

Success won't come until you know what you want

I recently answered a question about the challenge of hiring in the post-pandemic job market. While that answer covered a few potential reasons why finding talent has become so competitive and how a startup might address those challenges, in this post, I want to expand a little more on just one of those reasons.

It's about an entrepreneur's secret weapon: Freedom.

My first job out of college was one of the more highly-coveted placements available — a suit-and-tie role with a successful consulting firm. The firm had their own giant glass building not far from a big city downtown, a lucrative bonus and retirement plan — they paid for my move, even found my apartment for me and paid my security deposit.

I had high expectations. But I hated that job, right away, partially because of the suit-and-tie, but mostly because I had zero freedom, zero autonomy, and zero say in most matters.

See, that prestigious and successful consulting firm was already successful for a reason. They had developed a way of doing things that worked — most of the time — and when their methods didn't work, the opportunity cost of trying something new ate into the margin of doing what worked.

Thus, any new idea I had was met with a “No go kid, just pick up the next task and run with it.”

I did the unthinkable and quit that job a year into it and, by luck, landed at a startup in a small, unremarkable office park. I took less money, there was no bonus plan, not a lot of benefits, and certainly none of the perks I had just experienced. Luckily, the new job was in my college town, so I still had a couple friends there who could help me move.

Within six months, I was successful at that job, and it would be the first step on a successful career in startup and as an entrepreneur.

I was never in it for the money. I couldn't care less about power, fame, or connections. I'm just the kind of person who wants to build the rocket and see it fly.

But there's a reason why “rocket science” is a term used to describe something complex and difficult to pull off. It takes all of your focus, a ton of commitment, and there's always a risk that the rocket could explode — on the ground, in the air, or on impact when it returns from orbit.

That first job came with hurdle after hurdle preventing me from maintaining that focus. The daily commute and race to be in the giant glass building before 9:00 and the exhausting battle to get home not a minute before 5:00. The constant meetings, the paperwork, the second and third guessing of everything I did. Hell, it was even prevalent in the couple hours a week it took to maintain the suits and ties that very few people ever saw me wearing.

Oh, so maybe the reason you're having so much trouble hiring is that you're preventing people with the talent you're seeking from using that talent to the best of their abilities. Maybe the reason startup culture doesn't worry about suits or schedules or cubicles or management reports isn't because they don't *want* all of that, it's because they *know* they can't fire the rocket when all of that is weighing them down.

Startup life is not perfect, but I believe it gives talented people the best chance to expose their talent and use it for something that's ultimately satisfying and rewarding. There will always be people who chase money, power, fame, or perks, even talented people.

But if you're looking to be successful, as an entrepreneur or otherwise, just make sure you know

what you really want. Because when you know what you want, you're far more likely to get it.

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