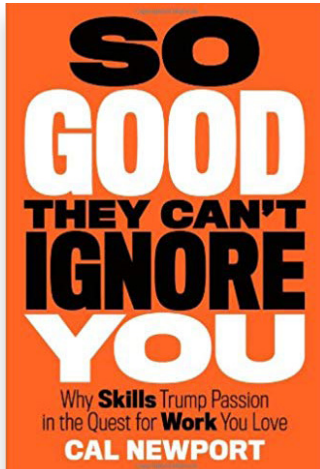


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So Good They Can't Ignore You

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction

The path to happiness is more complicated than simply answering the classic question “*What should I do with my life?*” I became obsessed with answering a simple question: *why do some people end up loving what they do, while so many others fail at this goal?* It was this obsession that led me to people whose stories help cement an insight I had long suspected to be true. When it comes to creating work you love, following your passion is not particularly useful advice. Not only is this conventional wisdom seriously flawed, for many people it can actually make things worse. This leads to chronic job shifting and unrelenting angst when one’s reality falls short of the dream.

So I launched “my quest.” My question was clear. *How do people end up loving what they do?* I needed an answer. The narratives in this book are bound by a common thread which is *the importance of ability*. 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 rewarding 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

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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.

RULE #1: Don't Follow Your Passion

Chapter One: The "Passion" of Steve Jobs

Steve Jobs' offered the following advice in his commencement address at Stanford in 2005:

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

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

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. At one point, he left his job at Atari to take a mendicant's spiritual journey through India.

If a young Steve Jobs had taken his own advice and decided to only pursue work he loved, we would probably find him today as one of the Los Altos Zen Center's most popular teachers. Ironically 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. It was essentially a "small time" money-making scheme that unexpectedly took off.

I don't doubt that 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 eventually love?*

Chapter Two: Passion is Rare

Public radio host Ira Glass once advised some students by saying, "In the movies there's this idea that you should just go for your dreams. But I don't believe that. Things happen in stages." Glass emphasized 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 is to force yourself through the work, force the skills to come; that's the hardest phase," he said.

Noticing the stricken faces of his interviewers, who were perhaps hoping to hear something more

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uplifting than *work is hard, so suck it up*, Glass continues, “I feel like your problem is that you’re trying to judge all things in the abstract before you do them. That’s your tragic mistake.” Compelling careers often have complex origins that reject the simple idea that all you have to do is follow your passion.

A respected forty-year-old theoretical framework known as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) tells us that motivation, in the workplace or elsewhere, requires that you fulfill three basic psychological needs. These needs are 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.

Of equal interest is what this list of basic psychological needs does *not* include which is “matching work to pre-existing passions.” The traits they did find are more general. Competence and autonomy, for example, are achievable by most people in a wide variety of jobs—assuming they’re willing to put in the hard work required for mastery. In other words, working right trumps finding the right work.

Chapter Three: Passion is Dangerous

It’s difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when our society began emphasizing the importance of following your passion, but a good approximation is the 1970 publication of *What Color is Your Parachute?* by Richard Bolles. The premise of Bolles’s guide sounds self-evident to the modern ear. “Figure out what you like to do . . . and then find a place that needs people like you.” In 1970, this was a radical notion. The optimism of this message caught on. *You* can control what you do with your life, so why not pursue what you love? There are now more than six million copies of Bolles’s book in print.

This magic “right” job is waiting for them, and when they find it, they’ll immediately recognize that this is the work *they were meant to do*. The problem, of course, is 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.

Before continuing, I should emphasize an obvious point. For some people, following their passion works. Still, the rareness of this happening underscores my claim that for *most* people “follow your passion” is bad advice.

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

Chapter Four: The Clarity of the Craftsman

Actor and comedian Steve Martin introduced a simple idea that floored me when I first heard it in an interview with Charlie Rose. "Nobody ever takes note of my advice, because it's not the answer they want 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.' If somebody's thinking, 'How can I be really good?' people are going to come to you."

Studio musician Mark Casstevens says obsessive focus on the quality of what you produce is the rule in professional music. "It trumps your appearance, your equipment, your personality, and your connections." He explains, "Studio musicians have this adage, 'The tape doesn't lie.' Immediately after the recording comes the playback; your ability has no hiding place."

To simplify things going forward, I'll call this output-centric approach to work "the craftsman mindset." Irrespective of what type of work you do, the craftsman mindset is *crucial* for building a career you love.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, I want to take a moment to contrast this mindset with the way most of us are used to thinking about our livelihood, "the passion mindset."

Whereas the craftsman mindset focuses on *what you can offer the world*, the passion mindset focuses instead on *what the world can offer you*. This mindset is how most people approach their working lives. There are two reasons why I dislike the passion mindset (beyond the fact it's based on a false premise as I argued in Rule #1). 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. 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. The passion mindset is almost guaranteed to keep you perpetually unhappy and confused.

Chapter Five: The Power of Career Capital

Here are the main strands of my argument, which I call "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 as much career capital as possible. This is why it trumps the passion mindset if your goal is to create work you love.

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This is not some philosophical debate on the existence of passion or the value of hard work. Rather, I'm being intensely pragmatic. You need to get good in order to get good things in your working life, and the craftsman mindset is focused on achieving exactly this goal.

Although almost any work can become the foundation for a compelling career, it has become clear to me that certain jobs are better suited for applying career capital theory than others. So I've devised a list of three traits that disqualify a job as providing a good foundation for building work you love.

- The job presents few opportunities to distinguish yourself by developing relevant skills that are rare and valuable.
- The job focuses on something that you think is useless or perhaps even actively bad for the world.
- The job forces you to work with people you really dislike.

Notice that these disqualifying traits still have nothing to do with whether a job is the right fit for some innate passion. They remain much more general. Therefore, working right still trumps finding the right work.

Chapter Six: The Career Capitalists

Alex Berger is thirty-one. He's a successful television writer and he loves his work. Mike Jackson is twenty-nine. He's a venture capitalist and he also loves his work. Their stories both highlight the somewhat messy reality of using the craftsman mindset to generate fantastic livelihoods. Alex and Mike both focused on getting good, and then used the career capital this generated to acquire the traits that made their careers compelling.

Chapter Seven: Becoming a Craftsman

Studies have shown it takes around ten years, at a minimum, to become a chess grand master. This is the "ten-year rule," sometimes called the "10,000-hour rule," which has been bouncing around scientific circles since the 1970s. Researchers believe 10,000 hours is the magic number for true expertise in performing a complex task.

In the 1990s the relevant question moved beyond asking *how long people worked* to *what type of work* they did. Among chess players with 10,000 hours of practice, a greater number of hours in serious study with books, teachers and coaches, skill development and immediate feedback was the difference between intermediate and advanced players.

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, therefore, we have to approach our jobs

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with a dedication to *deliberate practice*. There is no magic formula, but deliberate practice is a highly technical process. Here are the steps to applying the strategy of deliberate practice.

Step 1: Decide What Capital Market You're In. When you are acquiring career capital in a field, you can imagine you are acquiring this capital in a specific type of career capital "market." There are two types of these markets: *winner-take-all* and *auction*. In a *winner-take-all* market, there is only one type of career capital available which is a specific skill set and lots of different people competing for it. An *auction market*, by contrast involves many different types of career capital, a broad variety of relevant skills that could lead to a job.

Step 2: Identify Your Capital Type. Once you've identified your market, you must then identify the specific type of capital to pursue. In a *winner-take-all* market, by definition, there is only one type of capital that matters. For an *auction* market, it is useful to seek "open gates" or opportunities to build capital that are already open to you. The advantage of open gates is that they get you farther faster, in terms of career capital acquisition, than starting from scratch.

Step 3: Define "Good." It's at this point, once you've identified exactly what skill to build, that you can, for guidance, begin to draw from the research on deliberate practice. The first thing you need is clear goals. If you don't know where you're trying to get to, then it's hard to take effective action.

Step 4: Stretch and Destroy. The good news about deliberate practice is that it will push you into the realm where you have little competition. The bad news is that deliberate practice is often the opposite of enjoyable. I like the term "stretch" for describing what deliberate practice feels like. If you're not uncomfortable, then you're probably stuck at an "acceptable level." The other part of deliberate practice is embracing honest feedback even if it destroys what you thought was good. It's in honest, sometimes harsh feedback that you learn where to retrain your focus in order to continue to make progress.

Step 5: Be Patient. Here's Steve Martin's strategy for learning the banjo. "If I stay with it, then one day I will have been playing for forty years, and anyone who sticks with something for forty years will be pretty good at it." Deliberate practice requires diligence, which is less about paying attention to your main pursuit and more about your willingness to ignore other pursuits that pop up along the way to distract you. Acquiring capital can take time. But if you stretch yourself day after day you will one day look up and realize, "Hey, I've become pretty good, and people are starting to notice."

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

Chapter Eight: The Dream Job Elixir

The obvious next question is how to invest this capital once you have it. Gaining *control* over what

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you do and how you do it is incredibly important. Autonomy, the freedom to live a meaningful life on your own terms, is so powerful and so essential to the quest for work you love. This trait shows up so often in the lives of people who love what they do that I've taken to calling it the dream-job elixir.

If you want to observe the power of control up close in the workplace, look toward companies embracing a radical new philosophy called Results-Only Work Environment (or, ROWE, for short). In a ROWE company, all that matters is your results. When you show up to work and when you leave, when you take vacations, and how often you check your email are all irrelevant. They leave it to the employee to figure out whatever works best for getting the important things done. "No results, no job: It's that simple," as ROWE supporters like to say.

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.

Chapter Nine: The First Control Trap

Control requires career capital as the foundation for creating work you love. You must first generate this capital by becoming good at something rare and valuable, and then invest it in the traits that help make great work great. Control that's acquired without career capital is not sustainable. Investing your capital in control, however, turns out to be tricky. There are two traps that commonly snare people in their pursuit of this trait. The *first control trap* ignores the danger of trying to gain control without enough capital to back it up.

Some people decide they don't have to live life by other people's rules (and it's easy to spot these people, because they often blog about their exploits), and they generally skip over the part where they build a stable means to support their unconventional lifestyle. They assume that generating the courage to pursue control is what matters, while everything else is just a detail that is easily worked out. If you embrace control without career 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

The *second control trap* is at the point at which you have acquired enough career capital to get meaningful control over your working life and the point when you've become valuable enough to your current employer that they will try to prevent you from making the change.

Just because you have the capital to back up a bid for more control, you're still not out of the woods. Your employer will likely now fight to keep you on a more traditional path. They will resist your efforts to gain more autonomy because they realize that gaining more control is good for you but not for their bottom line. You should expect this, because they have every incentive to try to convince you

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to reinvest your career capital back into your career at their company, obtaining more money and prestige instead of more control, and this can be a hard argument to resist.

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 fantastic working life awaits you, but get it wrong by tripping the first control trap in a premature bid for autonomy, and disaster lurks.

Imagine you come up with an idea for injecting more control into your career. This is an idea worth paying attention to because control is so powerful in transforming your working life. Also imagine, however, that as you toy with this idea, people in your life start offering resistance. What's the right thing to do? The two control traps make this a hard question to answer.

It's possible that you don't have enough career capital to back up this bid for more control. That is, you're about to fall into the first control trap. In this case, you should heed the resistance and shelve the idea. At the same time, however, it's possible that you have plenty of career capital, and this resistance is being generated exactly because you're so valuable. This means you've fallen into the second control trap. In this case, you should ignore the resistance and pursue the idea. The problem with control is that both scenarios feel the same, but the right response is different in each. This conundrum is serious and perhaps one of the most difficult obstacles facing us in our quest for work we love.

Chapter Eleven: Avoiding the Control Traps

The control traps put you in a difficult situation. Let's say you have an idea for pursuing more control in your career and you're encountering resistance. How can you tell if this resistance is useful (for example, it's helping you avoid the first control trap) or something to ignore (for example, it's the result of the second control trap)? There's a simple rule to help navigate this control conundrum: "Do what people are willing to pay for."

This isn't necessarily about making money. Instead it's about using money as a "neutral indicator of value" or a way of determining whether or not you have enough career capital to succeed with a pursuit. By aiming to make money, you're aiming to be valuable. I call this *the law of financial viability*. It is a critical tool for navigating your own acquisition of control. This holds whether you are pondering an entrepreneurial venture or a new role within an established company. Unless people are willing to pay you, it's not an idea you're ready to go after.

Notice that the definition of "willing to pay" varies. In some cases, it literally means customers paying you money for a product or service. But it can also mean getting approved for a loan, receiving an outside investment, or, more commonly, convincing an employer to either hire you or keep writing

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you paychecks. This guideline can provide the structure to keep exploring variations on a dream until there's one to pursue that would actually yield results.

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

Chapter Twelve: The Meaningful Life of Paris Sabeti

Thirty-five-year-old Harvard professor of evolutionary biology, Pardis Sabeti, has built an engaging life. I recognized that her happiness comes from the fact that she built her career on a clear and compelling *mission* which is something that not only gives meaning to her work but provides the energy needed to embrace life beyond the lab. In the overachieving style typical of Harvard, Pardis's mission is by no means subtle. Her goal, put simply, is to use new technology to rid the world of its most ancient and deadly diseases.

Sabeti's 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. 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 which is 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. I was drawn to Pardis Sabeti because her career is driven by a mission and she's reaped happiness in return. Plenty of people are good at what they do but haven't reoriented their career in a compelling direction. So how do you make mission a reality in your working life?

Chapter Thirteen: Missions Require Capital

Missions are tricky. Just because you really want to organize your work around a mission doesn't mean that you can easily make it happen. A good career mission is likely to be discovered in the *adjacent possible*. This is the region just beyond the current cutting edge of your field.

It can be a struggle to find a mission before you get to the cutting edge, because if you can't see the adjacent possible, you're not likely to identify a compelling new direction for your work.

So mission, like all desirable career traits, requires career capital. You can't skip straight into a great mission without first building mastery in your field.

Getting to the cutting edge requires expertise. Trying to devise a mission when you're new to a field and lacking any career capital, is a venture bound for failure.

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"I think you do need passion to be happy," Pardis Sabeti told me. "It's just that we don't know what that passion is. If you ask someone, they'll tell you what they think they're passionate about, but they probably have it wrong." In other words, she believes that having passion for your work is vital, but she also believes that it's a fool's errand to try to figure out in advance what work will lead to this passion.

Advancing to the cutting edge in a field is an act of "small" thinking, requiring you to focus on a narrow collection of subjects for a potentially long time. Once you get to the cutting edge, however, and discover a mission in the adjacent possible, you must go after it with zeal which requires a "big" action. If you start by thinking "big," looking for a world-changing mission, but without capital, you can only match this big thinking with small, ineffectual acts. The art of mission asks us to suppress the most grandiose of our work instincts and instead adopt the patience required to get this ordering correct.

Chapter Fourteen: Missions Require Little Bets

Career capital is necessary to identify a good mission. *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 identify a general mission, however, you're still left with the task of launching specific projects that make it succeed. If you don't have a trusted strategy for making this leap from idea to execution, then like so many others, you'll probably avoid the leap altogether.

An effective strategy for accomplishing this task is to proceed by making methodical increments. Begin with small steps that generate concrete feedback—*little bets*—and then use this feedback, be it good or bad, to help figure out what to try next. This systematic exploration can help you uncover an exceptional way forward that you might have never otherwise noticed.

For example, Chris Rock prepared a comedy set for one of his acclaimed HBO specials by making fifty unannounced visits to a small New Jersey-area comedy club to help him figure out what material worked and which didn't. He showed up on stage with a yellow legal pad, working through different jokes, taking notes on the crowd's reaction. Most of the material fell flat. But those *little bets* or *little failures*, combined with the *little victories* of the jokes that connected, provided the key information required for Rock to put together an extraordinary set.

Chapter Fifteen: Missions Require Marketing

The little-bets strategy, I discovered as my research into mission continued, is not the only way to make a mission a success. It also helps to adopt the mindset of a marketer. This led to the strategy that I dubbed *the law of remarkability* which says that for a project to transform a mission into a success, it should be remarkable in two ways. First, it must be so remarkable that it compels people to remark about it. Second, it must be launched in a venue conducive to such remarks. Seth Godin said, "Remarkable marketing is the art of building things worth noticing."

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Mission is one of the most important traits you can acquire with your career capital, but adding this trait to your working life is not simple. Once you have the capital to identify a good mission, you must still work to make it succeed. By using *little bets* and *the law of remarkable*, you greatly increase your chances of finding ways to transform your mission from a compelling idea into a compelling career.

Conclusion

Working right trumps finding the right work. You don't need to have a perfect job to find occupational happiness; you need a better approach to the work already available to you.

Don't obsess over discovering your true calling. Instead, master rare and valuable skills. Once you build up the career capital those skills generate, invest it wisely. Use it to acquire control over what you do and how you do it, and to identify and act on a life-changing mission.

It's a simple idea, but it's also incredibly subversive, as it overturns decades of folk career advice all focused on the mystical value of passion. It wrenches us away from our daydreams of an overnight transformation into instant job bliss and provides instead a more sober way toward fulfillment.