TOOOG: Welcome to the Financial Mentor Podcast Episode #17 with Cal Newport. In today’s episode, we’re going to pull back the curtain on the “follow your passion” myth that is pervasive in success literature. Understanding the distinctions we’ll share today is critically important for achieving success in any field, and it’s at the root of nearly every success I’ve had in my own life. Until I ran across the information Cal will share with you today, I always did this intuitively. Now, you can do it consciously. It will help you on the income production side of your wealth building equation, as well as on your long-term investment returns, if you take today’s information to heart.

INTRO: Welcome to the Financial Mentor podcast where you get unconventional insights into wealth-building that actually work. Discover data-driven strategies and learn from a wealth of experience so you can take your financial skills to the next level, with your host, Todd Tresidder.

TOOOG: Today’s guest is Cal Newport, from CalNewport.com. Welcome to the show, Cal.

CAL: Thanks, Todd.

TOOOG: Cal is the author of several books, including his most recent “So Good They Can’t Ignore You,” which won mention on several of the best business books last year. The subtitle of the book is “Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love.” But, that’s not why I wanted to have Cal on the show today, because I don’t think that title fairly describes the value that’s in this book. The lessons Cal is going to share with you here are much deeper, and have much broader implications to your wealth, happiness, and life satisfaction when you really get what he’s teaching.

I first became a fan of Cal’s blog a couple years back, as he was developing the material that ultimately became this book. His writing showed an unusual depth of thinking that isn’t hoodwinked by popular myths. It is both intellectual and practical at the same time. This should come as no surprise when you look at Cal’s credentials.
He’s currently an assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown University. He got his PhD from MIT, and his undergrad from Dartmouth.

To properly introduce Cal here, I need to first develop a concept that will travel with us throughout this podcast, and future podcasts as well. That’s the idea of a second layer of knowledge. And, it’s something rare and valuable worth pursuing. The first layer of knowledge is usually something that’s superficially obvious – it’s a half-truth. Let me give you some examples.

- A good parent rewards their children for positive behavior.
- If you want to lose weight, you’ve got to eat fewer calories.
- Or, in my field, the conventional wisdom is that retail investors should invest in low-cost, passive index funds, with conventional asset allocation. Everybody says that.
- And for the discussion today, the popular success notion is that you should follow your passion.

The way it works is, the first layer of knowledge is usually over-simplistic, and just plausibly true enough to pass the smell test. It sort of works often enough, but not totally. Because it is simple, that also makes it easily understandable by the masses, causing it to rapidly spread and become conventional wisdom. Usually it has a distinctively intuitive kind of human appeal to it, such as the passion hypothesis.

We want to believe that following our passion is how we grow to success. But, unfortunately, the first layer of knowledge doesn’t hold up to careful scrutiny. When you dig deeper, you learn about anomalies and situations where the half-truth conventional wisdom doesn’t quite work right.

That deeper probing is what opens up that second layer of knowledge, and that’s what Cal is going to do for us today with the passion hypothesis. Second layer knowledge usually involves more complexity and dynamics, which makes it harder to spread to the masses, explaining why it doesn’t usually replace the first layer knowledge as conventional wisdom. Most people don’t want to work hard enough to understand more complex truths; they want simple answers, and they live with the mediocre results that come from those first layer half-truths. I love second layer knowledge because it gives you a competitive advantage over your peers. You can produce greater results more reliably thus allowing you to succeed in ways that mystify those who are stuck in those first layer half-truths.

Everything I teach in this podcast involves pursuit of second layer knowledge, which is why I wanted to spend a little time rambling about it before we get Cal going here.
Whether it’s wealth building, investment strategy, or personal freedom, the second layer of knowledge is what will give you the best results.

That’s why I wanted to have Cal on the show today – to share second layer knowledge for maximizing career satisfaction and income while taking on that half-truth of the passion hypothesis. What Cal’s going to teach you today maps perfectly into step one of my Seven Steps to Seven Figures Course, where you learn all about the habits and attitudes that literally pull you towards wealth and success. His thoughts are echoed throughout several sections of that course. So, Cal, are you ready to get things started?

CAL: Sure. Sounds good.

TODD: Was that intro reasonably on track for your beliefs?

CAL: Yeah, I love that terminology. I think first layer, second layer is a good way of explaining what I’m interested in, which is understanding the second layer.

TODD: That’s why I wanted to do this. You and I never talked before this interview, and yet I was confident you’d be at home with this idea: first layer and second layer of knowledge because it just travels throughout your writings.

CAL: Yeah, it’s true. In fact, it’s what I’ve been doing from the very beginning. My very earliest books were about college – how to do well in college. I was a student when I wrote them, but even way back then, I think you could describe those as second layer knowledge books. How do successful students become successful? Forget the clichés, what’s really going on? And that probably started me down this path.

TODD: And, what works as success in one field applies in other fields. You’re seeing it apply in your career now, aren’t you?

CAL: That’s right. And more generally, just the technique of moving past the first layer, and grappling with the second layer – and I think grapple is the right word. It’s complicated, it’s confusing, it takes some time to understand it. The models aren’t necessarily clean. But, if you put in that time, regardless of the pursuit, you get big returns.

TODD: So, why do you go for it then? If it’s complex and you have to grapple with it and it takes effort, why do it?

CAL: The returns. It’s all comes back, and my first experience with this type of thinking was college. I was a college student. Like a typical college student, I was doing fine. I worked hard and had reasonable grades. But I decided I didn’t like staying up late at night, which, of course scuttles most conventional wisdom about how you study or do well in college. So, I launched an experiment the sophomore year of college, where I’m
going to systematically investigate and experiment with study habits, and try to understand, okay, what really produces good grades, and what doesn’t? And, after that point, I got an A in every class, in every semester until I graduated, without ever studying past 8:00 at night. That experience gave me the sense that, yes, second layer knowledge is hard to get as compared to first layer knowledge, but it can give you massive rewards.

TODD: It’s funny you share that story. In my college career, my first year, my freshman year, I battled the first two quarters. The first quarter was horrible. And, I went in because I was a sharp high school kid, got into U.C. Davis, the University of California system. I always did fine in high school, never had to study, never had to work. Boy, did I wake up when I hit college. I had to develop that second layer of knowledge. I had to learn how to do it. It took me – the first quarter I totally fumbled, and basically that’s where it poking holes in my belief structure – and by the second quarter, I had a good system, and by the third quarter I was on track with almost all A’s, and then the final three years was almost straight A’s.

CAL: That’s a common story. I ended up interviewing, for one of my books, top national winners, Rhodes scholars, etc., and for another I interviewed early inductees into Phi Beta Kappa. So, some of the highest scoring students in the country. And, in both cases, these groups were surprisingly relaxed, and underworked even compared to the group right below them. They were studying much less and were much less stressed than the people who were throwing some combination of hard work and first layer of knowledge at college.

TODD: I never once pulled an all-nighter, either.

CAL: It just didn’t seem fun to me.

TODD: Let’s get into the topic, which is your book, “So Good They Can’t Ignore You,” and it’s in the show notes. I’ve got the link to it if anybody’s interested in it. I like the book, I highly recommend it. I’d like to enter this with a little saying, which is “every act of creation is at first an act of destruction.” So, let’s get the conversation going by first defining the passion hypothesis, and then explaining what’s wrong with it.

CAL: The passion hypothesis says that if your goal is to end up loving what you do for a living then the best strategy is to follow your passion. I think it’s very important, right off the bat, to separate the goal from the strategy here. People often mix those two up. But, the goal of ending up loving what you do is separate from the specific strategy of identifying a pre-existing passion as the basis of your career choices. So, the passion hypothesis is that strategy is the right way to achieve that goal. No matter how you look at it – anecdotally, through the scientific research, actually going out and finding people
who love what they do and ask them how they got there, all three of which I did, you find that the passion hypothesis just does not hold up.

**TODD:** Ok, so what’s wrong with it?

**CAL:** There’s two main problems. The first problem is it assumes people have easily-identifiable, pre-existing passions that are well-matched to the type of jobs available in the modern knowledge economy. We just don’t have evidence that that’s true for most people. In fact, if we really think about it, why would we expect a 20 or 21 year old to be hard-wired somehow for a particular knowledge work job, and he just needs to do some introspection to discover what that is. That’s the first problem. For many people, there’s simply not something they would identify as a passion, so this advice just can’t apply.

The second problem is, even if people are passionate about a topic – in other words, they exhibit a strong affinity or interest for a topic – we don’t have evidence that that’s all that important for ending up with a long-term, meaningful, and fulfilling career. Just because you really like something, doesn’t mean you will now enjoy a long-term career on that topic. We have any number of passionate amateur bakers or photographers who end up miserable once they open a professional bakery or professional photography studio. A fulfilling, meaningful career in the long-term is way more complex than simply “I like this, and now if I do it for work, I’ll like my work.”

**TODD:** When I was in high school, I loved auto mechanics. I was into hot cars and fixed up my ’68 SS396 El Camino and all that stuff. Once I was a mechanic as a profession, working weekends and nights, I hated working on other people’s cars. It was a totally different ballgame.

**CAL:** Yeah, and what’s weird is when people just hear the first layer idea here, oh, if you love something, go do that – intuitively you feel like, yeah, I guess that kind of makes sense. But if you step back even a little bit, you see the edges start to fray. And, in fact, there’s this major divide between that clichéd advice and decades of research we have about workplace satisfaction. Workplace satisfaction is a very highly researched topic, because it’s very relevant to the bottom lines of companies, therefore money is available to do the research.

And, if you look at this research, we find an almost unanimous consensus that the factors that lead to satisfaction in the workplace are varied and include things like a sense of autonomy, a sense of competency, a sense that you’re having an impact on the world, and that you’re connected to people. We have these varied traits that have nothing to do with matching your work to some pre-existing interest. These varied traits we know from decades of research really matter. If you say all that matters is “Oh, I like
this, I’ll do it for my job,” you’re ignoring all these things the research tells us are more important.

**TODD:** Yeah. So, I’m going to get into workplace satisfaction in a second. What I want to do right now is really develop this passion hypothesis, because both you and I are into it, but I want to make sure the listeners are really fully grounded in what you’re doing here. One of the instances everybody’s going to argue with is, they have the story of the star athlete who chose their passion – you use the example in your book of the baseball player. And, then you point out how that’s the exception that actually proves the rule. Can you go through that?

**CAL:** This is what happens when you say follow your passion. It typically doesn’t work. People say what about this guy I know, he’s a baseball player. He knew he wanted to do it from the beginning. I think there’s two relevant responses I’d want to bring up. The first relevant response is musicians and athletes, in general, are not good examples to generalize from, unless you’re interested in becoming a musician or athlete. They have very specific, somewhat idiosyncratic paths that are required to make a professional career in those fields. Their paths, and how they get there don’t really generalize. So, they’re not very good examples.

More generally, sure, there are people who end up knowing early on, this is what I want to do, and that’s what they end up doing and they’re happy. But, when I went out there to systematically study examples of people who love their work, it turns out those cases are quite rare. I’m not arguing that case doesn’t happen, but it’s rarer than we think. Typically, those aren’t the people who need help with their careers.

**TODD:** There’s another piece in the passion hypothesis that makes people less happy. I’d like to see you develop that before we move on to career satisfaction concepts.

**CAL:** It’s an interesting point. In the two decade period where follow your passion rose to become the most prominent piece of career advice, we also see a corresponding decrease in job satisfaction. And, the deepest decrease happening among the youngest group in the workforce - the group that’s most affected by this advice. That’s correlation, not causation, but I think that’s a nice sort of compelling hint at least that this advice to follow your passion is not just harmless, but can actually make people more unhappy. We see this in several common ways.

For one thing, if you think that the way you end up happy is that you find your true passion and follow it, what happens when that’s not happening for you? You can’t identify a pre-existing passion, or you thought you were passionate about something, like auto mechanics, and you take the job and you’re not liking it. Now you’re out of luck. The only piece of advice you’re given doesn’t work, and the result is confusion, and anxiety, and chronic job hunting. The idea that you’re always falling a little bit short.
Follow your passion isn’t just a harmless idea that can’t hurt. I think it’s leading a lot of people in my generation to be worse off, to feel more anxious and uncertain than if we were having a more complicated discussion about it.

**TODD:** I absolutely agree. It’s almost like setting a hurdle that most people will never clear. You think I’m supposed to be passionate about my work, not accepting that work can be hard, and work has difficulties. Running a business is about solving problems and overcoming challenges. If I had to hold up against the passion hypothesis every day, I’d probably have to change everything I do. It’s this hurdle that creates inherent dissatisfaction.

**CAL:** Especially once you dive deeper into this topic and realize, for example, that competency plays a big role in satisfaction. By definition, you’re not going to be competent the first year or two of a job. Then you realize you’re setting yourself up to be perpetually worried and unhappy because it’s almost impossible to be passionate about your work, say, in the first year that you do it. You just don’t have enough skills to have a sense of autonomy or competency. If you come into a job with this test of do I feel passionate about this from day one, you are guaranteeing that you are never going to be satisfied. You’re basically guaranteeing that you’re always going to feel like you’re falling short.

**TODD:** Then you begin the job shuffle, and you’re always at the intro level; you never drove deep enough to go into a passion state.

**CAL:** I quote a lot of people from my generation in one of the chapters from my book. I went and found these quotes from a book about twenty-something dissatisfaction, and they’ll floor you. You’ll see someone who says, for example, “I figured I always wanted to be in politics, and I made it happen. I got to D.C. I have this job pretty high up in a congressman’s office. I’m in the thick of things, it’s everything I ever wanted, there’s really interesting thing happening… but I’m not sure this is my true passion, so I’m looking for another job.” You hear stories like that, and hear them time and again so that’s why the saying follow your passion is not a harmless quip. You are actually setting people up – especially young people – for difficulty if you give them that advice.

**TODD:** So the passion hypothesis becomes this first layer of knowledge, or the dangerous half-truth I talked about at the beginning. You probed this deeper, and came to some interesting conclusions that opened up the second layer of knowledge for you. And so I’d like to explore them one-by-one. Do you know which ones I’m going to discuss, or do you want me to mention them?

**CAL:** You mention them, so I understand how you’re breaking this down.
TODD: I’m breaking it down according to how you listed out career passions are rare, passion take time, and passion is a side-effect of mastery. If you want to go through each one and develop them in your own words then people will know what you’re doing here.

CAL: Sure. We take the first one, career passions are rare. That’s the result of a fairly simple exercise. I went out, first of all, and found a large group of people from varied fields that self-reported a sense of passion for their work. And then I asked them to simply walk me through your whole work life, starting in college through everything that happened, what was going along the way. I found in that exercise that it was very rare to find someone that knew in advance, oh this is what I want to do, and that’s what they ended up doing and were passionate about.

Their paths were always significantly more complex than that. They didn’t know in advance what they wanted to do. There were false starts, uncertainty and serendipity. Their paths were much more complex, and actually much more interesting than what you’d expect if you believed the advice – figure out what you’re passionate on day one, you’ll love your work starting on day two. That’s the “career passions are rare” point.

The second point was career passions take time, and the basic idea there is that, again, if you study people who end up loving what they do, you almost always find passion grows along with their mastery. We can get into the details more later, but at a high level, what happens is as you get better at what you do, you gain more leverage over your working life. And, as you gain more leverage, you can steer it towards things that are interesting and resonate with you, and away from things that aren’t. So, almost always we find passion grows with mastery – that means it takes time. You shouldn’t expect it day two in the job, because you don’t have any leverage yet. You haven’t built up skills.

TODD: Yeah. So that pokes the hole in it. That opens the door to the second layer of knowledge. So, now we’re going to go into the self-determination theory, which was how you started realizing what was at the core of what creates job satisfaction.

CAL: Right. Self-determination theory is one of the more popular explanations in the field of motivational psychology right now for what leads people to a sense of motivation for their work. And, it identifies that traits like autonomy, a sense of competency, a sense of connection to other people are vital. If you don’t have these things then it’s very difficult to feel a sense of motivation or satisfaction for your work. It’s important to see that none of those really have to do with whether or not your job is a match for some mythical, pre-existing, innate passion. They’re more general than that. You can gain those traits in many fields. What matters is whether you have those traits in your
working life, if you’re going to end up passionate and satisfied and motivated for what you do.

The second layer of knowledge that I’m pointing people towards is, let’s leave behind this cliché, and let’s look more at this complex picture. There are these more complex traits that we know from decades of research really matter, and let’s ask, how do we actually get those types of traits into our working life. That’s a more complicated question, but it’s also a more fruitful one.

**TODD:** One thing that was interesting when I read the book, and I ran across the self-determination theory, I looked at that and thought, it doesn’t seem like a complete list to me. There were other aspects that were left out of that list that bothered me. Then, later on in the book, you went into the traits that make work great. And, you added the pieces that I felt were missing from that earlier list. You had creativity, impact, and control that added to the list, and I felt that combining those six is what really made a complete list.

**CAL:** The list grew after spending enough time with people who loved what they did that I saw there was – you could almost think of them as sub-traits. Control is very similar to autonomy. A sense of impact on the world; that may be a sub-trait under competency, but that turned out to be really important. Creativity, for a lot of people, was a big deal. The sense that they could be creative was a big deal in loving their work. Another trait on that list you didn’t mention was a sense of mission for their work. That showed up a lot, that people who were passionate about what they did had an over-arching mission for what they were doing with their professional life. As I dug deeper, the basics for motivational psychology sort of filled out to this deeper list.

**TODD:** So, we’ve got this concept of the passion hypothesis, which we call the first layer of knowledge, which is a myth. It’s actually a dangerous myth that hurts a lot of people. Then, we’ve got these building blocks of the self-determination theory and what makes a satisfying career. Now, you come back and do an end-around. You say how we’re going to develop these into building blocks, and you start developing this concept of career capital in ability.

**CAL:** That’s right. So, how do you get these traits? We have these traits - we can call them self-determination theory plus. We’re taking self-determination theory and filling it out a little bit more detailed…

**TODD:** On steroids.

**CAL:** On steroids, yes…a sort of pumped-up, Barry Bonds self-determination theory. We know those traits are important. How do you get those traits in your working life? Again, if you go back and study people who successfully got those type of traits in their
working life, the answer, I guess not surprisingly, was basic economics. Those traits are valuable, because they lead people to really enjoy their work. They're also rare. Not that many people can have great autonomy over what they do for a living, and a sense of competency, sense of creativity, or impact. Those are rare traits - valuable traits.

So, basic economics says you have to have something valuable to offer in return. And, that’s what led me to the notion of career capital, which in some sense is my metaphor for career development. As you build up rare and valuable skills of your own, your value in the marketplace grows. So, you can imagine, metaphorically speaking, that your stores of career capital grow. You, then, can invest that capital into four valuable traits, such as: autonomy in your career; more creativity in your career; more of a sense of impact in your career. It really is like an economic exchange. If you want more of these traits in your life that will make you feel more passionate, then you have to actually build up something valuable that you can offer in return. That becomes the rhythm of building a career you love. You’re deliberately building valuable skills, then deliberately investing them into traits that you think are important, and you repeat again and again. The career that you’re passionate about is something you craft, not something you stumbled into because you’re able to figure out what your true passion was.

TODD: I love the point you make in the book where you say an entry level job is more likely to have you changing the water cooler than changing the world.

CAL: Yeah. Career capital theory makes clear why this idea that you should love your work from day one is nonsensical. The whole thing is the more skills you have, the better things you can bring into your working life. You absolutely would not expect to be loving your work, say, at the entry level. But, that’s exactly what the passion hypothesis tells you to expect, and this is where we get the real disconnect between the layer one, the layer two knowledge.

TODD: Go ahead and develop the career craftsman as the way to develop your career capital.

CAL: You can imagine two mindsets. The passion hypothesis gives you what I call the passion mindset, which says you’re always asking, “What does my job offer me?” And, if it’s not offering you the right things, then you’d better go switch that job. That’s the passion mindset, the one that causes anxiety. I say we should replace that with the craftsman mindset, the career craftsman mindset, which says, ok, what are my current stores of career capital, and if I'm not happy with them, how do I grow them?

Growing career capital is an act of craft. You’re trying to systematically and deliberately build up skills, like a skilled woodworker might learn how to use a new tool. You’re
building up skills systematically like a craftsman so your career capital stores grow because as they grow you’re going to be able to do more and more interesting things with your working life. It’s a completely different way of seeing your career; you stop asking what’s it offering me, and ask instead, what am I offering it, what value am I offering to the world?

**TODD:** Did you pick up on the connection between that and the John F. Kennedy quote: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country?”

**CAL:** I think it’s a great connection. That’s basically, we need that equivalent statement made, but maybe switch country for career. And, you’re right in my wheelhouse.

**TODD:** You have another line in there that I really want to get in the podcast so people can hear it. I just thought it’s supporting it, which is: “It’s not about finding the right work, it’s about working right.”

**CAL:** I just think it’s really important to emphasize that this notion that the match matters is just not supported by reality. We just put way too much focus on the match. What specific job am I taking? How does this specific job match with my personality, with my passions, with my innate interest? And, that really is the wrong question. People who end up loving what they do is because they work right. They deliberately build skills, they build that capital, and they’re very aggressive in how they invest it. I think that’s actually a very nice analogy to a lot of what you hear in the financial independence community.

To connect it back to your community, financial independence is not just, for example, building up capital. You actually have to, then, use it; be willing to spend it as your income flows, so you could perhaps retire and not have to work at a normal job. Just accumulating the capital is not enough. You have to craft a lifestyle that takes the most advantage of it. That’s basically what happens in the career space. You have to build skills, and then be pretty aggressive about using those skills. You have to be willing to shape your life and your working life pretty aggressively once you have that capital to back yourself up.

**TODD:** There’s a quote you have in the book: “stop focusing on self-promotion, and instead focus on becoming better.” When I first ran across that, I thought, wow, that’s a central piece of what I’m trying to do here at FinancialMentor. In the internet marketing space it’s so easy to get caught up in self-promotion and trying to do that, and yet, you see the businesses that really grow are the ones that just focus on getting better and delivering more value. I just thought that was a really powerful thing right at the center of the title of the book: Become so good that they can’t ignore you.

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**FinancialMentor.Com | Podcast | Episode #17 Transcript**
CAL: I heard this great quote once from Douglas Rushkoff, who’s a media critic that also does quite a bit of consulting for big companies, on marketing and brands in the sort of digital age. He has this great quote in his most recent book, Present Shock, where he says what he basically is advising businesses now about social media is your goal should not be to launch a social media campaign; sort of figure out how to use social media to maybe change your brand, or control the message. Your goal should be to do good things, and keep in mind that social media will make it easier to talk about you when you do. As the company, do good things that people want to talk about. Don’t worry about the technology. That’s just going to help people talk about it once you’ve done it. I think that’s a great analogy for thinking about your career. Do good things, be valuable to the world, and good things will come.

TODD: Yeah. Social media is just a communication medium. The internet is just a communication medium. It’s still about creating a good business: become so good, they can’t ignore you.

CAL: I feel so strongly about that. I’m somewhat out on the extreme. I’m someone who writes and blogs about never having a social media account, for example. Never had a Facebook account, or Twitter account, or Google Plus account. I don’t even have a general email address where you can just write me. I’m putting my chips in one basket. I want to create good content, and ultimately I think that’s way more important than spending a lot of time trying to talk about my content, or interact with my readers in different sorts of ways. I’d rather just put that time into making the next thing I produce that much better because ultimately that’s what matters.

TODD: You cracked me up on your Facebook post where you took people to task on Facebook. At the very end you say you don’t have a Facebook presence and a Twitter presence, then you say, by the way, if you’ve got complaints about this idea, go ahead and post it on Facebook or Twitter.

CAL: Exactly. Complain all you want on your Facebook wall...

TODD: ...because I’ll never see it.

CAL: ...I’ll never see it.

TODD: That was great, you got a good laugh out of me on that one. What about the argument that the craftsman mindset is only viable for those people who already feel passionate about their work?

CAL: This is an argument that I wish I had actually gone into in more detail in the book. I touch on it, but it was the number one pushback I received after the book came out,
and basically, in all the speaking I’ve done since the book came out, I’ve had to spend a lot of time on this topic. I should have given it a big tier one chapter.

The issue is basically this: people will argue in response to my philosophy that the only way you can end up putting in the hard work required to become so good you can’t be ignored is if you are passionate about that topic in advance. You need that passion to fuel you through the hundreds or thousands of hours of practice necessary to become really good, and therefore, they argue, I’m not really saying anything different than follow your passion. Because, it all comes back to first figuring out what you’re passionate about.

That is the number one complaint I hear about my philosophy. What I want to emphasize is that that argument is completely wrong. If you go and study people who end up becoming really good at something, what you find out is, their passion for that subject grows along with their skill. It’s a snowball effect. They start, maybe just because it seemed interesting, their friend was doing it, whatever – their start, particularly people who end up really good at something is somewhat serendipitous; they might have a little bit of interest in it.

**TODD:** A lot of careers almost develop by accident. People just end up with a right connection, or whatever.

**CAL:** And what we see is, I’m citing here, in particular, studies of virtuosos, from the University of Chicago, who studied this giant corpus of virtuosos in the musical, physical, and intellectual fields. What they found in this research was that these people did not have auspicious starts. It wasn’t some notion of “I’m meant to do this.” They tended to stumble into it, be it mathematics, neurosurgery, swimming, or violin - they tended to just stumble into it. But, what the researchers found is that as they got better, that built up their confidence, built up their sense that this was a part of their identity, and therefore built up more motivation so they could get to the next stage. As they got better and better, their interest grew, it became strong, more important, and eventually, it blossoms into a full blown passion.

When you see people great at something, they’re most definitely passionate about it at that point, but it’s almost definitely also true that they did not start with that same amount of passion. You do not have to have this mythical, incorruptible, perfect passion for a topic before you start trying to get good. It’s enough to say, hey, this is interesting; now let me just get going just trying to do that well. The interest will snowball along with your skills.

**TODD:** There’s a hard phase that everyone must get through. I get this in my coaching all the time, where people come up with these prosperity mindsets where if you don’t have fun with it, if you don’t love it, you shouldn’t do it. And, I just think that’s bull.
There’s a hard phase in every career. There’s a hard phase in every job. You’ve got to get through it.

**CAL:** Things are hard. Things that are interesting, that have an impact on the world, that give you a real sense of satisfaction— they’re hard. And the reason people persist is not because they’re fun. Look at any literature on deliberate practice. It’s hard and not fun to improve with something, but people stick with it because it’s deeply fulfilling. They think this is important. This is where they’re putting their chips down in life. They see progress. They know they’re better at it now than they were a year ago. They know they’re becoming more elite. They’re able to cash in this skill for more control over their career; and that’s what drives you. If you want to just have a good time, go to an amusement park. If you want to have a career that’s fulfilling, that’s satisfying, something you’d be passionate about, keep in mind that’s going to involve a lot of hard work.

**TODD:** That bridges perfectly to this next idea, which is the idea of courage culture. I want to tee it up with an example. In wealth building, there’s three asset classes: business, real estate, and paper assets. A lot of people, when you’re in a W2 job, there’s boundaries on your income, which you can raise through what we’re discussing here, obviously. But, a lot of people try to branch out on their own, and in the process of branching out on their own, they end up embracing this concept of courage culture, so if you would go into that, please.

**CAL:** The courage culture is something I encountered quite a bit when I started writing in this space, or researching in this space. This is an idea that is especially popular online, and in certain types of books that says the main thing holding you back from whatever the goal is, being more passionate, having more wealth or what have you; the main thing holding you back is a lack of courage. Society is trying to hold you back and keep you in the status quo. The most important thing you can do is build up the courage to reject that, and be bold, and take a risk and do something new. I don’t like this idea, because I think it completely obscures what really matters. If you want to do something new and succeed at it, you have to commit to doing it really well. You have to commit to putting in a lot of work making it the main thing you’re focused on, be willing for it to be hard. To me, that’s not necessarily an act of courage, it’s an act of commitment. We prefer to talk about the courage because that’s easier. It’s easier just to say, I’m bold today and I’m going to quit my job. That’s not that hard to do. But, if I say instead, no, you need to learn how to do this and it’s going to take you about hundred to a thousand hours, and it’s going to be hard, it’s not so fun anymore. But, it’s that latter path that’s probably actually going to lead you somewhere successful.
**TODD:** It’s amazing you use that dirty little four-letter-word commitment. That’s actually step 3 in my [Seven Steps to Seven Figures process](#). I’m trying to find a new name for it, because nobody wants to embrace this concept of commitment. And yet, nothing happens without it.

**CAL:** I think that’s absolutely right. I wrote an article once that was controversial where I said “don’t get started.” I don’t like this mindset of hey, the most important thing is just get started and it will all work out at the end. I say, no, if you’re trying to do something valuable then that has to be something you commit to at the exclusion of tons of other things. So, that has to be an incredibly serious decision. If you just start things on a whim then you’re not acknowledging the reality that anything worth doing needs to be a major source of your focus over a very long time period. I actually say, don’t get started until you’re ready to say this is what I’m doing. I’m committing to this. I’m going to ignore the other shiny options that pop up along the way. I’m putting my head down and I’m going to grind away at this for the next couple of years. It’s such a big commitment that I say don’t jump into starting until you’re ready to do it.

**TODD:** I’m agreeing with you, and I want to create a distinction here because I want to be careful with this. That is, I’m in full sync with you on the commitment concept, and I very carefully pick and choose those things I get started on. I’m with you on it, but I want to create a distinction. When you do start, don’t get hung up on analysis paralysis, and don’t try to perfect your path because you’ll never know. You just have to get started in the first logical place you can by diving into it. It’s like Buckminster Fuller’s concept of “Precession”. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that?

**CAL:** I’m not.

**TODD:** It’s how you drop a pebble into water and the waves go out ninety degrees from the path of the pebble, then they hit the shore and bounce back. It’s the same thing in pursuing any career. You don’t know what will result in success in any field. I didn’t know investment strategy or anything when I first started. I just dove right in with the first logical step, and then I corrected and adjusted as the waves come back to me from what I’m creating, and go forward. If I don’t take that first logical step, those waves never go out and they never come back to me. You can get hung up in analysis paralysis, and I just want to create that distinction because I know this from coaching people. They will get hung up and try to figure out what they’re committed to, and what is their passion, and they’ll get all worked up about these ideas. It’s like – just do your best, decide that you’re willing to go for it, which is kind of the commitment thing, and then you just have to take that first logical step. As you get the info back, you correct and adjust, and you might drop that path. But that’s ok; at least you got started on something.
**CAL:** I think that’s an important distinction. This is a discussion I’ve had before. I know Scott Young, who you’ve interviewed on your show. For example, he and I had this discussion sort of publicly a few years ago, as well. In some sense, there’s a difference between what you do inside of commitment versus outside. So, there’s this notion that you have a very small number of things you commit to in your life, and that’s a really big decision, and you don’t make it lightly, and once you make it, you stick with it.

On the other hand, once you’ve committed to something, what do your efforts look like within that commitment? And there, things are more frenetic because you don’t know. I completely agree with you. Once you’ve committed to something, you can sit down and lay out the path, for here is exactly how things are going to unfold. Within a commitment is this notion of do the first step, have clear metrics, measure yourself, try to do it better, stretch yourself to improve, but don’t try to figure out your whole path in advance. All that advice suddenly makes sense. I think that’s a great distinction. This notion that you’ve got to take action, get started, measure and improve – all of that makes sense, but you have to restrict it within, ok – here is something that I agreed to commit to spending a lot of time on to the exclusion of other things.

**TODD:** The important concept in commitment is you only have so much time. You only have so many resources. As we’re pointing out here, there’s a career craftsman mindset. It takes time, it takes effort. You can’t spread yourself too thin, because what happens is a substitution effect: what you put in one, you’ve lost in another, and you can only achieve so many things. That commitment point is really important, and yet, we have to take action too. It’s this artistic dance. I like how you explained it – they almost exist in two different planes of thinking.

**CAL:** I think that’s absolutely right. You need to be able to rattle off at most two things that basically, this is where I’m putting my chips down. I did this. I made this decision when I was 20 years old. I said, ok, here it is – I’m at college, I’d been rowing crew, and then had a heart issue that took me off the team so I said, ok, I have to figure out what I’m going to do with my time now. Over that year I made the decision – here’s what it’s going to be: writing and computer science. That decision has not changed in the last decade. During the last decade those are the only two things I’ve put my attention to, and then, nothing has changed since then.

Within there, though of course, all sorts of starts and stops, trying this and that, research directions that fizzled, book ideas that didn’t come to fruition. Within it, it’s very frenetic. But, if you try to get me to do something that’s outside of those two things, well, good luck, because that’s where I’m putting my chips down. Now, after ten years, things are just starting to get interesting for me, and that should give you a sense of the time scale for some of this.
TODD: The distinction I create is there are two different types of goal-setting technology. What we’re talking about here is what works for process-oriented goals, which are things you never outlive, and you can never cross off a list. So, things like your health, your wealth, your relationships, and your career. All of these things go with you until you’re six feet underground. Those require a very specific type of achievement technology, which is what we’re addressing here; career craftsman, deliberate practice, all these different things. That’s completely different from a goal that you can cross off a list like buy a house, get a car, lose 20 pounds, whatever it is. All those, you can accomplish, you cross off your list. That’s an entirely different goal-setting technology, and that’s where more of the popular wisdom comes in. The popular wisdom works for the goals you can cross off your list. It does not work for the process oriented goals. It just so happens the really juicy stuff in life is all the process oriented goals.

CAL: I like that distinction. It allows us to describe some of the issues that are happening in terms of people’s careers and thinking about work. We can describe, in some sense, part of the problem is, they’re trying to apply the short-term goal strategies to these process-oriented long-term type goals - having a working life that is fulfilling for you. That mismatch creates a lot of problems. That idea of this is just something I can knock off. I need to match my passion to my job and now I’m set. That mismatching in goal thinking is causing a lot of issues.

TODD: It’s really fun talking with you about this stuff. You and I have never talked before, and you even pulled out this number of two things, and when I’m working with coaching clients, I’ll explain that really process goals you’re limited to about four things. I’ve seen people do three or four things really well. Once you go out to about five, it’s a juggling act, and all of them suffer as a result. We’ve never talked, and you pulled out this number too.

CAL: I think it’s no surprise. You could take 50 people who have craftsman-style careers that they really love, and they’re all doing about the same thing. If you talk to them, they’re not at all surprised about anything we’re talking about here. They’ll say, oh passion, I am passionate, how did I get here, this is complicated. I focused on this skill. They know this. The people who don’t know it are those that are flailing around and hoping to find that right slogan that somehow is going to turn around their working life in a week.

TODD: Alright, so why don’t you connect all of this career capital stuff to the deliberate practice, the concept of deliberate practice, the 10,000 hour rule, which most listeners will be familiar with from Malcolm Gladwell popularizing it, and then the type of work required to build career capital.
CAL: Once you know this philosophy that what matters is your capital - the more career capital you have, the better you can make your career – it changes the way you think about work. The main activity you should care about in your work is systematically building this career capital at the fastest rate possible. Okay, so if you look into the research on how people built up rare and valuable skills, you can’t avoid coming to this concept of deliberate practice, popularized by Anders Ericsson, the psychology professor at Florida State University. Malcolm Gladwell and others have written about this, but it’s this group of professors who really innovated it. It says, ok, if you study people who get really good, the way they do it is this very deliberate type of practicing where they don’t just do what they’re already good at. They systematically stretch themselves beyond where they’re comfortable with and generate harsh feedback about whether they’re succeeding or not. That stretch, just like a pushing your muscles beyond their capability to grow more muscle, is what builds skill.

Therefore, if you put these pieces together, you see this is what I should be doing in my career. I should be applying these deliberate practice techniques, like you might do if you’re a musician, chess player, or athlete. Apply these same deliberate practice techniques to the key skills in my career because that is going to grow these skills rapidly and therefore grow my career capital as fast as possible. This will get returns to my career quicker. It gives you a completely different vision of your career that is much simpler. It’s not about am I networking properly, does my LinkedIn profile look right, and have I found my right passion? It is how can I become more valuable this month? It’s just a much simpler way of seeing things, and it’s also a way that tends to actually provide tangible, positive returns.

TODD: Can you explain how deliberate practice works?

CAL: The key to deliberate practice is you must identify the particular skill you’re trying to improve. Then, you have to push yourself beyond where you’re comfortable into a state of strain. The right analogy is a muscle: your bicep’s not going to get larger if you keep lifting what you’re already comfortable lifting. You actually have to lift a heavy weight that causes your muscle to fail because then it grows.

It turns out this is how you grow almost any cognitive skill as well. You have to basically push yourself beyond where you’re comfortable and put yourself into a state of strain. It doesn’t feel great. Your mind is going to yell for distraction or relief, but it also can be a deeply satisfying thing because the strain is what grows your skill. It’s a very deliberate process that essentially most knowledge workers try to avoid. Most knowledge workers try to avoid that state of strain at all costs. As soon as their mind gets a little bit strained they want to see email, they want to see Facebook - something that can relieve that mental strain. But if you, instead, see these skills as building a
muscle then they’ll deliberately build them. You can have these massive returns, grow in ability very quickly compared to your peers, and start to get rewards pretty quickly.

**TODD:** This is counter-intuitive. Most people try to avoid discomfort. They want to avoid strain. And, yet, this is taking you deliberately toward pursuing discomfort.

**CAL:** Imagine you’re an athlete. Then this is the right thing to keep in mind. Your job is like an athlete.

**TODD:** Interval training.

**CAL:** Interval training… it’s hard.

**TODD:** It’s really hard.

**CAL:** You can’t be a professional athlete if you never want to be out of breath. But, that’s essentially what the modern knowledge worker’s doing with this state of distraction that they often work in. It’s as if they’re an athlete that says I want to become great at this sport, but I’m not willing to be out of breath. As soon as I get tired, I want to take a break.

**TODD:** And that interval training analogy holds up. That’s essentially what you are doing if you look at your accountability structures to produce results. You’re setting yourself up for interval training as a knowledge worker.

**CAL:** You are setting yourself up to do the thing that’s going to strain your current cognitive abilities. It’s not going to be comfortable, but by doing so you get better at it. That’s hard to do. That is not natural. Knowledge workers avoid it in the same way that athletes have to have coaches, or they’re not going to do it either.

**TODD:** Let’s tie this back to wealth building for a second. I just want to make sure this is really clear for everybody. When you increase your career capital, you’re increasing your earning capacity, and that increases your ability to save, if you hold your expenses constant. So, it’s a direct relationship between your earning capacity and your wealth building capacity as a saver. You can also use this concept to increase your investment knowledge, to produce higher returns and get a lower risk profile. You can increase your knowledge around personal finance so you make fewer mistakes. These are core concepts that can be applied directly to your wealth building.

**CAL:** I think that’s absolutely true, and I would add to that something I saw common in studying this craftsman concept. It also gives you great time affluence. It gives you great control over your time. If you’re going for early retirement lifestyle then something to keep in mind is that as you systematically build your skills, you can also keep your earning essentially constant while reducing the amount of hours you have to put into it,
which is something I’ve seen a lot of people with this mindset do. They can essentially say, as I become better and better, I can essentially make more and more per hour, have more control about when I work, and how I work.

I interviewed, for example, a data-base developer, computer programmer in the book who got so good that she turned down promotions, turned down things like having to show up at the office and be there late and be in charge of lots of people. She turned down the money that would have brought her. Instead, she set up a lifestyle where she would work four or five months then take the rest of the year off, then go back and work four or five months again. There’s quite a lot you can invest this type of capital into that can give you a new way of earning money using money and structuring your lifestyle.

**TODD:** You’ve got so much good stuff in this book that’s useful. Again, the book is *So Good They Can’t Ignore You*, and again, you’ll find it in the show notes. There’s stuff we’re going to have to skip over because of time here. I’ve got to respect everybody’s time here. Things like control traps, you’ve got a really elegant section on mission, finding your state of mission and how that’s done properly. But, there are a couple things I do want to tie in before we wind up here. One of them is this law of financial viability. I run into this a lot with wealth building, where people get hung up on this process of building wealth and making money versus making an impact in the world. So, this law of financial viability - I just really liked it.

**CAL:** That’s actually a term that was given to me by the entrepreneur, Derek Sivers, who used this philosophy to run his own sort of highly-iconoclastic, successful, entrepreneurial career. He says money serves a very important purpose because people don’t like to give up money. They don’t like to give up money unless they’re actually getting value in return. It’s a great way to get a neutral indicator about how much value you’re bringing into the world. Derek was someone who doesn’t care about money. He literally sold his start-up and put the money into a trust so it could be given away to charity.

**TODD:** This was CD Baby, right?

**CAL:** CD Baby, a twenty-something million dollar sale, he gave it away. He doesn’t care about money from the point of view of wanting to have it.

**TODD:** He was a musician. He came from the music side.

**CAL:** He came from the music side. But, he used money throughout his whole career to help understand how valuable something was and how to make it more valuable. He used it as feedback so he understood, ok, this is a valuable thing. He used it to make decisions. He started, for example, he was working for Warner Brothers and said, should I become a full-time musician? He said, I know how to test it. When I can make
as much money on the side as a musician as I’m making in my job then I know I’m good enough to do that. He waited until that happened, and then he became a musician. Then he started CD Baby and wondered should I do this full-time, get big investments, scale it up. He said, let me wait to see if I can make enough money from this that it’s paying as much as I’m making as a musician. Once he got there then he knew, okay, this is actually a valuable idea and went into that full-time. He said along the way, I was just using money as a scorecard. It’s an incredibly objective indicator of how valuable your skills are, and how valuable something you’re trying to do is.

Whether or not you care about money from an accumulation point of view, it’s an incredibly good tool to understand how valuable am I? Where are my real skills? What still needs to be polished?

TODD: It’s a great concept, and it totally blends the ideas that you’re doing good in the world with making money, because if people are willing to pay for that value then obviously they value it. They want what you’re producing.

CAL: You’re doing something worth doing.

TODD: You have another concept in here which really ties in to what my listeners would be interested in, which is this idea of little bets. I think it’s so important. I teach a lot about risk management - as you build out your business and build out your portfolio. This concept of risk management. Little bets are a great risk-management concept.

CAL: I think it’s an idea I really enjoy. It basically says, once you’ve committed to something, and you’re trying to figure how to get maximum value out of this direction you’ve committed to that a great strategy is to have concrete projects that can fit into a relatively constrained timeframe. Usually on a scale of one to four months is good although it could be slightly longer. A project that you can take to completion, and it will give you clear feedback about how successful it was.

Launching a lot of these little bets is actually a fantastic way to essentially feel your way through the fields you’ve committed to towards a lucrative or valuable niche or path. Instead of trying to sit back and in advance say I’m going to make a master plan and go after it, you instead say let me start launching bets. I will look at the feedback I get, use those to launch the new bets, and over time I’ll start evolving toward this great unexplored niche in my field, or a path that’s really going to return me a lot of value.

TODD: It’s a powerful, powerful concept. As we’re trying to wind this up, you list out the five steps toward the work you love. Can you do them off the top of your head, or do you want me to prompt you on them as we go through them? I’m trying to create an overview of this entire discussion so people can walk away with it, and really understand it.
CAL: I’m not going to remember off the top of my head exactly how I named those, but let me do off the top of my head my summary advice of how you go from zero to a work in life you love. Step one is to find something that is interesting to you. This does not mean that it has to be your one true passion. There could be many, many different things that are interesting to you. That’s fine at this stage - just flip a coin.

Once you find something interesting to you then commit to doing it really well. Commit to putting in the time to build up rare and valuable skills in that field, and recognize that it can take a while before you actually start to get tangible returns on that skill-building. That’s step two.

TODD: Define “a while,” so people can get a perspective on what you mean.

CAL: A while can take up to a year before you really start to get recognition if you’re new to something. You’ll start to get small recognition; oh, you can actually do this better than someone off the street. There’s a snowball effect; the rate of return is going to grow after a while, up to a certain point. It takes a while before you get recognition, but once you start getting some recognition for something then you’re going to have a nice acceleration for a while.

TODD: The further you climb, the rarer you become.

CAL: Exactly. And then, you’re going to hit another plateau farther up once you get to elite level skills. Eventually somewhere up there you’ll plateau, but that’s fine. By the time you get up there you’ll have great leverage over your career. Which brings me to step three, which is, once you start building real career capital then that’s where you actually have to have the courage to use it as leverage. If you just become really good at something but take no control of your career, you don’t take the skills out for a spin, then you could skill end up miserable. There’s plenty of brilliant workaholic lawyers who are miserable. It’s not just enough to get good at something. You have to then take step 3 by using those skills as leverage to take control of your career and steer it toward the trades that resonate with you. Pick something interesting, put your head down and get good. As you get good, use that skill as leverage to take control of your career.

That three step process very consistently leads people to work in lives they love.

TODD: What I’d like to do to close this up is use Steve Martin’s quote in the 2007 interview with Charlie Rose. And, it’s where the title of your book came from. He was often asked to give advice for aspiring entertainers, and he said “Nobody ever takes notice of my advice, because it’s not the answer they wanted to hear. 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.” I love that statement because it so ties into what I get on the wealth building side. Everybody wants to know what’s the hot stock? They
want to know the magic trick. And, here we’re laying out this concept of deliberate practice, career capital. We’re showing how it’s really done with real people.

I just want to thank you, Cal, for coming to the show and sharing these insights.

CAL: Thanks, Todd. I enjoyed it. It sounds like we’re definitely on the same page with these ideas.

TODD: This is not stuff I run across all the time. Again, how can people find you that are interested in learning more about your work?

CAL: [www.calnewport.com](http://www.calnewport.com) will bring you to what you need to know.

TODD: You changed over your site, because you used to be at studyhacks.com, and now everything is over at calnewport.com, correct?

CAL: Studyhacks was the name of the blog, but it was always at calnewport.com. But, I finally did a professional design for the site, after x number of years. Made my website so good, it can’t be ignored.

TODD: Alright, Cal. You’re in that rare group of people that have had a positive impact on my work and on my life. Thank you for coming to the show and sharing this with our listeners.

CAL: Thank you.

TODD: And one final note, if this podcast added value for you then a great way to give back is to head on over to iTunes and subscribe or leave a review. Thanks for listening, I appreciate your support.

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