you can figure out how to integrate deliberate practice into your own life, you have the possibility of blowing past your peers in your value, as you'll likely be alone in your dedication to systematically getting better. That is, deliberate practice might provide the key to quickly becoming so good they can't ignore you.

To successfully adopt the craftsman mindset, therefore, we have to approach our jobs... with a dedication to deliberate practice."

Ericsson and Charness are the researchers who first discovered the 10,000 hour rule of world-class performance.

Cal shares the way Malcolm Gladwell describes their research in *Outliers* ([see Notes](#)): *"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: ten thousand hours."*

Whether it's violinists, radiologists, chess masters or performers in any field, it's all about logging a huge amount of effort.

But it's not enough to just work hard.

We need to DELIBERATELY practice trying to get better.

We need to stretch ourselves beyond our comfort zones again and again and again—incrementally improving our skills.

[George Mumford](#) tells us we need to "romance our discomfort zone."

"Strain, I now accepted, was good. Instead of seeing this discomfort as a sensation to avoid, I began to understand it the same way that a body builder understands muscle burn: a sign that you're doing something right."

~ Cal Newport

Here's how he puts it in *The Mindful Athlete* ([see Notes](#) + [Micro Class](#)): "Our bodies like to be in homeostasis. We like to be balanced. Life is hard enough—we want to be comfortable! But, again, to get better and improve our game on and off the court, we need to move out of our comfort zones. That doesn't mean you should go so far out of your comfort zone that you can't function well. Our bodies work best when we push them in small increments. If we push ourselves too far, eustress can become distress. We have to really pay attention, because they can manifest the same symptoms. Eustress is achieved through moderation, sticking to the middle way, and not going to extremes. ..."

Moving out of your comfort zone through experiencing eustress is a continuous incremental process of romancing your discomfort zone. It's not like you get to a certain level and then stay there. Things are always either going forward or backward; they're not staying static. If you are comfortable where you are and you just want to stay comfortable, that's fine, but that isn't the way to pursue excellence and wisdom."

Now, all that's pretty straight-forward for professional athletes and chess players and others with a clear practice strategy.

For the rest of us knowledge workers there's good news and bad news.

Bad news: There's no clearly defined way for us to deliberately practice.

Good news: If we figure out how to deliberately practice, we'll be one of the very few in our fields who actually train ourselves to get better which means we'll POWERFULLY differentiate ourselves from those who do not.

Cal shares a number of key habits and lessons in the book. Check it out for more.

For now, what can YOU do to cultivate a deliberate practice in *your* chosen field?!

CAREER CAPITAL

"The Law of Financial Viability: 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."

~ Cal Newport

"THE CAREER CAPITAL THEORY OF GREAT WORK"

The traits that define great work are rare and valuable.

Supply and demand says that if you want these traits you need *rare and valuable* skills to offer in return. Think of these rare and valuable skills you can offer as your **career capital**.

The craftsman mindset, with its relentless focus on becoming 'so good they can't ignore you,' is a strategy well suited for acquiring career capital. This is why it trumps the passion mindset if your goal is to create work you love."

One of the keys to successfully creating sustainable work we love is to build what Cal calls "career capital."

He makes the *really* important point that, as we put in the deliberate practice in pursuit of becoming so good they can't ignore us, we accumulate *rare and valuable skills*. It's this career capital—accumulated over years of diligent deliberate practice—that we cash in to create our ideal work.

Failing to see the importance of this process is one of the reasons why, for example, a (passionate!) new yoga teacher who just completed a 200-hour certification process is not yet in a solid position to build a sustainable career.

Enough career capital hasn't been accumulated. There are a LOT of yoga teachers (or life coaches or ...) who have the very basic level of training. Those skills are not rare or valuable. Yet.

We need to be very honest with ourselves about just how much work is required to create our ideal work.

"Working right trumps finding the right work."

~ Cal Newport

PASSION IS NOT ENOUGH.

We must become craftsman—so good they can't ignore us.

RIGHT WORK VS. WORKING RIGHT

"I argued in Rule #1 that 'follow your passion' is bad advice, as the vast majority of people don't have preexisting passions waiting to be discovered and matched to a job. In Rule #2, I then countered that people with compelling careers instead start by getting good at something rare and valuable—building what I call 'career capital'—and then cashing in this capital for the traits that make great work great. In this understanding, finding the *right work* pales in importance to *working right*."

Finding the *right work* vs. *working right*.

Passion vs. Craftsman.

As we've discussed a number of times in this Note, Cal's message is clear: Passion by itself won't get us where we want to go.

It's not about simply finding the right work. We need to work right.

Let's do that as we optimize and actualize and get so good they can't ignore us!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.