The Five Most Valuable Skills You Can Develop For Free

The most valuable skills you can have in life and work are rarely taught in school, never show up on a resume, and are consistently overlooked and underappreciated.

But there's some good news: It costs nothing to develop them and you have the opportunity to do so.

Here's how…

1. The Ability To Pay Attention

The shorter the average attention span gets, the more valuable your ability to focus becomes.

It's a huge competitive advantage to be able to pay attention to things for an extended period of time (and unfortunately what passes for an extended period of time these days may be as little as 10 minutes).

The ability to pay attention helps you learn, communicate, be productive, and see opportunities others miss, among countless other things.

Two ways to improve your ability to pay attention:

1. Practice single tasking—read a book, watch a movie, or find some other thing to do for an extensive amount of time without allowing yourself to do anything else during that time. No side conversations. No checking your phone. Nothing but focus on that one thing.
2. Become intentional with how you use your phone (and for the love of God, turn off your notifications!).

2. The Ability To Follow Directions

This one takes your improved ability to pay attention a step further.

Every aspect of your life and career involves directions —customers tell you what they want, your boss tells you what she needs done, and the people you care about tell you what they expect of you.

It's one thing to pay attention to instructions, but it's another to accurately follow them.

The best qualifications in the world won't land you a job if your application doesn't include the details the employer requested.

Your company won't care about your innovative ideas if they don't align with the problems they asked you to solve.

And the reason Facebook Ads may not work for you isn't because Facebook ads don't work—it's because you don't know the right ways to use them.

The ability to follow directions serves as a filter that keeps otherwise qualified people from succeeding—and most of them don't even realize their struggles are rooted in this weakness.

Don't let that be you.

Two ways to improve your ability to follow directions:

1. Ask for directions on how to do things more often. Practice makes perfect.
2. Give directions to other people. Take something you know how to do (like write a blog post for example), and write up directions to help other people do it the way you do (like I did here). Teaching is a great way to learn and the process of creating directions will help you recognize the importance of little steps in directions you get from others.

3. The Ability To Care

You can always tell the difference between a person who cares about their work and one who doesn't.

Caring is a skill and it's one too few people have.

If you care about your work, customer, or audience, you will outperform more talented people who don't care.

Two ways to improve your ability to care:

1. Don't work on things you don't care about or find a way to care about the things you have to work on. Choose projects carefully and if you must work on something that doesn't align with your passion, find an element of it that does motivate you. You may not be passionate about being a barista, but what if you reframed it as an opportunity to give as many people as possible a momentary smile every day? Or learn one thing from every customer you speak to? How might that impact your approach and transform the job into something you do care about?
2. Surround yourself with people who care. Every conversation with an apathetic friend or co-worker makes it harder to find the meaning in your own work. But the flipside is also true—surround yourself with people who care and you'll find it easier to do so.

4. The Ability To Accept Responsibility

You're going to screw up, you're going to fail, and you're going to let down people who count on you.

But what you do in those moments matters more than what led to them.

When you learn to admit your mistake, accept blame, apologize, and not make excuses you become more trusted and dependable.

You also deflate the intensity of the situation.

By contrast, when you do what most people do—try to spin your way out of a jam or pin blame on something else—the exact opposite happens.

You create more problems for yourself and your company, anger your customer, and make a bad situation infinitely worse.

The quickest path to a solution after a mistake is to admit you made it in the first place.

Two ways to improve your ability to accept responsibility:

1. Apologize for one thing every day. Some days it can be for a minor screwup you made that day, others can be for a previous major incident you'd wished you handled differently. But each day you'll get more comfortable saying sorry and build more trust and credibility with the people you apologize to.
2. The next time somebody gets mad at you about something, stop yourself before you try to explain to them why they're wrong. Instead, react with more frustration about the incident than they have. "I know, I'm furious! I'm so mad that I screwed that thing up and am driving myself crazy about it!" The reaction you get to responding in that way will blow your mind— suddenly, the other person will try to calm you down instead of the other way around.

5. The Ability To Be Curious

Every successful person is a curious person.

That's because curiosity drives improvement in just about every other skill area—it's an engine that fuels people to become smart, well-rounded, creative, and innovative.

If you're not curious about your work and how to improve it, you never will.

If you're not curious about your customer, you'll never figure out how to serve them.

And if you're not as curious about the past and future of your industry as you are its present, you won't last in it long.

Two ways to improve your ability to be curious:

1. Read my For The Interested newsletter. I'm obviously biased, but it's a simple way to expose yourself to valuable ideas from curious people every week.
2. Pick a thing that interests you, ask yourself why it operates the way it does, and start Googling. Even the most mundane aspects of our lives have fascinating backstories you can uncover with a simple Google search or Wikipedia visit. For example, the origin of "The Cat in the Hat" may make you think twice about the value of creative constraints or the amazing story

of the Wu-Tang Clan's record deal might provide a greater lesson on entrepreneurship than any you got in business school.

The Dirty Secret About This Post

The point of this post isn't to make you feel overwhelmed. The truth is, you already have these skills—we all do.

But I wrote this because I've noticed many people don't think about these abilities as skills and therefore don't do much to hone them.

I'm sure you already pay attention (in short doses?), follow directions (roughly?), care (about some things?), accept responsibility (begrudgingly?), and are curious (especially when under the influence?).

But what might happen if you made a conscious effort to improve these skills?

I hope this inspires you to find out.