Chapter One

The “Passion” of Steve Jobs

In which I question the validity of the passion hypothesis, which says that the key to occupational happiness is to match your job to a pre-existing passion.

The Passion Hypothesis

In June 2005, Steve Jobs took the podium at Stanford Stadium to give the commencement speech to Stanford’s graduating class. Wearing jeans and sandals under his formal robe, Jobs addressed a crowd of 23,000 with a short speech that drew lessons from his life. About a third of the way into the address, Jobs offered the following advice:

You’ve got to find what you love. . . . [T]he only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking, and don’t settle.

When he finished, he received a standing ovation.

Though Jobs’ address contained several different lessons, his emphasis on doing what you love was the clear standout. In the official press release describing the event, for example, Stanford’s news service reported that Jobs “urged graduates to pursue their dreams.”

Soon after, an unofficial video of the address was posted on YouTube, where it went viral, gathering over 3.5 million views. When Stanford posted an official video, it gathered an additional 3 million views. The comments on these clips homed in on the importance of loving your work, with viewers summarizing their reactions in similar ways:

“The most valuable lesson is to find your purpose, follow your passions. . . . Life is too short to be doing what you think you have to do.”

“Follow your passions— life is for the living.”

“Passion is the engine to living your life.”

“[It’s] passion for your work that counts.”

“ ‘Don’t Settle.’ Amen.”

In other words, many of the millions of people who viewed this speech were excited to see Steve Jobs—a guru of iconoclastic thinking—put his stamp of approval on an immensely appealing piece of popular career advice, which I call the passion hypothesis:

The Passion Hypothesis
The key to occupational happiness is to first figure out what you're passionate about and then find a job that matches this passion.

This hypothesis is one of modern American society’s most well-worn themes. Those of us lucky enough to have some choice in what we do with our lives are bombarded with this message, starting at an early age. We are told to lionize those with the courage to follow their passion, and pity the conformist drones who cling to the safe path.

If you doubt the ubiquity of this message, spend a few minutes browsing the career-advice shelf the next time you visit a bookstore. Once you look past the technical manuals on resume writing and job-interview etiquette, it’s hard to find a book that doesn’t promote the passion hypothesis. These books have titles like Career Match: Connecting Who You Are with What You’ll Love to Do, and Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type, and they promise that you’re just a few personality tests away from finding your dream job. Recently, a new, more aggressive strain of the passion hypothesis has been spreading—a strain that despairs that traditional “cubicle jobs,” by their very nature, are bad, and that passion requires that you strike out on your own. This is where you find titles like Escape from Cubicle Nation, which, as one review described it, “teaches the tricks behind finding what makes you purr.”

These books, as well as the thousands of full-time bloggers, professional counselors, and self-proclaimed gurus who orbit these same core issues of workplace happiness, all peddle the same lesson: to be happy, you must follow your passion. As one prominent career counselor told me, “do what you love, and the money will follow” has become the de facto motto of the career-advice field.

There is, however, a problem lurking here: When you look past the feel-good slogans and go deeper into the details of how passionate people like Steve Jobs really got started, or ask scientists about what actually predicts workplace happiness, the issue becomes much more complicated.

You begin to find threads of nuance that, once pulled, unravel the tight certainty of the passion hypothesis, eventually leading to an unsettling recognition: “Follow your passion” might just be terrible advice.

It was around the time I was transitioning from graduate school that I started to pull on these threads, eventually leading to my complete rejection of the passion hypothesis and kicking off my quest to find out what really matters for creating work you love. Rule #1 is dedicated to laying out my argument against passion, as this insight—that “follow your passion” is bad advice—provides the foundation for everything that follows. Perhaps the best place to start is where we began, with the real story of Steve Jobs and the founding of Apple Computer.
Do What Steve Jobs Did, Not What He Said

If you had met a young Steve Jobs in the years leading up to his founding of Apple Computer, you wouldn’t have pegged him as someone who was passionate about starting a technology company. Jobs had attended Reed College, a prestigious liberal arts enclave in Oregon, where he grew his hair long and took to walking barefoot. Unlike other technology visionaries of his era, Jobs wasn’t particularly interested in either business or electronics as a student. He instead studied Western history and dance, and dabbled in Eastern mysticism.

Jobs dropped out of college after his first year, but remained on campus for a while, sleeping on floors and scrounging free meals at the local Hare Krishna temple. His non-conformity made him a campus celebrity—a “freak” in the terminology of the times. As Jeffrey S. Young notes in his exhaustively researched 1988 biography, *Steve Jobs: The Journey Is the Reward*, Jobs eventually grew tired of being a pauper and, during the early 1970s, returned home to California, where he moved back in with his parents and talked himself into a night-shift job at Atari. (The company had caught his attention with an ad in the *San Jose Mercury News* that read, “Have fun and make money.”) During this period, Jobs split his time between Atari and the All-One Farm, a country commune located north of San Francisco. At one point, he left his job at Atari for several months to make a mendicants’ spiritual journey through India, and on returning home he began to train seriously at the nearby Los Altos Zen Center.

In 1974, after Jobs’s return from India, a local engineer and entrepreneur named Alex Kamradt started a computer time-sharing company dubbed Call-in Computer. Kamradt approached Steve Wozniak to design a terminal device he could sell to clients to use for accessing his central computer. Unlike Jobs, Wozniak was a true electronics whiz who was obsessed with technology and had studied it formally at college. On the flip side, however, Wozniak couldn’t stomach business, so he allowed Jobs, a longtime friend, to handle the details of the arrangement. All was going well until the fall of 1975, when Jobs left for the season to spend time at the All-One commune. Unfortunately, he failed to tell Kamradt he was leaving. When he returned, he had been replaced.

I tell this story because these are hardly the actions of someone passionate about technology and entrepreneurship, yet this was less than a year before Jobs started Apple Computer. In other words, in the months leading up to the start of his visionary company, Steve Jobs was something of a conflicted young man, seeking spiritual enlightenment and dabbling in electronics only when it promised to earn him quick cash.

It was with this mindset that later that same year, Jobs stumbled into his big break. He noticed that the local “wireheads” were excited by the introduction of model-kit computers that enthusiasts could assemble at home. (He wasn’t alone in noticing the potential of this excitement. When an ambitious young Harvard student saw the first kit computer grace the cover of *Popular Electronics* magazine, he formed a company to
develop a version of the BASIC programming language for the new machine, eventually dropping out of school to grow the business. He called the new firm Microsoft.)

Jobs pitched Wozniak the idea of designing one of these kit computer circuit boards so they could sell them to local hobbyists. The initial plan was to make the boards for $25 apiece and sell them for $50. Jobs wanted to sell one hundred, total, which, after removing the costs of printing the boards, and a $1,500 fee for the initial board design, would leave them with a nice $1,000 profit. Neither Wozniak nor Jobs left their regular jobs: This was strictly a low-risk venture meant for their free time.

From this point, however, the story quickly veers into legend. Steve arrived barefoot at the Byte Shop, Paul Terrell’s pioneering Mountain View computer store, and offered Terrell the circuit boards for sale. Terrell didn’t want to sell plain boards, but said he would buy fully assembled computers. He would pay $500 for each, and wanted fifty as soon as they could be delivered. Jobs jumped at the opportunity to make an even larger amount of money and began scrounging together start-up capital. It was in this unexpected windfall that Apple Computer was born. As Young emphasizes, “Their plans were circumspect and small-time. They weren’t dreaming of taking over the world.”

The Messy Lessons of Jobs

I shared the details of Steve Jobs’s story, because when it comes to finding fulfilling work, the details matter. If a young Steve Jobs had taken his own advice and decided to only pursue work he loved, we would probably find him today as one of the Los Altos Zen Center’s most popular teachers. But he didn’t follow this simple advice. Apple Computer was decidedly not born out of passion, but instead was the result of a lucky break—a “small-time” scheme that unexpectedly took off.

I don’t doubt that Jobs eventually grew passionate about his work: If you’ve watched one of his famous keynote addresses, you’ve seen a man who obviously loved what he did. But so what? All that tells us is that it’s good to enjoy what you do. This advice, though true, borders on the tautological and doesn’t help us with the pressing question that we actually care about: How do we find work that we’ll eventually love? Like Jobs, should we resist settling into one rigid career and instead try lots of small schemes, waiting for one to take off? Does it matter what general field we explore? How do we know when to stick with a project or when to move on? In other words, Jobs’s story generates more questions than it answers. Perhaps the only thing it does make clear is that, at least for Jobs, “follow your passion” was not particularly useful advice.