

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 19: The Top 5 Reasons To Be a Jack of All Trades

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Tim Ferriss: Why, hello there, Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Tim Ferriss. Welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss show. This is an in-between-isode, which is a very short audio essay intended to give you perhaps some philosophical tidbits, something to chew on, to mull over this weekend or perhaps the week coming up. It will be very short, probably less than 15 minutes and it is to spread out some of the longer one and a half to two hour episodes that I usually do with other guests. And you can find all episodes of the Tim Ferriss show at fourhourworkweek.com, spelled out fourhourworkweek.com/podcast. If you like the show, or to support the show, please visit the Tim Ferriss book club. That's at fourhourworkweek.com/books where you can find books that have completely changed my life, hugely impacted my life. I choose roughly one per month and I think there are four or five up right now. That's at fourhourworkweek.com/books.

Today's essay is about this term jack-of-all-trades and it is based on some writing I'd done quite a while back that I've revised and added to and the title is *The Top 5 Reasons to Be a Jack of All Trades*. *The Top 5 Reasons to Be a Jack-of-All-Trades*. And we're going to begin with a quote and it is as follows: "A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, con a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone," I'm gonna speed up a little bit here, "comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, operate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer," still working on that one, "cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects." And that is a quote by Robert A. Heinlein, considered the dean of science fiction writing and the author of a book called *Stranger in a Strange Land*, one of my favorites.

But the point here is that specialization is for insects. But you might say to yourself the days of Da Vinci are long gone, totally dead. It is no longer possible to be, say, a world-class painter, engineer, scientist, or more. Those times are long gone, nothing was discovered back then. These days, in rapidly evolving technological times, the best you can really do is pick your field and master it. Now, that can result in lots of income. But the flipside of that is the collection of benefits and virtues of being a generalist, which is what we're going to discuss. So the devout specialist might label the impetuous learner, and you could count certainly Da Vinci and Ben Franklin among those, jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

And so the chorus would say in this modern world that it's he who specializes who survives and thrives. There's no place for renaissance men or women, those are just

starry-eyed amateurs who think they're gonna be the next Amadeus or whatever, or Mozart as it were, and they're just disillusioned. There are billions and billions of people on this planet, you need to specialize. Now, the question is, is this true? I do not think so based on all of my experiments, based on all of my research, and all of my interviews. I don't agree with that statement, or at least the artificial pairing of jack-of-all-trades, master of none. And here are the top five reasons why being a jack-of-all-trades, or what I prefer to call a generalist, is making a comeback. And if you hear some noise in the background, I'm sitting on the edge of a cornfield and there's agricultural equipment and all sorts of stuff around. Reason No. 5, all right, we're going in descending order here.

Jack-of-all-trades, master of none is an artificial pairing. You could also call it a false dichotomy. It's entirely possible to be a jack-of-all-trades, master of many. How is this possible? Specialists tend to overestimate the time needed to "master" a skill and confuse mastering a skill with perfecting a skill. And I've written about this extensively in *The 4-Hour Chef*, which is actually a book about learning. So that might be considered a titling error. Generalists recognize that the 80/20 principle applies to skills. For instance, 20 percent of a language's vocabulary will enable you to communicate and understand at least 80 percent of the time, 20 percent of a dance like tango, let's just say, lead and footwork, separates the novice from the pro. You could also look at, say, 20 percent of the moves in a sport accounting for 80 percent of the scoring, etc., etc., etc. Is this settling for mediocre? If you take a surgical approach to applying the 80/20 principle, I would argue not at all.

Generalists take the condensed study up to, but not beyond, the point of rapidly diminishing returns, okay? And you can be world-class, I think, in anything in six to 12 months, meaning in the top 5 percent in the general population. And people cite the 10,000 hour rule which was, in many ways, a sort of vast oversimplification of research by a guy named Anders and few others. And that has largely been, I think, discredited. You can look at deliberate practice, but there's just too many factors at play here and correlation does not equal causation if you look at that data set. And certainly if someone wants to get to, say, speaking Spanish fluently or even Chinese or Japanese, it can be done in eight to 12 weeks. I've seen it done. I've done it myself, even as someone who thought himself to be bad at languages as a kid. All right. So coming back to the main point, generalists take the condensed study up to, but not beyond, the point of rapidly diminishing returns.

So there's perhaps a 5 percent comprehension difference between the focused generalist who studies Japanese systematically for say two years, versus the specialist who studies Japanese for ten years with the lack of urgency – this is really important – with the lack of urgency typical of those who claim that something, "takes a lifetime to learn." Bullshit. That's hogwash. Hogwash, what a word. Based on all of, again the experiments I've done throughout all of the books, the hundreds of people I've interviewed, it is possible to become world-class in almost any skill within one year, meaning top 5 percent in the general population and sometimes well beyond that. All right. So reason No. 5 again, jack-of-all-trades, master of none is an artificial pairing. It sounds good, it's repeated so often we believe it to be true. Kind of like a bird in the hand is worth two in

the bush, but guess what? That's sometimes true; it's not always true, right?

You could run probabilities and stats on, let's just say a bird in the hand that's worth \$10.00 and two in the bush that could be worth \$10 million and if there's a 50 percent probability that you could do that based on A, B, C, D, and E, it doesn't always hold true. That's the point, right? It's a very memorable expression, but it's artificial. Okay, No. 4. In a world of dogmatic specialists it's often the generalist who ends up running the show. This is very, very true. So ask yourself, is the CEO of a given company a better accountant than the CFO or the CPA? And was Steve Jobs a better programmer than top coders at Apple? No, of course not. But he had a broad range of skills and saw the unseen interconnectedness. As technology becomes a commodity with the democratization of information and decreasing costs in hardware and software development alike, it's oftentimes, not always, but the big-picture generalists who can predict, innovate, and rise to power the fastest.

There is a reason military generals are called such. And we'll come back to this point, but it's very important. It doesn't mean that the leaders in, say, a tech company don't have tech jobs. It doesn't mean that leaders in a sales organization didn't formally develop a very high level of competency in building out sales organizations. But at the highest levels, you need certain, what you might consider soft skills or connective tissue, like communication and otherwise, to be able to thread everything together, to be a proper leader. And we'll come back to this. Reason No. 3, boredom is failure, okay? Boredom is failure. And I've written about this in the *4-Hour Workweek* where I said that you should replace striving for success in nebulous terms with striving for excitement, right? And that the opposite of happiness is not sadness, but in fact it is boredom. And if you want more on that you can read the relevant chapters.

But reason No. 3 why you should be a jack-of-all-trades, or at least many trades, boredom is failure. In a first-world economy we have all the physical necessities covered with even low-class income, right? You have shelter, you have food, you have water, etc. Subsequently, Maslow's hierarchy of needs drives us to need more for any measure of comparative "success", and again in quotation marks. So we get pushed up Maslow's hierarchy of needs to intellectual pursuits to these intangibles that aren't as easy to satisfy us just draping a blanket over someone's shoulders. And in such a case, lack of intellectual stimulation, not superlative material wealth beyond a certain point, is what drives us to depression and emotional bankruptcy, all right? Generalizing and experimenting prevents this while over-specialization nearly guarantees it.

And if you look really closely at some of the best specialists, let's just say programmers, those I know, they have extremely well-developed outside interests. Not always. But the people who have the longest staying power, the people who end up being cofounders of humungous companies, don't have their identity purely vested in one skill set. Okay, so boredom is failure. No. 2, consequently – or not consequently, I should say coincidentally, programmers and music is a really interesting combo at the higher levels. I see it combined a lot. Anyway, you techies can debate that one or disprove it. Boredom is failure. No. 2, reason No. 2, we're getting close to the top here, diversity of intellectual

playgrounds breeds confidence instead of fear. All right? And at the end of the day your subjective well-being, your contentedness is going to be very closely related to how much you embrace confidence and exude confidence, experience confidence instead of fear.

This diversity of intellectual playgrounds also breeds empathy with the broadest range of human conditions and appreciation of the broadest range of human accomplishments. The alternative is, on the extreme side, the defensive xenophobia and smugness, a lot of smugness, uniquely common to those whose identities are defined by their job title or single skill. And oftentimes these folks are also, past a certain point, pursuing this incremental gain out of obligation and not enjoyment. And most recently I had an extended debate with an engineer, a very good engineer, about something related to open source. It's a very, very long story. And I'm an advisor to Automatic, I'm very familiar with, say, WordPress as it exists as dot org and then dot com.

But because this gentleman's entire self-worth was wrapped up in one skill set, one perspective from which he could argue, he was more concerned with being right than with getting results. He couldn't move on until he'd been proven right in his sphere of expertise. And, those are some cars, as I mentioned. That doesn't mean he doesn't care or didn't care about results. It just means that he first and foremost wanted to be validated by winning arguments in his fear of competency. You really want to avoid, I encourage you to avoid, this type of myopic, often self-defeating behavior. And part of the way that you avoid it is by experimenting with a diversity of intellectual playgrounds, all right? Leading to more confidence, more empathy instead of fear and sort of knee-jerk xenophobic, defensive behavior. All right. Last reason, guys, and this is just a few more minutes.

Last reason, No. 1, the most important, it's more fun. It is more fun to be a jack of many trades. And in the most serious existential sense, the jack-of-all-trades maximizes his or her number of peak experiences in life. That's it. All right, I'll repeat it because it's very important. The jack-of-all-trades, or many trades, maximizes his number of peak experiences in life. He or she also learns to enjoy the pursuit of excellence unrelated to material gain all while finding the few things he or she is truly uniquely suited to dominate. All right? So you can also be a jack of many trades and pick one to really pursue being the best at. They're not mutually exclusive. But if we look at the specialist who imprisons himself in self-inflicted, one dimensionality – pursuing impossible perfection let's say in a very incremental way – he or she can spend decades stagnant or making imperceptible incremental improvements, right?

The curest genalist – wow, I'm getting all Porky Pig on you guys. The curious generalist often consistently measures improvement in quantum leaps. And this reminds me of a conversation I had last week with a former specialist, all right? A programmer who's now a CEO and he was talking about his sister in government being happy with a 1 percent improvement over a year, whereas he's really driving his entire organization for improvements in 2030, 100 percent...increments. And I think that at the highest level it's people who can sort of look at the same problems that have been examined before and see something different or look at things that are previously unconnected, not considered

inter-related, who have the insights necessary in a highly competitive world to win in the full context sport that is business or life.

All right. So leadership requires considering many different perspectives and therefore requires many different skills outside of one's core competency. All right. Now this is easy to wrap up. In conclusion, No. 1, don't put on experiential blinders in the name of specializing. It's both unnecessary and I consider it crippling. Those who label you a jack-of-all-trades, master of none are seldom satisfied with themselves so why take their advice, right? You should be seeking to emulate the people you aspire to be like. And part of that is not trying to please everyone. There may not be one path to success, but the sure path to failure is trying to please everyone. And I would like to wrap up with a description of the incredible Alfred Lee Loomis, Alfred Lee Loomis, L-O-O-M-I-S, who was a generalist of the highest order who changed the entire course of World War II with his private science experiments as an amateur.

So this very short excerpt is taken from an incredible portrait of his life from a book title *Tuxedo Park* and here it is. "Loomis did not conform to the conventional measure of a great scientist. He was too complex to categorize – financier, philanthropist, society figure, physicist, inventor, amateur, dilettante – a contradiction in terms." So I encourage you, be too complex to categorize. It's fun and it's very, very productive and it makes life richer. Be too complex to categorize. Specialization is for insects. You should look far and wide because there are many different worlds to conquer. And so with all this in mind, ask yourself, if I could become world class at an entire set of skills, a half dozen, a dozen skills, each in six months or less, which would I choose? Do not settle for partial incompleteness because you don't have to.

Thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.