

So Good They Can't Ignore You Summary

By Cal Newport

On a scale of one to ten, how passionate would you say you are about your job? Have you often found yourself feeling jealous of people who speak about their job satisfaction, and how passionate they are about their work?

So Good They Can't Ignore You, busts the myth that passion is the primary driver of career satisfaction. It suggests that fulfilling careers are built by analyzing what actually matters, so if you're a bit cynical about the passion-hypothesis, but still want to know how to build a great career, then this book may have some answers.

Newport is a compelling author, who has written numerous self-improvement books, that often go against the grain of contemporary thinking. Newport has been involved in the world of venture capitalists, screenwriters, rock-star computer programmers, and hotshot professors. Through all of this diverse experience, and through a lot of self-reflection, he has discovered what matters when building a compelling career. The key argument, and what quickly became apparent to him, is that passion is a side-effect, and not the starting point of a fulfilling career.

This summary briefly takes us through the main ideas in *So Good They Can't Ignore You*. The argument is that you can't expect a perfect working life until you've become good at something. As it turns out, the people who have the most job satisfaction, have acquired skills and have used their expertise to gain more control over their working lives. Once they've gained control, they've been able to explore projects that interest them.

Competence, autonomy, and meaning, are the three core elements that make people love what they do. However, these things don't just magically appear overnight, and yes, they certainly don't stem from following your passion.

Following Your Passion Could Be a Bad Strategy

Parents and teachers often tell children to follow their dreams. But, research shows that this has adverse effects. It shows that telling a young person to follow their passion, actually reduces their chances of ending up passionate and happy in their careers.

Newport argues why the passion-hypothesis is inherently flawed. The passion-hypothesis was born in the 1970s, and you'll be familiar with the phrase, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life." But, this ethos of telling people to only do work that they love has resulted in chronic job shifting, career confusion, and unrelenting anger. Studies show that job satisfaction has declined in recent decades. For example, in 2010, only 45% of Americans surveyed, were happy with their jobs. This number represents a significant drop, down from 61% in 1987.

Everyone imagines that someone like Steve Jobs would have delved into his career with all of the passion of youth. But, contrary to popular belief, he didn't start his career with tremendous enthusiasm for computers. In the period leading up to the Apple computer launch, Jobs didn't have a passion for tech and entrepreneurship, it was something that he stumbled into. His passion at the time was to become a zen-master, and Apple was just meant to be a small-time scheme. There's no doubts that Steve Jobs ended up utterly passionate about what he did for a living.

So, Newport believes that it's not about starting with passion. It's about ending up with it.

To find career passion, you need to focus on two things - that's getting experience, and building up a rare and valuable skill set.

Experience Is the Key to Career Enjoyment and Satisfaction

A professor at Yale University discovered that the more experience people have, the more they seem to enjoy their work. For example, a college administrative assistant's job might seem tedious, but their answers varied significantly when asked about their work.

One third considered it as just a job, merely something to pay the bills. Another third saw it as a stepping stone or a path towards something better. The final third believed it to be a calling, or an integral part of their life and identity. But here is the intriguing part; the more experience the administrative assistants had, the more likely they were to enjoy their work, and consider it vocational.

This sentiment applies to all fields, and the study found that people were more likely to identify their work as a calling after several years of experience. So, contrary to popular belief, passion comes with time.

But, your experience isn't the only thing that counts, and to enjoy what you do, it's important to become good at what you do.

Expertise: Becoming So Good, That They Can't Ignore You

What shows up frequently in research is that people who love what they do have an insane work ethic. Secondly, over several years, they systematically build up a rare and valuable skill, and they use these skills as leverage to take control of their working life. Once you have a compelling and impressive skill set, you can shift it in a direction that you want.

Finding "Mission-Driven" Work

According to Newport, trying to find a mission without experience and expertise is risky. Just because you really want to organize your work around a mission, doesn't mean that you can undoubtedly make it happen.

Take Jane for example. Jane dropped out of college to start a non-profit to develop her vision of health, human potential, and a life well-lived. Jane's concept was vague, and she failed to raise the money to support her vision. So, while recognizing the power of mission, she struggled to implement it, in her working life. Jane was putting the proverbial cart before the horse.

On the other hand, Pardis Sabeti, a thirty-five-year-old professor of evolutionary biology, is highly regarded in her field. Sabeti's career mission is clear. She wants to use new technology to fight old diseases. Her large grant sum is proof, of the invaluable impact behind this drive.

The difference between Pardis and Jane, is that Pardis thought small. For years, she honed her craft and focussed on a narrow research area. She only acted once she'd acquired enough experience and skills to identify a big mission. In contrast, Jane reversed this order. Jane started by thinking big and looking for a world-changing mission. However, she could only match this big thinking with small and ineffectual acts, without the experience or skill.

Newport argues that to find a mission, one that's impactful and important, you need to get to the cutting edge of your field. It's about finding the small gaps, and using your rare expertise to make a big difference.

In Conclusion

So if skill, autonomy, and meaning are keys to a fulfilling career, how do we practically go about this? Newport's highly acclaimed book, *Deep Work*, is the next step. This book is essential reading for anyone who wants to take their "mission" to the next level. For those who work in creative knowledge-work fields, *Deep Work* is an indispensable guide to anyone seeking focused success in a distracted world.

Building skills and expertise isn't easy, and requires a lot of physical and mental effort. Newport suggests critically analyzing how you work, and he argues that shifting the focus onto deep work, plays a crucial role in building invaluable skills.

After all, skills and expertise are everything.

So, it's not about finding the magical unicorn in terms of the right work. Newport says that we have to work right. And while following one's passion is a lovely sentiment, it's far too idealistic in contemporary life. We all need to shift focus, and debunk the myth of following one's passion. Instead, let passion find you as you build a career where you can be creative, have a greater sense of control, and eventually find a way to make an impact.