Career Advice No One Tells You

Who recognizes this photo? What’s the story?

By: Raghav Haran

Most people have “okay” jobs. We go to work, do what we have to do from 9 to 5, come back home, maybe hang out with friends, and do it all over again the next day. There’s nothing wrong with this.

But some people perform at a totally different level.

- They’re the people who land executive level positions by their early 30s while everyone else is still trying to “work their way up.”
- They’re the people who jump out of bed every morning, excited about the day ahead while everyone else drags themselves out of bed every Monday.
- They’re the people who impact thousands of people through their work, while everyone else keeps themselves busy with pointless tasks at work.

Here’s what they understand, that most people don’t.

1. Job requirements are negotiable

I remember going to the grocery store with my (Indian) grandfather when I was a kid. He would always look closely at the price of everything we put in our basket. And when we got to the cash register, he would do what I thought was the most embarrassing thing ever: he would try and negotiate with the cashier! But the crazy thing is... it usually worked.

Noah Kagan (founder of AppSumo) has this thing he calls the “coffee challenge.” Basically you walk into a coffee shop, order whatever it is you want, and when it comes time to pay, ask for 10% off. If the cashier asks why, say “just cause.” Most of the time, the cashier will just give it to you.

There are so many things in life that we think are “non-negotiable”, but in reality, we can totally get around it.
For example, I applied for a business development role once that required 3–5 years of experience and I had almost zero (I was still in school at the time). So I decided to prove to them that I could still bring value. Instead of submitting my resume and sitting back, I decided to go out and pitch some companies on forming partnerships with them, and introduced those companies to the hiring manager. I got the offer.

When I was applying for a product design position at Quora, I ran a usability test on the mobile app, mocked up some design suggestions, and sent it to the head of product design. He emailed me back the same day to schedule an interview.

Apart from jobs like academic professions like medicine or law, job requirements are largely negotiable — you just have to prove that you can bring value to the table. People who aren’t willing to “break the rules” a little bit usually end up wasting years of time and money trying to achieve a goal they could’ve achieved with a lot less.

2. Imposter syndrome is a good thing

The New York Times came out with this article a while ago, examining why people from certain groups do better than others economically. It may not be politically correct to say it, but the truth is that Asian people are more successful than everyone else on average.

“Indian-Americans earn almost double the national figure (roughly $90,000 per year in median household income versus $50,000). Iranian-, Lebanese- and Chinese-Americans are also top-earners.” — NY Times

The biggest reason for this, according to the NY Times, is cultural. The groups that are more successful than others have 3 common characteristics:

- A superiority complex
- Some insecurity, or a feeling that you’re not good enough at what you do
- Impulse control
The combination of believing that you can get to almost wherever you want to be, having discipline, and having insecurity about where you are is the formula for a successful, impactful career.

Embrace that feeling of inadequacy.

3. What’s “realistic” is just an illusion

What’s realistic for you is entirely predicated on what you’ve been exposed to.

When I was younger, I had some friends from lower income backgrounds whose families didn’t receive a high education. When they found out over time that my dad was a doctor, they’d be like “whoa, that’s amazing!!!” like it was some insanely big thing. In their mind, becoming a doctor was unrealistic. It was only because they didn’t know how.

If someone told me that they wanted to be a doctor, I would think that’s a totally achievable goal. It’s because I know what it takes to get into medical school, the process behind the scenes, and I had been around people who have successfully done it.

There are so many things in life you take for granted that someone else would think is crazy and unrealistic. Getting a graduate degree? There’s a guy somewhere whose family never went to college, and he thinks that’s unrealistic. Working for a Fortune 500 company? There’s a girl somewhere whose family works in minimum wage jobs, and she thinks that’s unrealistic. Running a multi-million dollar business? There’s a kid somewhere who comes from an upper middle class background, and he thinks that’s unrealistic.

Work alongside the best in your field, read their books, listen to their interviews, study what they did to get where they are — and eventually, those crazy unrealistic dreams will become realistic for you.

4. Don’t pick a career based on “average salaries” or employment numbers

When you’re striving to be great at what you do, the “averages” don’t matter.

I laugh when people say things like “writers don’t make money.” I’ve earned a good mid-5 figures on the side over the last several months from a few blog posts and emails alone, helped hundreds of people find jobs they love, and built an audience of 6,000+ people. And I’m definitely not the only one. When it comes to any field, the people who strive to be great have more than enough money and success. And everyone else fights over scraps.

We see the same thing in engineering — the best programmers get hired by companies like Google, but others trying to cash in on the “gold rush” of tech by looking through some online learn-to-code tutorials in a few weeks aren’t doing as well.

Do what you enjoy doing, and be great at it. Everything else will come.

5. Pick a boss, not a company

People think that if they just get a job at a company like Facebook or Goldman Sachs, then they’ll be set for life. Not true. Having the right mentor is the real key. Not only will you learn a ridiculous amount just by being around successful people in your field, you’ll also get into their “inner circle” if you can prove that you’re legit. And then you will have more opportunities than ever before. For example, I worked with NYT bestselling author Ramit Sethi, he was willing to refer me to powerhouses in his own network. It’s how I got job offers from some of the biggest marketing companies in the world.
Or they might even nudge you away from mistakes that could have cost you years of wasted time and effort. A while ago I was considering working for someone, and one of my mentors (a well-known figure in Silicon Valley) told me I shouldn’t.

That one email probably saved me months or even years of time going down the wrong path. Surrounding yourself with the right people could lead to more opportunities than any company could ever give you. And you’ll avoid the mistakes that keep others stuck for years on end.

6. Don’t be afraid to take a pay cut for the right experience

Stanley Druckenmiller, a hedge fund manager, once said this: “If you’re early on in your career and they give you a choice between a great mentor or higher pay, take the mentor every time. It’s not even close. And don’t even think about leaving that mentor until your learning curve peaks. There’s just nothing to me so invaluable in my business, but in many businesses, as great mentors. And a lot of kids are just too short-sighted in terms of going for the short-term money instead of preparing themselves for the longer term.” — Stanley Druckenmiller

Literally every single old person says that the biggest mistake young people make is being impatient. They optimize for the short term (i.e. a job at a big company that will impress their friends and family) instead of thinking about their long term goals.

Don’t be afraid to take one step back today to take two steps forward tomorrow.

7. What got you to level one won’t get you to level two

In the beginning of your career, your technical skills matter the most. You get tested on how well you can use excel, or write code, or design products, etc. But as time goes on, those technical skills start to matter less. How you interact with people starts to matter a lot more. Most people think that if they just get good enough at their craft, then everything will be fine. And it’s true, being good at what you do does matter. But you need much more than that. You need to know how to navigate the world of office politics. You need to figure out how to add value outside of your role.

You need to figure out what your company needs, and give it to them — even if they don’t tell you what it is.

8. The real education begins after college

It’s sad how many people think they’re “done with studying” the moment they leave school. In reality, everything you’ve learned in class is largely worthless in the real world.
Successful people read as much as one book a week sometimes. They listen to podcasts. They go to conferences. They read research papers. They talk to other people who are doing big things. That’s how they’re able to “connect the dots” between seemingly unrelated subjects, and use that insight to land more opportunities.

That’s how they see the world through a different lens than everyone else.

9. Always be getting more exposure

“Exposure is leverage.” — Gary Vaynerchuk

After you accomplish anything professionally, get online and write about it. Help someone who was once in your shoes trying to figure things out. Exposure builds credibility. The bigger the audience you have, the more people will take you seriously.

10. Don’t outsource your success to your company

A prominent venture capitalist in Silicon Valley once decided to work at a coffee shop for a month. Imagine that. Here was an insanely successful CEO standing behind a cash register. He was taking people’s orders and serving them coffee. Most people would never even think about doing such an “unglamorous” job. But he wanted to learn about the operations of the shop from the inside. He wanted to understand the logistics, the systems, the bottlenecks, the inefficiencies, how often customers show up, and more.

Most people think that working at a place like McDonald’s or Starbucks is objectively bad, while working at a big brand name company is objectively good in terms of getting future success. But in reality, a company is only as good as you make it.

For someone who worked at McDonald’s to study the operations of the business, the logistics, managements strategies, etc. to open a franchise business later on, working at a fast food joint would be an incredibly valuable experience. On the other hand, someone who expects to be “set for life” after getting a job at a brand name company is probably screwed.

No job is objectively good or bad. It’s what you make of it.

11. The real winners never go through the “front door”

Alex Banayan said it best: “[All highly successful people] treat life, business, and success... just like a nightclub.

There are always three ways in.

- There’s the First Door, where 99% of people wait in line, hoping to get in.
- There’s the Second Door, where billionaires and royalty slip through.
- But then there is always, always... the Third Door. It’s the entrance where you have to jump out of line, run down the alley, climb over the dumpster, bang on the door a hundred times, crack open the window, and sneak through kitchen. But there’s always a way in.

Whether it’s how Bill Gates sold his first piece of software, or how Steven Spielberg became the youngest director at a major studio in Hollywood — they all took the Third Door.” — Alex Banayan

No one gets extraordinary opportunities by taking the same approach everyone else takes. It’s amazing to me how many people want to land their dream jobs, jobs that thousands of people are competing for, yet they expect to get them by submitting a resume online. That’s not how it works. The name of the game is noticing the ‘unspoken rules’ around you, and giving people what they want before they have to ask you.

That’s how you win.