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ATTRACTION

When you first look for jobs, you may be attracted by the headline figures, such as the pay, the perks, or the possibility of quick promotions. But beyond the external attraction of a job is also how it fulfils you internally.

Thus, attraction, from the employee's perspective, comprises of internal and external elements. But with so many things to consider, sometimes we land up in the Cross-Matrix of Confusion, where there are seemingly thousands(!) of nuances to think through.

How do you know what you're attracted to? What should you even be considering as factors?

This is where a compass can help.

Beyond the initial attraction, *sustaining* the attraction is also vital. It's like a fire. Whilst the initial spark can raise a fire, the fire needs to be kept going with constant infusions of wood. Similarly, sustaining your attraction to a particular type of work is about constantly finding things that reignite the fire within.

To understand what engages you internally, we interviewed Shaiful.

FIND WORK THAT FEEDS YOUR SOUL: SHAIFUL'S STRUGGLE

Shaiful's story reads like something out of a drama. From being in six-figure debt, today he's the programming manager at Crane, a co-working space. It seems like a complete transformation.

Today, we are in one of the counselling rooms. Nestled in a comfortable sofa with nicely-scented candles in a corner, Shaiful leans back. He's dressed in a loose shirt, with a different sense of style. His pants are fashionably tucked into his socks. This is his off day, but he's still back to clear some work.

We kick off the interview with a question about his career history.

"I hate the word 'career'. For me, I prefer the word 'occupation'. Occupation is what you do. The word 'career' is dangerously insulating.

"I had to leave school after O levels because back then, when I wanted to study art, it was too expensive. So, I started as a cleaner.

"Later, I created my own zine. After that, I was actively gigging as a theatre performer for schools. Eventually I landed up in a theme park, 'pretending' to be a palaeontologist.

That was fun.

But I became a victim of my own success. I was earning a good pay.

But I opened credit cards. I landed up with 6-figure debt. That was a dark time of my life. I landed up having to do a DCP (Debt Consolidation Plan).

Then somehow or other, I landed up here."

But how has he found fulfilling work?

"I'd like to start with the simplest question. Ask yourself, 'If you could do something in your life, what would you like to do?'

"So many of us side hustle to satisfy our soul. So many of us feed our stomachs, but we don't feed our souls. We need to feed our souls."

Have you fed your soul?

Your response to that question may fit one of two different groups. Either you've found great work that you love, or you're on your way to finding one that you love. The process of finding one, or even being attracted to one is not easy.

That's where this chapter comes in. Being attracted to work is no easy process. After all, if you had money you could live on, why work?

As the School of Life observe in their book, *A Job to Love*, for most of history, we did work that we would rather not do. Sowing seeds. Or emptying chamber pots. You get the idea. A good life was seen as one that didn't involve work.

But somehow, as we came into modernity, the idea that one could enjoy one's work, and make a living out of it, came into being. What was once seen as two complete ends of the spectrum—with one end being making money and the other "feeding one's soul"—became parts of the same whole.

How does one find work that one is attracted to? Naturally? Rather than feeling like work is something that one has to constantly drag oneself to?

Let's start with some myths many have about finding work one is attracted to from within.

MYTH YOU FIND YOUR LOVE

One of the biggest misconceptions towards working at something you're attracted to is the idea that you will "find your passion". Proponents of such an approach suggest that if you reflect on certain questions, take career tests, you will find out what you like, and who you are like. They then suggest jobs you should explore.

Such a "passion" approach can work, but does not produce as much insights as a "*project*" approach. There are two reasons why. The first is because "finding your love" relies a lot on your feelings. It depends on exercises such as reflections on how you've felt about previous work you did. Those feelings can and will change.

There's little objective evidence that your feelings will be a reliable guide towards finding work that you remain attracted to, and

especially when that work is layered with possibly nasty colleagues, a poor salary, or a long commute. In Cal Newport's book, *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, he questioned this "passion hypothesis". Speaking to an employee who followed his passion to become a monk, Newport found that this ultimately led him to deeper unhappiness. Following our passion may lead us to think that there's always something better to do out there. That may be true.

But just because you can do *anything*, doesn't mean you should do everything.

The problem with such an approach, is that we may place too much hope searching for that lightning bolt of insight that we believe will bring us to sudden enlightenment about what we love. But waiting for that lightning bolt may frustrate you.

Secondly, what has happened in the past is no reliable indication of what you will be attracted to in the future.

A better approach is to use what Dr Brian Little suggests: using projects to elucidate what one enjoys and is skilled at. Look at what you're doing now. You may be:

- Learning to cook healthy meals;
- Building a new computer;
- Investing your excess income.

These projects can reveal the skills you're using, and the work you're interested in.

After graduating from the A levels, I had little idea of what I wanted to do. I took the two years of compulsory National Service to plan large-scale events at an organisation I volunteered at. These taught me to lead a team, plan a programme, and work with stakeholders.

After these projects ended, I started "seriously" thinking about what I wanted to do. I read books daily, reflecting through questions that asked:

- What do you enjoy doing in your free time?
- When time flies by, what are you doing?

I read article after article, Googling queries such as how to find one's passion. But these articles failed to instruct me as much as those projects had done. I was close to tearing my hair out from the stress of finding the answer.

Don't make the mistake of *thinking* more than you act. Whilst it is helpful to think through such questions, it can be far more instructive to take on projects that you're naturally interested in.

Build a computer. Write a blog.

Whatever happens along that journey, document that process. Write down the difficulties you face, what you're learning about the process, and what you're finding out about yourself.

Something practical you can do when you're stuck with deciding whether to take on a certain role is to "regret-test" your decision.

Dr Stephanié Say, a research scientist, admits that when she was looking for a job after her PhD, she fell in love with photography and thought of doing that as a career. But she immediately thought about the reality of the job market and how difficult it would be to make a living as a photographer.

She invites young people to think. "What are you passionate about? Because these days, we're so focused on our social network. You see people doing this, and think, maybe I should do that. But then we're no longer aligned to our centre. We're not spending enough time on ourselves."

In deciding whether to push ahead with it, Stephanié is similar to Deddy. She regret-tests her decision. She asks, "Do you want to feel regret or remorse?"

Regret is the feeling you get after *not* doing something. Remorse is the emotion you feel after *doing* something.

Today, if you're facing difficulties knowing what attracts your internal compass, take time to ask yourself whether you would regret the decision you take.

Finding your passion is less about the thinking, but more about the acting out of things you're interested in. Don't find your love. *Work* out your love.

MYTH

PAY AND PERKS MATTER: STEPHANIE'S STORY

When you first graduate, you may be excited about the big pay cheque you'll get. After getting a few hundred dollars a month from your parents, you can finally get a few thousands from your full-time role!

But how important are the external-facing pay and perks you can get from a job in determining what's attractive to you?

Stephanié was once a PhD student living in France. She was looking for a full-time role in Switzerland as she wanted to live there after graduating. But with no networks in Switzerland, she had little way in.

To stay meaningfully occupied, she worked at McDonald's. If it's strange to hear a PhD student working at McDonald's, you aren't alone. I thought the same too! Wasn't McDonald's a step down from life as a PhD student? After all, having a "Dr" prefix in front of your name seemed to represent a certain kind of work and income.

Stephanié didn't see it that way. Despite the lower pay, she saw her part-time work at McDonald's as a means to be meaningfully occupied, rather than falling into a depressive spiral over the lack of a full-time job.

One principle that helped in her job-hunt is *humility*. At McDonald's, she had younger people as her superiors. She was responsible for cleaning dishes, tables, and the toilets. But it was also there that she learnt skills such as customer service and stress management.

Hearing Stephanié led me to see the crucial quality of humility. Despite having a PhD, she didn't think of any job as "beneath" her.

It bears noting. We may turn down offers with salaries that are lower than what we expect. But instead of trying to enter at a higher salary, getting your initial foot in the door will give you a chance to prove yourself.

That's humility. The ability to look past oneself and beyond the pay one expects. Not less of oneself, but more of *others*. And that, is a crucial quality, especially in the first phase of work, where you are attracting employers to you.

No matter how good you think your CV is, the job market is very competitive. Jordan Peterson, in his book, *12 More Rules for Life*, suggests that a helpful gauge is to expect *1 interview for 50 applications*.

The constant array of rejections can cause you to go through periods of self-doubt. If you're not certain about what engages you internally and what the value you bring is, the job application process can be deeply distressing.

This chapter is about how to better understand yourself and what you're attracted to, whilst balancing that with the external attractions of a job.

Going into the job market without knowing what is important to you, and what you want, can be like wandering around with a blindfold across your eyes. You get lost. And you get nowhere.

But before searching for a full-time role, there's a caveat.

A DIFFERENT WAY TO THINK ABOUT EMPLOYMENT

For all the benefits of employment, there's a flip side.

In employment, you're trading your time for the employer's money. The employer dictates your agenda. You may not get to do what you think you're best at. As you're not the boss, you can't decide to abandon work you dislike.

As Jonathan Haidt formulated in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, happiness involves five factors (see Fig. 2.1):

1. Your biological setpoint for happiness;
2. Mental hygiene to keep your mind clear, with behaviours such as therapy, exercise, and meditation;
3. The fit between yourself and others;
4. The fit between yourself and the work you do; and
5. The fit between yourself and something greater than yourself.

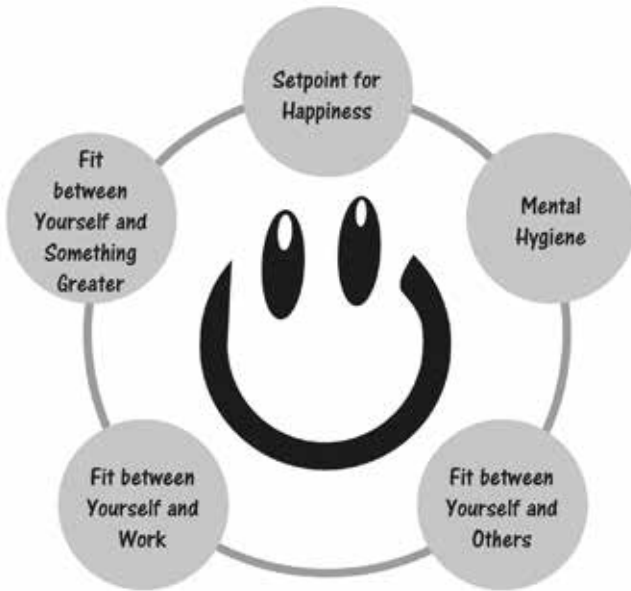


Fig. 2.1 A person's happiness is determined by five factors.

Drawing on the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who pioneered the concept of flow, Haidt found that the happiest people were those who did work that drew on their strengths and yet were

not too difficult for them. This keeps you in the ideal state between anxiety and boredom (Fig. 2.2). You're at a place where the task is not too challenging for you to feel fearful and anxious about, whilst also being in a place where you're not bored by what you're doing.

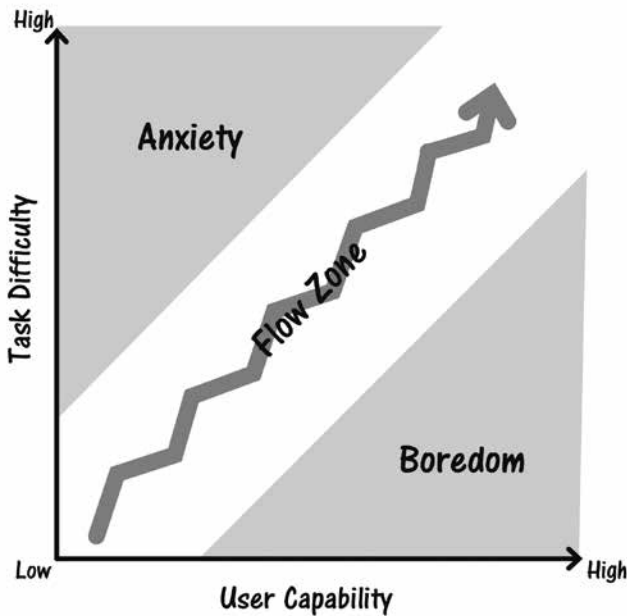


Fig. 2.2 The flow state comes when you're doing things that are just outside your comfort zone.

A helpful way to think of “flow” is to ask yourself whether you're meaningfully engaged with the task.

Imagine you were doing battle with a monster, with weapons by your side. Your skills are the weapons. The monster is the task.

Have you already given up, before doing battle, because you know that the weapons you have will never defeat the monster? Have you mentally “checked out” because it’s too difficult? In *The War of Art*, author Steven Pressfield writes about doing daily battle with the “resistance”, who stands between him and the work.

This relates to your relationship with the work you do. Do you see the work as a worthy opponent, whom you’re willing to do battle with? Or do you instead see it as too challenging a foe, that you don’t wish to take on?

A simple question to ask is: *Am I doing this because I want to or because I need to?*

Wanting to do something springs from desire, a natural, internal attraction to the work. Needing to do something stems from an external obligation, such as knowing that you might be sacked if you don’t do the work.

As a writer now, no matter how many missed swings I have at this “monster” called writing, I want to be in that battlefield, constantly sharpening my weapons for greater battle. Whereas in my previous work, I was fighting with a toothpick. I felt inadequate and incompetent. Knowing what makes you flow will make the difference between whether you’re engaged in work or not.

Secondly, you’re placing your security in the hands of the employer. It depends on how you see it. For some, that may be freedom. For others, that may be restrictive.

Growing up, I saw what could happen when you tied your security to an employer. It can leave you in a precarious place. Across the different financial crises, my parents were retrenched. We had to approach charities for help, getting free groceries such as rice, oil, and salt.

As harsh as this sounds, your employer may not care about your future wellbeing. They care about the organisation's well-being. You may end up giving your all, only to find yourself retrenched.

Therefore, before committing to a job, step back and think: *Might something different like entrepreneurship or freelancing work better for me?*

Few people want to come to a place where they stand in line, asking for grocery items. Considering a life outside of traditional employment and building independence can untether your job security from that of your employer, allowing you greater independence. Whilst it's attractive to have the perks an employer offers, sometimes it's useful to step back and ask yourself if your freedom and independence to work on different projects is more attractive an option.

But if you still believe that employment is for you, there are three elements of an employer's offer you should consider.

THREE ELEMENTS OF AN ATTRACTIVE OFFER

I propose a different conception of work. *Work is what enables you to build physical, social, and mental wealth.*

Focusing on these elements brings us to look beyond the monetary compensations we get, towards a more holistic understanding of what we can get from work.

Let's first start with some common misconceptions.

MYTH

More Work is More Wealth

Some may equate work to *wealth*. Work and wealth are different. However, in their minds: Work = Wealth.

The traditional narrative has been: If you work, you will eventually get wealthy.

Not necessarily. Work is a means whereby you exchange time, a finite resource, for money, an infinite resource. There are two crucial arguments here.

Firstly, money is not wealth. Naval Ravikant's definition of money is still the best I've found:

Money is social credits.

On the other hand, Ravikant says:

Wealth are assets that earn as you sleep.

In employment, you're exchanging your time for money which you can use in the future to get something you might want. You work for an hour now to get \$20, so that you can buy dinner *later*.

Whatever you do now, is it building wealth, or simply more money? Think of yourself as creating a wealth, money-making machine that's able to churn out more and more money, *without* you tending to it.

Secondly, money is infinite. Because governments can always print more money. Time, however, is a finite resource that you cannot buy, sell, or find more of.

School teaches us to work harder and harder and that more work equals to more wealth. But it's not the case! That's why you see the CEO and the cleaner earning stratospherically different pays, even though they work the same hours. The equation "Work = Money" is not always valid.

Instead, when you think of work in this form (work \neq money), you're no longer wedded to the traditional notion of work as one that comes with a contract. Society has taught us to seek a stable, secure income as the way to work. That's what work gives you

in the form of a contract. A contract gives you the security of a regular income. It may not be the only way to provide for your means.

I hope this encourages you to break free of the societal narrative that getting a full-time job is the *only* way to be financially secure. When you look past that, you realise that the most important thing isn't for you to get a fancy job title at a famous company. It's to build long-term *wealth*.

Looking at work this way may encourage you to look at gigging as a possible way to work. Gigging is where you're your own boss, working for no specific company.

The traditional route of employment may not work for everyone. Today, you may struggle to get a job, because you're unconventional and unlike the other candidates out there. You're constantly rejected. If that's you today, you are not alone. Here's a fist-bump.

But you *have* something special. Focus on that. How special and unique you are and how able you are at generating value independently, rather than thinking of work in terms of generating value for a company.

Let's now look at the three elements that may broaden our horizons of what an attractive offer may be.

Emotional Capital

Emotional capital is building up an asset base in a Bank of Emotions. Building up this base of positive emotional assets at your job is vital. But then you might ask: *How would I know this when I haven't worked in that particular full-time job?*

It's true that you can never fully know if the company's culture will build you up until you enter a job full-time. But there are ways to sense the culture that works for you. Look back at your past internships, projects, or part-time jobs.

- What have been the types of people you've enjoyed working with?
- What were the qualities of the teams you felt energised by?

Grace, a lecturer on workplace relations at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), acknowledges that it's hard to tell what a company's real culture is like unless you've been in it for a while. But she suggests ways to validate what you hear, see, and read.

For example, in the videos of the company's facilities, if the gyms or sleeping pods are new and shiny, it may show that no one is using them. Or sleeping pods may suggest how long you are expected to work!

Her next advice?

“Critically assess job descriptions. The more buzzwords there are, the more sceptical you should be. Whereas the more specific they are about a certain job role or responsibility, then the more “real” it's likely to be.

“Naturally, there are also websites like Glassdoor you can scan, or ask your own social networks. It pays to check first before accepting any job.

“It's not that the information is unavailable. I think it's partly because of laziness or maybe we don't want to know. Perhaps you want what's promised so badly that you're willing to close your eyes to what is there.”

When you look at the job you're applying for, look at the job scope.

- Do the tasks involved make you feel good about yourself?
- Are those tasks that you have done before, and felt great about executing?

Don't take on tasks just because they are part of the job. Take on tasks that are part of *you*. The job doesn't become something you drag yourself to, but is something you wake up, excited to do.

Another easy way to find out about this is to look back at the times when you've done things for the sake of doing it, rather than because you were asked to. Look at your hobbies. How you spend your free time. You may find insights there.

Human Capital

Think of your personal human capital, as described below by Carl Richards, as three things:

1. Your time;
2. Your skills; and
3. Your energy.

These are the things you bring to a job. Think of it as an exchange. You're exchanging your human capital in time, skills, and energy for financial capital.

Realistically, you can only use your work to grow your skill capital. How? A job would ideally allow you to develop skills you want to develop, at an ever-growing acceleration. You would ideally want to be at a place where you find yourself constantly pushed to the edges of what you thought was possible.

In every superhero movie we watch, we love the heroes because the limits of their superhero power is tested. We see a villain that's big enough to challenge them. Would you watch Superman if all he had to defeat was a tiny ant?

We love Superman because we see him suffering at the hands of kryptonite, which saps his power, and leaves him at the hands of the villain.

In much the same way, in our own careers, we crave challenge. Not comfort. We want to grow the skill that allows us to rise to bigger and bigger occasions, fighting bigger battles, and entering

caves where we have no assurance that we will ever emerge alive. That's what the best jobs do. They grow your base of skills so that you feel even more capable. To do that, ask for the opportunities that excite you. You don't get because you don't ask. You will be surprised at what happens when you start asking.

Whilst chasing a challenge can be ideal, balance this with realism.

Dr Candice Chee, the founder of MentorsHub, a mentoring initiative connecting industry leaders with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, frequently advises mentees to adjust their expectations of the first job.

"Many young people have the expectation that the first job should be their dream job. Young people have a lot of expectations for their first job. They expect the job to be high paying, to have a good title, good package, with a branded company.

It's important to be realistic in one's expectation. If you come with such expectations, your disappointment will always be there.

The first job, is hardly going to be your last job. The jobs that we get when we are young, are mostly stepping stones. Look at the first job as the opportunity where one can learn and get the exposure, to the industry or to the function, and learn from it.

Build your experience, and your credentials from there. That will help you to move on to your next job. If you were to do this conscientiously, you'll be making very pragmatic steps towards achieving your dream job."

Candice's advice seems contrarian. It's getting in to learn, rather than getting in to contribute. Doing the small things will grow your human capital so you eventually do the bigger things.

It's akin to the 20-mile march Jim Collins and Morten Hansen describe in *Great by Choice*. In 1911, Roald Amundsen and Robert

Falcon Scott, two seasoned explorers, were competing to be the first person to reach the South Pole.

They used two different approaches. Amundsen focused on hitting a steady mileage per day, even though there were days when he could go more. On bad days, Amundsen still headed out.

But Scott chose a “lumpier” approach, pushing hard when the weather was good and choosing not to move when the weather was bad.

Eventually, Amundsen reached the South Pole first.

It’s a story that holds lessons in finding what you’re attracted to. Rather than looking for the job that offers you a big leap in pay, passion, or purpose, Candice’s advice is to view jobs as a steady progression to climb upwards or get across. The winners are those who persist at improving their skills in contributing.

Financial Capital: Ser Jing’s Advice

One question Candice often hears is: Should you chase pay or passion?

“I’d be loved to be paid for my passion. But, we all need pay to pursue our passion.

“Pay gets us started. But passion sees us through.

“It’s okay to start a job that puts meals on the table and a roof over your head and work your way to pivot towards your interest.

“Passion can grow on you and the surest way to know if it will, is to be doing it. At different career and life stages, our needs change. One should be pragmatic while keeping your eyes on the horizon.”

At this point, we question a topic that’s often seen as taboo. *How far should pay factor into the attractiveness of a job?*

Money. What is enough for you? How much do you want to earn at a job to feel happy? How do you balance between passion and pay in choosing a job?

Pay builds up financial capital, which can eventually compound on its own. Money cannot grow if you don't work. But capital can.

How do people working at jobs also build up their capital? Could we come to a point where we were working because we wanted to, and not because we *needed* to? Now that's independence. You're unshackled to your job and can stop it when it no longer serves your needs.

To understand how others did that, I spoke to Ser Jing from *The Good Investors*, a blog written by two investors who managed to marry their passion for investing with their jobs as fund managers.

Ser Jing has a degree in engineering science. After graduating in 2012, he worked with *The Motley Fool Singapore*, which gives investment advice through online newsletters. He worked as a staff writer and also as a co-leader of the investment team.

I was curious why he chose this role when he could have gone into more highly paid roles such as investment management. After all, Ser Jing managed to grow his family's investment portfolio by an annual return of 19.5%, compared to 12.7% of the S&P 500 (Standard and Poor's 500). It would seem like he would achieve good returns (and a better pay) as an investment manager.

This is where Ser Jing steps back and shares his decision-making process in balancing pay and passion. After all, being thoroughly acquainted with the money people were making as asset managers, how did he stay away from that?

Firstly, Ser Jing shares a transformational moment in his life. In his early 20s, he had a friend from school who passed away suddenly. That had a big impact on his life.

"That got me thinking about the idea that nobody knows when their time is up. It's important to do something that makes me happy as much as possible.

“A lot of young people fail to see that your time here is finite. Oftentimes, I hear people say, ‘I want to try to make as much money as I can.’ They end up doing something they have no interest in. That’s a pity.

“If you don’t know when your time is going to come up, you might work your entire life, however short that might be, stuck in something that you derive no joy from. Money may not always be everything in an attractive job offer.

“If we don’t know when our time will be up, what is the best way to live our life? Or how not to live it? The best answer I have is doing things that I enjoy as much as I can.

“I craft my work in a way such that I minimise the unpleasant things attached to the investment management business. And make sure that the positives outweigh the negatives. So that in the process of monetizing my passion on all the things I enjoy in life, I don’t get burnt out. I put in the proper infrastructure to enable me to be in this for as long as possible or as long as my mind is functioning.”

It’s clear that Ser Jing doesn’t want to be stuck doing something that gives him no joy. Whilst money is an important factor, he balances it with a pursuit of joy.

He told me, “Just a few days ago, I was telling my wife that I came upon this realisation that many work to earn money to do things they like.”

It bears food for thought. Rather than trying to earn more money to buy things, or engage in experiences that bring you joy, why not find work that naturally brings you joy?

Secondly, to understand whether the jobs were truly attractive, he took time to understand different industries. He once knew a friend who wanted to enter the money management business.

“But when he entered, he became very disillusioned because it was not what he thought it would be. I think the mistake he made was that he did not try to find out as much as he could about the industry. He saw things from the outside and didn’t understand what it’s like from the inside. His career path could have been better if he had spent time understanding, finding resources online or physically, or meeting people. It’s like understanding the actual underbelly of the Beast before stepping in.”

But perhaps of greater note was how he managed eventually to build financial freedom despite working in a job that might have paid less than a mainstream, financial career.

To build greater freedom, he shares the story of his good friend’s cousin. At one point, he purchased a very expensive vehicle. His entire income went into paying for the vehicle, leaving him with little to save.

It’s a behaviour that he notices happens to people of all ages. “They make money to buy things to impress others.”

It’s a concept called the hedonic treadmill.

“People’s desires often increase together with your earning power. But your material desires can remain stagnant over time, decline over time, or grow over time.

“The trick is to ensure that even if your material desires grow, it grows at a much slower pace compared to your income.

“Sometimes, your material desires overshoot your earning capability, even if your earning capability is very high. That causes people to be trapped. They can’t leave jobs they dislike, because they are in debt. And they can’t escape from that. Because their material desires increase so much, compared to the increase in their earning potential. That doesn’t create the gap that enables them to be freer.”

As you look at the job you’re looking for, you may be tempted to pass on ones that don’t pay as well.

I half-expected him to share with me ten hacks to getting one million dollars. After all, he is a fund manager. But his sole principle is to ensure that you spend consistently below your earnings. That way, you can invest yourself in a job you are interested in, even if it does not pay as well.

But the overarching idea is *memento mori*, remembering that that your moment on Earth is finite.

Finances are *infinite*. We can always have more of it. But time isn't. With that limited time, how do you want to find fit?

EARN YOUR OWN KEEP

Understanding what kind of job attracts and engages you is a long-term game. To ensure that you have the finances to last the distance, and not have to take a job that has little attraction to you, *build a skill that brings an independent income*.

There are two key suggestions in the above principle.

The first is “building skill”. Naval Ravikant loves saying, “Become the best at what you do.”

Keep redefining it until this is true.

Know what your skill is, and how to develop it. Many people live life trying to chase after the next “hottest” skill.

But it's your *natural* skill that will take you furthest.

Thriving in your transition from school to adulthood is a process of recognising what your skill is, developing that skill, and using that skill as a lever. Like a pole vault, you vault yourself over the swamp of adulthood.

That way, rather than wading through the muck of job applications, interviewing repeatedly, you are vaunted to a place that recognises your value, because of the skills you show.

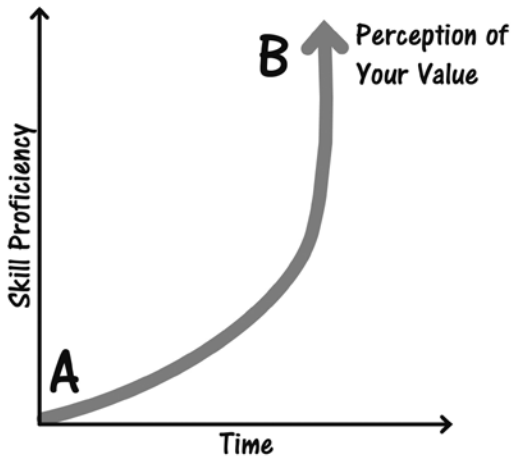


Fig. 2.3 The value perception exponential.

Value perception doesn't increase linearly. It increases exponentially (Fig. 2.3). Above, you can see more clearly what I mean. If you're starting out as a programmer (at A), your skill proficiency may be low.

But those at point B, where your skill is much higher than average, are valued much highly. That's because you solve problems few people can. You create value faster than what others can. You deliver value far more reliably than others. It's why you observe phenomena like a Google programmer being paid \$300,000 a year, whilst someone from Shopee might be paid \$84,000 a year.

This sounds impossible. After all, as a young person, you may not feel that you've sufficiently put out a body of work that would make people go, "Wow, this is someone special."

But the internet has given you permission to publish anything you want, to showcase the value you can bring to the world. The

only way to illustrate your value, and to vault across the swamp, is to consistently, and strategically, ship.

Shipping is about putting your skill out there for feedback. As a programmer, you ship a piece of code. Or as a marketer, you present an ad campaign that converts at rates above industry.

The missed opportunity in how we use the internet today is using it for consumption, rather than creation. We seldom think about harnessing the internet to hone our creative skill. Instead, we've used it to be mindless consumers of whatever the Internet feeds us.

Gigging to Get By

Understanding the gig economy can teach us to earn our own keep. There are two forms of gig work. The first is freelancing, where you do something creative such as writing, art, or performance to serve a client's needs.

The other is through platform work, involving more menial labour, such as food delivery, driving, or last mile parcel deliveries. Many people choose this route because of the flexibility in work schedules and the quick payouts.

Besides, if you need to put food on the table, it's difficult to think about other things you can do to support yourself. No one knows how long it will take to find a job you're attracted to. It could be a week. Or a year. We never know. Going for something certain, like platform work, is attractive.

There's a caveat. You may be stuck there longer. Through platform work, you're doing something that may not grow your base of skills. After all, what can you place on your CV?

Please don't get me wrong. This isn't an insult to those who depend on this to sustain themselves. But you may find yourself further behind in finding a full-time role that leverages on your skills.

For example, Boon Lai, a university graduate turned delivery rider, told the Institute of Policy Studies: “You face a lot of hurdles as a rider in finding a job, your resume is not really a resume because a resume should essentially show experience, but what is my experience the last few years? And being a food delivery rider, you don’t have the achievement that will stand out from hundreds of thousands of applications.”

There’s also a murkier reason to understand. It’s not in the best interests of platforms like Grab to ensure you get a full-time, professional role. If they do, they lose a stable base of platform workers whom they do not need to provide any assurances (such as retirement benefits) for. In a full-time role, where you’re developed to grow your base of skills, this may not happen in the gig economy role.

In *21 Questions for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that this produces an “underclass” of workers who follow instructions in an app, and no longer contribute creatively to the world. Platform workers have skills but cannot live out their full potential because they don’t have the credentials employers recognise.

It becomes a vicious cycle because the longer they work in these jobs, the longer they stay there. It keeps platform workers stuck. Why? Because it pays just enough to feed you, whilst taking up the time, energy, and motivation you need to upskill.

Eventually, employers find it difficult to hire them because they cannot see how exactly platform workers can add value.

What then can you do?

Firstly, do the bare minimal to support your own needs. Calculate how much money you need to survive. Estimate the hours you need to work to reach that income. When you hit that number, stop working. Doing this allows you to devote more time towards developing yourself, finding a full-time role, rather than spending all your waking time and energy in platform work.

Secondly, know your skills. An earlier chapter shared how the first step to knowing yourself is knowing your strengths, leveraging that so others trust you with a job.

Thirdly, as Jay Ng from Weshine (who was mentioned in Chapter 1) suggests, engage in microlearning. There are online courses today that give you the chance to learn. Employers appreciate that. Take time to engage in learning employable, marketable skills.

Lastly, find a community. It will be difficult to find the motivation to break out of it alone. Going through it together with someone else will make the process easier.

Nurture Your Skill

To thrive in your transition, to truly fall in love with your work, nurture your work like you would nurture a relationship with another human being.

Treat it as a craft. Care for it like you would care for a gleaming jewel in your possession. Because your skill is your most valuable asset.

When you initially discover your skill, you will find that your skill level sucks. It's akin to playing the hard level on a computer game when you've trained with easy mode. You struggle. It's messy, you don't know what you are doing, and you wonder, "Are you sure this is my skill?"

Stick with it. Even if people say your initial work isn't great. As you develop your skill, the early work you produce with your skill isn't going to be great.

Keep practising. Nurturing your skill is playing the long game, not the short one. You never know when you break through, reaching a world-class standard.

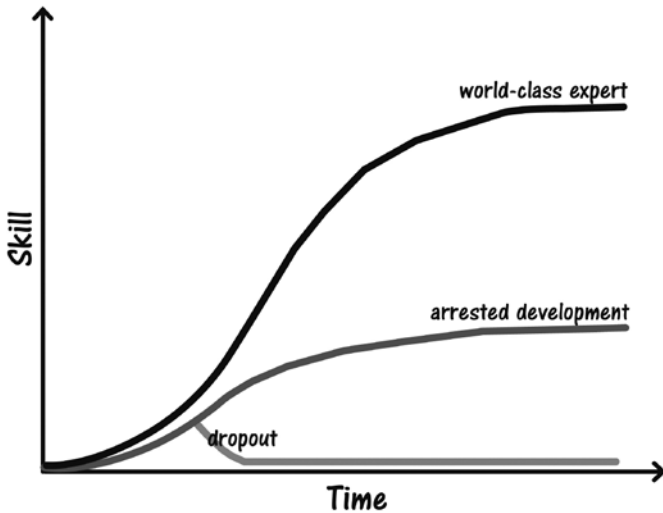


Fig. 2.4 A graphical explanation of how skill can grow over time (adapted from Angela Duckworth's book, *Grit*).

Starting out, there's a period of slow to almost no growth. That's the time when you're tempted to throw in the towel, and say, "It's not working. I give up."

But you will see yourself making certain improvements, or that over time, practice gets easier, and the products you're creating become of higher quality (see Fig. 2.4.).

Let's take the example of a complex skill today that many are learning.

Investing.

How do you get better at it? Practice, then perform. Rinse and repeat. Investing is one of the best examples of a soft and hard skill because of how it's an art *and* a science. Whilst having the technical

knowledge to read financial statements is important, determining the quality of the company is more of an art. There is no exact number you can place on the value of the company.

Investing also has a clear measure of success. If your bet earns you more money, you've made a good bet. If it loses you money, there may be a problem in your process.

When you start investing, you may first learn investing from books. You may practise by making practice trades on a platform using fake money. Slowly, you make your first trade with real money. Eventually, the share price moves up or down. That's the performance.

As you practise more and more, you find your skill at identifying good companies, and investing in them, becoming much better. Your bets also begin to pay off more.



Fig. 2.5 Deliberately improving your skill level is switching between the learning/practice and performance zones.

Therefore, the important thing is to have a process whereby you practise and perform (Fig. 2.5), and reflect on that performance.

An Independent Income

The second suggestion in the principle of “building a skill that brings an independent income” is “an independent income”.

Generating an income independently, without the help of your employer, is liberating. Even if you were retrenched tomorrow, you can still earn your own money. Diversifying your income source away from only your employer ensures you are not plunged into desperation when you’re sacked.

Welcome to the world of freelancing. It’s not as hard as you think. As professional speaker Yasmine Khater once said, “Clearly package your offer and ask for what you’re worth.”

Freelancing is recognising the problem you solve, and asking for what you’re worth.

What are you offering? Do people want it?

To test if people want to buy the skill you’re providing, start small.

START TINY

Bill Gates didn’t start his career by creating Microsoft. He started with a small piece of code, typing out small programs on a machine.

He started tiny.

Tiny is transformational.

That’s how you become great. By starting small. Super small.

As you look at where you are now, I hope the previous sections gave you a clearer idea of what you can be the best in the world at. Now, ask yourself if there are tiny behaviours you can do to improve your skill.

Try what BJ Fogg, the professor who inspired the likes of Instagram, suggests in *Tiny Habits* (see Fig. 2.6). Place your aspirational goal in the centre. Let's say it's: Be a world-class programmer/marketer/investor. Then place all the behaviours that could contribute to that outcome. As soon as you write down those behaviours, write down what you think you can do to make that behaviour possible.



Fig. 2.6 According to BJ Fogg, a Swarm of Be(e)haviours will help you achieve your aspirational goals.

Next, ask:

- What is stopping me from doing this?
- What can make it easier for me to do this?



Commit to doing the small action that will contribute to the outcome you want. For example, if you want to be a better programmer, you could commit to writing 10 minutes of code daily. This small action seems so tiny that it almost seems too easy. That's the point. By making it easy, you make it done.

This chapter has spoken about how to understand the three aspects of a job offer—emotional, financial, and the human capital you will grow from it, to know if you would be attracted by it. But it's also provided practical steps on how you can thrive in the meantime, whilst you find a role that attracts you.