Geek Out, Become the Mini-Expert

Idea In Short

Stop Googling your way to basic answers. When something interests you, research it, interview experts, keep asking why and go two layers deeper than anyone required. Data is free and thinking is scarce, so the wow factor comes from geeking out where others stopped at good enough.

An Argument for Obsession

Geek out is slang worth adopting. It means becoming a little obsessive about something, usually a hobby, and the argument here is that consultants and students should harness exactly that enthusiasm for business problems. Do not just Google your way through life, arriving at the most basic answers, which are boring, superficial and not your own thinking. When you stumble on something that interests you, do the research, talk to experts, ask why and geek out on it until you become the mini-expert. Napoleon Hill's line fits the ambition: 1

> Your big opportunity may be right where you are now

Thinking Is the Scarce Asset

The case for depth rests on a market shift. In a world where all data is freely and easily accessible, data is not valuable. Thinking is valuable, insights are valuable and a point of view is valuable. Slow thinking has become rare, which is precisely why it stands out, the same way long-form journalism that fairly analyzes a hard issue stands out from the feed. It is a joy to watch someone take pride in their work, and the joy is rarer than it should be.

Consultants, to be fair, do good work. The profession is highly reliable, well researched, super-logical, persuasive and neat. Marvin Bower2, the McKinsey builder often called the

godfather of consulting, deliberately fashioned management consultants after lawyers:

> formal, white-collared and precise

Nothing is wrong with that standard. The problem is that good is often not great, and clients notice the difference.

Where the Wow Factor Lives

Great work means layering a spicy, even pungent point of view onto some part of the deliverable, adding the special sauce and running one extra lap past the good-enough finish line. The opportunities are concrete and weekly:

- In the spreadsheet, did you run the sensitivity analysis to see how results move when variables shift, and build the extra valuation-comps sheet out of pure curiosity?
- In the slide deck, did you prepare appendix pages for the three or four questions you know will come, and redraw a chart another way in case a histogram tells the story more honestly?
- For the presentation, did you rehearse the pauses, adjust the language and record yourself for critique?
- Before the meeting, did you review the existing process flows or plan to wing it?
- And for a teammate's email, did you think deeply about their questions or fire back token comments to check the teamwork box?

John Updike captured the underlying principle:

> Any activity becomes creative when the doer cares about doing it right or better

Foolish, Silly and Mad

The word geek descends from German and Dutch roots meaning foolish, silly or mad, and each insult repays inspection.

> Foolish: going two or three layers deeper into a cost model than anyone required looks like poor time management, right up until you understand the cost drivers and implications twice as well as everyone else

That mini-expertise, and the self-confidence it builds, travels with you for a career.

> Silly: give yourself room to be human, because we are not business robots or walking supply-and-demand curves

The founders of famously original companies, from outdoor apparel to shapewear to craft beer, consistently credit serendipity, whimsy, lateral thinking and openness for their breakouts, because life is not a straight line. Benjamin Disraeli framed the readiness this produces:

> The secret of success in life is for a man to be ready for his opportunity when he comes

> Mad: standing out from the me-too masses requires being crazy enough to stop pleasing everyone, crazy enough to believe in yourself before others do and crazy enough to ask for help when needed.

Building the Mini-Expert Habit

Turning occasional curiosity into a repeatable practice takes light structure. Keep a running list of questions that surfaced during the week's work and went unanswered, because those questions are pre-qualified geek-out candidates tied to real deliverables. Block two hours weekly for pursuing exactly one of them, going deep enough to explain the topic to a colleague without notes. Talk to one human expert per topic rather than relying only on reading, since practitioners carry the exceptions and war stories that documents omit. Write up each dive in a page, building the portfolio that turns private curiosity into visible expertise. Within a quarter, the compounding starts: colleagues route questions to you, clients request you by name and the mini-expertises begin connecting into a distinctive point of view nobody assigned you.

B-Plus Everywhere, A-Plus-Plus Somewhere

Readers of this kind of material are wired to deliver B-plus work regardless, resourceful and dependable by default, and that is good enough for most tasks. The strategy is selective intensity. Do B-plus work across the board, then find the spots where you completely geek out and deliver futuristic, not-asked-for, bleeding-edge, giving-it-away-for-free levels of surprise. That is where the wow factor returns to professional work, and where reputations get minted. As Seth Godin puts it, be an enthusiast.3 Mark Twain supplied the closing compass for the whole philosophy:

> The secret of success is making your vocation your vacation

Choose one corner of this week's work and treat it exactly that way.

- 1Napoleon Hill
- 2Marvin Bower
- 3Seth Godin

Summary

Good work is reliable, researched and neat. Great work adds a point of view earned through obsessive depth. Embrace the foolish, silly and slightly mad sides of geeking out, do B-plus work everywhere and A-plus-plus work where curiosity strikes. Be an enthusiast.