

Cultivating the Critical Skillsets for the Creators of the Passion Economy

"No force on earth can stop an idea whose time has come" - Victor Hugo

I have been moulded by the dichotomies of two generations – by the sagacious life lessons from my parents and the perspicacious acts of rebellion by my elder brother.

My parents belong to a generation where professions were predetermined for you at an early age. There wasn't any room for personal aspirations and the concept of monetising hobbies was simply non-existent. In the eyes of their parents— my grandparents, men were to find themselves a government job and stay there until retirement, while women were relegated to the realm of academics and managing homes. A stable, secure government job was viewed as a beacon of hope and maintaining loyalty towards that job was an absolute necessity in securing a sense of social respectability.

In his 1957 lecture on the problems of maintaining continuous and full employment, Drucker in fact acknowledged the role played by such social pressures in ensuring that the need for a stable job superseded anything else – even at the expense of wages or working conditions (Drucker, 1957). He had the prescience to envisage potential problems with such an approach and questioned the dangers of individuals staying in organizations due to the “security of employment” even if it no longer continues to be in line with their knowledge, abilities and skillsets (Drucker, 1957).

As the economy progressed and India embraced liberalisation in the 90s, private sector jobs emerged as a potential alternative and invited the workforce to experiment with their career choices. My Father's career was inevitably shaped by these changing times but the values underscoring a continuous and traditional employment – stability and job security continued to remain a compass that guided his career decisions. Individual enterprise and personal passion projects were merely a privilege that couldn't be afforded any time.

The times had changed by the time my Brother joined the workforce. It was the early 2000s and by then, a sum total of three new respectable professions had emerged for middle class Indian families– Medicine, Law and Engineering. For a large part of Indian households even today, these three career options continue to be the most popular choices. He, however, opted to embark upon the path of rebellion and decided to build a career for himself in music instead. His passion for contributing to the music industry surpassed the peer pressure of pursuing a conventional career path, and it gave him something he believed was more valuable – happiness and peace of mind.

My career decisions have been a reconciliation between these two different worlds. Of carefully choosing between passion and profit and questioning the possibility of merging both through “side hustles” and monetisation of hobbies. But today, the world of employment around me looks very different – such reconciliations are no longer required. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Fiverr and Upwork have emerged to help millions of creators monetise what they love and build a livelihood on their own terms. This is an empowering yet unnerving proposition for India and the world – for the jobs and businesses that are thriving now may have no room to exist in this ever-changing future. This generation and the ones after will therefore get to do things that few people in history have even had a

chance to think about. Cultivating the following skillsets will play an essential role in unlocking the powers of this passion economy and leveraging its potential to the fullest.

Adopting a solution-oriented mindset through curiosity

Passion projects need a problem to address and solve. Without a tangible problem at hand, creators are going to be investing their energy and efforts into building something which isn't sustainable or scalable. Key questions that need to be asked and answered here would involve:

- Is my passion addressing a problem or a gap in the market?
- Who are my customers and key stakeholders? How can I understand them better?
- Would people be willing to spend money to make this problem go away?

Educational institutes and organizations will need to play a critical role in shaping this thought process and helping students and employees cultivate an ability to think about problems from a solutioning mindset. This would entail a razor-sharp focus on nurturing competencies such as curiosity and an agility to learn new things on a continuous basis. An Egon Zehnder study in 2018 corroborates this – they believe that curiosity is one of the best predictors of leadership and success and needs to be consciously cultivated as a competence. (Gino, n.d.)

For the self-employed, investing in building and strengthening this skillset will play a key role in enabling their occupations to thrive across disruptions and ensure that they're ready to pivot whenever the market dictates them to.

Making Strength Productive

In his book "The Effective Executive", Peter Drucker talks about how we need to leverage our available strengths to achieve results. Below is an excerpt which captures the essence of what he meant by this:

"Strong people always have strong weaknesses too. Where there are peaks, there are valleys. And no one is strong in many areas. Measured against the universe of human knowledge, experience, and abilities, even the greatest genius would have to be rated a total failure. There is no such thing as a "good man." Good for what? is the question." (Drucker, The Effective Executive, 2002)

People who will be engaging with the creator economy will need to understand what they're good at, and how to get better at it in order to succeed. This doesn't mean that they need to be completely blind towards their weaknesses – they need to mindfully design their vocation in a manner that builds on the knowledge, skillset and abilities that they possess and pursue to strengthen it. The questions one must ask here include:

- What have I done well in the past?
- What can I continue to do well today?
- Do I have gaps that I need to bridge in this area? How can I do so?

The role of assessments needs to be called out here as well. Having participated in numerous paid and unpaid surveys, 360 feedback and strength assessment tests, I can vouch for the insights and self-reflection that they generate. We are often blind to our perceptions and skillsets, and testing enables us to unlock this critical information in a clear and succinct manner. Complimenting these tests with actionable areas to work on will ensure that strengths are leveraged not just well, but also productively. This needs to be taken up more proactively at universities and workplaces for people to truly understand how to add more value to their contributions.

Building Networks

People who have succeeded in building a career for themselves— not in terms of designations or salaries drawn, but in terms of having a sense of satisfaction, achievement and contribution— are those who keep in touch (Drucker, Drucker Lectures - Essential Lessons on Management, Society and Economy, 1957). In the highly digitized world that we live in today, the connections and networks we forge will play a pivotal role in ensuring that we remain adaptively innovative.

Creators of the passion economy who are passionate about setting up their business around their unique skillsets will benefit from inculcating curiosity, enhancing learning agility and leveraging their strengths. But rapid changes in the digital world, disruptions in the world economy and unprecedented global pandemics like COVID -19 are unpredictable, and will require a community of people one trusts and relies on to confront effectively. And that's where networking will help creators stay the course and navigate uncharted territories.

People often say that you're one-person away from a life changing opportunity; something that the former P&G CEO A.G. Lafley would resonate with when he cold called Peter Drucker on a Monday afternoon and heard back!

"What will you decide to be curious about on a Monday morning" is a question which Lafley would often ask himself and one afternoon, he decided to call Peter Drucker out of the blue, to see if he would be willing to meet. Not only did Drucker agree, but their living room chat that afternoon became the foundation of their work on defining the role of a CEO over the next few years (Dillon, 2010).

This is an example that encapsulates all the three skillsets we've spoken about— being curious, leveraging your existing strengths and networking effectively to succeed. In order to do the latter well, one must reflect on the following cues:

- Who do I look up to, and why?
- How can I connect and give back to the communities I'm a part of?
- Who are doing well in my field and how can I learn from them?
- Who can I reach out to in order to learn more about a new field?

Creators in this passion economy will need to consciously engage with these questions in order to build and expand on their networks. At the same time, educational institutes and organizations must also reflect on the cues above in order to unleash the potential of their students and employees further.

While this essay focuses on one of the most key stakeholders of the passion economy – the creator, one must acknowledge the presence of two more key participants: the digital platforms that enable the creator to grow their product and services, as well as the market that purchases these offerings of the creator. While there has been a rise and fall of several platforms that enable such work to happen, there has also been an unpredictable trend in what people want to consume.

While it's difficult to predict how this landscape will evolve over time, the skillsets mentioned above will ensure that creators of this passion economy navigate the waters of uncertainty and disruption with an unflinching tenacity to adapt and evolve.

References

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