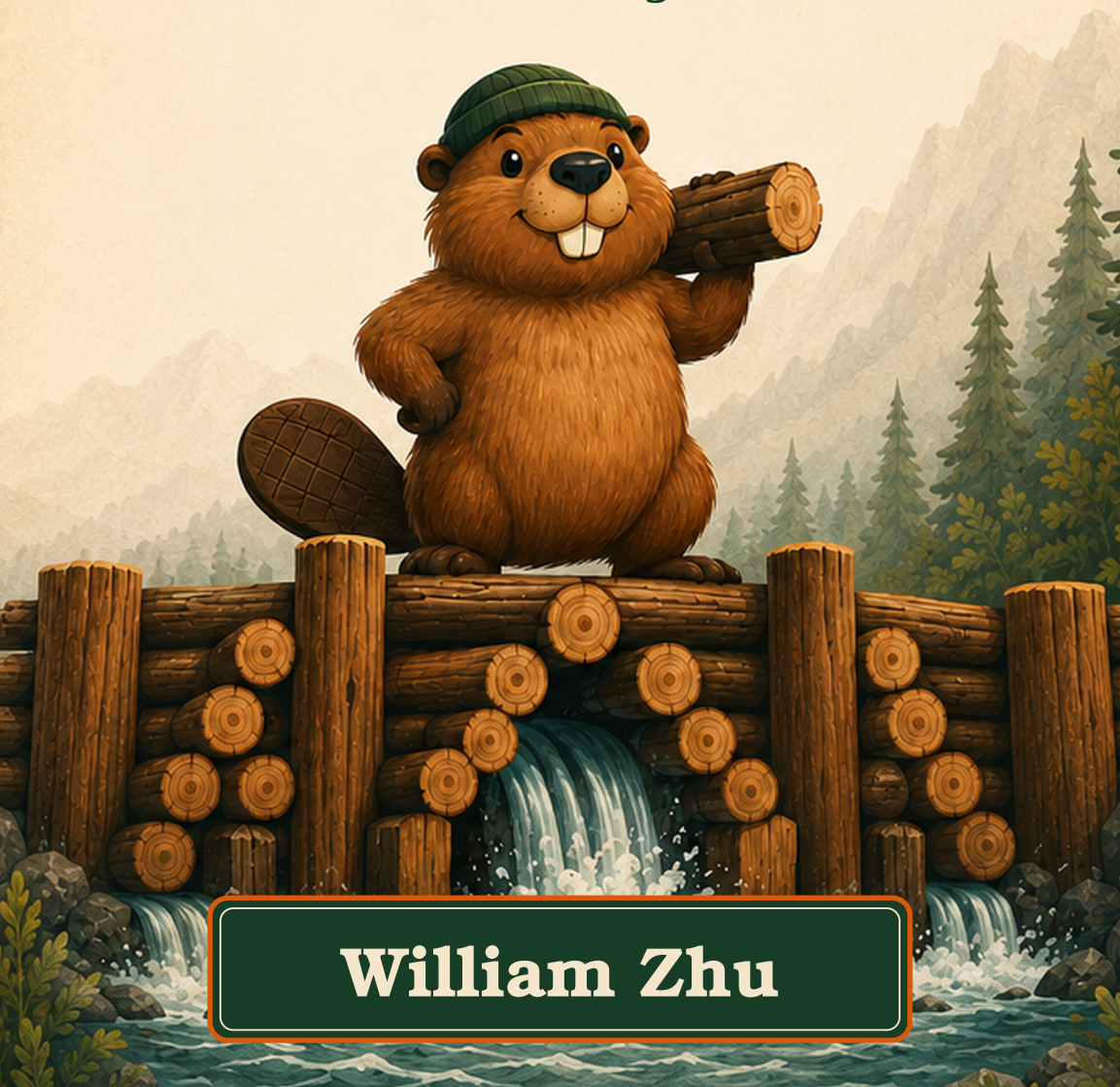


PROOF — OVER — PROMISE

How to Build an Undeniable
Career in the Age of AI



William Zhu

Proof Over Promise

How to Build an Undeniable Career in the Age of AI

William Zhu

Proof Over Promise: How to Build an Undeniable Career in the Age of AI

Copyright © 2026 William Zhu

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

ISBN: [To be assigned]

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

Contents

Chapter 1: The Stranger's Bet	5
Chapter 2: The Promising Detour	15
Chapter 3: The Second Collapse	27
Chapter 4: The Undeniable Signal	41
Chapter 5: The Flywheel	53
Chapter 6: The Cold Start	67
Chapter 7: The Long Middle	79
Chapter 8: The Proof Next Door	93
Chapter 9: The Setback as Setup	105
Chapter 10: The Story of You	119

Chapter 1: The Stranger's Bet

In the spring of 2020, a nineteen-year-old sits in a dorm room in Austin, Texas, and writes an email to a professor who has never heard of him.

The professor is Bryan Caplan, an economist at George Mason University. Caplan had written three books that rearranged the way this student thought about the world, on immigration, and on whether higher education is worth the money. That last book, *The Case Against Education*, argued that most of what colleges teach is an elaborate, expensive waste of time. It had made Caplan a lightning rod in academic circles and a cult figure in contrarian ones.

The student writes to tell Caplan how much the books changed his thinking. To his surprise, Caplan writes back. The student asks a follow-up question about one of the arguments. Caplan answers. And then, riding the momentum of a conversation he cannot believe is happening, the student asks if Caplan would come on his podcast.

There is no podcast, not even a name for one. There is a college sophomore named Dwarkesh Patel, stuck in his dorm because COVID has moved his classes online, bored, hungry for the kind of conversation his campus can no longer provide. He has a laptop, a list of questions he has been turning over for months, and the nerve to ask a famous economist to take him seriously.

Caplan says yes. He assumes Patel has an actual show. “He was kind enough, he did it,” Patel would say later.

Patel is terrified and thrilled. “It’s like, oh my god, I’m just a random college kid,” he recalled. “I get to interview this person. So I’m going to spend a week prepping and reading everything that might even be potentially relevant.”

The podcast episode goes live on May 22, 2020. Patel calls it The Lunar Society, borrowed from an eighteenth-century club of scientists and industrialists in Birmingham, England, who met by the light of the full moon.

“He wasn’t just repeating ten questions from everyone else,” Caplan would say later. “He had his own close-reading questions.”

Caplan said yes because the questions were good. That was all it took. A college sophomore with a laptop and a list of questions got a famous economist to clear his calendar, because the work itself was undeniably valuable.

Your career depends on decisions made mostly by people who do not know you.

Think about the last real turn in your career. The job offer, the raise, the admission, the first client, the yes that changed the next three years. Now think about who actually made that decision.

A hiring manager holding two hundred resumes for one opening. An admissions officer with a folder and a quota. A promotion committee reading your self-assessment for the first time ten minutes before the meeting. An investor deciding in a forty-minute meeting whether to wire you money that could change your family's trajectory.

We call these people **gatekeepers**. They are being asked to predict your future performance from a handful of signals. They are gambling, and you are the bet.

You do not advance your own career. Strangers advance it for you.

This sounds obvious when stated plainly, but most career advice treats it as background noise. We talk about “building skills” and “following your passion” and “being your authentic self” as though a career is a private project you construct in solitude, then reveal to applause. It is not.

A career is a series of bets that other people place on you. It is shaped less by whether you are good at what you do, and more by whether a stranger, working under real constraints, can tell.

To understand those constraints, let us sit on the other side of the desk.

Start with time. Eye-tracking studies of professional recruiters have found that the first pass over a resume lasts six to seven seconds. In that window the recruiter registers a name, a title, a previous employer, maybe a school, and sorts you into a pile. Venture capitalists spend under four minutes on the average pitch deck.

You experience your career as a continuous, textured story. The people deciding it experience you as a skim.

Now add stakes. A hiring mistake costs the person who championed the hire. If they vouched for someone who unraveled within a quarter, every meeting where that name comes up is a meeting about their judgment. The recruiter who passed on a future star will never hear about it. The one who backed a flop will hear about nothing else. So gatekeepers optimize for safety. They favor the resume they could defend in the post-mortem.

Then there is volume. You spend an hour tailoring your resume, writing a cover letter, and proofreading it twice and hit submit. On the other end, your application lands in a stack with four hundred others. Software filters out most of them before a human sees anything. By the time the hiring manager looks at your file, they see you as merely a line on a spreadsheet.

The gatekeepers are not lazy. They are overwhelmed. They have to decide whether to bet on you based on incomplete information, under time pressure, at some risk to themselves. Of course they reach for signals. Signals are all they have.

And for most of the last century, the most reliable signal was ***promising credentials***. An elite degree compressed four years of filtered effort into a single line on a resume. A title at a respected firm meant that other gatekeepers, with better visibility, had already bet on you and had not regretted it. The credential ladder was a chain of vouchers, each step telling the next stranger, “Someone with more information than you already checked.”

The cost of obtaining *promising credentials* was significant. Years of your life. Tens or hundreds of thousands of tuition dollars. Opportunities you turned down along the way. But the expense served a purpose. It made the signal rare and prestigious. And a signal that is rare and prestigious is one an overwhelmed gatekeeper can trust.

So the conventional career map routed everyone through the detour. Aspiring founders did two years in investment banking and two more in business school before starting companies. Aspiring writers got journalism degrees before publishing. Aspiring leaders climbed the corporate ladder one promotion at a time. **The dream career was always**

downstream. First you collected the permission. Then, someday, a gatekeeper let you begin.

That system is breaking down. **The signals that once separated people are losing their power**, for reasons the next few chapters will illustrate. But first, look at what Dwarkesh Patel did instead.

If Patel had followed the conventional map toward a career interviewing the world's most important thinkers, the path would start with getting into a top journalism program and interning at a serious publication. Then spend years as a beat reporter, building a portfolio under editors who gradually trust you with bigger stories. Or get a PhD, become a credentialed expert, and earn the right to ask hard questions from a position of academic authority.

Patel was a computer science sophomore at a state university whose father, a physician from India, had brought the family to America on an H1-B work visa when Patel was eight. They had moved from North Dakota to West Virginia to Maryland to Texas, following wherever a rural hospital needed a doctor. Nothing on his resume would have survived the first scan at any major media company in the country.

He skipped the entire credential detour, and went directly to the open market, the online platforms where anyone can publish, ship, or share work without asking a gatekeeper's permission, and let the audience decide whether his work was worth their time.

It worked because Patel built ***proof of value***, evidence that real people found his work useful.

Every question he asked Caplan was valuable to Caplan himself, the kind of deep, close-reading challenge that forced the economist to think in ways his own colleagues rarely prodded. Caplan could tell that Patel already belonged in the room.

And then the **proof compounded**.

Caplan recommended him to Tyler Cowen, one of the most influential economists in the world. Cowen came on the show and later gave Patel a research grant. After seeing just one episode and a couple of blog posts, a tech founder named Anil Varanasi cold-emailed Patel and asked how much money he would need to keep doing this for six months. Not much, Patel said. He was living with his parents. Varanasi wired him ten thousand dollars.

A billionaire named Steve Kuhn, who had gotten to know Patel over a summer in Austin, offered to invest in the podcast for equity. “Even at that age,” Kuhn said, “he in some ways commanded the room in ways not many people do.”

Each piece of proof became a springboard to the next opportunity. Each opportunity produced more proof. Before interviewing Ilya Sutskever, then the chief scientist of OpenAI, Patel spent weeks preparing and programmed a neural network transformer by hand so he could understand the architecture from the inside. Before sitting down with Demis

Hassabis, the CEO of Google DeepMind, he read most of the lab's recent papers and spoke with a dozen AI researchers.

His parents were initially skeptical of the whole enterprise. Alongside the podcast, Patel had been writing essays on his Substack about science, innovation, and progress. One of them, "The Mystery of the Miracle Year," explored why great scientists tend to have a single extraordinary year of multiple breakthroughs. It went viral when Jeff Bezos, Paul Graham, and Marc Andreessen all shared it on Twitter. Bezos wrote to him: "You're thoughtful and thought-provoking. Gratitude. Please keep it up!"

His parents' response was priceless. "My parents were like, 'Oh, that's cool. You think you can talk to him about getting a job at Amazon?'" Patel recalled. They finally came around after his interview with Sutskever crossed half a million views on YouTube.

Five years after that first cold email, TIME named Patel one of the hundred most influential people in artificial intelligence. The Economist called him "the man who has the ear of Silicon Valley." His podcast, now renamed the Dwarkesh Podcast, had grown to 1.37 million YouTube subscribers as of July 2026. Mark Zuckerberg, Satya Nadella, Jensen Huang, and Elon Musk cleared their calendars to sit with him. He published a book, ***The Scaling Era***, an oral history of the AI revolution assembled from his own interviews. He was twenty-four years old.

None of this required any credential. What it took was proof that real people found useful, compounding over time into a body of work so visible that the gatekeepers who once would have ignored his resume were now asking to appear on his show.

“It’s insane,” Patel told TIME, “that I can just read a book, and if I find it interesting enough, I can email the author, and pepper them with questions for two hours.”

It is not insane. It is the direct path.

Instead of spending years collecting credentials to earn a gatekeeper's permission to launch your dream career, start building *proof of value* today and share it publicly. That is the message of this book.

Proof of value is honest, because the gatekeepers can see whether you have real users and traction. You cannot fake a thousand people finding your work useful. And it is scarce, because the sustained effort required to earn traction is something most people quit before completing.

When proof of value enters the room, the gatekeeper’s entire calculus changes. The risk drops, because they are no longer predicting whether a stranger might perform. They are looking at a movement that is already compounding, and deciding whether to join it. They go from defensive, scanning for reasons to say no, to leaning forward, eager to say yes. Sometimes they reach out first, because they saw the traction and want to be part of it.

That is the power of ***proof of value***. It beats promising credentials every time. **It gets you an honest answer years sooner, about whether your dream career is actually what you would enjoy doing**, or whether you were merely chasing material incentives that will not last during the inevitable long grind before traction.

The rest of this book makes the case and then hands you the tools. The first few chapters trace the collapse. **Credential inflation diluted the scarcity that made degrees and employer brands valuable, and AI accelerated the trend by commoditizing the very skills those credentials were supposed to certify**. The middle chapters define **proof of value as the undeniable signal and show how it compounds over time**. The rest is practice. **How to start from nothing, survive the long stretch before traction kicks in, and what to do when your effort falls short**.

Our story starts with what happened to the old signals.

Chapter 2: The Promising Detour

In the fall of 2024, a young MBA graduate named Yvette Anguiano packed her apartment and moved to Seattle for a job that was supposed to start in November.

She had earned the move the hard way. Anguiano grew up in Dallas, the first person in her family to go to college. She studied mechanical engineering at Washington University in St. Louis, spent four years as an infrastructure engineer, then left for an MBA at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Kellogg awarded her a Forte Fellowship and an 80 percent tuition scholarship. She landed a summer internship at EY-Parthenon, converted it into a full-time offer, and followed the credential map all the way to its promised destination.

Then EY-Parthenon called. Her start date was being pushed to June 2025, nine months away. She was one of roughly two hundred new hires the firm had benched, citing a slowdown in

mergers-and-acquisitions activity. The firm offered a stipend far less than her starting salary.

She tried to find other work. In 2022, 97 percent of Kellogg MBAs had accepted a job within three months of graduating. By 2024, that number had fallen to 87 percent. Thousands of elite MBA graduates were competing for the same shrinking pool of openings, and the best Anguiano could find was temporary gigs to stay afloat. Her savings ran out while student-loan payments loomed.

“I had tried to do everything right,” she told the *Wall Street Journal*. “I was pretty devastated.” She eventually started the job when the deferral ended, nine months later. But the map she had trusted since high school had left her stranded for the better part of a year. For a first-generation college student who had staked her family's faith on the premise that credentials lead somewhere, the deferral felt like a betrayal.

Anguiano followed every instruction the conventional map gave her. So why did the map fail?

The answer is that **the map was drawn for a world where credentials were scarce. Scarcity has vanished.**

American universities awarded 235,000 master's degrees in 1971. By 2025, that number had nearly quadrupled to 864,000, and the salary premium for a master's degree over a bachelor's fell from 31% in 2015 to 23.5% in 2024.

Bryan Caplan, the economist whose book started Dwarkesh Patel on his whole journey in Chapter 1, **compares credential inflation to everyone at a concert standing up to get a better view.** It is smart for one and useless for all. When everyone stands, nobody sees better, and everyone's legs ache. His argument in *The Case Against Education* is that most of what a degree tells an employer has little to do with what you learned in school. It tells them you are probably intelligent, probably diligent, and probably willing to tolerate serious boredom. The degree is a filter. And filters only work when they are scarce.

By 2024, even the most prestigious filters had stopped separating people. 23 percent of job-seeking Harvard MBA graduates were still hunting for jobs three months after graduation, up from 10 percent in 2022. At Chicago's Booth School and Northwestern's Kellogg, the share of unemployed graduates tripled. More than a dozen top-tier programs, including Wharton and Stanford, posted the worst placement outcomes in recent memory. Kristen Fitzpatrick, the managing director of career development at Harvard Business School, made a statement that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier. **"Going to Harvard is not going to be a differentiator. You have to have the skills."**

One day in March 2025, Valerie Lockhart was called into a meeting with her manager's boss. She was a vice president at Morgan Stanley, the primary earner for her family, a husband and a young son in Georgia. The meeting did not feel out of the

ordinary. Then she walked into the conference room and saw a human resources representative sitting at the table.

She was being laid off. She later learned that many others were too, including several people she knew personally. Morgan Stanley had grown 26 percent in two years and was now cutting 2,000 employees in a single round.

Lockhart did what every career advisor tells you to do. She updated her LinkedIn, tuned her resume for the automated screening systems that now filter applications, and focused her search on governance, risk, and compliance roles at large firms. She created a spreadsheet to track every job she applied for. By November, the spreadsheet held more than five hundred and fifty entries. Every one was a position she had carefully selected.

Out of those five hundred and fifty, she heard back from about twenty-five. She made it to the final round of interviews multiple times. “At the last stage, something always seems to flip,” she said, “and it doesn’t work out.” None led to an offer.

The search was draining Lockhart’s savings, retirement accounts, and unemployment benefits. Paying the mortgage became the biggest pressure point, even after canceling entertainment subscriptions and cutting back wherever they could.

Then, one day in September, Lockhart came home to find the right side of her garage flooded. A pipe had leaked under the house, causing thousands of dollars in damage. They could not afford the plumbing repair, because paying that bill would mean

using the money they needed to stay afloat and put food on the table. So they delayed the fix and lived without hot water. She called it their “Little House on the Prairie” moment.

After some hesitation, Lockhart started a GoFundMe campaign and shared it on LinkedIn. A Morgan Stanley vice president, asking the internet for help with a water heater.

In January 2026, ten months after the layoff, she started a temporary contract role that finally allowed her to save enough to repair the hot water. She was still looking for a permanent job. “At this point,” she said, “I just need one opportunity.”

Lockhart was not alone. **Credential inflation had spread beyond degrees to employer brands.**

During the pandemic boom, companies hired aggressively: McKinsey tripled its new consultant hires, Goldman Sachs swelled from 38,300 employees to 49,100, and the major tech firms added tens of thousands of engineers. Then revenue flattened, and between 2022 and 2026, nearly a million tech workers were laid off. McKinsey shed over 5,000 employees. Goldman launched its biggest round of layoffs since the 2008 financial crisis, cutting over 3,000 jobs in a single month. LinkedIn filled with profiles leading with “ex-Google” and “ex-Meta,” each one a badge that used to carry weight. Melissa Zlatow, a seven-year Meta veteran laid off in 2022, put it plainly, “The gold standard has changed.”

In all these industries, the laid-off discovered that their former employer's prestigious name on their resume no longer set them apart.

Mody Khan had spent five years as a cloud architect at Microsoft. A year after his layoff, his savings were nearly gone. By 2025, laid-off tech workers were averaging nearly seven months between jobs, longer than in any other knowledge-worker industry. "It feels like recruiters are looking for Superman," Khan said.

In consulting, leaving McKinsey or BCG used to mean fielding calls from headhunters within days. Now five laid-off MBB consultants showed up for every corporate strategy opening.

When everyone in the applicant pool carries the same signal, the signal loses its power.

In 1970, an economist named George Akerlof wrote a short paper about used cars that explains what happens next.

Imagine you are buying a used car. The seller knows whether the car runs well or is a lemon, a car that looks fine but falls apart the moment you drive it off the lot. You have no way to tell. So you offer a price somewhere in the middle, because you are guessing.

That middle price creates a cycle. It is too low for the person selling a good car, who knows it is worth more. And it is perfectly fine for the person selling a lemon, who knows they are getting overpaid. So the good-car sellers walk away. The average quality drops. Buyers offer even less. More good sellers leave. The lot

fills with lemons, and nobody trusts anybody. Akerlof shared the Nobel Prize in Economics for this insight in 2001.

Picture a hiring manager holding two hundred resumes that all carry the same credentials. She has no reliable way to distinguish who is talented from who collected the same stamps as everyone else. So she treats everyone the same. She adds more rounds of interviews, more filters, more hoops. She has to find a way through a stack of identical resumes.

The people who suffer most are the ones with real ability. They are the good cars on Akerlof's lot. They earned hard skills, put in long hours, and now watch the gatekeeper lump them in with everyone else, because the credential that was supposed to set them apart has lost its power.

That is one way the credential path fails you. The signal degrades until the map leads nowhere. But there is a second, subtler failure mode. Even when the credential still works, it can trap you.

Nobody had more optionality than Jim Koch.

Koch collected credentials the way some people collect stamps. He went to Harvard for college, then back to Harvard for a joint law and MBA degree in 1978, then spent six years at Boston Consulting Group advising corporations on strategy. By 1984, he was thirty-four years old, earning a six-figure salary, and carrying three Harvard degrees like a stack of armor.

The job was fine. The office was on the thirty-third floor of a skyscraper in Boston. He flew first class to meet clients. The pay was excellent. And yet, after six years, Koch could see where the track led. “You start by doing the work and the work I liked,” he said. “Then you get promoted to managing a group of people doing the work, but you’re also still very involved in it, and I liked that. But six years in, the next promotion was to being a vice president, where you’re doing much more selling and you’re managing managers. That was my future, and I didn’t want to manage a consultancy. So I got off the train.”

Leaving a six-figure salary felt like the gamble. Koch saw it the other way around. **“The real risk would have been staying in a job that was OK but I didn’t love, getting to 67 and looking back and going, ‘Oh my God! I wasted my life.’”** Once he saw it that way, the decision was already made. **“I realized the rest of my life starts tomorrow.”** He gave BCG his notice without knowing what came next.

In his book *The Wisdom of Finance*, Harvard professor Mihir Desai gives Koch’s predicament a name. He calls it optionality. A top MBA and a name-brand employer gave you the right to pivot later, to business school, to a startup, to a completely different industry. You could leave the destination unresolved indefinitely. The credential kept every door open while you explored.

Optionality felt like freedom. It was the reason a person who hated their job would stay another year, and then another. Why commit now when you can keep accumulating options?

You can see the logic at every stage. A college senior takes the consulting job instead of the startup because she can always do that later. A first-year consultant stays for a third year because leaving now would mean wasting the brand she just earned. An MBA student picks the safe offer over the risky one because two more years of optionality feels wiser than a bet that might fail. Each decision makes perfect sense in isolation.

The trap is that they compound. By the time you have enough safety nets to take the leap, you have so much to lose that the leap feels reckless.

Desai saw something deeper than paralysis. “These safety nets don’t end up enabling big risk-taking,” he wrote. “Individuals just become habitual acquirers of safety nets.” **Over time, the person collecting the credentials stopped being the kind of person who leaps. The detour became the destination.** “The shortest distance between two points is reliably a straight line,” Desai warned. “If your dreams are apparent to you, pursue them.”

Koch had spent a decade becoming a habitual acquirer of safety nets. His decision to leave BCG was the turning point.

Koch left BCG without a plan. He gave himself eight months to figure out what came next. The answer surfaced from his own family history.

His father was a brewmaster. His grandfather had been a brewmaster. So had his great-grandfather, and his great-great-

grandfather before that. Five generations of firstborn Koch sons had brewed beer, the longest line of brewmasters in the United States. Koch had a 150-year-old family recipe sitting in his father's attic, and he could see a gap the big brewers had missed. The American beer industry had dumbed itself down so far that there was open space for a brewer willing to make a genuinely great beer.

He sat down at his parents' kitchen table in Cincinnati, spread out a business plan, and told his father he was going to start a beer company. He figured his father would be proud.

"Jim," his father said, "you've done some stupid things in your life. This is about the stupidest."

Koch walked him through the plan. His father listened, thought, and gave a verdict. "Okay, I get it. You'll never be very big, but you'll probably stay out of the welfare line."

His father also gave him a piece of advice Koch would later call the best he ever received. "When you start a company, it's kind of lonely, and it's much better if you have a partner. It's very much better if that partner is different from you."

Koch raised \$140,000 from friends and family in a single weekend and founded the Boston Beer Company, brewing a lager he named Samuel Adams. For his partner, he followed his father's counsel and looked beyond the rows of overqualified Harvard graduates at BCG. His co-founder was Rhonda Kallman, his secretary at the firm. She had gone to community college and

bartended at night. Bars were her natural habitat. “We had more Harvard degrees than we needed,” Koch said. What they needed was someone who could sell.

Harvard Business School had dozens of courses on marketing and zero courses on selling. So Koch went to the Harvard bookstore and bought a book, *How to Master the Art of Selling* by Tom Hopkins. He read it at night. The next morning he packed seven bottles of Samuel Adams, two blue ice packs, and a sleeve of paper cups into his briefcase. “I didn’t want to get out of bed. I was scared to death,” Koch shared.

Still wearing his dark pinstriped BCG suit, he walked into a bar and started pitching the bartender stacking glasses behind the counter. The bartender stared at him like he had two heads.

The manager walked over, suspicious. Koch took a breath, and told him he had left a lucrative consulting career to brew beer using an old family recipe found in his father’s attic. Then he poured a cup and asked, “Do you think it’s good enough to offer to your customers?”

The manager sniffed, drank it, and ordered 25 cases on the spot. “In the space of ten minutes,” Koch said, “I went from sheer terror to ecstasy.”

He had a 5 percent success rate. But he could make twenty calls a day, and one new account a day was enough to grow.

Meanwhile, Kallman was building the sales organization that would turn Samuel Adams into a national brand. Over fifteen

years, she built a team of two hundred and eventually started her own distillery in Boston.

Koch's original business plan projected \$1.2 million in revenue and eight employees. Forty years later, Boston Beer Company generates over \$2 billion in revenue and employs 2,800 people.

Years later, speaking at Harvard Law School, Koch said, **“My education was protection because it gave me status and self-image, but I had to leave that behind. Starting a business was scary, but what was really dangerous was not starting this company and wasting my life.”**

Koch escaped the optionality trap when he stopped collecting credentials and committed. A briefcase, a how-to book, and a willingness to hear “no” nineteen times a day built his company, none of which he learned from his Harvard degrees.

The credential path failed Anguiano and Koch in opposite ways. Anguiano followed every instruction on the credential map and found the ground eroding beneath her, because the signals that once separated people had inflated past the point of usefulness.

Koch followed the map for a decade and nearly missed out on the career he wanted, because optionality became a substitute for commitment. One path broke underneath you. The other seduced you into never leaving.

But credential inflation was only the first crack. While the old signal was losing its scarcity, a second force was depreciating the market value of the specialized expertise that credentials certify.

Chapter 3: The Second Collapse

In the fall of 2021, Winston Weinberg was a twenty-six-year-old first-year associate at the Los Angeles offices of O'Melveny and Myers, one of the oldest and largest law firms in the United States, when he got stuck on a deal at three in the morning. A partner had told him to prepare the disclosure schedules for a signing the next day. Weinberg had never worked a deal and had no idea what the term "disclosure schedules" meant. He picked up the phone and called document services: "Do you guys know what disclosure schedules are?"

Weinberg was grinding through eighty-hour weeks of document review, doing work that, as he later said, associates "could have done even before law school."

For most of his life, he had been, by his own description, a terrible student who kept getting kicked out of schools. "I didn't find something that made me want to get up every morning and apply myself," he said. A bachelor's degree from Kenyon College and a law degree from USC were supposed to be the structure

that gave him direction. Instead, the direction led to a dark office at three in the morning, calling document services about a term he had never heard.

His roommate, Gabriel Pereyra, was living in a different world. The two had met over brunch, where Pereyra spent most of the meal explaining his chess education startup that would use predictive analysis to teach people how to play. The startup failed. But Pereyra had spent years at the center of the AI revolution, working at Google Brain in 2016 and 2017, then at DeepMind and Meta. He was looking for the next idea.

One evening, Pereyra showed Weinberg an AI system called GPT-3, built by the San Francisco artificial intelligence company OpenAI. The system could take a question or instruction in plain English and generate a response that sounded as if a human had written it. OpenAI would later use the same technology to build ChatGPT. “In the beginning, I swear to God, the main use case I had for it was running a Dungeons and Dragons game with friends in LA,” Weinberg said.

Then Weinberg got assigned a pro bono case in landlord-tenant law, a subject entirely outside his training. He and Pereyra ran an experiment. Instead of asking the AI a single question, they broke the legal problem into a sequence of steps, walking the system through California landlord-tenant statutes one piece at a time, the way a law professor might guide a student through a case. The technique, later called chain-of-thought prompting,

became a standard method in AI research, but the two roommates figured it out on their own.

The next step was a blind test. They pulled a hundred legal questions from Reddit's legal advice forum, ran through GPT-3, and handed to three practicing attorneys without mentioning artificial intelligence. They asked an identical question to each attorney: *"A potential customer asked this question. Here is the answer. Would you make any edits, or would you send this as is?"*

For eighty-six of the hundred samples, two or more of the attorneys said they would send the answer to a client without changing a word.

Weinberg and Pereyra cold-emailed Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, and Jason Kwon, the company's general counsel. The email included the legal answers generated in their experiment that practicing attorneys would send to clients unchanged. They had included Kwon deliberately, figuring that only a lawyer on the receiving end could judge whether the answers were correct. Kwon's reaction was immediate: "Oh my God, I had no idea these models were this good at legal."

On the morning of July 4, 2022, at ten o'clock, the two roommates sat in their apartment, a mattress still on the floor, and took a video call with OpenAI's entire C-suite. Within a week, Altman committed five million dollars through the OpenAI Startup Fund.

“I didn’t have any friends that worked in tech,” Weinberg said. “I didn’t grow up in San Francisco. I didn’t know who the top VCs were. This was all just net new to me.” OpenAI backed them anyway. For the first time in his life, Weinberg felt driven by his work rather than buried under it. **“I’ve never felt this overwhelming obsession and excitement to get up every morning,” he said. “Ever. And it is absolutely terrifying to me to lose that.”**

Pereyra, drawing on his connections from Google Brain and DeepMind, secured early access to GPT-4, a far more powerful version of the system, roughly six months before OpenAI released ChatGPT to the public. Pereyra built the system and trained it on millions of pages of legal documents so it would make fewer mistakes and give more reliable answers. Weinberg spent fourteen hours straight testing the new system on corporate law and emerged with results that could handle complex transactions at a level the earlier model had never approached. “This is going to change big law,” they decided.

They named the product Harvey, after Harvey Specter, the fictional attorney from the television show *Suits*. Lawyers prompted the AI more naturally when they addressed it by a human name rather than a product name. The name also sounded like Harvard, which, as Weinberg admitted, mattered when selling to an industry built on prestige.

In the early days, Weinberg sent thousands of cold messages on LinkedIn, trying to get anyone at a law firm to look at Harvey. He

had practiced law for less than a year before leaving O'Melveny to start the company, far too little time to build connections across the industry.

When he got a law firm partner on a call, he had seconds to hold their attention. He settled on an audacious tactic. Before every demo, he would look up the partner he was presenting to, pull a court filing they had recently written from PACER, the federal court's public records system, and feed it into Harvey. Then he would show the lawyer Harvey's critique of their own argument.

Weinberg would prompt Harvey to find flaws in the lawyer's own argument. "I would try to come up with prompts that were like, 'Your reasoning here is weak, and here is why,'" he said. "Because they're a litigator and I'm basically attacking something that they just wrote, they would instantly read the screen."

It was a gamble. Early versions of the model still hallucinated, and a single bad output could end the conversation. He had left a stable career, bet on a technology he could not control, and was now staking his credibility on whether a model would hallucinate in front of the most powerful people in the legal professions. But Weinberg understood lawyers, argumentative by nature. He let them fight with the model, and the model held its ground. Partners who planned to give him five minutes put their phones down and leaned forward. They argued back at the screen, then went quiet when the AI landed a genuine insight. **"The times that they got it right, it was over,"** Weinberg said.

The breakthrough came when Allen and Overy, one of the world's largest firms with thirty-five hundred lawyers in forty-three offices, became their first major client. Harvey grew into an enterprise serving more than two thousand firms across seventy countries. Its agents completed seven hundred thousand tasks every day, compressing ten to twenty hours of legal research into twenty minutes. By 2026, the company was generating three hundred million dollars in annual recurring revenue. The valuation reached eleven billion. The *New York Times* profiled the two founders as AI billionaires. They were still roommates, living in the same apartment. "Yeah, sure it's in the billions," Weinberg said, "but it's on paper."

The AI agents Weinberg had built were completing the same contracts that junior associates once reviewed by hand, and the profession was beginning to shrink around them.

Zach Couger, a junior associate at McDermott Will and Schulte, felt the shift from the other side. He used ChatGPT every day and saw the efficiency firsthand. The doubt arrived with it. "I'm worried that I'm not getting the same reps that senior attorneys got," he told *MIT Technology Review*. **"I may be the last plane out,"** he said.

A law degree certifies a specific set of skills. Three years of law school and a bar exam teach a graduate to research statutes, draft contracts, review documents for risk, synthesize case law, and interpret regulatory language. Those are the skills that

justify a six-figure tuition bill and the three years of opportunity cost that come with it. **They are also, almost to the letter, the skills that Harvey's agents perform seven hundred thousand times a day.** The grunt work Weinberg once did at three in the morning, calling document services because he had never heard the phrase "disclosure schedules," is the same work his startup Harvey now automates for two thousand firms across seventy countries.

Harvey's agents now produce those same skills for pennies, and the credential is losing its market power as a result. Couger's law degree still certified that he could research, draft, and review at a reliable level of competence. Harvey produced that same output in twenty minutes. **The credential remained honest. The work it certified had become commoditized.**

Chapter 2 showed the credential losing value because too many people hold it. Couger faces a different problem. Even if he were the only law graduate in his class, Harvey's agents could still replicate his output at a fraction of the cost.

Law firms were already cutting junior hiring. Clifford Chance cut ten percent of its London business services staff. The Am Law 100 cut first-year associate hiring in 2025, and two-thirds of managing partners expected to hire fewer associates over the next three to five years. Those junior positions were also where future senior lawyers learned their craft by spending years reviewing contracts and drowning in case law until legal judgment became instinct. Every senior partner in the profession

had built their expertise by doing the same grunt work that firms were now handing to AI. **The entry point into the profession was disappearing.**

The pattern extended well beyond law. Consulting firms, accounting firms, and investment banks were cutting junior roles because AI could now handle the research, analysis, and drafting that new hires used to do. McKinsey disclosed in January 2026 that twenty-five thousand AI agents now worked alongside its forty thousand human employees, saving the firm 1.5 million hours of research and synthesis in a single year.

The Big Four accounting firms cut graduate hiring across the board. KPMG cut by 29 percent, Deloitte by 18 percent. A *Financial Times* analysis of fifty thousand job postings found that the firms now advertise more positions for AI specialists than for auditors. Goldman Sachs CEO David Solomon told *Bloomberg* that an AI system could draft 95 percent of an IPO prospectus in minutes, work that once kept teams of junior analysts at their desks through the night. JPMorgan's chief financial officer told managers to stop reflexively hiring when AI could absorb the work instead.

Across the United States, entry-level job postings fell 35 percent from January 2023 to mid-2025, according to the labor research firm Revelio Labs. Harvard economists Seyed Hosseini and Guy Lichtinger named the pattern “seniority-biased technological change.” **At companies that adopted generative AI, junior hiring fell while senior employment continued to grow.**

As credentials lost their premium, the skills they once guarded became accessible to people the old system had never trained, and some of them started building.

In February 2025, a journalist named Vanessa Ricarte was killed by her ex-fiance in Campo Grande, a city in central Brazil. He had at least fourteen pending domestic violence cases involving multiple women. The records were public, scattered across court systems and government databases that corporations, employers, and HR departments searched routinely. Ordinary women had no practical way to access them. Ricarte had left an audio message saying that if she had known about his past, she would never have gotten involved with him.

“Vanessa was like me, like you,” Sabrina Matos later said. “And she died because she didn’t know who she was dealing with.”

Matos was watching coverage of the case with her mother at home in Curitiba, a city in southern Brazil. Her mother’s response was blunt: “You have to do something. Women here have no access to this kind of information until it’s too late.”

The frustration was personal. Every woman Matos knew had at some point trusted a man whose history she could not verify, and the anger that followed was less about technology than about a system that kept life-saving data locked behind interfaces built for corporations.

Matos had spent thirteen years in growth marketing. She had never written a line of code. At fifteen, her mother had given her a sublimation kit from the family's clothing factory. Matos started printing celebrity t-shirts, Demi Lovato and Justin Bieber, under a brand she called Made For Fun. She traveled alone to concerts across Brazil, selling at shows in São Paulo by herself. In a single week of touring she made fifty thousand reais (roughly ten thousand dollars). She dropped out of school in her last year. **“I learned English by myself, Spanish by myself, marketing by myself,” she said. “I don’t have a degree.”** By nineteen she had moved into digital marketing.

Over the next decade, she worked across startups in Brazil, the United States, and Europe, helped products scale from zero to a million users, and founded a twenty-person outbound sales agency. **Her entire career had been spent next to product teams, watching engineers turn ideas into working software, without ever learning to do it herself.**

In April 2025, Matos called Felipe Bahia, a growth marketer she had worked with at an agency five years earlier. “I’m planning to build an app that lets women in Brazil run criminal background checks on the men in their lives,” she told him. “What do you think?” Bahia’s answer was immediate: “I think it’s fine. We can do that.” Neither of them could write a line of code.

They tested three AI app builders in a single week and chose Lovable, a platform that converts plain-English descriptions into working software. In 45 days they built three versions of Plinq, a

consumer-facing app that lets anyone in Brazil run an instant criminal background check using a name, a phone number, or a national ID number. The app pulls from the same public databases that corporations pay thousands of dollars a year to access and returns a color-coded risk score of green, yellow, or red. Both Matos and Bahia were still working nine-to-five jobs and built the entire company in the hours between.

They launched on June 1, 2025, sharing the link with friends on Instagram. Two days later, Matos wrote a LinkedIn post about Plinq that went viral. Fifteen hundred users signed up in the first week. By December the platform was pulling 1.1 million page views in a single month, with a new user signing up every ten minutes.

One story from the early months stayed with Matos. A woman in her circle was about to go on a first date with a man she had been talking to at her gym for weeks. Her friends persuaded her to run his name through Plinq before she left the house. The screen came back red. He had eight charges on file, including domestic violence. She canceled the date.

Within three months, Plinq crossed forty thousand users and reached four hundred fifty-six thousand dollars in annual recurring revenue, growing at 300 percent month over month. More than two hundred women reported that a Plinq check had helped them avoid a dangerous situation. Users expanded the use case on their own, with twenty percent of searches going toward ride-sharing drivers, doctors, or service providers,

because the need for safety information extended far beyond dating.

By the end of 2025, Matos was negotiating multi-million-dollar government contracts with two of Brazil's largest states to deploy the platform through their women's safety departments. She had eight employees, a CTO, and a product expanding from background checks into a full safety system with a panic button and location-sharing check-in.

“I built the website, the desktop app, the backend workflows, all without an engineering degree,” she said. “If Lovable didn't exist, Plinq would never have seen the light of day.”

Under the old system, building software required a computer science degree through several years of training, and tens of thousands of dollars in tuition. AI tools collapsed that barrier. **The pool of potential builders expanded from a few million computer science graduates to anyone with a problem worth solving and the persistence to ship a solution.** Matos had the customer insight from thirteen years of marketing. AI supplied the engineering. **The credential that once stood between an idea and a working product became unnecessary.**

For professionals who had built their careers on technical mastery, the collapse reached past the job market and into personal identity. Software developers started calling the feeling **Deep Blue**, after the IBM machine

that defeated the chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov in 1997. The term described the existential dread that arrived when AI mastered a craft someone had spent years learning.

At Spotify, the company's top engineers had stopped writing code entirely by December 2025, supervising AI systems instead. Simon Willison, co-creator of the Django web framework, summarized the refrain he kept hearing from developers across the industry: "I dedicated my career to learning this, and now it just does it. What am I even for?" A junior software engineer at a mid-size software company captured the same unease in plainer language: "It is what I do for forty hours a week. You want to take some pride and have some ownership of it. And you don't want it to just all be spit out of the machine."

Matos felt the opposite of Deep Blue. She had spent thirteen years watching engineers turn ideas into working software, unable to close the gap herself. Heorhi Tratsiak, a former banker who left his career to build technology products with AI, described it this way: "A persistent, quiet frustration that the most interesting problems of our time were being solved by people with credentials I didn't have, in a language I didn't speak." For Matos and Tratsiak, AI dissolved that frustration. The same technology that made many engineers question their relevance gave them the ability to build for the first time.

The difference was where each person had anchored their identity to *an expertise to master or a problem to solve*. Professionals who took pride in their *technical mastery*

watched it become a depreciating commodity. Those who had built their identity around **a problem worth solving** felt the excitement of finally building their dream product with their own hands.

When credentials of technical expertise lose their pricing power and building becomes accessible to anyone with an idea, how does someone stand out? We will find out in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Undeniable Signal

In the summer of 2009, a young computer science professor stood beside a poster in a conference hall in Miami Beach and watched hundreds of researchers walk past without slowing down.

Fei-Fei Li had spent three years building the project pinned to that board. It was called ImageNet, the largest collection of labeled photographs ever assembled, over fourteen million images sorted into nearly twenty-two thousand categories. Each one had been verified by human workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk, a platform where people complete small digital tasks for pay. Li worked in computer vision, the branch of AI that teaches machines to understand images. Most researchers believed progress required better algorithms. Li believed it required more data, at a scale nobody had attempted. So she built the dataset herself.

Her colleagues were not impressed. Grant committees refused to fund the project. Peers called it a waste of time. The academic incentive structure rewarded clever algorithms published in top journals, and the slow, unglamorous work of collecting and labeling millions of photographs looked more like data entry than science. At the 2009 Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition, the field's premier gathering, the ImageNet paper was assigned to the poster session, the place a conference puts the work that did not earn a speaking slot.

Li stood beside her poster and waited. Researchers drifted past on their way to the talks that mattered. A few stopped, glanced, and moved on. **Three years of work, and the field's verdict was a shrug.**

Li had arrived in the United States from China at fifteen. Her parents had left the country's middle class for Parsippany, New Jersey, where her father repaired cameras and her mother worked as a cashier. While other teenagers spent their weekends with friends, Li spent hers waitressing and cleaning houses to help the family stay afloat. A nearly full scholarship to Princeton arrived so unexpectedly that she asked two different high school advisors to check the acceptance letter.

Li later described those years as a tale of two cities. Monday to Friday she was a physics student at Princeton, surrounded by intellectuals. On weekends she drove back to Parsippany to work at the dry-cleaning shop her family had opened with borrowed

money, including a loan from her high school math teacher, Bob Sabella, who had taught her calculus during lunch hours.

Li was the only one in her family who spoke English, so she became what she called the “CEO” of the dry-cleaning shop: answering phones, managing inspections, talking to customers, handling the billing. She kept running the business remotely even after leaving for her PhD in electrical engineering at Caltech, calling in between research sessions until she was halfway through graduate school.

In 2007, Li returned to Princeton as an assistant professor at its Computer Science Department, where she began building ImageNet with a small team and almost no funding. At first, Li tried hiring Princeton undergrads at ten dollars an hour to label images. Her graduate student Jia Deng ran the numbers and calculated that at their labeling rate, he would be working on his PhD for nineteen years.

The project stalled until during a chance hallway conversation, another graduate student asked Li whether she had heard of Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing platform barely a year old. She logged on, tried a sample task identifying wine bottle labels, and knew instantly. “Literally that day I knew the ImageNet project was going to happen,” she said. “Suddenly we found a tool that could scale, that we could not possibly dream of by hiring Princeton undergrads.” Even with Mechanical Turk, the dataset took two and a half years to finish.

The work was tedious. Labeling fourteen million images required thousands of Mechanical Turk workers, each one tagging photos of dogs, cars, bridges, and wombats, one click at a time. But Li had an unusual tolerance for invisible labor in service of a long-term goal. The same stubbornness that carried her family through those early years in New Jersey carried the ImageNet project through three years of being ignored.

Even her own mentors tried to talk her out of it. One warned that she was leaping too far ahead of the field. Skeptical researchers asked, “If you can’t even do one object well, why would you do thousands?” Li later described her persistence as inheritance. “Maybe it’s the same kind of unbelievable conviction that took my parents to America,” she said.

The field did not care, so Li found a way to make them pay attention.

In 2010, after moving to Stanford, she and her team launched the ImageNet Large Scale Visual Recognition Challenge, a public competition. The rules were straightforward. Research teams from around the world would build models that looked at photographs they had never seen before and tried to identify what was in them. A golden retriever, a stop sign, a plate of sushi. Each model had to label each one correctly, and a public scoreboard tracked which team was most accurate.

For two years, the improvements were modest. Then, in 2012, a team of three, Alex Krizhevsky, Ilya Sutskever, and Geoffrey Hinton, at the University of Toronto submitted a deep neural

network called AlexNet. It won by a margin that stunned the field. The error rate dropped more than ten percentage points in a single year, a leap so large that researchers who had spent decades in computer vision could not explain it away. That result is widely regarded as the spark that ignited the modern AI revolution, the moment that made deep learning the dominant approach in fields from medical imaging to autonomous vehicles to natural language processing.

Li's dataset, her years of invisible labor, her contrarian bet on data over algorithms, made it all possible. Nothing about her ability changed between 2009 and 2012. She was the same scientist with the same conviction and the same dataset. **What changed was what strangers could see.** The scoreboard gave the entire field a shared measuring stick. Any team in the world could test its approach against the same data and see where it stood. **Without the dataset she built, the field may never have recognized the potential of deep learning.** Today, Fei-Fei Li is known as the “Godmother of AI.”

Before that scoreboard existed, Li was in the same position as anyone with untested work. She had built a dataset that was ambitious, original, and technically impressive, but the researchers walking past her poster had no way to know whether that dataset would ever matter to anyone beyond Li herself. The work might be brilliant. It might be a dead end. Without traction, anyone evaluating it is guessing.

Li's story reveals the difference between two kinds of proof:

Proof of effort shows that you did the work. A polished prototype, a well-researched manuscript, three years of labeled photographs. The gatekeeper can see that effort went in, but cannot tell whether the result will matter to anyone else.

Proof of value shows that the work found traction. A thousand users paying for your product, a hundred researchers citing your paper, a public scoreboard displaying results that change a field. A gatekeeper who can see traction does not need to take your word for it.

The gap between these two is widening every year. The previous chapter showed that AI has collapsed the cost of producing proof of effort. Polished prototypes and websites can be prompted into existence in a weekend. What remains rare is proof of value, which requires strangers voting on your work with their own time and money.

Proof of effort is necessary. You have to build the work before anyone can use it. But it is no longer sufficient. **The finish line has moved from “show me you can build” to “show me someone cares.”**

Li’s ImageNet dataset, on its own, was **proof of effort**. The competition she built around it turned that effort into **proof of value**. While the data was the same, the difference was a public leaderboard where strangers could test their models and the whole field could measure the progress.

Li built her own scoreboard. But what happens when the scoreboard already exists?

In the late 2000s, a computer programmer named Andy Weir tried to publish a novel. He had wanted to be a writer since he was twelve or thirteen years old, but he was risk-averse by nature.

He had been hired as a computer programmer at a national laboratory at fifteen, studied computer science at UC San Diego until he ran out of money before he could finish, and later landed at AOL. When AOL laid him off in the late 1990s, he cashed in some of the company's then-valuable stock and gave himself three years to break into publishing. He wrote a novel called *Theft of Pride* and spent those three years pitching literary agents. "Couldn't get an agent, couldn't get a publisher interested," he said. "You've never heard of it, because it sucked."

The failure settled into something quieter than disappointment. He went back to programming not with bitterness but with the resigned clarity of someone who had tried, failed, and decided that a guaranteed income and a hobby he loved were enough. He treated writing as exactly that, posting short stories on his personal website for fun.

The idea for his next project started on his couch. Weir was a self-described space dork, and one day he tried to work out how a manned Mars mission would actually function with current technology. He thought of a scene he loved in the movie *Apollo 13*, where engineers jury-rigged a CO₂ scrubber from duct tape

and cardboard, and realized he wanted a whole book of that kind of desperate resourcefulness. “I started thinking about all the things that could go wrong,” he said. “So I created an unfortunate protagonist and subjected him to all of it.”

In late 2009, he started posting the novel on his website, chapter by chapter, for free. It was about an astronaut stranded alone on Mars.

Weir had a rule for the story. No magic technology was allowed. Every solution the astronaut used had to be scientifically accurate, down to the orbital mechanics, the Martian soil chemistry, and the rate at which a pressurized habitat leaks atmosphere. “I put math in on one side,” he said, “and got the plot out the other.” When he calculated how much water his astronaut would need to grow potatoes, the answer was six hundred liters, far more than any Mars mission would carry. So the character had to manufacture water from scratch using chemistry, and that side plot became one of the book’s most gripping sequences.

Weir wrote his own software to simulate the solar system. He needed to time his fictional Mars mission so that it overlapped with Thanksgiving, because that was the only plausible reason potatoes would be on board. Finding that launch window required constructing an ephemeris of planetary orbits and running several years of simulated trajectories. The exact launch date is never stated in the book, but the clues are buried in the

text for anyone willing to consult a real ephemeris and work it out. No reader has found it yet.

Every six to eight weeks he posted a new chapter. Professors and scientists emailed corrections. Three thousand readers became an unpaid peer-review board, checking his work and telling him when he got the science wrong. He fixed it and posted the next chapter.

“It was a serial,” he said. “I never thought it would be more than that.”

When the serial was finished, Weir posted it as a free e-book on his website. Readers who were not as technically inclined kept asking him to make it available on Kindle instead, so he put it on Amazon for 99 cents, the minimum price the platform allowed. Within months, *The Martian* had sold 35,000 copies and risen to the top of Amazon’s science fiction bestseller list. The 99-cent Kindle version outsold the free one.

This got the attention of Julian Pavia, an editor at Crown Publishing, a division of Random House. He mentioned it to a colleague, a literary agent named David Fugate. Fugate read it, liked it, and called Weir. “Hey, need an agent?”

“Earlier in life, I’d spent three years trying to get a literary agent and couldn’t get any interest,” Weir said. “And then one comes knocking on my door.”

Fugate became his agent. Crown bought the print rights for over \$100,000. That same week, 20th Century Fox optioned the movie rights. Four days separated the two deals.

“I was honestly worried it was a scam,” Weir said. “Out of nowhere someone offers to make all my dreams and lifelong ambitions come true and pay me a big pile of money? It seemed too good.”

Weir has a deep fear of flying and has not set foot on an airplane since 2007. So he signed both deals entirely over the phone, from his modest condo in Mountain View, California. He never met any of the voices calling from New York and Los Angeles, never shook anyone’s hand, never clinked champagne flutes in a conference room. “But then the checks started coming in,” he said with a laugh. “And I thought, ‘Well, if it’s a scam, then they’re not very good at it.’”

The week the deals came together, Weir was still sitting in his cubicle at MobileIron, fixing software bugs between calls about his movie rights. He walked to the conference room to negotiate with Fox, then walked back to debug code. On the day everything finalized, he had to leave work entirely. He could not breathe.

His co-workers at MobileIron had been rooting for him the whole time. When Weir finally quit to write full-time, it was not a victory lap. “It was absolutely not a ‘take this job and shove it’ situation,” he said. “It was bittersweet. I was sad to go.”

Years later, asked whether *The Martian*'s protagonist Mark Watney was based on himself, Weir smiled. "Mark Watney is who I want to be. He has all the qualities I like about myself magnified without any of the qualities I dislike." He paused. "Mark Watney isn't afraid to fly."

The Martian sold three million copies, earned seven Academy Award nominations, and launched a career that produced *Artemis* and *Project Hail Mary*. The author that every literary agent had passed on produced three of the most successful science fiction novels of the decade.

Weir's story looks like a fairy tale. Rejected writer posts book online and becomes famous. But the mechanism underneath it is the same one Fei-Fei Li used: **a public scoring system that let strangers evaluate the work independently.**

Consider what Amazon's marketplace did for Weir. When literary agents received his query letters in the early 2000s, they were being asked to predict. Read this manuscript, imagine whether it might sell, and gamble your reputation on a stranger. **Every agent said no, because no is the safe answer when you are predicting.**

By the time David Fugate called Weir a decade later, the book had 35,000 paying readers and a number-one genre ranking on Amazon. **Instead of betting on an unknown stranger, Fugate was inspecting a proven result.**

This shift from prediction to inspection is what happens whenever proof of value enters the room. The gatekeeper's risk drops. Their confidence rises. The yes becomes easier to give. And sometimes, as Weir discovered, the gatekeeper comes looking for you.

Notice how Weir flipped the order. **The conventional path sends you to the gatekeeper first, manuscript in hand, hoping for permission to reach an audience. Weir went to the open market first. He posted his novel online, where anyone could read it, judge it, and decide independently whether it was worth their time, without a small group of gatekeepers blocking the way.** By the time the gatekeeper showed up, the market had already decided.

Fei-Fei Li did the same. She could not convince the conference to give her a speaking slot. So she built a competition where the dataset proved its own value publicly, to anyone paying attention.

Chapters 2 and 3 showed that credentials depreciate because too many people hold the same degree and AI has commoditized the technical expertise that degree certifies. In contrast, **proof of value compounds and appreciates over time.** The next chapter will show you how.

Chapter 5: The Flywheel

In 2001, a thirty-six-year-old programmer sat in a small office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that he also used as a painting studio, and posted an essay on a website nobody read.

Paul Graham had studied philosophy at Cornell and earned a PhD in computer science at Harvard before training as a painter at RISD and in Florence. In 1995, he and a friend named Robert Morris had started Viaweb, one of the first applications that ran entirely in a web browser. It let anyone build an online store without installing software, at a time when most programs still shipped on disks. Yahoo bought Viaweb in 1998 for \$49.6 million in stock. Graham was suddenly rich, and he had no idea what to do next.

He figured he would become an investor. Instead, he started writing. He gave a talk at a programming conference about how he had used an obscure language called Lisp to build Viaweb, and afterward posted the text on paulgraham.com, a personal website he had created years earlier but never used for anything. In one day it got 30,000 page views.

“Wow, I thought, there’s an audience,” he wrote later. “If I write something and put it on the web, anyone can read it. That may seem obvious now, but it was surprising then.”

Over the next four years, Graham wrote thirty-one essays about programming, startups, and ideas. He posted them for free on his website. They found traction on hacker forums and social news sites like Slashdot. O’Reilly published a collection as a book, *Hackers & Painters*, in 2004. He was writing about what interested him and posting it for anyone to read.

In early 2005, the Harvard Computer Society invited Graham to give a talk. He decided to speak about how to start a startup. Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, two seniors at the University of Virginia, took the train to Cambridge to hear it, because they had been reading his essays online for years. The startup talk was a bonus.

Graham had always meant to do some angel investing after selling Viaweb. Seven years had passed and he still had zero investments to show for it. He had been writing software and writing essays, but the thing he kept telling himself he would do, the angel investing that felt like a moral obligation after someone else had funded him, had never actually started.

Meanwhile, his partner Jessica Livingston was interviewing at a Boston venture capital firm that kept stalling. Every night at dinner, Graham would tell Livingston what was wrong with the VC industry. The ideas piled up over weeks: smaller checks, younger founders, fund hackers instead of MBAs in suits.

One night, walking home from dinner in Harvard Square, Graham stopped on the sidewalk. “Let’s just start our own,” he said. They turned onto Walker Street and decided to do it. Graham put up \$100,000. Livingston quit her job. They recruited Morris and Trevor Blackwell, who added \$50,000 each, and named the firm Y Combinator, after a concept in computer science: a function that runs other functions.

The model was the opposite of traditional venture capital. VCs wrote large checks to established companies with polished business plans. Y Combinator would write tiny checks to college kids with laptops, enough to cover rent and server costs for a summer, and help them build their startups from scratch. They called the first run the Summer Founders Program, posted the application on Graham’s website, and got 225 applications. The experiment was already more serious than they had intended.

They picked eight teams for that first summer of 2005. Reddit was one of them, started by Huffman and Ohanian, the two students who had taken the train from Virginia. Justin Kan and Emmett Shear were in the batch, and would later cofound Twitch. Each team got \$6,000 per founder. Most were college-age programmers with wild ideas and zero business experience. That was the point.

The founders gathered each week at Graham’s office. Every Tuesday, Graham cooked dinner for the entire group, slow-cooking a stew he called “Glop” and serving it over rice at plywood tables. At the end of the summer, they hosted Demo

Day: the founders presented their startups to a room of about fifteen investors, mostly friends of Graham and Livingston. The pitches were ten minutes long, rambling, and uniformly terrible. Jared Friedman, a founder in one of the early batches, recalled the scene. “Only a couple of companies raised any money,” he said. “The vast majority raised zero dollars, including ours.” Serious investors stayed away. “They didn’t really believe in this Y Combinator thing,” Friedman said.

For the first few batches, YC remained invisible. But the flywheel was starting to turn. Reddit was growing fast. Each batch produced a few startups that survived, and those survivors became proof that the model worked. The next batch’s applicants had heard about the last batch’s successes. The applicant pool grew, and the quality grew with it.

Then the big names started to arrive. Dropbox came through in 2007. Airbnb in 2009. Stripe in 2009, founded by two Irish brothers who had been reading Graham’s essays as teenagers. Each success story became a recruiting pitch for the next generation of founders. “That started a virtuous cycle,” Friedman said. “There was more interest in coming to Demo Day, which meant more companies raised more money, which made Y Combinator more appealing for founders to join.”

The investors who had once ignored Demo Day were now fighting to get in. By 2012, four hundred and fifty investors, entrepreneurs, and reporters squeezed into the Computer History Museum in Mountain View to watch sixty-six startups

pitch. An angel investor named Bulent Tekmen described the atmosphere. “It’s like there are lots of sharks and you have to be more edgy than them to invest,” he said. “If you don’t, the big names will catch your investment opportunity, your prey.”

The alumni network compounded alongside the investor interest. Founders from earlier batches came back to advise later ones. They shared sales decks, introduced each other to investors, helped each other hire, and bought each other’s products. A YC-backed enterprise startup could find its first ten customers entirely from the alumni directory.

Twenty years later, Y Combinator has funded over 5,000 companies with a combined valuation exceeding \$1 trillion. Dropbox, Airbnb, Stripe, DoorDash, Coinbase, Scale AI, and Instacart all came through its program.

It started with a man posting essays on a website nobody visited.

Credentials depreciate. Every year more people hold the same degree, and AI automates the expertise the degree once certified. Proof of value does the opposite, and Graham’s story shows what “the opposite” looks like.

His first essay attracted readers. Those readers attracted more readers. The readers showed up at a Harvard talk. The talk led to Y Combinator. YC’s first batch produced Reddit. Each successful batch became proof that the model worked, which attracted the next batch, which produced Airbnb, Stripe, and DoorDash. Each piece of traction generated the conditions for the next piece.

Every step of Graham's journey was proof of value. The essays were genuinely useful to aspiring founders, and readers kept coming back. YC itself taught young programmers how to build startups, and the companies they built became some of the most valuable in the world. Each layer of proof compounded into the next. But why?

The first reason is that proof of value is persistent.

Graham posted "Beating the Averages" in April 2001. Four years later, Huffman was still reading it in his dorm room at UVA. That essay had never stopped working. It sat on Graham's website at minimum cost, drawing readers while Graham slept. When the Harvard talk happened in 2005, the audience was already primed because they had been reading him for years.

Emmett Shear, one of the founders in YC's first batch who later cofounded Twitch, described the pull. "I was a big fan of Paul's essays in college," he said. "I was reading his essays along with spending just vastly too much time on the internet in general." When a friend told him about the Summer Founders Program, Shear recognized Graham's name instantly. The essays had done the recruiting years before the application went live.

The second reason is that proof spreads through people.

At Y Combinator, Livingston played a role that most outsiders never understood. Graham called her "the Social Radar." During interviews, the three technical cofounders would pepper

applicants with questions about their startups. Livingston mostly watched.

After each interview, Graham, Morris, and Blackwell would turn to Livingston and ask: “What does the Social Radar say?”

Livingston had an unusual ability to read character. “She can see through any kind of faker almost immediately,” Graham wrote. She could tell when someone was just telling the interviewers what they wanted to hear, and spot a bad cofounder relationship in ten minutes. “From the beginning, I was very careful about only funding earnest people,” she wrote. “I always tried to create an asshole-free culture.” For the first six years, she effectively had a veto over funding decisions.

YC was investing at such an early stage that there was often no product or revenue to evaluate. At that stage, you are picking founders, and founders alone. And Livingston was the one picking.

The founders she chose became the YC alumni network. Years later, Graham reflected on what this had built. “We thought Airbnb was a bad idea,” he wrote. “We funded it because we liked the founders.” That decision was based on Livingston’s read on character rather than Graham’s read on the market, and it produced one of the most valuable companies YC ever funded.

“Some now think YC’s alumni network is its most valuable feature,” Graham wrote. Livingston selected for character, and

that selection compounded over twenty years into a culture that became, in Graham's words, "the product."

What Livingston built at YC is a concentrated version of how proof of value spreads. An early user tells a colleague. A reader shares your research. A customer refers you to someone more influential, who refers you to someone more influential still.

Each referral is proof of value that has spread through a person, someone who saw your work and now carries it to the next gatekeeper for you.

This may look like networking, but not all networking is equal. The founders of Reddit and Dropbox recommended the next generation of young entrepreneurs to apply to YC because YC had helped them gain traction. Each referral carried weight because the founders had witnessed YC's proof of value and were staking their credibility on that experience. That is much stronger than putting in a word for a random person you met at a dinner party who has never shipped anything.

At scale, this becomes reputation, which is the most durable career asset. YC's reputation was built by founders telling other founders the program worked, and then by the results that proved them right.

The third reason is that the practice of building helps us improve our craft.

In 2011, a young engineering student in Pune, India, signed up for an online course called "Introduction to Artificial

Intelligence.” She had just failed the IIT-JEE, the entrance exam to India’s most elite engineering universities, which millions of Indian students believe decides their future.

“I thought, ‘That’s it. I missed my chance,’” Niki Parmar later recalled. Anyone who has prepared for a competitive exam in India knows that feeling. Millions of students take IIT-JEE every year. Families reorganize entire years around it. Coaching institutes are a multi-billion-dollar industry. When years of effort come down to one result, it is easy to believe there is no Plan B.

She had grown up in a lower-middle-class family in Pune. “There wasn’t anyone to guide me into engineering or AI,” she said. “So, I had to figure it out by myself.” As a child, she was never content just using a computer. She wanted to know what was happening behind the screen. She taught herself coding, built websites, and spent hours taking things apart and putting them back together.

After the IIT-JEE rejection, she enrolled at the Pune Institute of Computer Technology. At a time when few people outside research circles were talking about machine learning, the online AI course changed the direction of her life. Parmar was fascinated. “I was curious about the combined power of data, pattern matching, and optimization,” she said.

Her mother had once dreamed of becoming an architect but never got the chance. She made sure her daughter would have the freedom she never had. “My mom always pushed me to chase what I wanted,” Parmar said. “She couldn’t follow her own dream, but she ensured I had the freedom to pursue mine.”

After graduating in 2013, she was accepted for a master's degree at the University of Southern California. She had arranged an education loan and believed the difficult part was over. Then, shortly after she landed in the United States, her father called. The bank had refused to release the funds. In a matter of hours, the excitement of arriving in a new country collapsed into panic.

"I had no money, no place to stay, and no idea how I'd pay for my tuition," she said. Back home, her father and uncle began calling relatives and friends, borrowing money so she could continue. "It was a huge sacrifice," Parmar said. "My dad wouldn't have done that for himself, but he ensured I could keep going." Her professor funded her second year. An internship allowed her to repay the family's loans before she even graduated.

At USC, she joined a computational social science lab led by Professor Morteza Dehghani. She applied machine learning to analyze hundreds of thousands of tweets, studying how moral values predicted connections in social networks, and co-authored published research. "Niki collaborated on several projects with me, and it was clear that she is simply an outstanding thinker," Dehghani said. She met Ashish Vaswani, a PhD candidate who gave a guest lecture on neural networks. They became friends and research collaborators.

After graduating from USC in 2015, Parmar joined Google at twenty-four as a software engineer. She was the youngest member of her AI research team and the only one without a PhD.

“It was a little intimidating at first,” she said. “But it was also an incredible learning experience. I was constantly surrounded by people pushing the boundaries of what AI could do.”

Her first work was building deep learning models for question answering and text similarity that launched on Google Search. She built some of the first successful deep learning systems for Search, proof that a twenty-four-year-old without a doctorate could build production AI at one of the most competitive companies in the world.

Those results earned her a move to Google Brain in 2017, the company’s pure research division. A small group of researchers there had begun working on a radical idea: what if an AI model could read an entire sentence at once instead of processing it one word at a time? Vaswani, her friend from USC, was one of the lead architects. Parmar learned about the project through her work with another researcher, Jakob Uszkoreit. “No one told me to work on it,” she said. “I just wanted to see how far it could go.”

Each day, the team gathered to discuss what they had learned and debate what to try next. Each night, Parmar went back to the code. She built prototype after prototype, testing whether the ideas that sounded promising in conversation actually worked in practice. When a model variant didn’t work, she dug into the results, adjusted the architecture, and ran it again.

“We did this every day,” she later said, “and discussed at great lengths the new results we got each day and then went on to try new things. Every detail, every question, every choice seems

relevant.” She did this for months, through what the paper’s own footnote would later describe as “countless model variants.”

That obsession led to “Attention Is All You Need,” a research paper published in 2017 by eight co-authors, Parmar among them. It introduced the Transformer architecture, the foundation of every major generative AI system as of 2026, from GPT to Gemini to Claude. The T in ChatGPT stands for Transformer. By 2026, the paper had been cited over 270,000 times.

At every stage of Parmar’s journey, building proof of value also built the skill for the next one. Side projects in Pune made her a programmer. Research at USC taught her to apply machine learning to real data. Shipping deep learning systems for Google Search taught her to build AI that worked at scale. By the time she reached Google Brain, she had the intuition to recognize the Transformer idea and the engineering depth to bring it to life. Each piece of proof opened a door, and each one made her capable of walking through it.

And then the proof of value she had built springboarded what came next. After more than six years at Google, Parmar co-founded two AI startups with Vaswani, building tools that let AI operate software and automate workflows for businesses, and raised hundreds of millions from backers including Google and Nvidia. In early 2025, she joined Anthropic, where she works on Claude, an AI system built on the Transformer architecture her paper introduced.

She went from a student who failed an entrance exam to a co-author of the most cited AI paper of the twenty-first century, then a serial founder, then a researcher at one of the leading AI companies in the world. She never earned a PhD.

“You do not necessarily need a PhD to make fundamental contributions to artificial intelligence,” she said, “if you have the drive to learn and experiment.”

Proof of value compounds in three ways. It persists, attracting attention long after you create it. It spreads through people, as users become referrers and referrals become reputation. And it sharpens the builder, because the work of creating proof builds the skills for the next stage. When all three reinforce each other, they create a flywheel. Each turn generates the momentum for the next.

Graham started with an essay. Parmar started with an online course. Both built proof of value that compounded over years into careers that credential alone could not have predicted. The first four chapters of this book all point to the same advice: **spend your time and energy building proof of value rather than collecting credentials. Find a problem you are passionate about solving. Build something people want. Share your work publicly. Let users’ response and feedback compound into the evidence that opens the next door, and the next one after that.**

Where do you start when you have nothing to show? How do you survive the long stretch before the flywheel kicks in? The next two chapters answer those questions.

Chapter 6: The Cold Start

In the summer of 2022, a sixteen-year-old high school sophomore in Illinois opened his laptop and wrote an email he had already rewritten a dozen times. The subject line read: “Big Fan of beehiiv.”

Jay Yang had been writing a newsletter on beehiiv, a platform for email creators, and had fallen in love with how the company shipped new features every week. He wanted to work there. But when he went to their website to look for an internship, he saw that the company had no job postings or application forms of any kind.

Two years earlier, Yang had been playing video games five hours a day during COVID lockdown. One morning he looked in the mirror and felt ashamed of what he saw. He searched on Google “how to make money online.” The first result led him to start a music promotion YouTube channel.

He posted a song every single day for an entire summer. Most of the videos collected a few dozen views and disappeared. Then,

near the end of the summer, a motivational song blew up to over one million views. For a few weeks, the numbers looked promising. Subscribers poured in. But the audience had arrived for one viral hit, and when the next uploads were more of the same, they vanished. The channel never produced any durable income. Yang quit before his freshman year of high school. “I realized I wasn’t that passionate about music,” he wrote later. “It was unsustainable.”

He pivoted to a clothing brand called Project Inspire, and went to Walmart and bought a cartful of plain black tees and shorts. But when he realized that he would have to physically print, pack, and ship every order himself, Yang decided to quit. The blank tees are still in his closet. He tried copywriting, social media marketing, and personal growth content. Each lasted a few months, then faded. After all of these ventures, none had stuck. He was frustrated, and worst of all, he was disappointed in himself.

The pattern was consistent. Yang worked hard, built fast, and stopped, because he was motivated by profit and engagement metrics. So when those metrics stalled, he lost the motivation to stay. Daniel Pink, in his book *Drive*, calls this the gap between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. **External rewards like profit and follower counts can push you to start, but only genuine curiosity about the work itself can carry you through the disappointing moments when the numbers flatten.**

One day he sat down with his mom and told her he felt stuck. She said, “Maybe you should try working for someone else for a little bit. Pick your favorite company and go try and work for them.”

That conversation shifted his mindset. Instead of searching for a profitable idea, Yang searched for a company he genuinely cared about. That led to beehiiv. Because he used it daily, he could see exactly where it could improve.

So without asking for permission, Yang built his own job application: a pitch deck with three project ideas, each one specific to problems he had noticed as a user. He attached it to an email addressed to Tyler Denk, beehiiv’s cofounder and CEO, and stared at the send button.

Yang was sixteen, without any professional experience or connections to anyone at the company. The image that kept running through his mind was Denk opening the email, reading two lines, and closing it. “What if he thought I was a joke?” he wrote later.

He hit send.

The next morning, a new email landed in his inbox. Tyler Denk, Re: Big Fan of beehiiv. Denk liked his ideas. He wanted to hop on a call. Two weeks later, Yang was working directly with the CEO and the marketing team. He spent the summer building beehiiv 101, a free course that helped hundreds of users get more out of the platform.

The internship produced a second effect Yang had never anticipated. Because he built a visible, useful resource, founders started reaching out to him for advice on newsletters and social media growth. The proof of value attracted the opportunities on its own.

A year later, Yang heard through a connection that Noah Kagan, the founder of software deals marketplace AppSumo, was looking for someone to grow his newsletter. Over the next forty hours, he built a 19-slide pitch deck that deconstructed Kagan's entire social media and email funnel. The deck analyzed old podcast episodes, YouTube videos, the website signup flow, and the newsletter sequence. He identified gaps, proposed fixes, and attached nine ready-to-publish pieces of content. All Kagan had to do was click send.

Yang emailed it over with the same framing he had used with Denk: if you like this, let's work together. If you don't, no harm, no foul.

Kagan loved it. Yang started on a paid trial running his Instagram, and within weeks was promoted to Head of Content. From there he led the social media campaign that made Kagan's book *Million Dollar Weekend* a New York Times bestseller. He was seventeen.

At nineteen, Yang left college to join Alex and Leila Hormozi's media team at Acquisition.com, where he helped run the marketing campaign for *\$100M Money Models*, which broke a Guinness World Record and generated \$106 million in three

days. That same year, he self-published *You Can Just Do Things*, which became an Amazon bestseller.

Yang's story reveals how to convert proof of effort into proof of value when your track record is empty and nobody is paying attention.

The starting point is to choose a field you genuinely care about, then explore it until you find a gap. This is where Pink's intrinsic motivation becomes essential. Yang's YouTube channel and clothing brand failed because he was chasing profits, and profit is an extrinsic reward that evaporates the moment the numbers dip. With beehiiv, he cared about the product itself. Because he used it daily, he could see exactly where it fell short, and that genuine curiosity gave him a specific, informed opinion about what should be built next.

Once you have identified a gap that you are excited about, build a deliverable small enough to finish in days and concrete enough for a stranger to judge in minutes. Yang's pitch deck took forty hours. If the deliverable takes months, you will never finish it. If it takes seconds to produce, a stranger cannot tell whether you put thoughtful effort into it. The sweet spot is a few days of focused work, delivered in a format the recipient can judge in one sitting.

Next, show agency by delivering your work directly to your target audience before they ask for it. beehiiv did not have any job postings or application form. Yang cold emailed the CEO with his work. As he later wrote in *You Can Just Do Things*,

the biggest barrier between most people and the career they want is the assumption that someone else needs to open the door first.

If you see a gap you can fill for a specific person or company, build the solution and send it. Attach your work to a clear, low-pressure ask, and put it in front of the person who can say yes. The worst outcome is silence. The best outcome is what happened to Yang.

Yang was sixteen with an empty calendar and a free summer to spend. But what if you already have a career and want to pivot into a new one?

In 2015, Carly Stein was waking up every morning with panic attacks on her way to the Goldman Sachs trading floor. It was her second finance job. The first had been at a hedge fund, and she hated it. A more prestigious firm, she thought, might fix the feeling. It did the opposite. At Goldman, she was burnt out, had barely any life outside of work, and felt no sense of purpose or identity.

“I felt like I was doing a terrible job,” she wrote later. “The funny thing is, the people around me felt like I was doing a great job. I was getting mentorship and promotions and more money. But I had no idea where it was all leading.” She looked at her manager and her manager’s manager. They all seemed miserable, making great money but always complaining about how they had too little. “The irony is that taking the safe path had made me more scared than I’d ever been.”

Stein had grown up in Toronto and studied social sciences with a focus on biology and chemistry in college. She had followed the plan: get the degree, land the prestigious job, build the career your parents can brag about. Goldman was supposed to be the reward, but instead it felt like a trap. She would find her way out, and the seed had been planted years earlier, in an Italian pharmacy.

Stein had been chronically sick since childhood. She was allergic to most antibiotics, and years of alternative treatments had failed. During a college semester abroad in Italy, her health cratered so badly she considered flying home for surgery. Instead, she stumbled into a pharmacy and explained her situation to the pharmacist. The woman said casually, “Oh, you just need propolis.” Stein had never heard the word “propolis,” but she gave it a try and took it twice a day for five days. For the first time in years, she made a full recovery.

Back home in Canada, propolis was nowhere to be found. So she went to a local beekeeper to learn how to make her own. His name was John, a third-generation beekeeper and retired biochemist from Romania. She apprenticed with him for her final year of college, harvesting propolis from the hives and running experiments in the university chemistry lab. Before long she was bottling what she made and giving it to friends. Word spread across campus. Broke college students were paying a premium for these immune boosters made of bee products, sold from her dorm room.

After graduation, she left the beekeeping behind and took the Goldman job. The credential path pulled her forward.

One night, months into the trading floor grind, she started a journal and made what she later called a “happiness spreadsheet,” listing every activity that brought her joy. Beekeeping and making products kept coming back. She ordered lab equipment and had John ship raw propolis to her studio apartment. Friends and family thought she was having a breakdown.

She stayed at Goldman. But on weekends, she started sneaking into farmers markets. A friend who organized events had suggested it: “Why don’t you come sell your stuff at this market. It’s weird and cool and different.” Stein showed up with a folding table and bottles of propolis throat spray she had formulated in her kitchen. She had spent years earning the credibility that came with saying “I work at Goldman Sachs.” Now she was standing behind a card table with a cardboard sign, explaining bee resin to strangers who had never heard the word “propolis.”

“I was really sheepish about it,” she said later. “I was embarrassed about this weird hobby.” When she was met with confusion and skepticism, it stung, but she taught herself to reframe it. If the idea were so familiar that nobody questioned it, the gap probably was not worth filling. She laid out the bottles and waited to see if anyone would buy.

They did, and they came back the following week. Within months, she had built what she later called “a scrappy

evangelizing customer base that would follow me from market to market.” The early customers were young parents looking for cleaner alternatives to drugstore cold medicine and people with autoimmune conditions who were allergic to antibiotics, just like her. One customer had a six-year-old son with chronic sore throats and said the propolis spray was the first product that ever worked for him. Stories like that kept coming.

Without realizing it, she was conducting the most effective consumer research of her career. Every conversation at the folding table taught her who her customer was, what language they used to describe their problem, and which products they would pay for again. “I did so much consumer testing,” she said later. “That was incredibly valuable, and it completely shaped my company.”

During her lunch hour at Goldman, she cold-emailed buyers at major retail chains. Most went unanswered. Then she found a Whole Foods Canada buyer through LinkedIn, sent fruit baskets and educational letters about the science of propolis, and eventually got a reply and a purchase order. Soon, demand outstripped what she could make.

After a year of this double life, the evidence that people needed what she made was undeniable. She gave her notice at Goldman Sachs. A former boss pulled out a whiteboard and drew two graphs: one showing her Goldman trajectory as an upward growth curve, the other showing the wellness company, which he predicted would fail. “Years later, I realize that he wanted me to

stay not because I was particularly good at my job,” she wrote, “but because if I walked away from everything he’d built his life around, what did that say about his choices?” Friends held an intervention. Someone laughed out loud at a Manhattan dinner party when she explained what she was doing. She left and never looked back.

She invested her savings into the company, booked a one-way flight to Indonesia because she could not afford Europe, and spent three months in a coworking space formulating new products. Back in New York, she slept on a friend’s couch for six months because she could not make rent. “I went from a position of financial abundance to a situation where I had a hard time buying food,” she said. “But even at the hardest times, I was so excited about what I had the opportunity to build.”

By 2020, her Propolis Throat Spray had climbed to the number-one cold and flu product on Amazon. The company she founded, Beekeeper’s Naturals, reached all 422 Whole Foods locations in the United States.

It all started with a folding table at a weekend farmers market.

Stein’s intrinsic motivation came from being her own patient. Years of chronic illness and failed treatments had given her specific knowledge that surveys and focus groups would have missed. She knew propolis worked because she had tested it on herself, and that firsthand experience is what gave her the curiosity to start exploring.

The cold start pivot asks for your evenings and weekends before it asks for your career. Stein kept Goldman for a full year while the market told her whether the idea worked, packing boxes at midnight and cold-emailing retail buyers during her lunch hour. She quit only when demand exceeded what she could produce on the side. The safety net made the leap rational rather than reckless.

If you are exploring a new career or building a new venture, test the market before leaving the old one. Use the farmers market, the weekend pop-up, the side project after hours. Let the market's response tell you when to leap. The consumer research you accumulate along the way is irreplaceable. And if the market says no, you still have a paycheck and the freedom to try a different angle.

Yang and Stein took different paths to the same destination.

Yang knew exactly who to target. He studied a company's specific situation, built a solution for that company's gaps, and delivered it directly.

Stein's customer was a mystery. She had a product she believed in, and she brought it to an open market to see who responded. The farmers market was a discovery mechanism. Every conversation at the folding table taught her who her buyer was, what language they used to describe their problem, and what they would pay for again. By the time she cold-emailed Whole Foods, she already knew her customer, because hundreds of strangers had revealed the answer.

When you can identify a specific person or company whose problem you can solve, the Yang approach works. Study their situation, build the deliverable, deliver it directly.

When you have a product or skill you believe in but your audience is unclear, follow Stein's approach. Bring it to an open market, watch who responds, and let the market show you what customer segments to focus on.

The cold start is the scariest moment because you have the least evidence and the most doubt. It is also the shortest phase. Once the first yes arrives and you understand why it worked, you are building from one instead of none.

The longer, harder test comes next. Most people survive the cold start. Fewer survive what follows.

Chapter 7: The Long Middle

In the summer of 2012, Melanie Perkins stood on a beach in Maui, Hawaii, trying to control a nine-meter kite that kept dragging her face-first into the surf.

She was twenty-four years old, and had traveled halfway around the world from Perth, the most isolated major city in Australia, to attend an invite-only gathering of technology founders and investors. The gathering had an unusual requirement: everyone had to kitesurf. Perkins had never touched a kite, so she spent four months teaching herself the sport for this single opportunity.

“It’s not something that I would normally, naturally try,” she said later. “But when you don’t have any connections, you don’t have any network, you just kind of have to wedge your foot in the door and wiggle it all the way through.”

Five years earlier, Perkins had been a nineteen-year-old communications student at the University of Western Australia, earning extra money by tutoring classmates in Photoshop and

InDesign. The programs were powerful and painfully complicated. Students spent an entire semester learning the basics and still struggled to design a simple flyer. Perkins saw the gap. Professional design software had been built for professionals who devoted years to mastering it, while everyone else was locked out.

She left university before graduating and co-founded Fusion Books with Cliff Obrecht, her boyfriend. Their product was an online tool that let students design school yearbooks by dragging photos and text into templates, without any training required.

They built the company from her mother's living room. Perkins wrote an eighty-page blueprint describing exactly how the product should work. Obrecht cold-called schools, lowering his voice when anyone asked to speak with a manager. Orders were packed on the kitchen floor, with her mother proofreading layouts and his father handling shipping.

In the first year, sixteen schools signed up. Then fifty. Then a hundred. Fusion Books expanded to France and New Zealand. Within five years, it had become the largest yearbook company in Australia, reaching one million dollars in annual sales.

Yearbooks were the proving ground. Perkins' real ambition was a design platform for everyone, a tool that could do for Photoshop what Google Docs had done for Microsoft Word. Turning that vision into reality would require venture capital and technical talent that Perth, a city of two million people on the western coast of Australia, could never supply.

In 2010, Perkins and Obrecht attended the Western Australian Innovator of the Year awards, where they had a brief conversation with Bill Tai, an American venture capitalist who had flown from Silicon Valley to speak at the event. Tai had become a venture capitalist in 1991, served as the first investor in Zoom, and backed twenty-three startups that grew into publicly listed companies.

The five-minute conversation felt like a window into a world Perkins had never known existed. Tai gave her his contact details and told her to look him up if she was ever in California. “He was the first investor we’d ever met,” Perkins later wrote.

A few months later, she sent him an email: “Hi Bill, hope all is well. I’m going to be in San Francisco from 21st May to 1st June. Are you still interested in an investment in my area?”

Tai replied: “You should also meet up with Lars Rasmussen. I’ll intro you separately.” Rasmussen was the co-founder of Google Maps, a product that had transformed how people navigate the world.

Perkins had planned a two-week trip. It turned into three months. She printed a paper pitch deck on her mother’s printing presses in Perth, and stayed on the floor of her brother’s apartment in San Francisco.

Tai suggested lunch at University Cafe on University Avenue in Palo Alto. Perkins was so nervous in the days before the meeting that she made a deal with herself: if she managed to catch the

train and get herself there, she would count it as a win, even if the meeting flopped.

She pulled out her paper deck and began flipping through the pages. Then their food arrived, and Perkins found herself trying to eat lunch, turn pages, and explain the future of publishing all at once. She had also read that mimicking someone's body language makes them like you more, so when Tai put one arm behind his chair, she tried to do the same. "I didn't have enough hands to flip the pages in my deck, eat my lunch, and put my hand behind my chair," she recalled. "It was quite distressing."

Through all of it, Tai kept glancing at his phone. Perkins left feeling like she had failed completely. Then she checked her email and found it full of introductions. Tai had been sending her pitch to his network the entire time.

The meeting with Rasmussen went far better. They spoke for hours about the future of design and found deep overlap between his work on Google Wave, an ambitious collaboration tool, and what Perkins wanted to build. Rasmussen offered to help find an engineering team. Tai sent a follow-up: "If the tech team looks solid, I'd be excited to back you and team."

What followed was a year in the long middle. Perkins and Obrecht pitched more than a hundred investors. Every single one said no. Too early. Too far from Silicon Valley, where investors wanted to ride their bicycles to the founders' office. She lacked a technical co-founder. And the core concept, a design product built for people who would never call themselves designers,

struck most investors as an oxymoron. “There were so many rejections,” Perkins recalled. “Each one of them really hurt.” Perkins later described the period as the most intense stretch of her life, a cycle of refining the pitch, walking into another room, and absorbing another dismissal that left her questioning herself rather than the idea.

And through it all, Tai kept asking the same two questions. How was the business? And how was her kitesurfing?

Tai was an avid kiteboarder who had organized an annual gathering on Maui called MaiTai (later renamed ACTAI Global), an invite-only community of founders, investors, and conservationists. The format combined tech talks and startup pitches with afternoons on the water and evenings of deeper conversation. The sport humbles everyone, regardless of wealth or status, and what mattered most was what the struggle revealed about character.

“I’ve funded many an entrepreneur who’s come up through MaiTai,” Tai said. “You get to really know people. There’s a big difference in understanding who an entrepreneur is while they’re going through something so hard. How they learn. How they recover from failure. How they handle stress. It’s a very different experience than just having someone pitch you a PowerPoint presentation.”

Perkins spent four months in Perth teaching herself to kitesurf, then flew to Maui for MaiTai. She crashed, and crashed again. The kitesurfing was miserable, but the community was

transformative. At MaiTai, Perkins found herself surrounded by founders who had survived their own long middles, investors who evaluated character by watching people struggle on the water, and a culture where failing was the price of entry. While other attendees relaxed on the beach between sessions, Perkins and Obrecht were in the room iterating on their pitch. Rasmussen noticed. “Mel and Cliff could have been on the beach partying with us,” he said later, “but while we were doing that, they were in the room iterating and working.”

It was through this network that Rasmussen finally found the engineer who met his standards. Cameron Adams had worked at Google on Google Wave. Adams was skeptical at first. The idea of building a design product from Australia, led by founders without engineering backgrounds, seemed unlikely to succeed. Perkins showed him Fusion Books, a working product with paying customers in three countries. Adams joined as the third co-founder in June 2012.

With Adams on board, the equation changed. Perkins now had a technical co-founder from Google, a working product, and a community of investors who had observed her character under pressure for two years. Tai opened the seed round. Canva raised three million dollars in late 2012 and early 2013, with Tai and Rasmussen among the lead investors.

Canva launched publicly in August 2013. Within the first year, seven hundred and fifty thousand people signed up. From there, growth compounded relentlessly. By 2025, the company had

three and a half billion dollars in annual revenue, 265 million monthly active users, and a valuation of 42 billion dollars.

“Getting Canva off the ground has been difficult and taken a long time, more than six years,” Perkins said. “In fact, every stage has been an incredible challenge, but also an incredible adventure.”

Perkins had convictions. More than a hundred rejections over three years failed to shake her belief that the design market was ready.

Mentorship bridged the gap that effort alone could not cross. A mentor is someone further along the path who invests in you before the outcome is certain, because they have seen enough to believe in the trajectory. Bill Tai watched Perkins over time, saw the real business, watched her crash into the surf for months because the opportunity mattered that much. Tai introduced Perkins to Rasmussen. Rasmussen found Adams. Adams brought the engineering credibility that unlocked the seed round. Every link in that chain traces back to a mentor who chose to help.

Community turned isolation into belonging. At MaiTai, Perkins was surrounded by founders who had endured their own long middles, people who understood what a hundred rejections felt like because they had lived through the same stretch. The kitesurfing stripped away titles and wealth and left only character. In that setting, Perkins’ persistence became visible in a way that a pitch deck could never convey. The community made her proof of character legible to the people who could help.

The long middle is too long to walk alone. If you are building in isolation, find your community. Look for peers in the same stretch, people who understand the grind because they are living it themselves. **If no community exists for what you are doing, start one. The act of gathering a cohort is itself proof of value.**

Seek your mentors proactively. Send a cold message with a specific, researched question to someone further along the path. Thoughtful outreach signals effort, and the people worth learning from can tell the difference between a generic ask and genuine curiosity. Perkins flew halfway around the world and taught herself to kitesurf for one conversation. You can start with an email or LinkedIn message.

Perkins knew what she wanted to build from the very beginning. Her long middle tested whether she could persist until the right collaborators arrived. Meanwhile, some people in the long middle face a different challenge.

In October 2015, Ben Gilbert and David Rosenthal, two friends from the Seattle venture capital scene, sat down in front of a microphone in Gilbert's apartment and recorded the first episode of a podcast they called *Acquired*.

They started it as two friends looking for an excuse to hang out. Neither had ever made a podcast before. They spent a few hours researching Disney's acquisition of Pixar, the animation studio behind *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*, then hit record. The first episode lasted about forty minutes.

In the original format, each episode analyzed a single technology acquisition and assigned it a letter grade. Facebook's purchase of Instagram earned an A+. The concept was tightly constrained because the acquisition had to involve a technology company.

For the first several years, the audience growth was invisible. "If Acquired had been a startup," Gilbert later acknowledged, "it would have been shuttered after two years because of its slow growth." Neither host believed the podcast could lead to a viable career. Gilbert had always assumed his future was in venture capital, that he would eventually raise a fund, start a company, and take it public.

For years, both hosts kept their day jobs. They recorded episodes in Gilbert's apartment after work, spent hours researching companies that a few thousand people would hear them discuss, and treated the whole endeavor as a hobby.

When colleagues at their venture firms started noticing, the reaction was bewilderment. "People I worked with would be like, 'What are you doing?'" Rosenthal recalled. "You're a venture capitalist. You're supposed to be doing whatever venture capitalists are supposed to do." Gilbert would not admit for years that the side project had quietly become the most meaningful work of his career.

The original concept, grading technology acquisitions, had run out of material after about twenty episodes. Around 2016, they expanded to cover IPOs as well, starting with Facebook's public

offering. By 2020, they had broadened further to tell full company histories, untethered from any specific financial event.

Each expansion was driven by curiosity and audience feedback rather than strategy. Then they discovered an insight. “The thing that we thought was true,” Gilbert said, “was people want to listen to this because they like us grading acquisitions, and we were super wrong about the job to be done of Acquired in the mind of a listener. The thing that they were actually there for is great storytelling.”

Listeners asked them to conduct deeper research into their stories and broaden their scope. Gilbert and Rosenthal listened, and the product kept evolving.

The storytelling itself became the core product. They discovered that great episodes followed a formula: a compelling protagonist on a hero’s journey, a secret hiding in plain sight, and a narrative arc that carried the listener from obscurity to breakthrough.

Because great storytelling demands great research, they doubled down on their preparation from a few hours per episode to over a hundred hours of independent research per host, plus ten hours of recording. Episodes stretched from 40 minutes to three and four hours. Every conventional rule of podcasting said to keep episodes short, publish weekly, and promote aggressively on social media. Gilbert and Rosenthal ignored all of it.

The preparation was grueling, but it contained a private reward. Gilbert later described a moment that arrived a day or two before

every recording: after weeks of research, the full picture of a company would suddenly click into place, and he would think, “My God, I understand why this worked.” That flash of clarity was what kept them going through the years when the audience was too small to justify the effort.

The breakthrough came in February 2023 with a three-and-a-half-hour episode about LVMH, the French luxury conglomerate behind Louis Vuitton, Dior, and Moët Hennessy.

Rosenthal had majored in French literature at Princeton and written his senior thesis on the marketing history of champagne. Thirteen years later, that obscure fascination became the seed of their biggest episode.

LVMH operated entirely outside the technology industry, but the episode taught their tech-fluent audience an important idea: that brand is a real and durable competitive advantage. “When I say deciding to cover luxury brands was the best decision we ever made,” Gilbert said, “it expanded our audience and our market from tech nerds to the entire world, all of business.”

In late 2023, Gilbert went full-time on *Acquired*, eight years after recording that first episode. Rosenthal had made the leap in 2019. That year, the show covered the NFL, Nike, and Costco and reached five hundred thousand listeners per episode. In May 2024, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a profile with the headline “The Smartest People in the Room Are All Listening to the Same Podcast,” driving hundreds of thousands of new subscribers.

By 2025, Acquired had crossed one million listeners per episode. Annual advertising revenue reached twelve million dollars. Gilbert and Rosenthal drew six thousand people to the Chase Center in San Francisco with Mark Zuckerberg as their guest, then booked Radio City Music Hall with Jamie Dimon. Harvard Business School published a case study on the show.

“We started this as a side project,” Gilbert told Zuckerberg at the Chase Center. “We never intended for it to even become a business, let alone our life’s work.”

Gilbert and Rosenthal were wrong about their product for seven years. **They assumed the audience wanted acquisition analysis. Later they realized the audience wanted great storytelling.** Most creators in the long middle make the same misdiagnosis when traction stalls. They blame distribution or marketing, but in many cases, the root cause was the product format itself.

What saved Gilbert and Rosenthal was a willingness to listen and let the audience reshape the product. Every pivot traced back to audience behavior. Listeners asked for broader scope, so they expanded beyond acquisitions. Listeners engaged most with deep research, so they escalated from one hour of prep to two hundred. Listeners responded to the LVMH episode, so they expanded beyond tech entirely. Each time, Gilbert and Rosenthal questioned their own assumptions instead of defending the original format. They treated curiosity as a compass and audience response as the map.

The hardest part of experimenting in the long middle is letting go of the version you started with. For Gilbert and Rosenthal, their later episodes that reached a million listeners bore almost no resemblance to their early ones on acquisition analysis. That willingness to evolve, to hold the mission loosely enough that it can change shape, is what separates builders who find product-market fit from those who keep polishing a product the market has already rejected.

If your traction has stalled, question the product before blaming the distribution. Share your work where strangers can respond to it, on social media, in communities, through newsletters, in open forums. Pay attention to what draws the strongest reaction, and follow it even when it contradicts your original plan. Build a feedback loop by shipping regularly and measuring honestly. The audience will tell you what the product should become, if you are willing to hear it.

Both Melanie Perkins and the Acquired co-hosts arrived at the other side of the long middle, but the shape of the journey was different. Perkins held a steady vision and persisted until her proof attracted the right collaborators. Gilbert and Rosenthal held a steady partnership and evolved the product until it found the right audience.

Both required years. Perkins spent six between Fusion Books and Canva's launch. Gilbert and Rosenthal spent seven before their audience reached critical mass. And the people who survive that stretch are the ones that would keep on building even if nobody

noticed. That intrinsic motivation, deeper than ambition and more durable than discipline, is what carries you through the years when the world has yet to catch up.

So far, the protagonists of this book have been legendary figures that achieved extraordinary outcomes in their fields. The reader's reasonable response, at this point, is that most careers will never look like this. For people inside ordinary organizations and who will never make a magazine cover, does the same approach still work?

Chapter 8: The Proof Next Door

The last time Beth Portesi had written code, she was customizing her Myspace page in 2007. In 2025, she was sitting at her desk at Fivetran, a data infrastructure company, at her wit's end with Slack. Every day, action items flew past in channels and direct messages, and by the time she opened her Google Sheets to-do list to log them, half had already scrolled out of view. She had tried every workaround: browser tabs, sticky notes, copying and pasting. They all broke down by Wednesday.

So she opened Claude, the AI assistant she had been using for drafts and research, and typed a question: “How can I get my action items from Slack into my Google Sheets to-do list automatically?”

Claude offered to write the code for her.

Portesi had been an executive assistant for twelve years. She had never opened a terminal or touched an API in her life. Claude produced a block of code that looked like a foreign language. Her

instinct was to close the window and go back to copying and pasting. Instead, she followed Claude's instructions: copied the code, pasted it where Claude told her to paste it, and ran it.

It worked.

Within days, she had refined the automation until she could add an emoji to any Slack message and watch it appear on her to-do list seconds later. "I felt like I had a super genius parked in a van outside my house," she said, "giving me a play-by-play of all the things I needed to do."

Portesi had loved being an executive assistant. The career started at ten dollars an hour, and over four years she increased her rate by five dollars with every new client until she was earning six figures. Along the way, she founded a mentoring platform called Next Level VA to teach other women the skills that had transformed her income.

When one of her clients was acquired by Fivetran, Portesi followed and became the company's Lead Executive Assistant, supporting the chief legal officer from her home in Grants Pass, Oregon. The work suited her, and she was proud of it. "I genuinely thought I was going to retire as an Executive Assistant," she said later.

The Slack automation changed the trajectory. After that first success, Portesi started staying up late and waking up early, building automations for every friction she could find. When a flight appeared on her executive's calendar, an automation added

airport drive time. Board meetings triggered prep blocks. Interviews generated resume review windows. The automations were small on their own, but together they saved hours every week and freed Portesi to focus on the judgment calls that only a human who knew the executive could make.

“I was building things,” she said. “And it felt like magic.”

But every automation she built pulled her further from the role she had spent twelve years mastering. **The more she built, the less her work looked like an executive assistant’s and the more it looked like an engineer’s, except she was doing it without any engineering credentials.** Was she drifting into territory where nobody would take her seriously, an Executive Assistant pretending to be a technologist? The reputation she carried had been earned in a profession she understood deeply. Walking away from that identity, even sideways, felt like risking the reputation she had spent twelve years earning.

She kept going, because the automations were solving real problems, and the people who used them kept asking for more.

Over Christmas break in 2025, Portesi set an ambitious goal: teach one hundred people to use AI by March. To get there, she launched an initiative called Vibe Coding for Executive Assistants and started running workshops at Fivetran, walking colleagues through the same path she had taken, from the shallow end of the pool, where Claude drafts a document or polishes a

spreadsheet, to the deep end, where it writes code and builds automations a non-technical person can deploy.

By the end of March, she had taught 320 people, more than triple her goal. The workshops spread beyond assistants. Portesi started running one-on-one Claude training sessions with Fivetran's executives, showing them that the tool could build deliverables, spreadsheets with working formulas, slide decks with company branding, interactive prototypes they could click through. "One executive kept repeating 'holy...' every time Claude generated something," she recalled. "That's the reaction you want."

The teaching revealed a gap Portesi was uniquely positioned to fill. Engineers at Fivetran understood how AI worked under the hood. Executives understood what the company needed. **Portesi understood both languages because she had spent twelve years translating between them, anticipating what her executives needed before they asked, and now building the tools to deliver it.** The company had recently rolled out Claude Enterprise licenses to every employee and needed someone to drive adoption, design training, and build the operational infrastructure that would turn a tool rollout into a lasting shift in how people worked.

What made Portesi's trajectory remarkable was how visible the proof became without her ever intending it to be. The Slack automation started as a fix for her own frustration. The workshops grew out of a desire to share what she had found. The

executive training happened because leaders needed help and Portesi was the person in the room who could provide it. Each step generated proof that her manager, Alexis Kirkman, could inspect directly. Kirkman championed her for a new role that had never existed at Fivetran: AI Enablement and Program Lead.

“So I took a detour,” Portesi wrote when she announced the move. “I always thought I’d retire as an Executive Assistant. Maybe I still will? But somewhere in those three months I found a love for watching people realize what they’re capable of building once the technical wall comes down.”

Today, Portesi manages Fivetran’s AI transformation program. She works cross-functionally with stakeholders from individual contributors to senior leadership, building the systems, training, and change management strategies that turn AI adoption from a corporate initiative into a daily habit. In less than a year, she went from AI curious to AI champion to leading the company’s transformation. Her only coding credential remains a Myspace page from 2007. The person who thought she would retire as an executive assistant is now the person leading the company into an era where everyone builds.

The technical gap between knowing a problem and building the solution kept Portesi’s automation from existing for twelve years. She had understood for years that a board meeting needed prep blocks two days in advance. But the ability to turn it into working software was absent, because building an automation required a software developer, and getting a developer to fix a to-do list

required a formal request, a queue of higher-priority projects ahead of it, and a manager willing to spend engineering time on an assistant's workflow instead of on the product. AI removed that gap in an afternoon. Twelve years of accumulated knowledge about what executives need became a working product between lunch and dinner.

The proof Portesi built had almost nothing to do with her job description. An executive assistant is hired to manage calendars and keep a leader's day running smoothly. Building AI automations and teaching 320 colleagues to build with AI are activities that fall well outside that description. Before AI, stepping outside a role like that usually meant asking for permission, for budget, for someone else's time. AI collapses that dependency. The cost of building a prototype or running a workshop is now low enough that a motivated person can do it on their own, often before anyone asks them to.

When proof of value is visible, the role follows the proof. Portesi was promoted into a position that had never existed at Fivetran, a role invented to match the work she had already been doing.

In a market where job descriptions change faster than companies can rewrite them, the person who builds proof of value beyond their current role is the person most likely to land the next one, whether that means a promotion, a lateral move, or an entirely new career.

Would the same mechanism work if you do not have any company to start with?

In late 2025, a recruiter asked Ailin Werner: “What have you built?” Most candidates would have talked about their experience. Werner opened her laptop and started sending demo links to her apps.

For fifteen years, Ailin Werner had built email campaigns for large companies. The career included stints at Fuji Xerox in Australia and Flybuys before landing at Publicis Production, one of the largest advertising production companies in the world, where Werner led a team of sixteen people across Europe from her base in Valencia, Spain. Her job was to make sure that a marketing email looked right whether the customer opened it on a phone, a laptop, or a desktop, and that millions of messages went out on schedule every month without errors. It was steady, respected work, and she expected to keep doing it for a long time.

Then her employer decided to move the work offshore. Werner spent months training the new team overseas, answering their questions, reviewing their work, transferring every piece of expertise she had so they could run the operation without her. When the handoff was complete, Publicis let Werner and her entire European team go because she had done her job so well that her job was no longer needed.

Werner was thirty-nine, with two young children and suddenly no income.

Panic set in. She started with the traditional playbook: LinkedIn applications, interviews, the same resume sent to dozens of companies. But most job descriptions asked for qualifications she lacked, like Python, machine learning, a computer science degree. The market had moved, and her fifteen years of email development seemed to count for less with every rejection.

After months of rejections, Werner stopped applying and asked herself: “What do I already know how to do well, and how can I mix that with AI?”

The answer was hiding in the fifteen years she thought she had lost. All those years inside large organizations had taught Werner where time gets wasted, where communication breaks down, and where a manual step could become an automated one. She had spent her career learning which problems mattered most and where the biggest time sinks hid. What she lacked was the software engineering background to turn that knowledge into working solutions. A friend mentioned automations. Werner started with simple drag-and-drop tools, outgrew them within weeks, and kept moving to more powerful ones. Eventually she discovered Claude Code, an AI-powered coding assistant that let her describe what she wanted in plain English and watch it build the system for her.

For months, Werner started her day at four in the morning, sitting in the dark in Valencia with a laptop while her children were asleep. The silence before dawn became her classroom, and some mornings the only thing that kept her going was the

knowledge that by the time the children woke up, she would have built something that did not exist the day before. Her first real project was an AI agent named María that handled booking and rescheduling appointments for a local veterinary clinic.

Next, she tackled email by building an assistant that scanned a company inbox every fifteen minutes, matched each message against internal documentation, and drafted a reply ready for a human to review and send. By the third month, she was building content engines for marketing agencies. The automations broke constantly. She rebuilt them from scratch and watched them break again. “I failed eight million times,” she said later. “I started over eight million times. And slowly, things started clicking.”

Then she made a decision that made her stand out from the thousands of other laid-off professionals learning AI tools in 2025: Werner started documenting every step. She launched two YouTube channels, one in English and one in Spanish, recording what she was learning and building. She posted on LinkedIn consistently, on good days and bad. Every automation she built was recorded so she would have proof to show later.

The first time she spoke in public, at a local AI builder meetup, she stood before ninety people and delivered what she later called a terrified talk. Her hands shook. But then the room surprised her. The audience asked questions she could answer, about email workflows, about campaign delivery pipelines, about

the kind of operational bottlenecks she had spent fifteen years navigating. The processes she understood from the inside were the same processes other organizations wanted to automate. Her domain expertise, which had felt irrelevant in every job listing, was suddenly the rarest ingredient in the room. The engineers in the audience knew how to build automations. Werner knew which automations were worth building.

Over the following weeks, Werner applied to about ten jobs. One of them was a Head of AI role at YOUNG, a Netherlands-based group with fifteen companies under its umbrella.

The recruiter asked: “What have you built?”

Werner had spent eight months preparing for exactly that question. She opened her laptop and started sending YouTube videos where she walked through automation workflows in plain English, LinkedIn posts documenting what she had learned each week, automation systems she had designed, AI agents she had deployed, dashboards she had built for practice projects. Her own face was attached to every piece of proof, explaining how each system worked, why she had built it, and what business problem it solved.

The recruiter watched the demos and shifted from predicting to inspecting. They bypassed the rest of the hiring process and connected Werner directly with the CEO.

The offer came through. Less than a year after packing up her desk at Publicis, the email developer was leading AI automation

at YOUNG, building the strategy and the team from the ground up. Her role spans fifteen companies across hospitality, media, and real estate, designing systems, defining the roadmap, and creating measurable impact. She has yet to learn to code. The career she built in eight months of 4 AM mornings bore no resemblance to the career she had lost. “AI doesn’t replace people who know everything,” Werner has said. “It replaces people who don’t know what problem they’re solving.”

Portesi and Werner both lack a traditional software engineering background. What they share is initiative, agency, and a curiosity that drove them to learn AI and use it to build proof of value they could show to a gatekeeper.

The difference is where they built it. Portesi had a company, a manager, and colleagues who could watch her work accumulate in real time. Werner had none of that. **Her proof had to travel further and persuade a stranger, which is why the decision to document mattered more than any individual automation she built.**

Most professionals who learn a new skill keep the learning private until they feel ready to show it. Werner reversed the order. She recorded her automations before they were polished, posted her lessons before she was confident, and spoke at a meetup before she was comfortable.

“I positioned myself as something very specific,” Werner said. “AI automations for non-technical people, focused on real

business processes. When you're specific, you stop competing with everyone and start being the only person for someone." The specificity turned her fifteen years of email development from a dated credential into the core of her pitch.

Every story in this book so far has featured someone who built a billion-dollar company, filled arenas, or changed a field. Portesi is an executive assistant in Grants Pass, Oregon. Werner is a laid-off email developer in Valencia, Spain. They are the proof next door that the proof-of-value strategy works for them too.

The reader's reasonable response, at this point, is to ask whether the outcome is guaranteed. Both Portesi and Werner succeeded, but what happens when the bet of building proof of value falls short?

Chapter 9: The Setback as Setup

In the winter of 1957, Vera Wang discovered her first passion on a frozen lake in Central Park, wearing ice skates she received from her father for Christmas. She was eight years old.

From that winter forward, skating became her singular focus. Wang took lessons, commuted to New Jersey nightly to use a public rink, and trained in ballet at George Balanchine's School of American Ballet to bring artistry to her technique. She competed in pairs with her partner James Stuart, coached by Sonya Dunfield, one of the most respected pairs coaches in the country. She won regional championships by twelve. Every waking hour that was available belonged to the ice. "I was completely dedicated to it," she later said.

In January 1968, Wang and Stuart competed at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Philadelphia. A top finish would put them on the path to the Winter Olympics in Grenoble. They finished fifth in the junior pairs division. The placement

confirmed what Wang had been suspecting for months: she had hit the ceiling. Younger skaters were coming up with cleaner technique and more explosive jumps, and no amount of work was going to close the gap.

“As hard as I tried and as hard as I worked, I never really achieved the level that I wished,” she recalled. “It was a very hard realization that since I was in my late teens, I was never going to get better. I wasn’t going to make the Olympic team, and there were younger skaters coming up. So I quit. And I think quitting was a sign to me that I failed.”

The loss hit her harder than anyone around her could see. “It sounds very obsessive to a normal person,” she said, “but when you try to become an elite athlete, it’s your happiness and your torture at the same time. It’s something you live to do. It’s the kind of dedication and passion for something that I don’t know if everyone gets to experience. And when it’s over, and you feel like you’ve failed. To bounce back from that, it takes so many different things. It takes time. It takes an acceptance that you have to move on. And it takes being open to new experiences.”

“I had a nervous breakdown and ended up doing a semester in Paris,” she said of her shattered Olympic dreams. The trip was meant to be a recovery. Paris in the late 1960s was in the middle of a social revolution, and Wang arrived at the Sorbonne at a moment when the whole world felt like it was being remade. Surrounded by couture houses and a century of fashion history,

she felt pulled toward a new obsession for the first time since the ice. “That’s where I realized I had a passion for fashion,” she said.

Wang came home from Paris and took a job as a salesgirl at Yves Saint Laurent on Madison Avenue to earn spending money. A Vogue fashion director named Frances Stein spotted her in the store and told her to call when she graduated. Wang called a year and a half later. Stein remembered. Wang joined Vogue, and by twenty-three was an editor, one of the youngest in the magazine’s history.

She stayed for seventeen years. She rose through the ranks, produced covers and influential fashion shoots with photographers like Richard Avedon and Deborah Turbeville. She covered every major collection, developed the editorial instinct to see a runway and know instantly which four garments would define the story. Her work earned respect inside the industry. “A lot of my life has been predicated on not getting what I hoped I would get,” she later confessed. “I spent the first third of my life training to be an Olympic figure skater. Every waking hour was devoted to the sport.” Then she devoted the next seventeen years to the same intensity at Vogue. “I don’t think you stay for sixteen years and not want the ultimate say,” she said.

She did want it. When the editor-in-chief position opened, it went to Anna Wintour. Wang was passed over. “In my own mind, I had not obtained what I hoped I would,” she said. “I felt that, again, I’ve fallen short. I didn’t make the Olympic team. I didn’t

become editor-in-chief at Vogue.” And then: “I had to try to recover.”

“After investing yet another fifteen years in a career that really meant something to me, I left,” she said. “I was a bit discouraged, I can’t lie.”

She moved to Ralph Lauren as design director for women’s accessories, where she spent two years learning the mechanics of building a global fashion brand from the inside. “When I saw what it takes to build that kind of empire,” she said, “if I had been sane, I probably would have stopped there.”

In 1989, preparing to marry investor Arthur Becker, Wang went looking for a wedding dress. She was thirty-nine, which in 1989 felt late for a first wedding. She visited every bridal department she could find in New York, flew to Paris and London, visited the Emanuels, who had designed Princess Diana’s gown, and Victor Edelstein, and a parade of other British designers.

The experience was miserable. “I was really appalled and shocked by the lack of taste in bridal,” she said. “It was a very, very formula kind of business: the sort of lace with multicolored, iridescent, sequined and fake pearls sewn on the bodice, and a big full skirt and flowers up at your shoulder. If you weren’t in the market for that, there were no other alternatives.” She ended up having two dresses made.

Her father, a businessman who had emigrated from China, watched the entire ordeal. He looked at the options and said:

“These are really pretty ugly. I’ll back you in a business if it’s bridal, but no fashion.”

Wang hesitated. She was forty. “I thought maybe it’s just too late for me,” she said. She had already spent two careers watching from the inside. “I always sort of dreamed of being a fashion designer,” she said, “and I thought, well, if I don’t try it now, I’m never going to be able to do it.”

In 1990, her father gave her seed money, and Vera Wang opened a bridal salon at the Carlyle Hotel in New York City. She was forty, married, founding a company, and trying to become a mother, all at once. The adjustment was brutal. “All doors that are open when you work in a big company, they shut when you go ahead on your own,” she recalled. “I felt like a student, like a ‘debutante.’ I used to laugh and say: ‘I’m not a young designer, but I am an old new designer.’”

Her first client was Ethel Kennedy, the widow of Robert F. Kennedy. Ethel’s son, Max Kennedy, was marrying a law student, and Wang spent eight months on the dress. “Within ten minutes of the ceremony, she was out kicking a football with the Kennedy brothers,” Wang recalled. Eight months of work ended in grass stains in ten minutes.

“There have been a million days where I said to myself, ‘What was I thinking?’ or ‘Why did I do this?’” Wang said. “But there have been way more days where I felt extremely lucky to be doing something that I love so much.”

Within a decade, gowns designed by Vera Wang were on every red carpet and in every bridal magazine in the world. Victoria Beckham, Ariana Grande, Chelsea Clinton, Mariah Carey, and Alicia Keys all wore her gowns. She expanded into ready-to-wear, eyewear, fine jewelry, home goods, and fragrance. By 2005, the Council of Fashion Designers of America named her Womenswear Designer of the Year.

Even as her fashion empire grew, skating never fully left her. Wang still understood the ice: how a body rotates in a triple axel, how fabric catches air during a spin, how a costume has to move with an athlete rather than against her. When Olympic figure skater Nancy Kerrigan's team came looking for someone to design her Olympic costumes for the 1992 Winter Games, Wang was the only designer in the world who had lived on both sides, as a competitive skater and as a couturier. She designed for Kerrigan again in 1994, then for Michelle Kwan in 1998 and 2002, Evan Lysacek in 2010, and Nathan Chen in 2018 and 2022.

The work terrified her. She began having nightmares: a dress that rips at the armhole, a quadruple-sewn zipper that comes undone, a sequin that drops to the ice and causes a fall. "If there is any wardrobe malfunction, you can ruin someone's Olympic championship," she said. "The responsibility is staggering."

She had walked away from skating and walked away from Vogue, and both paths led her here. "I joke it's the two Fs: figure skating and fashion," she said. "But in all fairness, that I can meld the

two was beyond my wildest. I never dreamt that I would come back to figure skating in the capacity that I came back to.”

“Each time was very, very painful, to make a decision to leave,” Wang said of her career changes. “But what I do now couldn’t have happened without the first two. I had to constantly reinvent myself.”

Every story so far in this book has ended in triumph. But what happens when the same path comes up short?

The direct path can fail. You can put in time and energy to build proof of value and still hit a ceiling. The proof-of-value strategy improves the odds. But odds are never certainties.

When the direct path fails, the skills survive. Wang spent seventeen years at Vogue learning to look at a runway and know instantly which garments would define the season. That eye worked just as well in bridal. The discipline she built on the ice applied to any career that demanded relentless commitment. Every career she walked away from left its skills with her.

Each of Wang’s careers ended in disappointment, and each one opened a door she could never have seen coming. Wang could never have planned, at nineteen, that her skating would one day help her design Olympic costumes. She could never have planned, at twenty-three, that a Vogue fashion director spotting her in a store would lead to seventeen years of editorial relationships that gave her instant credibility in bridal.

The experience of building proof of value compounds. Each career, even the ones that feel like failures, feeds the next in directions that only become visible afterward.

Wang carried her skills through each failure into the next career. Meanwhile, some failures also provide hints on the path you were meant to take.

On August 16, 1976, a 22-year-old news anchor named Oprah Winfrey debuted on the six o'clock evening news at WJZ-TV in Baltimore.

The station had built an enormous campaign around her arrival. Billboards went up across the city. Her photograph appeared on the back of every bus. The station was pairing her with Jerry Turner, the most popular local news anchor in the country, and the promotion suggested that the city expected a star.

Less than eight months later, on April 1, 1977, the general manager called Winfrey into his office.

He offered her a ginger ale. Then he told her she was being removed from the evening news. "We think you are so talented, we want you to have your own spot," he said. "We're going to move you to the 7:25 a.m. cut-in." A cut-in is a brief local announcement inserted into a national network broadcast. It is among the least visible slots in television.

Winfrey asked if it was an April Fools' joke. It was a demotion, and she knew it. "I was devastated," she recalled.

The general manager explained that Winfrey was too emotional for news anchoring. She got too invested in the stories she covered. She felt the suffering of the people she reported on, and the feeling showed on camera. At a funeral, she refused to approach the grieving family for a comment. The assistant news director told her to go back out and ask. She couldn't do it. "I was too emotional," she said. "I felt things so deeply it was hard for me to let things go. I was worried about the family."

In a format that rewarded detachment, composure, and the ability to read tragedy off a teleprompter and move on to the weather, Winfrey's empathy was a liability.

After the demotion, she tried to leave Baltimore entirely. She applied to every station she could find, including KYW in Philadelphia and WCCO in Minneapolis. Nobody would hire her. "I failed," she said in a 2026 interview. "I failed in Baltimore. The embarrassment and shame of that was hard to bear."

Later that year, a new general manager named Bill Baker arrived at WJZ in Baltimore with a plan to launch a local morning talk show called *People Are Talking*. Baker needed a cohost. His wife, Jeannemarie, who often watched daytime television at home, told him Winfrey was the obvious choice. "There is something magical about her," she said. "She wears her heart on her sleeve, and she is not at all pretentious." Baker agreed.

Winfrey was unconvinced. "It was the last thing in the world she wanted to do," Baker recalled. "She said, 'Bill, I don't want to do a talk show.' She had tears in her eyes when she said it." Baker

told her: “If you are successful, you can have more power to do good and make more of an impact on the community than you would have in TV news.”

On August 14, 1978, Winfrey sat down alongside veteran newsman Richard Sher for the first episode of *People Are Talking*. She interviewed the Carvel ice cream man and an actor from *All My Children*. And in the first minutes of that broadcast, her life changed.

“The moment I sat on the talk show, something felt like I had entered the home space for myself,” she recalled. “I knew instantly: this is what I should be doing.”

The trait that had gotten her removed from the news desk, her emotional investment in other people’s stories, was the precise quality that made her a transcendent talk show host.

Winfrey spent five years in Baltimore refining her gift: learning timing, rhythm, pacing, how to make an audience laugh, how to reveal parts of herself without making the conversation about herself. “I looked at Baltimore as a learning opportunity, as a ‘teach me’ school for life,” she said.

Then Chicago came calling. In January 1984, Winfrey took over a struggling local morning show called *A.M. Chicago*. Dennis Swanson, the general manager at WLS-TV in Chicago, had watched her audition tape and told her not to change a thing. “I wanted her just as she was.”

Nobody expected her to beat Phil Donahue, the rival host on a competing Chicago station who had defined the American talk show format for a decade. Within a month, Winfrey's A.M. Chicago went from last place to first in local ratings, surpassing Donahue in his home market.

Linguist Deborah Tannen appeared on both shows and saw the difference up close. Tannen's 1990 bestseller *You Just Don't Understand* had described how men and women develop distinct conversational styles from childhood: men gravitate toward "report-talk," focused on information and status, while women gravitate toward "rapport-talk," built on connection and self-revealing intimacy.

Donahue's format was textbook report-talk: the producers had asked Tannen to prepare paired lists of gendered statements to flash on screen, plus a research video contrasting how boys and girls interact. When she appeared on Winfrey's show, Winfrey opened by saying she had read Tannen's book and "saw myself over and over" in it, then illustrated the research by describing her own relationship with Stedman Graham, her longtime partner, whom viewers knew on a first-name basis the way close friends do. "She was able to be more intimate with her audience than I was," Donahue later admitted. "She could wink and half the audience would know exactly what she meant."

The show was renamed The Oprah Winfrey Show, launched in national syndication in 1986, and ran for twenty-five seasons. Winfrey built Harpo Productions, O Magazine, and OWN: Oprah

Winfrey Network. She became a billionaire and one of the most influential figures in American media.

“What that taught me, and has forever been a life lesson,” she said, “is that life closes a door and it gives room and space for a new door to flourish. Had that not happened, I would have continued to be dutiful, to be loyal.”

“The setback is a setup. You’ve set me free to find the thing I really should be doing.”

When a gatekeeper rejects you by saying “you are too X for this role,” pay attention to the X, because it reveals the quality that makes you distinctive. Cherish that quality and find the stage where it becomes your superpower.

Winfrey was the last person to see her own potential as a talk show host. Jeannemarie and Bill Baker recognized it in the way Winfrey connected with people on camera, while Winfrey resisted with tears in her eyes. When proof of value redirects you, you may still be grieving the path you lost. **Pay attention to what others see in you, especially the quality you are trying to suppress.**

Wang spent a decade skating and seventeen years at Vogue before she started her defining career as a designer. Winfrey was publicly humiliated in Baltimore and spent a year unable to find work. Both eventually broke through, but many people who build proof of value will put in the time and effort and still never

achieve their dream. **This book cannot promise that building proof of value will open the door for your dream role. But it can promise that the strategy gives you better odds, and that even when it fails, you walk away with practical skills, a network, and self-discovery that another credential would not have granted you.**

Where a credential is a legal requirement, as in medicine, law, and aviation, the strategy begins after the license is in hand. But two surgeons can hold the same medical license, and the one who publishes research, documents patient outcomes, and builds a visible track record and professional network will travel a different career trajectory than the one who relies on the license alone.

“I think not trying is worse than failing,” Vera Wang said. “Have the courage to try. Otherwise, what are we here for?”

Chapter 10: The Story of You

In 1910, a six-year-old boy named Joseph Campbell sat in the crowd at Madison Square Garden, watching Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, a touring arena spectacle of cowboys and Native American performers that was at the time one of the most popular entertainments in America. The cowboys were the stars of the evening, but the young Campbell barely noticed them. He sat transfixed by a different figure, a Native American with his ear to the ground, a bow and arrow in his hand, and what Campbell would later describe as "a look of special knowledge in his eyes."

That evening, Campbell developed an obsession with mythology and ancient cultures that never faded. When the family moved to New Rochelle, New York, a public library had just opened next door. By the time Joseph was eleven, the librarians admitted him to the adult stacks. He devoured every report the United States Bureau of Ethnology had published on Native American culture. At fourteen, he later said, he was "a good little anthropologist."

Campbell earned his bachelor's from Columbia University in 1925. His master's thesis on Arthurian legend led him to two years in Paris and Munich, studying medieval French and Sanskrit, the ancient literary language of India, reading Joyce, and discovering Jung. By twenty-five he had built the foundation for a distinguished academic career.

Then his path to becoming a professor hit a wall.

When Campbell returned from Europe in 1929, his time abroad had broadened his interests beyond Arthurian legend to include Sanskrit, modern art, and psychology. He wanted to trace the connections between disciplines, to follow the threads wherever they led. Columbia's advisors refused. The university required a narrow specialization, and Campbell's interdisciplinary ambitions fell outside any single department's jurisdiction. "They wouldn't let me move into another place to continue my education," Campbell later recalled, "so I said to hell with it." He walked away from the PhD program.

Then the Great Depression arrived, and the job market disappeared entirely. Campbell wrote to some seventy colleges and universities looking for a teaching position. Every one sent back a rejection letter. They were firing professors, and hiring was out of the question.

Campbell settled in Woodstock, New York, in a cottage without running water, where he read nine hours a day, dividing his time into four-hour blocks of solitary study, and filled journals with

the frustrations of a man who had walked away from the credentialed path and had no idea where the next one led:

“I begin to think that I have a genius for working like an ox over totally irrelevant subjects. I am filled with an excruciating sense of never having gotten anywhere.”

For five years, Campbell had almost nothing to show for his time. He tried writing short fiction and sold exactly one story to a magazine. He started a novel that went nowhere. What he mostly did was read, nine hours a day, across mythology, anthropology, psychology, and comparative religion, tracing the connections between cultures and traditions that Columbia had refused to let him explore. He was accumulating the raw material for his life’s work, though he had no way of knowing it at the time.

In 1934, Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, offered him a teaching position. Campbell took it and kept it for thirty-eight years. The salary covered the bills. The summers and evenings belonged to the real work.

Fifteen years later, he published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The book’s central claim was extraordinary. Across every culture and every century, from ancient Greece to medieval Japan to indigenous Australia, **great stories follow the same arc, later known as “the hero’s journey”:** **A person leaves the familiar world, faces trials in the unknown, earns a reward through struggle, and returns transformed.** Campbell was the first scholar to articulate this

universal storytelling pattern with such clarity. And once he discovered it, everyone could see it.

Campbell died in October 1987. Months later, PBS aired *The Power of Myth*, his six-part conversation with Bill Moyers, filmed at George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch in California. Lucas credited Campbell's hero's journey as the foundation for *Star Wars*. "If it hadn't been for him, it's possible I would still be trying to write *Star Wars*," Lucas said later.

Two years before Campbell's death, a Disney story analyst named Christopher Vogler had written a seven-page memo translating Campbell's hero's journey into the language of filmmaking. He called it "A Practical Guide to the Hero with a Thousand Faces." The memo spread through Hollywood by fax machine and copier, passed from desk to desk until Jeffrey Katzenberg, Disney's studio chief, made it required reading for the entire development staff.

Katzenberg sent Vogler to work with Disney's animation division on a project called *King of the Jungle*. When Vogler arrived, he found the storyboard already organized by the twelve stages of the hero's journey, his memo pinned to the corkboard. *King of the Jungle* became *The Lion King*, the highest-grossing animated film of its era.

The hero's journey story arc kept spreading. The Wachowskis structured *The Matrix* around it. J.K. Rowling traced Harry Potter's arc through every stage. Christopher Nolan shaped *Batman Begins* with it. Pixar, Marvel, and Disney Animation

returned to it film after film. In 2011, Time magazine named *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* one of the hundred most influential books written in English since 1923. A man who never earned a PhD had reshaped how the modern world tells stories.

Every story in this book follows that same arc. Fei-Fei Li stood beside an ignored poster in Miami Beach and built a competition that transformed the field of AI. Carly Stein walked away from Goldman Sachs to sell bee-based remedies at a farmers market. Vera Wang fell short of the Olympic team, was passed over at Vogue, and started her own wedding dress company at forty. Each one departed from the familiar, faced trials, earned proof through struggle, and returned transformed. Campbell saw this pattern in ancient myths. It runs through modern careers just as clearly.

This book has laid out five steps for embarking on your own hero's journey:

Find a problem in a field you genuinely care about. Jay Yang, the sixteen-year-old from Chapter 6, tried YouTube, a clothing brand, copywriting, and social media marketing before finding beehiiv, a newsletter platform he used every day. Every earlier venture had been driven by profit, an extrinsic motivation that evaporated when the numbers dipped. beehiiv was different because Yang had intrinsic motivation. He cared about the product itself. When you care about a field deeply enough to spot its gaps, you are motivated to endure through the inevitable days of struggle and frustration.

Imagine the project that solves the problem and start building it today. Picture the deliverable that would solve the problem you care about: a video recording, a working website, an analysis report. Then build a prototype this weekend. With AI tools, you can deliver projects that used to require years of expert training. Beth Portesi from Chapter 8 had never written code in her life, but she used an AI coding tool to build a working Slack automation in a single afternoon. Start with the smallest version of your project.

Ship your work publicly, gather feedback, revise, and ship again. Andy Weir posted chapters of *The Martian* on his personal website for free. His readers were scientists and engineers who emailed corrections every time he got the orbital mechanics wrong. He fixed the errors and posted the next chapter. Listen to how the public responds. Revise. Ship the next version.

Find mentors and peers on the same journey. The long middle is where most people quit, and the ones who survive it rarely do it alone. Melanie Perkins from Chapter 7 spent three years hearing no from over a hundred investors. Her trajectory changed when a mentor, Bill Tai, invited her into a community of founders and unlocked the co-founder and seed round that built Canva. Seek out mentors who are further along the path and communities where builders gather. The right people will accelerate your growth.

Make the proof compound by earning referrals and learning through iterations. Paul Graham posted essays on his personal website. Those essays led to a talk, which led to Y Combinator, which funded Reddit, Dropbox, Airbnb, and Stripe. Each batch attracted stronger applicants than the last. Twenty years later the portfolio exceeded \$1 trillion, making Y Combinator the most influential startup accelerator in the world. Every project you ship earns referrals from people who found value in it, and every iteration builds skills that make the next project stronger.

But where do you start? That depends on where you are right now.

If you are in high school or college, start with the problem you already complain about to your friends. A campus process that wastes everyone's time. A tool you use daily that misses an obvious feature. Build a prototype this weekend with AI. Share your work publicly on social media, and with the people most likely to benefit from the problem you are solving.

If you are in a job you want to grow in, look for the bottleneck your colleagues complain about every week. The recurring manual steps that everyone agrees should be automated. Build the fix yourself using AI and show your manager and team the working result. Let your proof of value make the case for your title change.

If you are in a career transition or want to pivot to a new career path, begin with a field or company you are

genuinely passionate about. Build a project that proves you can deliver value there, and share everything publicly on LinkedIn, YouTube, or a personal site. When a recruiter asks “What have you built?”, open your laptop and send the links.

“The very cave you are afraid to enter,” Campbell once said, “turns out to be the source of what you are looking for.”

Entering the cave means walking away from the safe, credentialed detour that everyone else is on. **This book has shown that the credentialed path is less reliable than it used to be. And deep down, we all know that at the end of our lives, we wish we had confronted our fear and embarked on our own hero’s journey.**

You already know the problem you are excited to solve. You already have the AI tools to build the first version this weekend. I wish you the best on your hero’s journey. **Once you have made it through, please let me know, and I will write a story about you.**

Notes

Chapter 1 Notes: The Stranger's Bet

1. The account of Dwarkesh Patel's cold email to Bryan Caplan, Caplan's quotes ("He was kind enough, he did it," "He wasn't just repeating ten questions from everyone else. He had his own close-reading questions."), the Anil Varanasi and Steve Kuhn details, and the Tyler Cowen research grant are drawn from the *New York Times* profile of Patel, excerpted in Alex Tabarrok, "Dwarkesh!" *Marginal Revolution*, April 27, 2026. Bryan Caplan is a professor of economics at George Mason University; the three books referenced are *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (2007), *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money* (2018), and *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration* (2019).

2. Patel's quotes ("It's like, oh my god, I'm just a random college kid," "I get to interview this person. So I'm going to spend a week prepping and reading everything that might even be potentially relevant") and his family background (father's H1-B visa, moves from North Dakota to West Virginia to Maryland to Texas) are from "The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare Like Dwarkesh Patel," *Mercury*, February 29, 2024.
3. The Lunar Society of Birmingham was an eighteenth-century group of natural philosophers, industrialists, and intellectuals in England who met near the time of the full moon so that moonlight would illuminate the road home. Members included Matthew Boulton, James Watt, Erasmus Darwin, and Josiah Wedgwood. Patel's inaugural episode, "Bryan Caplan — Nurturing Orphaned Ideas," published under the original show name The Lunar Society on May 22, 2020. Source: dwarkeshpatel.com/p/bryan-caplan.
4. The eye-tracking study finding that recruiters spend six seconds on an initial resume review is from TheLadders, "Keeping an Eye on Recruiter Behavior," 2012. The study used gaze-tracking technology on thirty professional recruiters over a ten-week period.
5. The finding that venture capitalists spend under four minutes on the average pitch deck is from DocSend, "What VCs Really Want to See Inside Your Seed Deck," 2015. The

study found an average of 3 minutes and 44 seconds per deck.

6. Patel's preparation methods (programming a neural network transformer by hand before interviewing Ilya Sutskever, reading most of DeepMind's recent papers and speaking with a dozen AI researchers before interviewing Demis Hassabis) are from the *Mercury* profile and from Chris Johnson, "The Dwarkesh Method: Deep Preparation Beats Platform Volume Every Time," *Gun.io*, July 30, 2025.

7. Jeff Bezos's comment ("You're thoughtful and thought-provoking. Gratitude. Please keep it up!") is from the *Mercury* profile, which quotes Patel recounting the exchange. The essay that prompted it, "The Mystery of the Miracle Year," was published on Patel's Substack on April 14, 2022. Marc Andreessen and Paul Graham also shared it on Twitter.

1. Patel's parents' reaction to Jeff Bezos ("Oh, that's cool. You think you can talk to him about getting a job at Amazon?") and the detail that his interview with Ilya Sutskever crossed half a million views on YouTube are also from the *Mercury* profile.
2. TIME named Patel to the TIME100 AI list in 2024. His quote ("It's insane that I can just read a book, and if I find it interesting enough, I can email the author, and pepper

them with questions for two hours”) is from “Dwarkesh Patel: The 100 Most Influential People in AI 2024,” *TIME*, September 5, 2024.

3. The Economist called Patel “the man who has the ear of Silicon Valley” in an episode of *Money Talks*, April 17, 2025.

11. Patel’s YouTube subscriber count (1.37 million as of July 2026) and his book *The Scaling Era: An Oral History of AI, 2019-2025* (Stripe Press, 2025), co-authored with Gavin Leech.

Chapter 2 Notes: The Promising Detour

1. Yvette Anguiano’s account (Kellogg MBA, first-generation college graduate, WashU engineering degree, EY-Parthenon offer after summer internship, move to Seattle, start date pushed nine months, stipend of \$35,000, out of savings, “I had tried to do everything right,” “I was pretty devastated”) is from Lindsay Ellis, “Even Harvard M.B.A.s Are Struggling to Land Jobs,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 2025. EY-Parthenon’s deferral of approximately 200 new hires are from “EY Tells 200 Grads Expecting to Start Soon to Hit the Bench Until Next Year,” *Going Concern*, October 14, 2024. EY cited a “disappointing market for mergers and acquisitions and private equity activity” per the *Financial Times*, as reported by *Going Concern*. Additional detail from “EY-Parthenon Delays Start Dates For 2025 Undergraduate Hires,” *Management*

Consulted, May 14, 2025. Additional biographical details (Dallas native, mechanical engineering at WashU, Forte Fellowship with 80 percent tuition merit scholarship, MLT MBA PD Fellow, Kellogg Alumni Club of Seattle board member) are from Anguiano's public LinkedIn profile, accessed July 2026.

2. Kellogg MBA employment data (97 percent job acceptances within three months in 2022, 87 percent in 2024; offers down from 95 percent to 90 percent) is from Northwestern Kellogg's 2024 Employment Report as analyzed in Marc Ethier, "Another M7 School Reports MBA Salaries & Pay Slipping In 2024: Kellogg," *Poets&Quants*, December 18, 2024.
3. Master's degree data (235,564 awarded in 1970-71; 864,457 projected for 2024-25) is from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 318.10, "Degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by level of degree and sex of student: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2031-32."
4. The salary premium decline for master's degree holders (the average starting-salary differential over a bachelor's degree fell from 31% in 2015 to 23.5% for the Class of 2024) is from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), *First Destinations for the College Class of 2024* (2025 report), Figure 7, and NACE,

“Outcomes Rates Nudge Up for Class of 2024 Bachelor’s, Master’s Graduates,” December 8, 2025. NACE attributes the narrowing partly to wage compression from faster wage growth for lower-income workers in a tight labor market. Corroborating context on the flattening graduate wage premium: Robert G. Valletta, “Recent Flattening in the Higher Education Wage Premium,” NBER; NCES, “Annual Earnings by Educational Attainment,” Condition of Education 2024.

5. Bryan Caplan’s signaling model of education and the concert analogy are from Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money* (Princeton University Press, 2018).
6. Harvard MBA unemployment data (23 percent job-seeking three months after graduation in 2024, up from 10 percent in 2022) and Kristen Fitzpatrick’s quote (“Going to Harvard is not going to be a differentiator”) are from “Even Harvard M.B.A.s Are Struggling to Land Jobs,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 2025. Tripling of unemployed MBA shares at Chicago Booth and Northwestern Kellogg is from the same *Wall Street Journal* analysis. Wharton, Stanford, and other top-tier programs reporting worst placement outcomes in recent memory is from the *Wall Street Journal* analysis and Marc Ethier, “Nearly 1/4 Of Job-Seeking Class Of 2024 Harvard MBAs Couldn’t Find Work After Months Of Searching,” *Poets&Quants*, December 22, 2024.

7. Valerie Lockhart's account (vice president at Morgan Stanley, laid off March 2025, applied to more than 550 jobs, made it to final rounds multiple times without an offer, finances significantly strained, started a GoFundMe, eventually landed a temporary contract role in January 2026) is from Jacob Zinkula, "Laid Off From Morgan Stanley, Struggling to Find Work, Pay Bills," *Business Insider*, March 20, 2026.
8. Cumulative tech layoff data (nearly 950,000 between 2022 and mid-2026) is from Layoffs.fyi (2022-2024) and TrueUp.io (2025-2026), as compiled in "Tech Layoffs by Year: Complete Data 2020-2026," *ValueAddVC*, May 6, 2026, and Crunchbase News tech layoff tracker. Company-specific cuts (Google 22,000+, Amazon 40,000+, Meta 35,000) are from company announcements and CNBC/Reuters reporting, as catalogued by Layoffs.fyi and Statista, "Biggest tech layoffs since COVID-19 worldwide," October 2025.
9. Melissa Zlatow's quote ("The gold standard has changed. Five years ago, working at a big-name tech company was an ideal to aspire to") and her account of being laid off from Meta after seven years are from "Over 100,000 Tech Workers Were Laid Off This Year. Here's Where They Went," *CNBC*, December 21, 2023.
10. McKinsey's headcount expansion (from roughly 34,000 employees in 2020 to 45,000 by end of 2023) and

subsequent contraction (to approximately 40,000 by mid-2025) are from Polly Thompson, “McKinsey’s Staff Numbers Have Dropped More Than 10% in Past 18 Months,” *Business Insider*, May 28, 2025, and McKinsey’s annual social responsibility reports. McKinsey’s plan to cut approximately 10 percent more of its workforce over 18 to 24 months is from Sridhar Natarajan and Ambereen Choudhury, “Why is McKinsey cutting thousands of jobs during its 100th anniversary year?” *Los Angeles Times* (via Bloomberg), December 16, 2025. BCG’s 40 percent headcount increase in 2021-22 is from Peter K, “Why McKinsey, Bain & BCG Aren’t Likely To Hire Many MBAs Full-Time In Fall 2024,” *Poets&Quants*, June 19, 2024. BCG’s tightened performance reviews, characterized as hidden layoffs, are described in the same *Poets&Quants* analysis, which cites the *Financial Times* (April 2024) reporting that BCG’s attrition remained in line with its 12-year average despite flat revenue, indicating “BCG has been more aggressive in letting employees go.” Bain’s 50 percent headcount surge in 2020-23 is from the same *Poets&Quants* analysis.

11. Goldman Sachs’s pandemic-era headcount growth (from 38,300 at end of 2019 to 49,100 by Q3 2022, a 28 percent increase) and its January 2023 layoffs of over 3,000 employees, described as “the biggest round of layoffs since the 2008 financial crisis,” are from Saeed Azhar, “Goldman Sachs may cut more than 1,300

employees in annual review, source says,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2025; “Goldman to cut thousands of staff as Wall Street layoffs intensify,” *Reuters*, December 16, 2022; and “Goldman job cuts hit investment banking, global markets hard,” *Reuters*, January 12, 2023. The pre-pandemic headcount of 38,300 is from Goldman Sachs’s 2019 annual filing. Morgan Stanley’s 26 percent headcount increase (to 76,541) is from Hugh Son, “Wall Street layoffs likely ahead as two-year hiring boom turns to bust,” *CNBC*, June 27, 2022. Morgan Stanley’s cut of approximately 2,000 employees in March 2025 is from “Morgan Stanley to lay off about 2000 employees to trim costs,” *Reuters*, March 18, 2025. The aggregate figure of over 23,000 jobs shed by major Wall Street banks in 2023 is from “Wall Street’s string of job cuts in tumultuous 2023,” *Reuters*, January 18, 2024.

12. The technology sector’s average unemployment duration of nearly seven months (28.7 weeks mean, information sector) is from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 32, “Unemployed persons by occupation, industry, and duration of unemployment,” 2025 annual averages. The information sector (which includes technology, media, and telecommunications) had the longest mean unemployment duration of any knowledge-worker industry in 2025. Overall mean unemployment duration rose from 20.6 weeks (2023) to 23.0 weeks (2025). See also Steven

Mostyn, “Average Job Search Duration by Industry in 2026,” *Career Agents*, May 21, 2026, which analyzes the BLS CPS Table 32 data.

13. Mody Khan’s account (five years at Microsoft as a cloud solution architect, laid off December 2024, still searching over a year later, savings nearly depleted, fears losing his home, “It feels like recruiters are looking for Superman”) is from Jacob Zinkula, “Big Tech workers once thought their resumes were bulletproof. Not in this job market,” *Business Insider*, January 29, 2026; and Jacob Zinkula, “2025 Is the Year the Tech Job Market Cracked Under Layoffs, Low Hiring,” *Business Insider*, December 12, 2025.
14. The observation that five laid-off MBB alumni now showed up to interview for every corporate strategy opening, and that “normally, exiting MBB is one of the easier moves in your career” but “the competition that used to be on the way into consulting is now on the way out,” is from “McKinsey, BCG & Bain Layoffs: Inside the Consulting Crisis,” *Case Interview Hub*, April 9, 2026. The article was written by two former McKinsey consultants with six-plus years each at the firm who maintain active networks inside the firms.
15. George Akerlof’s “lemon” model and its application to markets with asymmetric information are from George A. Akerlof, “The Market for ‘Lemons’: Quality Uncertainty

and the Market Mechanism,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 84, no. 3 (1970): 488-500. Akerlof shared the 2001 Nobel Prize in Economics with Michael Spence and Joseph Stiglitz for their work on markets with asymmetric information.

16. Koch’s description of his career progression at BCG and why he left (“You start by doing the work and the work I liked. Then you get promoted to managing a group of people doing the work... But six years in, the next promotion was to being a vice president, where you’re doing much more selling and you’re managing managers. That was my future, and I didn’t want to manage a consultancy. So I got off the train”) is from Phil Rosenthal, “Jim Koch Talks Business and Brews,” *Union Leader* (via *Chicago Tribune*), July 18, 2016. His thirty-third-floor office and first-class travel details are from “Billionaire Jim Koch: Listen to Your Gut, Not Your Dad,” *CNBC*, October 7, 2016. His quote about the real risk (“The real risk would have been staying in a job that was OK but I didn’t love for the rest of my life, staying in that job and getting to 67 and looking back and going, ‘Oh my God! I wasted my life’”) is also from the *CNBC* October 2016 profile.
17. Mihir Desai’s concept of optionality and the quotes (“These safety nets don’t end up enabling big risk-taking. Individuals just become habitual acquirers of safety nets” and “The shortest distance between two points is reliably a

straight line. If your dreams are apparent to you, pursue them”) are from Mihir A. Desai, “The Trouble with Optionality,” *The Harvard Crimson*, May 25, 2017; and Mihir A. Desai, *The Wisdom of Finance: Discovering Humanity in the World of Risk and Return* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

18. Koch’s eight months to figure out what came next after leaving BCG, his ruling out former clients, and his father’s advice about partners (“When you start a company, it’s kind of lonely, and it’s much better if you have a partner. It’s very much better if that partner is different from you”) are from Alice Barlow, “Samuel Adams’ founder carried a briefcase full of beer to bars to launch his brand,” *Fortune* (via *Yahoo Finance*), October 24, 2024.
19. Jim Koch’s founding story, including the kitchen-table scene, his father’s reactions (“Jim, you’ve done some stupid things in your life. This is about the stupidest” and “You’ll never be very big, but you’ll probably stay out of the welfare line”), the five-generation brewing lineage, and his quote (“I realized that I probably didn’t want to do that for the rest of my life. And then I realized the rest of my life starts tomorrow”) are from Jim Koch’s memoir as quoted in a *Marketplace* interview, March 31, 2016, and Alice Barlow, “Samuel Adams’ founder carried a briefcase full of beer to bars to launch his brand,” *Fortune* (via *Yahoo Finance*), October 24, 2024.

20. Koch's description of Rhonda Kallman ("She went to secretarial school and bartended at night," "Bars were kind of her natural habitat"), the line "We had more Harvard degrees than we needed," and the detail that Kallman eventually started her own distillery in Boston are from the *Fortune* profile. NOTE: Koch's quote says "secretarial school"; Kallman is a 1980 graduate of North Shore Community College (NSCC) with a degree in secretary science. Body text uses "community college," which is accurate.
21. Koch's selling routine (seven bottles, two ice packs, a sleeve of cups in a briefcase; his pitch to bar owners; 5 percent success rate; twenty calls a day) and the detail that Harvard had "dozens of courses on marketing and no courses on selling" are from the *Fortune* profile and "How Jim Koch Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Sales," *All About Beer*, March 12, 2015. The book Koch bought at the HBS bookstore, *How to Master the Art of Selling* by Tom Hopkins, and his account of teaching himself to sell from it, are from Kathleen Elkins, "Self-made billionaire Jim Koch says this book taught him more than Harvard did," *CNBC*, September 26, 2016.
22. Koch's original business plan (\$1.2 million revenue, eight employees) and current company metrics (\$2 billion+ revenue, 2,800 employees) are from the *Fortune* profile and "Jim Koch Quit Six-Figure Job to Launch Sam Adams," *CNBC*, September 13, 2022.

23. Koch's quotes "My education was protection because it gave me status and self-image, but I had to leave that behind" and "Starting a business was scary, but what was really dangerous was not starting this company and wasting my life" are from "Taking Chances: A Conversation Between Jim Koch and Dean Minow," Harvard Law School, March 6, 2015.

Chapter 3 Notes: The Second Collapse

1. "Inside Harvey: How a First-Year Legal Associate Built One of Silicon Valley's Hottest Startups," *TechCrunch*, November 14, 2025. (Weinberg: Kenyon College BA, USC JD, O'Melveny associate 2021. D&D quote. 86/100 landlord-tenant test with three attorneys. Cold email to Altman and Kwon. Pereyra: USC CS, Google Brain resident 2016-2017, DeepMind 2017-2018, Meta 2022, dropped-out Oxford PhD. Kwon reaction quote traces to Sequoia/ Masters of Scale podcasts (Notes 3, 12); cold-email strategy confirmed here and in Note 6.)
2. *Financial Times* interview with Weinberg and Pereyra, May 2026. (Weinberg practiced law "a little less than a year." Work associates "could have done even before law school." Roommates in LA/San Diego. July 4, 2022 call with OpenAI C-suite.)
3. *Sequoia Capital* podcast, "Harvey CEO Winston Weinberg: Why You Should Reinvent Yourself Every 4 Months,"

January 15, 2026. (Weinberg troubled youth: “terrible student, got kind of like kicked out of a bunch of schools.” “I didn’t find something that made me want to get up every morning and apply myself.” “I’ve never felt this overwhelming obsession and excitement to get up every morning. Ever. And it is absolutely terrifying to me to lose that.” PACER demo tactic confirmed. \$190M ARR.)

4. Guy Louzon, “Harvey AI,” *Substack*, May 2, 2026. (Pereyra at Google Brain during “Attention Is All You Need” paper. Chess startup details. Chain-of-thought prompting before the technique was widely named.)
5. *Observer*, “Harvey Founder and CEO Winston Weinberg on the Legal A.I. Race,” March 18, 2026. (Harvey naming: human name for natural prompting, Harvey Specter from Suits, sounds like “Harvard.” Weinberg was 27 in 2022. “I didn’t have any friends that worked in tech. I didn’t grow up in San Francisco.” \$190M+ ARR, 1,000+ customers, 60+ countries.)
6. “Masters of Scale: How Harvey is reinventing legal work with AI, with Gabe Pereyra.” (Pereyra: “We got early access to GPT-4 about six months before ChatGPT was released.” Division of labor: Pereyra = product/engineering, Weinberg = go-to-market. Custom-trained models on legal data.)
7. Gene Dai, “Gabriel Pereyra: Harvey AI,” November 22, 2025. (Custom-trained models on 10B+ tokens of legal

data. 97% attorney preference for Harvey's model vs. standard GPT-4. Agentic AI workflows with A&O Shearman.)

8. *LawNext* podcast, "From Roommates to Billionaires," January 2026. (Mattress on floor, same apartment. Thousands of LinkedIn cold messages. Allen & Overy as breakthrough client, 3,500 lawyers in 43 offices.)
9. "Harvey's CEO on the Early, Risky Tactic That Won Lawyers' Attention," *Business Insider*, January 19, 2026. (PACER demo tactic: pulled partners' own court filings, had Harvey critique their arguments. "I would try to come up with prompts that were like, 'This is bad.' Because they're a litigator and I'm basically attacking something that they just wrote, they would instantly read the screen." Hallucination risk: "But the times that they got it right, it was over.")
10. "Harvey's CEO says AI agents are picking up more work that human lawyers used to do," *Business Insider* / DNYUZ, May 5, 2026. (\$11B valuation, 700K+ agent-powered tasks per day, 100K+ lawyers across 1,500 firms. Agents automate 10-20 hours in 20 minutes.)
11. Sourcery.vc, "Harvey HQ Visit," June 16, 2026. (Harvey passed \$300M ARR by mid-2026, ~2,000 customers.) Also: [Harvey.ai/customers](https://harvey.ai/customers) (July 2026): 200,000+ professionals, 2,400+ organizations, 70 countries. *CNBC*

(March 25, 2026): \$200M raise at \$11B valuation, total funding exceeds \$1B.

12. “AI billionaires still living with roommates in San Francisco,” *New York Post*, January 2026 (reporting NYT profile). Weinberg: “Yeah, sure it’s in the billions, but it’s on paper.” “Yes, Gabe and I still live together with one other roommate.”
13. *DigiPalms*, “From Apartment Startup to \$11B Legal AI Operating System,” April 10, 2026. (July 4 call details, timeline: 2021 prototyping, summer 2022 OpenAI meeting, November 2022 launch.)
14. “The Models Are the Product: Gabe Pereyra on Building an AI Associate,” *3 Geeks and a Law Blog*, September 22, 2025. (Pereyra’s thesis: “the models are the product.” Matter-centric design. Pereyra’s brother also a lawyer at Harvey.)
15. *Forbes Australia*, “What is Harvey AI?” March 12, 2026. (San Diego apartment, “The Vault” encrypted environment.)
16. “AI might not be coming for lawyers’ jobs anytime soon,” *MIT Technology Review*, December 15, 2025. (Couger: “I’m worried that I’m not getting the same reps that senior attorneys got,” “I may be the last plane out.” Clifford Chance 10% London business services cut. 47.8% of attorneys at 500+ lawyer firms using AI.)

17. “How AI Affects Associate Hiring,” *AI Vortex*, April 17, 2026. (67% of Am Law 200 managing partners expect to hire fewer associates within 3-5 years. 43% said AI influenced hiring decisions.) NOTE: NALP-sourced 8% hiring decline is contradicted by NLJ 500 data (Note 18) showing ~2.8%; body text uses the 67% figure only.
18. Law.com / *National Law Journal*, “NLJ 500 First-Year Associate Report,” June 2026. (Am Law 100 first-year headcount dipped ~2.8% in 2025, “essentially flat.” Average first-year class fell from 72 in 2023 to 65 in 2025.)
19. “McKinsey Boss Says AI Is Reshaping Its Workforce,” *Business Insider*, January 7, 2026. (40,000 human employees alongside 25,000 AI agents. 1.5 million hours of search and synthesis saved in 2025.)
20. “The Big Four accounting firms are now hiring more AI specialists than accountants,” *Computerworld*, May 19, 2026. (FT analysis of 50,000+ job postings: AI roles ~7% vs. audit roles ~3%.)
21. “Big Four accounting firms slash graduate hiring as AI takes on junior tasks,” *HRreview*, June 24, 2025. (KPMG cut 29%, Deloitte 18%, EY 11%, PwC 6%.)
22. “JPMorgan Chase, Goldman Sachs already using AI to hire fewer people,” *CNBC*, October 15, 2025. (JPMorgan CFO: “very strong bias against having the reflexive response to any given need to be to hire more people.”)

23. “JPMorgan’s new plan to cut junior bankers & shift jobs to India,” *eFinancialCareers*, October 3, 2025. (Goldman CEO Solomon: LLM can draft 95% of an IPO prospectus in minutes.)
24. “AI Reshapes the Entry-Level Pipeline Across Law, Finance, and Consulting,” *TechTimes*, July 20, 2026. (Entry-level postings fell ~35% from Jan 2023 to mid-2025, Revelio Labs data. Harvard economists Hosseini & Lichtinger: “seniority-biased technological change.” NOTE: Revelio Labs data is economy-wide, body text says “across the United States.”)
25. *G1 Globo*, “Vanessa Ricarte: quem foi vítima de feminicídio que inspirou app,” October 29, 2025. (Journalist from Três Lagoas, worked at Ministério Público do Trabalho. Killed by ex-fiance Caio Nascimento, February 2025. At least 14 pending domestic violence cases. Held in captivity, sought protective order, attacked when returning for belongings. Crime caused national outcry.)
26. *TechTudo* / *Marie Claire*, “Boy ‘cilada’? Site revela antecedentes criminais de homens em segundos,” November 1, 2025. (Matos: “What shocked me was that she left an audio saying that, if she had known, she would never have gotten involved with him.” Confirmed 14 cases. Green/yellow/red flag system.)
27. *Judit* case study, “Plinq usa Judit API e Combate ao Feminicídio,” April 19, 2026. (80% of searches for

romantic partners, 20% for ride-sharing drivers, doctors, service providers. R\$97/year unlimited, R\$27 single search. ARR R\$2.2M.)

28. *Exame*, “Aos 28, curitibana cria site para proteger mulheres do ‘boy cilada,’” December 17, 2025. (Matos from Curitiba, age 28. Made For Fun: sublimation kit from mother, sold at concerts including São Paulo alone. Founded 20-person agency, closed 2024. “Vanessa was like me, like you.” Gym story: 8 charges including domestic violence. 35K users by December 2025. “The right to life comes before the right to privacy. If we save one woman, it was worth it.” Homicide-discovery user story: partner had committed homicide, “she canceled her subscription and said she would never date again.”)

29. *Lovable* blog, “How Sabrina used Lovable to Fight Gender-Based Violence in Brazil,” September 18, 2025. (Growth marketer, 13 years, no coding background. Built Plinq in 45 days. \$456K ARR, 10K+ users in 3 months, 200+ dangerous situations avoided. “If Lovable didn’t exist, Plinq would never have seen the light of day.” Mother’s quote: “you have to do something.” 37.5% of Brazilian women aged 16+ experienced violence.)

30. *Brasil 247*, “Tecnologia brasileira quer interromper ciclo de violência contra a mulher,” February 20, 2026. (Origin scene: “A ideia nasceu de uma cena doméstica.” 45K+ users. Data quality: “sometimes the data stored in a court

in a given city is all wrong.” 75% of São Paulo femicide perpetrators had prior criminal records.)

31. *No Code MBA* interview with Matos, September 30, 2025 (YouTube). (Co-founder Felipe Bahia background. Launched June 1-2, viral LinkedIn post June 3. “We started like three days without sleeping.” Both working 9-to-5 jobs. Made For Fun at 15-16: sublimation kit from mother, 50K reais in one week.)
32. *Lovable* interview with Matos (YouTube), “How She Vibe Coded a \$200k/Year App,” 2026. (40K+ users. 1.1 million page views in December. New user every 10 minutes. Government contracts: \$5-6M/year, 2-year contracts. Brought CTO later for mobile app. Lovable CEO Anton Osika invested.)
33. *AI Eating The World*, “Non-Technical Founder Used Lovable to Hit \$456K ARR,” June 26, 2026. (40K+ users. Government contracts with two of Brazil’s largest states. Team of 8, now has CTO.)
34. *Good Business* newsletter, “#14: Plinq,” May 20, 2026. (Public records accessible to corporations, inaccessible to individuals. “Plinq built a consumer-facing interface on top of infrastructure that already existed.” 300% MoM growth. R\$97/year.)
35. *Diário de Goiás*, “Plinq: Plataforma criada após caso de feminicídio,” November 30, 2025. (Matos on Sem Censura

TV: “A Plinq nasceu do medo que virou propósito” (“Plinq was born from fear that became purpose”). “A resposta não começa na tecnologia, começa na vida real.”)

36. Simon Willison, “Deep Blue,” *simonwillison.net*, February 15, 2026. (Term coined on Oxide and Friends podcast, primary credit to Adam Leventhal. Named after IBM’s Deep Blue defeating Kasparov in 1997. Describes “psychological ennui leading into existential dread” among software developers facing AI encroachment. Willison: “Something I see a lot of is people out there who are having existential crises and are very, very unhappy because they’re like, ‘I dedicated my career to learning this thing and now it just does it. What am I even for?’” Bryan Cantrill predicted the community would name the feeling; Leventhal supplied “Deep Blue.” Willison: “Becoming a professional software engineer is hard. Getting good enough for people to pay you money to write software takes years of dedicated work... The idea that this could all be stripped away by a chatbot is deeply upsetting.”)

37. Tim Paradis, “AI Is Creating an Identity Crisis for Software Engineers,” *Business Insider*, March 6, 2026. (Adam Janes rarely writes code anymore, drafts specifications in English instead. Spotify co-CEO Gustav Soderström on February earnings call: company’s top developers “haven’t drafted ‘a single line of code’ since December.” Block laid off 40%+ of workforce citing AI-driven efficiencies. “For some software developers, there is an added reckoning: If the core act of

coding, long a source of status and identity, becomes [automated].”)

38. Anuschka Schmitt, Krzysztof Z. Gajos, Osnat Mokryn, “Software Engineers’ Sense-Making of Generative AI,” *arXiv*, October 2024. (Qualitative study at “SoftCloud,” a mid-size software company. Junior engineer J5: “It is what I do for 40 hours a week. You want to take some pride and have some ownership of it. And you don’t want it to just all be spit out of the machine.” Junior engineer J2: “I’m concerned, not for myself, but for people who come after me, especially the younger entry-level people.” Engineers’ occupational identity framed by expertise; sensemaking served as identity-protection mechanism. Junior engineers refrained from using AI for certain tasks to preserve skill development and occupational identity.)
39. Heorhi Tratsiak, “I Have No CS Degree. Here’s How I Built 4 Tech Products Using AI Tools,” *tratsiak.com*, May 20, 2026. (Bachelor’s and master’s in economics, seven years in banking. “A persistent, quiet frustration that the most interesting problems of our time were being solved by people with credentials I didn’t have, in a language I didn’t speak.” Left banking during a war, built four products across four markets using AI tools. “The tools genuinely collapse the distance between idea and prototype.” “What the tools do not do is make the judgment calls.” TSG Tech Ltd, UK-registered. Also published on Medium/Startup Insider.)

Chapter 4 Notes: The Undeniable Signal

1. ImageNet's scale (over fourteen million images, nearly twenty-two thousand categories, labeled via Amazon Mechanical Turk) and its presentation as a poster at CVPR 2009 in Miami are from Jia Deng, Wei Dong, Richard Socher, Li-Jia Li, Kai Li, and Li Fei-Fei, "ImageNet: A Large-Scale Hierarchical Image Database," *2009 IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition*, pp. 248-255; and "ImageNet," HandWiki. NOTE: Official ImageNet stats page (image-net.org/about) shows exactly 14,197,122 images and 21,841 synsets (categories). Body text uses "nearly twenty-two thousand" since the actual count is under 22,000, though Li herself rounds to "22,000" in public remarks. The poster assignment (rather than a speaking slot) is noted in "This Decision Helped Fei-Fei Li Establish Her Status As the Queen of AI," HyperAI.
2. Li's conviction that data was the bottleneck in computer vision, the skepticism from colleagues, and the refusal of grant committees to fund ImageNet are from *The Worlds I See* and "In the Hallways of Princeton, a Fascination with the Human Mind Unlocked the Power of Deep Learning," Princeton Computer Science Department.
3. Fei-Fei Li's immigration story is from Fei-Fei Li, *The Worlds I See: Curiosity, Exploration, and Discovery at the Dawn of AI* (Flatiron Books, 2023); and "Fei-Fei Li: A

Candid Look at a Young Immigrant's Rise to AI Trailblazer," Stanford HAI, November 7, 2023. NOTE on age: Li's age at arrival is disputed between sources. Britannica says 16; Li herself more often says 15 (Microsoft interview 2025: "When I was 15, my mom and I joined my dad in New Jersey"; CNN Money 2016: same). Born July 3, 1976, emigrated 1992. Body text uses 15 per Li's own statements. NOTE on parents' work: Upon arrival, her father repaired cameras and her mother worked as a supermarket cashier (Britannica). The dry-cleaning shop was purchased later, while Li was at Princeton. CNN Money (2016): "While Li was in college at Princeton, she borrowed money from friends -- and even her high school math teacher -- to buy a dry cleaning business for her parents." During high school, Li worked as a waitress and house cleaner, not at the dry cleaner. NOTE on scholarship: Li told CNN (2016): "Princeton gave me a nearly full scholarship." Stanford HAI says "full scholarship." Body text uses "nearly full" per Li's own words.

4. Li's "tale of two cities" between Princeton and Parsippany, her role as the "CEO" of her parents' dry-cleaning shop (answering phones, managing inspections, talking to customers, handling billing as the only English speaker), and her continuing to run the business remotely through half of her Caltech PhD are from Octavio Blanco, "One Immigrant's Path from Cleaning Houses to Stanford

Professor,” *CNN Money*, July 21, 2016; Eva Roytburg, “She Ran Her Parents’ Dry-Cleaning Business at 18,” *Fortune*, November 24, 2025 (citing Bloomberg interview); and “Fei-Fei Li: A Candid Look at a Young Immigrant’s Rise to AI Trailblazer,” Stanford HAI, November 7, 2023. NOTE: CNN Money (2016) says Li “borrowed money from friends, and even her high school math teacher” to buy the dry-cleaning business. The math teacher is Bob Sabella, identified by name in Martin Wolk, “Why This AI Pioneer Is Calling for ‘Human Centered’ Computing,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2023, and in “The Godmother of AI,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. Sabella taught Li advanced calculus during lunch hours per the *LA Times* and the PAW profile.

5. Li’s academic path (physics at Princeton 1999, PhD at Caltech 2005, assistant professor at UIUC 2005-2006, assistant professor at Princeton 2007-2009, then Stanford 2009 onward) is from her Wikipedia entry and “The Godmother of AI,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. NOTE: Li’s formal PhD was in Electrical Engineering (per her Stanford resume at cs.stanford.edu/people/feifeili/Resume.htm and Caltech records), though her research was at the intersection of computer vision and neuroscience (co-advisors: Pietro Perona for CV, Christof Koch for neuroscience). Body text corrected to “PhD in electrical engineering at Caltech, where she studied computer vision and neuroscience.”

6. Li's initial failed attempt to hire Princeton undergrads at \$10/hour, Jia Deng's calculation that labeling would take 18-19 years at their rate, and the hallway discovery of Amazon Mechanical Turk are from Gershgorn, *Quartz* (2017); Timothy B. Lee, "How a Stubborn Computer Scientist Accidentally Launched the Deep Learning Boom," *Ars Technica*, November 11, 2024; and "Fei-Fei Li, the Godmother of AI," *AINEXT*, January 23, 2026. Li's quotes ("Literally that day I knew the ImageNet project was going to happen" and "Suddenly we found a tool that could scale") are from the *Quartz* article. The wine bottle label anecdote is from *AINEXT*. The two-and-a-half-year completion timeline is from *Quartz*.
7. Li's mentor Jitendra Malik warning she was "leaping too far ahead of the field" and the skeptical question "If you can't even do one object well, why would you do thousands?" are from Celeste Garcia, "Herstory Profile: Fei-Fei Li," *She Writes AI* (Substack), April 3, 2026; and "Fei-Fei Li: A Candid Look at a Young Immigrant's Rise to AI Trailblazer," Stanford HAI. Li's quote "Maybe it's the same kind of unbelievable conviction that took my parents to America" is from the Stanford HAI interview.
8. The ImageNet Large Scale Visual Recognition Challenge (ILSVRC) launched in 2010. AlexNet's 2012 victory is from Alex Krizhevsky, Ilya Sutskever, and Geoffrey E. Hinton, "ImageNet Classification with Deep Convolutional Neural Networks," *Advances in Neural Information Processing*

Systems 25 (2012). NOTE: AlexNet achieved 15.3% top-5 error vs. the runner-up's 26.2%, a gap of 10.9 percentage points. Year-over-year improvement from the 2011 winner (~25.8%) was ~10.5 points. Body text uses "more than ten percentage points." The result is described as AI's "Big Bang moment" in the Princeton Computer Science Department profile of Li.

9. Andy Weir's background (computer programmer, prior unpublished novel *Theft of Pride*, three-year attempt to find a literary agent, return to programming) and his quote ("Couldn't get an agent, couldn't get a publisher interested. You've never heard of it, because it sucked") are from "Andy Weir on His Strange Journey from Self-Publishing to Hollywood," *Entertainment Weekly*, November 5, 2014; and "Andy Weir: 'The Martian' Writer's Internet Success Story," *Front Row Features*, October 26, 2015.
10. The couch origin story, the *Apollo 13* CO₂ scrubber inspiration ("I loved that kind of extremely resourceful problem solving stuff, and I wanted to make a whole book of it"), and his quote ("I started thinking about all the things that could go wrong. So I created an unfortunate protagonist and subjected him to all of it") are from "The Martian' Author Andy Weir on How to Keep an Astronaut Busy," *Inverse*, September 18, 2015; and "Author Discusses How 'The Martian' Went from Blog to Blockbuster," *WPR*, October 6, 2015.

11. The quote “I put math in on one side and got plot out of the other” and the six-hundred-liter water detail (discovering his astronaut would need far more water than a Mars mission would carry, leading to the chemistry side plot) are from “Q&A: ‘The Martian’ Author Andy Weir,” *Pocono Record*, August 16, 2015; and “Drinker’s VIP Lounge - Andy Weir,” *Critical Drinker After Hours* (YouTube).
12. Weir’s serial publication of *The Martian* on his website (beginning late 2009, one chapter every six to eight weeks), his scientific accuracy rule, three thousand readers serving as an unpaid peer-review board, and professors and scientists emailing corrections are from the *Entertainment Weekly* profile, the *WPR* interview, and the *APP.com* Q&A (August 2015), where Weir specifies “I’d post a new chapter every six to eight weeks” and “I had accumulated about 3,000 regular readers to my website.”
13. The Kindle publication at 99 cents (the minimum Amazon price) and the sales figure (35,000 copies) are from the *Entertainment Weekly* profile and the Wikipedia entry for *The Martian*. NOTE: The timeframe for the 35,000 copies varies across sources: Wikipedia says “three months,” *EW* says “four months,” *Hollywood Reporter* (Nov 2015) says “six months.” Body text uses “within months” to avoid the disputed timeframe.

14. Julian Pavia discovering the book through Amazon's bestseller lists ("The book sold very well and made its way up various top-seller lists on Amazon. That got the attention of Julian Pavia at Crown"), David Fugate becoming Weir's agent ("Hey, you need an agent?"), Crown purchasing print rights for over \$100,000, and 20th Century Fox optioning film rights the same week (four days apart) are from "Science Book a Day Interviews Andy Weir," *Science Book a Day*, July 24, 2015; the *WPR* interview; and the *Entertainment Weekly* profile.
15. Weir's quotes ("It was a serial. I never thought it would be more than that," "Earlier in life, I'd spent three years trying to get a literary agent and couldn't get any interest, and then one comes knocking on my door," "I was honestly worried it was a scam. Out of nowhere someone offers to make all my dreams and lifelong ambitions come true and pay me a big pile of money? It seemed too good") are from the *Entertainment Weekly* profile and "Andy Weir, Author of The Martian, on the Story's Origins, Publishing, and the Upcoming Film," *Kirkus Reviews*, 2015.
16. Weir's risk aversion ("I'm essentially a risk-averse person. I wasn't willing to take a chance on a lifestyle where I could fail and be economically ruined. Computer programming is pretty much guaranteed income. I'm good at it and I like it. But it was my second choice") and his three-year self-imposed deadline are from "Andy Weir on His Strange Journey from Self-Publishing to Hollywood,"

Entertainment Weekly, November 5, 2014 (also Note 6). Weir's account of the week the deals came together ("I was still sitting in my cubicle at MobileIron, fixing software bugs... 'Oh, I need to figure out this program bug and also I need to go negotiate my movie deal'... The day it all came together I had to take off from work. I was so stressed out I couldn't breathe") is from the same *EW* profile.

17. *The Martian* selling three million copies (confirmed as of 2017, North America, per Penguin Random House press release) and earning seven Academy Award nominations (88th Academy Awards, Feb 2016: Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Production Design, Best Sound Editing, Best Sound Mixing, Best Visual Effects; won none) are widely documented. *Project Hail Mary* (Crown, 2021) is Weir's third published novel; *Artemis* (Crown, 2017) was his second. Body text updated to include both.
18. Weir's hiring as a programmer at a national laboratory (Sandia at Livermore) at age fifteen, studying computer science at UC San Diego until he ran out of money, landing at AOL, cashing in AOL stock after being laid off in the late 1990s, and using the proceeds to fund his three-year writing attempt are from "Andy Weir on His Strange Journey from Self-Publishing to Hollywood," *Entertainment Weekly*, November 5, 2014; and Lee Hutchinson, "Stuck on Mars with Nothing but Disco: Ars

Talks with The Martian's Andy Weir," *Ars Technica*, November 16, 2014.

19. Weir's custom orbital trajectory software, the requirement to overlap the mission with Thanksgiving so potatoes would be on board, the construction of a solar system ephemeris to find a launch window, and the hidden Easter egg launch date ("No one has yet figured out what it is, but the clues to do so are buried in the text") are from the *Ars Technica* interview (2014) and Andy Weir, "How Science Made Me a Writer," *Salon*, February 11, 2014.
20. Weir's deep fear of flying (not having flown since 2007), signing both deals entirely over the phone from his Mountain View condo without meeting anyone in person, and his quote ("But then the checks started coming in, and I thought, 'Well, if it's a scam, then they're not very good at it'") are from the *Entertainment Weekly* profile (2014).
21. Weir's co-workers at MobileIron rooting for him and his bittersweet departure ("It was absolutely not a 'take this job and shove it' situation. It was bittersweet. I was sad to go") are from the *Entertainment Weekly* profile (2014) and Sheryl Garratt, "Andy Weir on Writing an Accidental Best-Seller," *The Creative Life*, April 13, 2016. The quote about Mark Watney as an idealized self ("Mark Watney is who I want to be. He has all the qualities I like about myself magnified without any of the qualities I dislike...

Mark Watney isn't afraid to fly") is from the *Entertainment Weekly* profile (2014).

Chapter 5 Notes: The Flywheel

1. Paul Graham's background (philosophy at Cornell, PhD in computer science from Harvard, painting at RISD and the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence) is from paulgraham.com/bio.html. NOTE: The chronological order is philosophy BA at Cornell (1986), PhD at Harvard (1990), then painting at RISD (1990-1993) and Florence (1991). Graham applied to art schools while finishing his thesis and started RISD's BFA program the same year he completed his PhD. Body text corrected to reflect this order. Viaweb's founding in 1995 with Robert Morris, its acquisition by Yahoo in 1998 for \$49.6 million in stock, and the product becoming Yahoo Store are from Paul Graham, "What I Worked On," October 2021 (paulgraham.com); and Graham's Wikipedia entry.
2. Graham's account of posting his first essay online ("In one day it got 30,000 page views. What on earth had happened?... Wow, I thought, there's an audience. If I write something and put it on the web, anyone can read it") is from "What I Worked On." The essay was "Beating the Averages" (paulgraham.com/avg.html), dated April 2001, derived from a talk Graham gave at the 2001 Franz Developer Symposium in Cambridge, MA (March 25,

2001) about writing Viaweb in Lisp. This is the same essay referenced later in the chapter as the one Steve Huffman was still reading at UVA four years later.

3. Graham published thirty-one essays between 2001 and the announcement of YC in March 2005. The description of him as “the leading apostle, to not say messiah, of the startup gospel” is from Antonio García Martínez, *Chaos Monkeys: Obscene Fortune and Random Failure in Silicon Valley* (Harper, 2016), as cited in Tony Kulesa, “A Relatively Small Amount of Force Applied at Just the Right Place,” July 13, 2023. O’Reilly published *Hackers & Painters: Big Ideas from the Computer Age* in 2004.
4. Graham’s account of the Harvard Computer Society talk, realizing he had not started angel investing after seven years, the walk home with Livingston on Walker Street, the \$200,000 starting capital (\$100K from Graham, \$50K each from Robert Morris and Trevor Blackwell), and the name change from Cambridge Seed to Y Combinator are from Paul Graham, “How Y Combinator Started,” March 2012 (paulgraham.com).
5. Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian taking the train from the University of Virginia, Huffman reading Graham’s essays, and the founding of Reddit as part of YC’s first batch are from Paul Graham, “The Reddits,” March 2024 (paulgraham.com).

6. Jessica Livingston's account of working at an investment bank, interviewing at a VC firm, the dinner conversations with Graham ("You know what you should do?"), the decision to start YC ("Let's just start our own"), and the quote about learning angel investing by funding in batches ("Neither of us know anything about angel investing. Let's learn quickly by funding a bunch of startups at once") are from "How YC Was Created With Jessica Livingston," Y Combinator, September 6, 2024; and Jessica Livingston, "Grow the Puzzle Around You," foundersatwork.posthaven.com.
7. The 225 applications for the Summer Founders Program, and the detail that many applicants had already graduated, are from Paul Graham, "How Y Combinator Started."
8. The first batch including Reddit and Justin Kan (later cofounder of Twitch), the \$6,000 per founder stipend, the Tuesday dinners cooked by Graham, guest speakers arriving "in the spirit of someone coming to address a Boy Scout troop," and the term "the Y Combinator effect" are from Paul Graham, "How Y Combinator Started"; and "Paul Graham on Doing Things Right by Accident." The \$6,000 stipend detail is from "How YC Was Created With Jessica Livingston."
9. Details of the first summer's setting (Graham's former painting studio, the cinderblock building in Cambridge, the industrial crockpots of "Glop" served at plywood

tables), Livingston's role (buying groceries, delivering air conditioners from Home Depot, "the only one of us organized enough to make all this kind of stuff happen"), Livingston lighting candles and laying out cheese from Formaggio Kitchen, and the first dinner feeling "like hosting a nice dinner party" are from Hillary Johnson, "Among the Summer Founders," *Inc.* (unpublished, later posted on Medium), January 15, 2013; "How YC Was Created With Jessica Livingston," Y Combinator, September 6, 2024; and Jessica Livingston, "The Social Radar: What I Did at Y Combinator," foundersatwork.posthaven.com, March 4, 2015.

10. The first Demo Day (about fifteen investors, mostly friends, ten-minute rambling pitches, most companies raising zero dollars), Jared Friedman's quotes ("Only a couple of companies raised any money. The vast majority raised zero dollars, including ours" and "Serious investors didn't really believe in this Y Combinator thing. Historically, incubators had produced no big hits"), and his description of the "virtuous cycle" ("There was more interest in coming to Demo Day, which meant more companies raised more money, which made Y Combinator more appealing for founders to join") are from Jared Friedman, "Nine Years of Demo Days: How YC Has Changed," jaredfriedman.wordpress.com, August 18, 2015; and "Founder from Early Y Combinator Batch Tells How

Much Demo Days Have Changed,” *San Jose Business Journal*, March 20, 2017.

11. The 2012 Demo Day at the Computer History Museum (450 investors, entrepreneurs, and reporters; 66 startups; partners from Sand Hill Road firms stalking conference rooms), Graham’s warning (“Some of those hotter rounds are going to fill up today”), and Bulent Tekmen’s quote (“It’s like there are lots of sharks and you have to be more edgy than them to invest. If you don’t, the big names will catch your investment opportunity, your prey”) are from Sean Silcoff, “Y Combinator ‘Demo Day’ Turns into Start-up Feeding Frenzy,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 28, 2012.
12. The alumni network compounding (founders from earlier batches returning to advise later ones, sharing sales decks, making introductions, helping each other hire, and a YC-backed enterprise startup finding its first ten customers through the alumni directory) is documented in “YC Alumni Who Paid It Forward,” Y Combinator blog.
13. Y Combinator’s current scale (over 5,000 companies funded, combined valuation exceeding \$1 trillion, acceptance rate lower than Harvard’s) is from YC’s public statistics as of 2026 and “Why Y Combinator Produces More Unicorns Than Any Other Accelerator,” *Unicorn Screener*, May 1, 2026. Companies listed (Dropbox, Airbnb, Stripe, DoorDash, Coinbase, Scale AI, and Instacart) are widely documented YC alumni. NOTE on YC

batch years: Dropbox was YC Summer 2007 (correct in body). Airbnb was YC Winter 2009 (correct in body). Stripe was YC Summer 2009 (S09), not 2010 as previously stated. Patrick Collison’s Wikipedia says “In 2010, Collison co-founded Stripe,” referring to when the product work began, but the YC batch was 2009. Body text corrected to 2009 since the chapter lists these by when companies “came through” YC.

14. Emmett Shear’s account of being a fan of Graham’s essays (“I was a big fan of Paul’s essays in college. I was reading his essays along with spending just vastly too much time on the internet in general”) and hearing about the Summer Founders Program through a friend is from “Twitch Founder Emmett Shear Explains What the First Batch of Y Combinator Was Like,” *The Social Radars Podcast*, September 30, 2024.
15. Paul Graham’s essay about Jessica Livingston, including the description of her as “the Social Radar,” the interview dynamic (“What does the Social Radar say?”), her ability to read character (“She can see through any kind of faker almost immediately”), the Airbnb anecdote (“We thought Airbnb was a bad idea. We funded it because we liked the founders”), the alumni network as perhaps YC’s most valuable feature, and the quote “At YC, the culture was the product” are from Paul Graham, “Jessica,” November 2015 (paulgraham.com).

16. Livingston's description of her role in YC interviews (could not judge technical ability but could spot bad cofounder dynamics in ten minutes, applicants reflecting interviewers' ideas back at them), her effective veto over funding decisions for the first six years, and her quotes ("From the beginning, I was very careful about only funding earnest people," "I always tried to create an asshole-free culture") are from Jessica Livingston, "The Social Radar: What I Did at Y Combinator," foundersatwork.posthaven.com, March 4, 2015.
17. Niki Parmar's background (lower-middle-class family in Pune, failing IIT-JEE, "I thought, 'That's it. I missed my chance,'" enrolling at Pune Institute of Computer Technology, taking an online AI course) is from "She Missed IIT-JEE but Changed the World of AI," *The Times of India*, July 8, 2026; and "Niki Parmar Shares Her Experience on Moving to Modern AI Pioneer," *Nation Now*, October 5, 2024. Both cite an NDTV interview as the primary source. NOTE: The online AI course year was 2011, not 2010. Stanford's "Introduction to Artificial Intelligence" by Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig launched October 10, 2011 (confirmed by archived ai-class.org and NYT coverage, August 2011). Andrew Ng's Machine Learning course also launched October 2011. Some Indian press articles (Times of India, Economic Times) erroneously report 2010. Body text corrected to 2011.

18. Parmar's quote about what drew her to machine learning ("I was curious about the combined power of data, pattern matching, and optimization") and her account of taking the first MOOCs by Andrew Ng and Peter Norvig are from an interview with Sayak Paul, "An Interview with Niki Parmar, Senior Research Scientist at Google Brain," Medium, May 29, 2020.
19. Parmar's financial struggles at USC (education loan not released, "I had no money, no place to stay, and no idea how I'd pay for my tuition," father and uncle borrowing from relatives, professor funding her second year, internship repaying loans) are from the NDTV interview as cited in *The Times of India* and *Nation Now* profiles.
20. Parmar joining Professor Morteza Dehghani's Computational Social Science Lab at USC, her research applying machine learning to social media data (analyzing tweets to study moral values and social connections), her co-authored publications, and Dehghani's quote ("Niki collaborated on several projects with me, and it was clear that she is simply an outstanding thinker") are from "USC Alumni Paved Path for ChatGPT," USC Viterbi School of Engineering, March 9, 2023. Her published papers from the lab include Dehghani et al., "Purity Homophily in Social Networks," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 2016; and Dehghani et al., "TACIT: An Open-Source Text Analysis, Crawling, and Interpretation Tool," *Behavior Research Methods*, 2016.

21. Parmar meeting Ashish Vaswani at USC (Vaswani gave a guest lecture on neural networks, “the pair became fast friends and research collaborators”) is from “USC Alumni Paved Path for ChatGPT,” USC Viterbi School of Engineering, March 9, 2023.
22. Parmar joining Google at twenty-four as the youngest team member and only non-PhD (“It was a little intimidating at first”), her applied research on text similarity and question answering for Google Search (“Launched some of the first successful deep learning based AI models for Question Answering and Text similarity for Google Search”), and her transition to Google Brain are from Parmar’s LinkedIn profile; the NDTV interview as cited in *The Times of India*, *Nation Now*, and “Niki Parmar: Pushing the Boundaries of AI,” *Forbes India*, June 17, 2025; and the Sayak Paul interview on Medium.
23. Parmar’s self-initiated work on the Transformer model (“No one told me to work on it. I just wanted to see how far it could go”) and the organic formation of the Transformer team at Google (researchers overhearing conversations in adjacent buildings, Parmar learning about the project through her work with Jakob Uszkoreit, daily meetings and nightly coding sessions) are from the NDTV interview as cited in *The Times of India* and *Nation Now*; and “Pandemonium: The Transformers Story,” *Hugging Face Blog*, March 30, 2025.

24. Parmar’s daily experimentation process and her quote (“We did this every day and discussed at great lengths the new results we got each day and then went on to try new things. Through the course of the project, paying attention to details is important — every detail, every question, every choice seems relevant”) are from the Sayak Paul interview, “An Interview with Niki Parmar, Senior Research Scientist at Google Brain,” Medium, May 29, 2020 (same source as Note 18). The paper’s footnote attribution of Parmar’s specific contribution (“Niki designed, implemented, tuned and evaluated countless model variants in our original codebase and tensor2tensor”) is from the author contribution footnote in “Attention Is All You Need,” *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems* 30, 2017.
25. “Attention Is All You Need” (Ashish Vaswani, Noam Shazeer, Niki Parmar, Jakob Uszkoreit, Llion Jones, Aidan N. Gomez, Lukasz Kaiser, and Illia Polosukhin, *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems* 30, 2017) introduced the Transformer architecture. Citation count updated to over 270,000 per Wikipedia and Google Scholar as of mid-2026 (previously cited as 234,000). The eight co-authors and their subsequent paths are profiled in Steven Levy, “8 Google Employees Invented Modern AI. Here’s the Inside Story,” *WIRED*, March 20, 2024.
26. Parmar co-founding Adept AI Labs (building AI that could operate software tools on behalf of users; third co-founder

David Luan, formerly of OpenAI) and Essential AI with Vaswani (enterprise AI for automating data workflows; rounds led by Thrive Capital, March Capital, and Lightspeed, with Google and Nvidia as strategic minority investors), and joining Anthropic in early 2025 as a member of the technical staff working on post-training for Claude, are from “Niki Parmar: Pushing the Boundaries of AI,” *Forbes India*; “Ashish Vaswani’s Essential AI,” *Forbes India*, June 10, 2025; Parmar’s LinkedIn profile (shows Jan 2025 start at Anthropic); and “Niki Parmar,” nextomoro.com, May 8, 2026. NOTE: Parmar left Essential AI in September 2024; LinkedIn shows Anthropic start date as January 2025, not December 2024. Body text corrected to “In early 2025.” Google tenure was ~6 years 4 months (July 2015 - November 2021); body text uses “more than six years,” consistent with Parmar’s own “6+ years” phrasing.

27. Parmar’s quote (“You do not necessarily need a PhD to make fundamental contributions to artificial intelligence if you have the drive to learn and experiment”) is from “Niki Parmar: Pushing the Boundaries of AI,” *Forbes India*.
28. The cultural context of IIT-JEE (millions of students taking the exam each year, families reorganizing entire years around it, coaching institutes as a multi-billion-dollar industry) is general knowledge widely documented in Indian media; specific framing “Anyone who has prepared for a competitive exam in India knows that

feeling” adapted from “She Missed IIT-JEE but Changed the World of AI,” *The Times of India*, July 8, 2026 (already cited in Note 17).

Chapter 6 Notes: The Cold Start

1. Jay Yang’s backstory (playing video games five hours a day during COVID, Googling “how to make money online,” starting a music promotion YouTube channel, uploading one video per day for a summer, a motivational song blowing up to over one million views, trying a clothing brand called Project Inspire, buying blank tees at Walmart, discovering copywriting and online business, realizing he was not passionate about music, the conversation with his mom about picking his favorite company) is from Jay Yang, “My Story: How the Internet Changed My Life,” jayyanginspires.beehiiv.com, February 11, 2024; “#089 Jay Yang: Success Without Permission,” *MindHack Podcast*, April 28, 2025; and “#27 Jay Yang: How to Achieve the Life You Want,” *Creator Alchemy Podcast*. NOTE: Yang is from Hoffman Estates, Illinois (Chicago suburb), confirmed by Conant High School records (Class of 2024) and MindHack podcast (“I am in Champaign, Illinois,” referencing University of Illinois). Body text corrected from “Texas” to “Illinois.” The cold email was sent in summer 2022 (Jay’s podcast: “the summer after sophomore year”), corrected from “spring.”

2. Yang's emotional state after his serial ventures ("After all of my ventures, none had stuck. I was frustrated. Worst of all, I was disappointed in myself") is from Jay Yang, "My Story: How The Internet Changed My Life," jayyanginspires.beehiiv.com, February 11, 2024 (already cited in Note 1).
3. The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is from Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).
4. Yang's cold email to Tyler Denk (the subject line "Big Fan of beehiiv," rewriting the email a dozen times, the pitch deck with three project ideas, his fear that Denk would think he was "a joke," Denk's reply the next morning, landing the internship) is from Jay Yang, "How I Landed an Internship at a Tech Startup at 16," jayyanginspires.beehiiv.com, May 1, 2025.
5. Yang's pitch deck strategy (doing the work upfront rather than asking "how can I help," the two things it demonstrates: you want the opportunity and you can do the opportunity) is from the beehiiv pitch deck landing page on jayyanginspires.beehiiv.com; and the *MindHack Podcast* interview.
6. Yang's beehiiv internship (June-August 2023, building beehiiv 101, learning to prioritize features and work in sprints, measuring output over input) is from Yang's LinkedIn profile and "My Story: How the Internet

Changed My Life.” NOTE: Jay’s beehiiv About page says beehiiv 101 helped “hundreds” of users; his main website (jayyanginspires.com) says “thousands.” Body text uses “hundreds” as the more frequently cited and conservative figure.

7. The beehiiv 101 course generating inbound opportunities (founders reaching out for advice, closing two ghostwriting clients at \$4,000-\$5,000/month, first five-figure month while in high school) is from “My Story: How the Internet Changed My Life.”
8. Yang’s connection to Noah Kagan (DMing Jeremy Mary to say thanks, hearing about the newsletter opening, spending forty hours on a 19-slide pitch deck, deconstructing Kagan’s social and email funnel, analyzing old podcast episodes and YouTube videos, attaching nine ready-to-publish pieces of content, starting on a paid trial, promotion to Head of Content, leading the *Million Dollar Weekend* campaign to a NYT bestseller) is from the *MindHack Podcast* interview and “My Story: How the Internet Changed My Life.”
9. Yang joining Acquisition.com at nineteen, the *\$100M Money Models* campaign (Guinness World Record, \$106 million in three days), and the publication of *You Can Just Do Things* as an Amazon bestseller are from “Jay Yang - Author & Hormozi’s Secret Weapon,” scottdclary.com, September 7, 2025; and jayyanginspires.com/about.

10. Stein's description of having "barely any life outside of work, and no sense of purpose or identity" at Goldman is from Carly Kremer (nee Stein), "I've Told My Founder Story a Hundred Times. Here's the One I Haven't Told," carlykremer.substack.com, May 5, 2026. Stein's reframing of confusion and skepticism at the farmers market ("When I was met with confusion and skepticism... I'm doing something really different") and the "cardboard sign" detail are from "Carly Stein Left Her Job in Banking to Build a Bee Empire," *Glamour*, November 5, 2020, and "How This Propolis-Centric Business Is Growing While Helping The Bees," *Forbes*, July 29, 2022.
11. Carly Stein's background (chronic tonsillitis, allergic to antibiotics, the Italian pharmacist recommending propolis, taking it twice a day for five days, full recovery) is from Carly Kremer (nee Stein), "I've Told My Founder Story a Hundred Times. Here's the One I Haven't Told," carlykremer.substack.com, May 5, 2026; and "Carly Stein Left Her Job in Banking to Build a Bee Empire," *Glamour*, November 5, 2020. NOTE on education: Stein attended the University of Victoria. Per Allure (Jan 2021), her degree was in social sciences with "biology- and chemistry-heavy" coursework. Supermaker: "I did social sciences and biology." Body text corrected to "social sciences with a focus on biology and chemistry."
12. Stein apprenticing with John (third-generation beekeeper, retired Romanian biochemist, Vancouver Island), making

propolis in the university chemistry lab, selling from her dorm room, and broke college students paying a premium are from the *Glamour* profile; “Meet Carly Stein of Beekeeper’s Naturals,” *Voyage LA*, March 12, 2019; the Substack essay; and “Full-Time Working Entrepreneurs,” *The Badass CEO Podcast*, February 9, 2021.

13. Stein’s career path (hedge fund, Goldman Sachs biotech trading), the “happiness spreadsheet,” and ordering lab equipment to her studio apartment are from the *Glamour* profile; “Why I Traded Goldman Sachs to Build a Wellness Brand Powered by Bees,” *Glory Media*, September 2, 2020; and the Substack essay.
14. The farmers-market phase (a friend suggesting the first pop-up, Stein feeling “really sheepish” and “embarrassed about this weird hobby,” the contrast with Goldman Sachs credibility, the “scrappy evangelizing customer base that would follow me from market to market,” young parents as early champions, the customer with the six-year-old son with chronic sore throats, and the quote “I did so much consumer testing... it completely shaped my company”) is from the *Badass CEO Podcast* interview; the *Glamour* profile; and “Meet Carly Stein of Beekeeper’s Naturals,” *Voyage LA*, March 12, 2019.
15. Stein’s cold emails to retail buyers during lunch hour, finding the Whole Foods Canada buyer through LinkedIn, sending fruit baskets and letters, demand outstripping

capacity, and leaving Goldman end of 2016 are from the Substack essay and the *Badass CEO Podcast* interview.

16. Friends holding an intervention, the manager's motivation for urging Stein to stay ("he wanted me to stay not because I was particularly good at my job, but because if I walked away from everything he'd built his life around, what did that say about his choices?"), the quote about leaving ("Leave a lucrative, stable career to go start a wellness company powered by bees?!"), someone laughing at a Manhattan dinner party, sleeping on a friend's couch for six months, and the one-way ticket to Indonesia are from the *Glamour* profile; *Glory Media*; the Substack essay; and "The Founder That Left Goldman Sachs for Beekeeping," *Supermaker*, October 30, 2019. The whiteboard graph (former boss drawing Goldman upward trajectory vs. wellness company failure) is from "How to Transform Your Self Talk," *33Voices*, June 24, 2019. The post-Goldman struggle details ("I went from a position of financial abundance to a situation where I had a hard time buying food. But even at the hardest times, I was so excited about what I had the opportunity to build") are from the *Supermaker* interview. The detail about having no roadmap the day after quitting ("I sat down in my living room to work on my new business, and I realized I didn't know where to start") is from the Substack essay. The Indonesia trip specifics (booking a one-way flight, choosing Southeast Asia over Europe for affordability,

spending three months in a coworking space formulating three new SKUs) are from the *Supermaker* interview.

17. Beekeeper's Naturals' growth (over \$15 million raised, Forbes 30 Under 30 in 2019, thirty-person team, Amazon cold and flu ranking, Whole Foods distribution) is from "Beekeeper's Naturals Founder On Selling Products At Markets To Raising \$15 Mil," *Create & Cultivate*, February 4, 2024; the *Supermaker* interview; and the *Glamour* profile. NOTE on Amazon ranking: *Glamour* (Nov 2020) reported Propolis Throat Spray as #2 cold and flu product on Amazon. By June 2023 it had risen to #1 (PR Newswire press release). Current Amazon listing (2026) shows "#1 Best Seller in Cold & Flu Medicine." Body text updated to #1 with "By 2020" framing (the #1 ranking was confirmed by 2023, and the product was already top-ranked by then). The "ahead of Advil and Tylenol" claim from the original text was unverifiable and removed. NOTE on timeline: Stein left Goldman end of 2016. Whole Foods 422-location U.S. expansion was April 2020 (~3.5 years later, per Bloomberg). Body text changed from "Within three years" to "By 2020" to avoid the compressed timeline.

Chapter 7 Notes: The Long Middle

1. Perkins teaching herself to kitesurf over four months, her opening quote ("It's not something that I would normally, naturally try..."), and Tai's repeated question about her

kitesurfing progress (“Every time he would say how was my business going, he’d also be like ‘how’s your kitesurfing going?’”) are from the CNBC profile; the Forbes India profile; and the Yahoo Finance / Business Insider profile.

2. Melanie Perkins’ background (born 1987 in Perth, attended University of Western Australia, tutored classmates in design software, left before graduating) and the founding of Fusion Books in 2007. NOTE: Multiple sources confirm she dropped out, but the “one semester short” detail is unsupported. Wikipedia says she “left university at age 19,” which would be early in a typical degree. Body text corrected to “left university before graduating.” (online yearbook design tool, co-founded with Cliff Obrecht from her mother’s living room) are from Wikipedia’s entry on Melanie Perkins; Karen Gilchrist, “Canva: How Melanie Perkins Built a \$3.2 Billion-Dollar Design Start-Up,” CNBC, January 9, 2020; and the Harvard Business School case study “Yearbook Inc. (A): The Start-up Years,” SSRN, 2022.
3. Perkins writing an eighty-page blueprint, most Perth developers declining, Obrecht cold-calling schools (lowering his voice when asked to speak with a manager), and orders packed on the kitchen floor with her mother proofreading and Obrecht’s father handling logistics are from Sebastien Bouckaert, “She Got 100+ Rejections. Then Built a \$40B Company,” Weekly Business Story (Substack), May 2025; and “Canva: How a Young

Kitesurfer Built a \$3.2 Bn (Profitable!) Startup,” Forbes India, February 2020.

4. Fusion Books growing from sixteen schools in its first year to the largest yearbook company in Australia (\$1M in annual sales), expanding to France and New Zealand, is from the Harvard Business School case study; “Melanie Perkins, Canva,” Career Contessa (undated); and the CNBC profile.
5. Bill Tai’s background (son of Taiwanese immigrants in suburban Chicago, self-described C student, turning down Princeton for the University of Illinois, turning down MBA admissions at Harvard, Stanford, and Northwestern, driving a Dodge Colt to California) is from Shivaune Field, “From Canva to Zoom, Bill Tai Built His Name as a Billionaire Maker,” Forbes Australia, October 14, 2025; and the HBS Alumni Bulletin Skydeck podcast transcript, “MaiTai Global and Kiteboarding” (undated).
6. Tai’s career at LSI Logic alongside Jensen Huang, helping establish TSMC in 1987, becoming a venture capitalist in 1991, twenty-three startups growing to publicly listed companies, and being the first investor in Zoom are from the Forbes Australia profile; the ACTAI Global website bio (actai.global); and Anna Tutova, “Bill Tai: The Kiteboarding VC With No Office,” Benzinga, December 18, 2025.

7. Perkins and Obrecht entering the Western Australian Innovator of the Year competition (NOTE: most sources say “Innovator,” not “Inventor”; body text corrected) (missing first place by one spot, invited back the following year), meeting Bill Tai at the awards, the five-minute conversation, Tai’s contact details, and the quote “He was the first investor we’d ever met” are from Melanie Perkins, “Five Secrets to the Success of Billion-Dollar Startup Canva,” SmartCompany, January 15, 2018 (first-person account); and Bill Kerr, “Melanie Perkins, Making Design Easy for the World,” Open Source CEO (Substack), December 26, 2024.
8. Perkins’ unanswered Skype emails to Tai, her email pretending to be passing through San Francisco (“Hi Bill, hope all is well. I’m going to be in San Francisco from 21st May to 1st June”), Tai’s reply including the introduction to Lars Rasmussen, and Tai’s conditional offer (“If the tech team looks solid, I’d be excited to back you”) are from the SmartCompany first-person account and the CNBC profile.
9. The Palo Alto lunch at University Cafe (Perkins’ nervousness, the paper pitch deck printed on her mother’s presses, the body-language mimicry, Tai on his phone throughout lunch, and Perkins’ quote “I didn’t have enough hands to flip the pages in my deck, eat my lunch and put my hand behind my chair. It was quite distressing”) are from the SmartCompany first-person account. The planned two-week trip turning into three

months and staying on brother Greg's floor are from the SmartCompany account and the Yahoo Finance / Business Insider profile.

10. The meeting with Lars Rasmussen going well, speaking for hours about the future of design, the overlap with Google Wave, and Rasmussen offering to help find a team are from the SmartCompany first-person account and the CNBC profile.
11. Over one hundred investor rejections, the reasons ("too early," "too far from Silicon Valley," "a design product for non-designers is an oxymoron"), and Perkins' quote about the pain of rejection are from "It Hurt A Lot': Canva Founder Melanie Perkins on How It Took Them 3 Years to Raise Funding," OfficeChai, March 2025; "We Believed in What We Were Building': Canva's Melanie Perkins on Raising Capital," Women's Agenda, October 2024; and Carmine Gallo, "How Canva's Melanie Perkins Learned to Pitch Persuasively After More Than 100 Rejections," Inc., September 2021.
12. Perkins describing the rejection period as the most intense stretch of her life ("Just how intense that period of time was, being rejected time and time again. It doesn't feel nice") is from "Melanie Perkins on the Power of Vision and Learning from Rejection," StartupBell, June 8, 2024; and the OfficeChai profile (March 2025).

13. MaiTai (later renamed ACTAI Global), its growth to over thirty cities, and the invite-only format combining tech talks with kitesurfing are from “MaiTai: The ‘Golf Course’ of Silicon Valley,” CNBC, June 16, 2015; Hermione Way, “Is MaiTai the Beginnings of a New TED?” The Next Web, May 23, 2012; and the ACTAI Global website (actai.global), which notes: “What began in 2007 as an intimate gathering in Maui has since evolved into a global community of Athletes, Conservationists, Technologists, Artists, and Innovators, the collective that forms the ACTAI name.”
14. Tai’s quotes about kitesurfing revealing character (“You will fail a lot... It’s like Special Forces training”) and the difference between observing entrepreneurs on the water versus in a PowerPoint presentation are from the CNBC commentary and the HBS Alumni Bulletin Skydeck podcast transcript, “MaiTai Global and Kiteboarding” (undated).
15. Rasmussen’s quote about Perkins working while others partied (“Mel and Cliff could have been on the beach partying with us, but while we were doing that, they were in the room iterating and working”) and his characterization of Perkins as “unstoppable” are from Shivaune Field, “Inside the Global Tech Network Linking Canva, Zoom & Google Maps,” Forbes Australia, October 28, 2025.

16. Cameron Adams (former Google engineer, Google Wave), his initial skepticism. NOTE: Adams worked on Google Wave and then briefly on Google+ (per Forbes Australia profile), not Chrome. Body text corrected to remove Chrome., and his joining as third co-founder in June 2012 are from the Forbes Australia profiles (October 2025); the Weekly Business Story profile; and Michelle Hammond, “How to Raise \$3 Million While Kitesurfing in Hawaii,” SmartCompany, March 19, 2013.
17. Rasmussen spending a year rejecting every engineer Perkins brought him, and her quote (“He was rejecting every single person that I brought him. Which was incredibly frustrating because I just wanted to get started”) are from the Kitrum profile, “The Melanie Perkins Story as Canva CEO,” February 25, 2025; and the CNBC profile.
18. Canva’s three million dollar seed round (investors including Tai, Rasmussen, Ken Goldman, Matrix Partners, InterWest Partners, 500 Startups, and Paul Bassat; matched by an Australian government Commercialisation Australia grant) is from Sarah Perez, “Canva Raises \$3 Million to Make Design Accessible to Everyone,” TechCrunch, March 19, 2013; and the SmartCompany 2013 profile.
19. Canva launching in August 2013, reaching 750,000 users in the first year (per Wikipedia; some sources say 600,000), and 2025 metrics (265 million monthly active

users, \$42 billion valuation) are from the Women’s Agenda profile; and Ivan Mehta, “Canva Gets to \$4B in Revenue as LLM Referral Traffic Rises,” TechCrunch, February 18, 2026. NOTE on revenue: Canva’s 2025 year-in-review reports \$3.5 billion in recognized revenue. The \$4 billion figure (per co-founder Cliff Obrecht at Web Summit Qatar, Feb 2026) is Annual Recurring Revenue (ARR), which differs from recognized revenue. Body text uses \$3.5B (recognized revenue).

20. Perkins’ quote about Canva taking “more than six years” and being “an incredible challenge, but also an incredible adventure” is from “Melanie Perkins, Canva,” Career Contessa.
21. Ben Gilbert and David Rosenthal meeting at a Passover Seder at Madrona partner Greg Gottesman’s house, the first Acquired episode on Disney’s acquisition of Pixar (October 15, 2015, approximately 39-40 minutes per Apple Podcasts), and a few hundred initial listeners are from the Transistor.fm customer story, February 21, 2024; and “10 Years of Acquired with Michael Lewis,” transcript, podscripts.co, December 15, 2025. NOTE on roles: By Oct 2015, David was a Principal at Madrona Venture Group (mid-level, not “junior”). Ben had already left Madrona Venture Labs to co-found Pioneer Square Labs. Body text corrected from “junior venture capitalists at Madrona” to “friends from the Seattle venture capital scene.” NOTE on early research: Sources (Cal Newport, Podnotes) report

5-10 hours of research per episode in early days. Body text changed from “about an hour” to “a few hours.”

22. The podcast starting as two friends looking for an excuse to hang out is from the Transistor.fm customer story; and David Rosenthal’s interview on Build Your SaaS / Transistor, January 24, 2024.
23. The original acquisition-grading format running through approximately 24 episodes before the IPO format was introduced in Episode 25 (The Facebook IPO, November 2016), expansion to full company histories (approximately 2020), and the Berkshire Hathaway trilogy (2021, three episodes, nine-plus hours) are from the Madrona annual meeting transcript, March 28, 2023; and the “Acquired Briefing” summary of the Michael Lewis episode, December 16, 2025. NOTE: The IPO expansion was NOT timed with Uber/Airbnb/Slack IPOs (those were 2019-2020). Body text corrected to “starting with Facebook’s public offering.” The grading-curve example in the body (Facebook’s acquisition of Instagram graded A-plus) is from Rosenthal directly: “The grading curve that we use is Facebook’s acquisition of Instagram was an A-plus. We almost never give an A-plus,” in “Podcast Spotlight: David Rosenthal ‘07 Takes a Closer Look at IPOs and Acquisitions,” Princeton Alumni Weekly.
24. Gilbert’s acknowledgment that Acquired “would have been shuttered after two years because of its slow growth” is

from the Fast Company profile. Rosenthal's quote about colleagues questioning the podcast ("People I worked with would be like, 'What are you doing? You're a venture capitalist'") and the cognitive dissonance of podcasting being seen as incompatible with venture capital are from the Build Your SaaS / Transistor interview, January 2024.

25. Gilbert's assumption that his future was in venture capital and the realization that Acquired had become his company ("Somewhere along the line I realized Acquired was my company and I have completely different goals now. I no longer feel like I am building toward getting to start my startup") is from "Alum Turned His Passion Project into a Podcast Sensation," Ohio State College of Engineering, February 1, 2025. The quiet doubt and colleagues' bewilderment landing emotionally are from the Esquire profile (Note 33) and the Leadership Matters interview (Note 26).
26. Gilbert's quote about chasing curiosity versus serving the original goal is from the Leadership Matters interview, May 8, 2025.
27. Gilbert's quote about being "super wrong about the job to be done" and the audience wanting "great storytelling, structured analytical thinking, and Ben and David" is from the Madrona annual meeting transcript, 2023.
28. Research intensity escalating to over one hundred hours per host per episode (two hundred total plus ten hours of

recording) and episodes stretching to three and four hours are from Cal Newport, “How the Acquired Podcast Became a Sensation,” calnewport.com, February 15, 2024; and the Fast Company profile.

29. Gilbert’s description of the private creative reward (“There really is this magic moment a day or two before recording where I feel like I’m pouring over all my notes and attempts to understand the company, and it just clicks. I’m like, ‘My god, I understand why this company worked’”) is from Alex Heath, “Your CEO’s Favorite Podcast,” *The Verge*, September 13, 2024.
30. The LVMH episode (February 2023) as a watershed moment, its significance in expanding the audience beyond technology, and Gilbert’s quote about luxury brands being “the best decision we ever made” are from the Leadership Matters interview, May 8, 2025; and the TBPN Digest interview, October 8, 2025. Rosenthal’s background that seeded the episode (a French literature major at Princeton, class of 2007, in the Department of French and Italian, whose senior thesis was a marketing history of champagne, “The Kick to Champagne: A Marketing History of the World’s Most Fabulous Wine”) is from the Princeton University senior-thesis record and the Princeton French & Italian department spotlight, “Spotlight on French and Italian alumnus David Rosenthal ‘07.” The thesis centers on champagne marketing history; the body’s “Dom Perignon” framing reflects how Rosenthal

has described it in retellings tied to the LVMH-owned Moët/Dom Pérignon brand.

31. NOTE: David Rosenthal went full-time on Acquired circa 2019 (GeekWire Nov 2023: “has been working on ‘Acquired’ full time for the last four years”). Ben Gilbert went full-time in late 2023/early 2024 (Holiday Special 2023 announcement). Body text corrected to reflect staggered transitions. Both hosts going full-time (Gilbert in late 2023), reaching five hundred thousand listeners that year, and the Wall Street Journal profile (“The Smartest People in the Room Are All Listening to the Same Podcast,” May 2024) driving hundreds of thousands of new subscribers are from the WSJ profile (referenced via notes.alongtheray.com); and Ben Gilbert’s interview with Guy Kawasaki, guykawasaki.com, June 11, 2025.
32. Acquired crossing one million listeners per episode, \$12 million annual advertising revenue (2025), the Chase Center event with Mark Zuckerberg (September 10, 2024, approximately 6,000 attendees; NOTE: Chase Center’s full capacity is 18,064; the event was configured for ~6,000. Body text corrected from “six-thousand-seat Chase Center” to “drew six thousand people to the Chase Center”), Radio City Music Hall with Jamie Dimon (July 2025), Time’s “100 Best Podcasts of All Time” (July 2025), and the Harvard Business School case study are from Wikipedia’s entry on Acquired (podcast); “The Acquired Podcast: Scaling the Mic,” HBR / Cold Call podcast, February 3,

2026; and “How 8 Episodes a Year Built One of Podcasting’s Most Expensive Advertising Inventories,” Netinfluencer, April 10, 2026.

33. The Gilbert-Zuckerberg exchange (“We started this as a side project... We never intended for it to even become a business, let alone our life’s work” / “I’m familiar”) is from Lauren Goode, “The Tech Bros Who Changed Podcasting,” Esquire, September 13, 2024.

Chapter 8 Notes: The Proof Next Door

1. Jeremy Burrows, “Ep 384: Beth Portesi — Vibe Coding for Executive Assistants,” The Leader Assistant Podcast, July 12, 2026. <https://goburrows.com/ep-384-beth-portesi-vibe-coding-for-executive-assistants/> (Primary source. 12 years as EA, “genuinely thought I was going to retire as an EA.” Slack to-do list frustration, Claude offered code, “voila, it actually worked.” Emoji-to-task automation. “I felt like I had a super genius parked in a van outside my house.” Pool metaphor for AI adoption. Executive training sessions.)
2. Jeremy Burrows, “Ep 269: Beth Portesi — Lead Executive Assistant at Fivetran,” The Leader Assistant Podcast, April 28, 2024. <https://goburrows.com/ep-269-beth-portesi-lead-executive-assistant-at-fivetran/> (Earlier episode as Lead EA. Started at \$10/hour at a small nonprofit. 600% rate increase in four years via demand-based \$5 increases

per new client. Founded Next Level VA. “Six-figure habits.” Transition from contractor to Fivetran employee via acquisition. NOTE: \$10/hour was at the nonprofit, not as independent contractor; body text corrected.)

3. Beth Portesi, LinkedIn post, May 27, 2026. (“Last year I opened Claude for the first time and built something. Me. The person whose only coding experience was a customized Myspace page in 2007.” Goal of teaching 100 people by March, taught 320+. “I always thought I’d retire as an Executive Assistant.” Accepted role of AI Enablement & Program Lead. Thanks Alexis Kirkman “for letting me color outside the lines of my job description.”)
4. Beth Portesi, LinkedIn post, December 31, 2025. (“I’m going all in on one thing in 2026. Vibe coding for Executive Assistants.” “Most people who can build technical solutions do not understand executive operations. Most people who understand executive operations are not technical. Vibe coding closes that gap.”)
5. Beth Portesi, LinkedIn post, February 5, 2026. (One-on-one Claude training with executives. “One executive kept repeating ‘holy...’ every time Claude generated something.” Spreadsheets, slide decks, interactive prototypes. “As an EA, you’re the ideal person to run this training.”)
6. Beth Portesi, LinkedIn profile. (Career timeline: independent contractor, Next Level VA founder, Lead EA

at Fivetran, AI Enablement & Program Lead at Fivetran.
Based in Grants Pass, Oregon.)

7. Ailin Werner, “From Email Developer to Head of AI — Without Learning to Code,” YouTube, 2026. (Primary source. “Seven months ago, I lost my job.” “I had spent 15 years as an email developer. I worked my way up to leading a team of 16 people across Europe. And in the end, I was replaced by a team overseas that I had trained myself.” “When I got let go, I panicked. I had two kids and suddenly no more income.” “What do I already know how to do well and how can I mix that with AI?” “I woke up at 4:00 a.m. for months to learn.” “I still don’t know how to code.” Three lessons: know what to ask, past experience is your edge, be specific.)
8. Nate Herk, “From Laid Off to Head of AI in 1 Year (as a regular person),” podcast, June 2026. LinkedIn post summarizing the episode, June 12, 2026. (“No CS degree. No years in AI. No big following. 15 years writing HTML emails, then her whole team got cut. 39 years old, two little kids.” Tried Zapier, then Make, then n8n. Built in public with zero subscribers. Gave terrified first talk to 90+ people at local meetup. Applied to ~10 jobs. HR asked “What have you built?” Sent links, videos, demos. Skipped past HR to CEO call.)
9. Ailin Werner, LinkedIn profile. (Career: Salmat (Sydney), Steel (London), Fuji Xerox (Australia), Flybuys, Publicis

Production EMEA Hub (Technical Manager, team of 16).
NOTE: Career did not start at Fuji Xerox; body text corrected to “included stints at Fuji Xerox and Flybuys.”
Current role: Head of AI at YOUNG (15 companies, hospitality/media/real estate). NOTE: YOUNG (Young Venture Group) headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands; body text corrected from “Valencia-based” to “Netherlands-based.” Based in Valencia, Spain.)

10. Ailin Werner, LinkedIn post, May 29, 2026. (“I was an email developer for 15 years. I know the pride you feel when you test across 40+ email clients and everything renders perfectly.” “I spent over eight months going deep into AI automations. I was watching videos at 4am. I failed eight million times. I started over eight million times. And slowly, things started clicking.”)
11. Ailin Werner, LinkedIn post, May 14, 2026. (“Went from unemployed to Head of AI at a multinational company in Europe in under a year. No degree. No coding. No connections.”)

Chapter 9 Notes: The Setback as Setup

1. Wang discovering skating on a frozen lake in Central Park with skates received from her father for Christmas, commuting to New Jersey nightly to use a public rink, and training in ballet at George Balanchine’s School of American Ballet are from “Vera Wang Reflects on 30 Years

of Olympic Figure Skating Fashion,” *NBC Los Angeles*, February 7, 2022. NOTE: Wang was born June 27, 1949 (per Wikipedia, Encyclopedia.com). She began skating at age eight, placing the discovery around winter 1957. Body text corrected from 1955 to 1957.

2. Wang’s figure skating career, competing in junior pairs with James Stuart at the 1968 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Philadelphia (finishing fifth), and being coached by Sonya Dunfield are documented in the Figure Skating Wiki entry for Vera Wang and in “People in Sports: Vera Wang,” *The Seattle Times*, December 14, 2008. Wang was inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame in January 2009.
3. Wang’s quotes about her skating career (“I was completely dedicated to it”) and falling short (“As hard as I tried and as hard as I worked, I never really achieved the level that I wished”) are from “Fashion designer Vera Wang on her ‘devastated’ Olympic figure skating dreams,” Olympics.com, November 3, 2020.
4. Wang’s extended quotes about the intensity of competitive skating (“It sounds very obsessive to a normal person, but when you try to become an elite athlete, it’s your happiness and your torture at the same time...”), leaving Vogue (“After investing yet another fifteen years in a career that really meant something to me, I left. I was a bit discouraged, I can’t lie”), and reinvention (“Each time was

very, very painful...”) are from “Vera Wang Says: Know When to Walk Away... and Start Something New,” *The Cut*, June 24, 2015, an interview with Jennifer Vineyard.

5. Wang’s nervous breakdown and discovery of fashion in Paris (“I had a nervous breakdown and ended up doing a semester in Paris... where I realized I had a passion for fashion”) are from the Olympics.com profile (November 2020). Her enrollment at the Sorbonne in the late 1960s and the context of Paris’s social revolution are from “From figure skating to fashion designing,” *BURO*, May 2, 2017.
6. Wang’s discovery by Vogue fashion director Frances Patiky Stein while working at Yves Saint Laurent on Madison Avenue, Stein telling her to call when she graduated, and Wang becoming one of the youngest editors in Vogue’s history by age 23 are from “Vera Wang’s Career History: From Ice Skater to Top Bridal Designer,” *WWD*, November 3, 2023; and *The Cut* interview (June 2015). NOTE: Wang first joined Vogue as a “rover” (entry-level assistant) and was promoted to editor by 23. Body text corrected from “joined Vogue as an editor” to “joined Vogue, and by twenty-three was an editor.”
7. Wang’s work on covers and shoots with Richard Avedon and Deborah Turbeville, her quote about wanting “the ultimate say” (“I don’t think you stay for sixteen years and not want the ultimate say”), and the detail about her life

being “predicated on not getting what I hoped I would get” are from “Aisles of Style,” *Time*, September 21, 2007.

8. Wang being passed over for editor-in-chief in favor of Anna Wintour and her quote (“In my own mind, I had not obtained what I hoped I would. I felt that, again, I’ve fallen short. I didn’t make the Olympic team. I didn’t become editor-in-chief at Vogue”) are from the *CNBC* interview, “Vera Wang on starting her company at 40,” May 18, 2021.
9. Wang’s time at Ralph Lauren as design director for women’s accessories (NYT wedding announcement, June 1989: “design director for Ralph Lauren women’s accessories and at-home wear”; body text corrected from “women’s line” to “women’s accessories”) and her quote about the scale of Lauren’s operation (“When I saw what it takes to build that kind of empire, if I had been sane, I probably would have stopped there”) are from the *CNBC* interview (May 2021).
10. Wang’s wedding dress search (visiting Paris, London, the Emanuels, Victor Edelstein), her shock at the bridal market (“I was really appalled by and shocked by the lack of taste in bridal... a very, very formula kind of business”), and having two dresses made are from “Visionary in White,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1999.
11. Wang’s father’s fuller quote (“These are really pretty ugly. I’ll back you in a business if it’s bridal, but no fashion”) is from *Time* (September 2007). Wang’s self-doubt (“I

thought maybe it's just too late for me") and her father's encouragement are from the *CNBC* interview (May 2021).

12. Wang's quotes about the shock of independence ("All doors that are open when you work in a big company, they shut when you go ahead on your own. I felt like a student, like a 'debutante'") are from "From figure skating to fashion designing," *BURO*, May 2, 2017.
13. Wang's first client (Ethel Kennedy, eight months on the dress, "within ten minutes of the ceremony, she was out kicking a football with the Kennedy brothers") is from "Expect to 'age out' of your career, says Vera Wang," *BBC Culture*, March 7, 2025, an interview with Katty Kay on the series *Influential*.
14. Wang's quote about doubts and gratitude ("There have been a million days where I said to myself, 'What was I thinking?' or 'Why did I do this?' But there have been way more days where I felt extremely lucky") is from the *CNBC* interview (May 2021).
15. Celebrity clients (Victoria Beckham, Ariana Grande, Chelsea Clinton, Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys) and the expansion into ready-to-wear, eyewear, jewelry, home goods, and fragrance are from the *WWD* career history profile (November 2023). The CFDA Womenswear Designer of the Year award (2005) is from *Time* (September 2007).

16. Wang's Olympic costume designs for Nancy Kerrigan (1992, 1994), Michelle Kwan (1998, 2002), Evan Lysacek (2010), and Nathan Chen (2018, 2022) are from the Olympics.com profile (November 2020) and the *WWD* career history (November 2023). NOTE: Chen's 2022 Beijing Olympics designs confirmed by People magazine and Vogue (2022). Body text updated to include 2022.
17. Wang's nightmares about costume malfunctions ("a dress that rips at the armhole, a quadruple-sewn zipper that comes undone, a sequin that drops to the ice and causes a fall") and her quote about the responsibility ("If there is any wardrobe malfunction, you can ruin someone's Olympic championship. The responsibility is staggering") are from the *NBC Los Angeles* profile (February 2022).
18. Wang's quote about the convergence of skating and fashion ("I joke it's the two Fs: figure skating and fashion. But in all fairness, that I can meld the two was beyond my wildest. I never dreamt that I would come back to figure skating in the capacity that I came back to") is from the *NBC Los Angeles* profile (February 2022).
19. Oprah Winfrey's hiring at WJZ-TV in Baltimore at age 22, the "What is an Oprah?" promotional campaign (billboards, bus advertisements, twenty daily television spots), and her debut on August 16, 1976, are from "When Oprah Was Ours," *Baltimore Magazine*, May 2011, by Jane Marion.

20. Winfrey's demotion on April 1, 1977, the general manager offering her a ginger ale, the reassignment to the 7:25 a.m. cut-in slot, and her quotes ("I was devastated" and "I knew it was a horrible demotion") are from *Baltimore Magazine* (May 2011).
21. Winfrey's quote about being too emotional ("I was too emotional. I felt things so deeply it was hard for me to let things go. I was worried about the family") and the detail about refusing to ask a grieving family for a comment are from *Baltimore Magazine* (May 2011). Additional details about the assistant news director ordering her back out are from *Baltimore Sun* coverage, "From Sun Magazine: Oprah, Built in Baltimore," May 18, 2011, by David Zurawik.
22. Winfrey applying to KYW in Philadelphia, WCCO in Minneapolis, and being unable to find work elsewhere are from the *Oprah Daily* memoir excerpt (October 2025).
23. Winfrey's quote ("I failed. I failed in Baltimore. The embarrassment and shame of that was hard to bear") is from her CBS Sunday Morning interview with Jane Pauley, January 2026, as reported by Yahoo Entertainment, January 12, 2026.
24. Bill Baker's arrival at WJZ in spring 1977 (NOTE: Baltimore Magazine places Baker's arrival in spring 1977, following Winfrey's April 1977 demotion; body text corrected from "1978" to "Later that year"), his creation of

People Are Talking, and his quotes ("It was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. She said, 'Bill, I don't want to do a talk show.' She had tears in her eyes when she said it. I said, 'If you are successful, you can have more power to do good and make more of an impact on the community than you would have in TV news'") are from *Baltimore Magazine* (May 2011). Baker's wife Jeannemarie identifying Winfrey's potential for the talk show ("There is something magical about her. She wears her heart on her sleeve, and she is not at all pretentious") is also from *Baltimore Magazine* (May 2011).

25. The first episode of People Are Talking on August 14, 1978, the Carvel ice cream man and the All My Children actor as first guests, and Winfrey's quote ("The moment I sat on the talk show, something felt like I had entered the home space for myself. I knew instantly: this is what I should be doing") are from the *Oprah Daily* memoir excerpt (October 2025).
26. Winfrey's description of Baltimore as "a 'teach me' school for life" and her years refining timing, rhythm, and pacing are from *Baltimore Magazine* (May 2011).
27. Dennis Swanson's hiring of Winfrey, his instruction ("I wanted her just as she was"), and Winfrey taking over A.M. Chicago on January 2, 1984, are from "The man who discovered Oprah," *CBS News*, May 21, 2011 (interview with Rebecca Jarvis), and "Oprah had a Chicago audition

to remember,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 2011. Donahue was based at WBBM-Channel 2 in Chicago, having relocated his show to the city in 1974. A.M. Chicago went from last place to first in local ratings within one month of Winfrey’s debut, surpassing Donahue in his home market. Sources: Oprah Winfrey’s Official Biography, oprah.com; “How TV Host Phil Donahue Inspired Oprah Winfrey,” *Biography.com*, August 19, 2024; “Remembering Phil Donahue,” *CBS Chicago*, August 19, 2024. The show was renamed The Oprah Winfrey Show, launched in national syndication in 1986, and ran for twenty-five seasons. Harpo Productions, O Magazine, and OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network are documented in the Britannica biography.

28. Deborah Tannen’s “report-talk” vs. “rapport-talk” framework, her account of appearing on Winfrey’s show (Winfrey opening by saying she “saw myself over and over” in Tannen’s book and illustrating it with herself and Stedman), and her characterization of Winfrey’s power (“she tells her own secrets”) are from “Oprah Winfrey: The TV Host,” *TIME*, June 8, 1998, by Deborah Tannen. The same framework appeared in Tannen’s NYT op-ed “Donahue Talked, Oprah Listened,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2009. Donahue’s quote about Winfrey’s intimacy with her audience (“She was able to be more intimate with her audience than I was. She could wink and half the audience would know exactly what she meant”) is

from the WBEZ podcast “Making Oprah,” Episode Bonus: “Making Donahue,” December 30, 2016.

29. Winfrey’s quotes about the lesson of the demotion (“What that taught me, and has forever been a life lesson, is that life closes a door and it gives room and space for a new door to flourish. Had that not happened, I would have continued to be dutiful, to be loyal” and “The setback is a setup. You’ve set me free to find the thing I really should be doing”) are from the *Oprah Daily* memoir excerpt (October 2025).
30. Wang’s closing quote (“I think not trying is worse than failing. Have the courage to try. Otherwise, what are we here for?”) is from *The Cut* interview (June 2015).

Chapter 10 Notes: The Story of You

1. Campbell’s childhood obsession with Native Americans after seeing Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show around 1910, age five or six. Campbell: “I started as a kid of 5 or 6 around 1910” (1983 NYT interview). Described the Native American figure as having “a look of special knowledge in his eyes.” Became “fascinated, seized, obsessed.” By fourteen was “a good little anthropologist.” The “Indian blood” anecdote from Esalen memorial: on a family walk, a woman said “What nice little boys!” and Joseph replied “I have Indian blood in me.” Sources: “Joseph Campbell: 70 Years of Making Connections,” NYT Book Review,

December 18, 1983; Esalen memorial biography; Encyclopedia.com.

2. Campbell earned his BA from Columbia in 1925 (ran track, played saxophone in jazz bands). Master's thesis (1927): *A Study of the Dolorous Stroke*, on Wasteland imagery in Arthurian legends. Studied medieval French at the University of Paris and Sanskrit at the University of Munich, 1927-1929. Sources: Encyclopedia.com; Stephen and Robin Larsen, *A Fire in the Mind* (1991).
3. Campbell withdrew from Columbia's PhD program because his interdisciplinary proposal was rejected. "They wouldn't let me move into another place to continue my education, so I said to hell with it. I went up into the woods and spent five years reading." Source: Diane K. Osbon, ed., *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion* (1991). A shorter version appears in a 1999 Independent profile: "Well, I just said, 'To Hell with it.'" Wrote to approximately seventy colleges seeking employment (JCF biography; body text corrected from "eighty-five"). Journal entries from the Depression era: "I begin to think that I have a genius for working like an ox over totally irrelevant subjects." And: "The thought of growing into a professor gives me the creeps." Cross-country road trip, settled in Woodstock in "a cottage without running water" (Esalen memorial) on Maverick Road. Campbell's nine-hour daily reading schedule divided into four-hour blocks: "When you don't have a job or

anyone to tell you what to do, you've got to fix one for yourself. I divided the day into four four-hour periods, of which I would be reading in three of the four-hour periods, and free one of them... I would get nine hours of sheer reading done in a day. And this went on for five years straight." Sources: Esalen memorial; Phil Cousineau, *The Hero's Journey* (1990/2003); *A Fire in the Mind* (1991); *Reflections on the Art of Living* (1991).

4. Campbell taught at Sarah Lawrence College from 1934 to 1972. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* published by Bollingen in 1949. Won the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award. Campbell held no PhD; his highest degree was a master's from Columbia. Sources: Encyclopedia.com; Joseph Campbell Foundation.
5. Campbell died October 30, 1987, in Honolulu. *The Power of Myth*, his six-part conversation with Bill Moyers, aired on PBS in 1988. Sources: Encyclopedia.com; billmoyers.com.
6. *The Power of Myth* interviews filmed at George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch in Marin County, beginning 1985, and at the American Museum of Natural History. Sources: Encyclopedia.com; billmoyers.com.
7. George Lucas credited Campbell's monomyth as a structural influence on *Star Wars*. Verified quote from the New Rochelle historical marker: "If it hadn't been for him, it's possible I would still be trying to write *Star Wars*."

Lucas: “I wrote many drafts of this work and then I stumbled across *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*... It was all there and had been there for thousands and thousands of years.” Sources: jcf.org; Christopher Vogler, “The Hero’s Journey” podcast, *The Screenwriting Life*, Episode 204 (July 2024).

8. Christopher Vogler’s seven-page memo “A Practical Guide to the Hero with a Thousand Faces,” written in the mid-1980s as a story analyst at Walt Disney Pictures. Spread virally through Hollywood via fax. A junior executive plagiarized it; when Vogler asserted authorship, Jeffrey Katzenberg sent him to animation. He arrived to find the *King of the Jungle* (later *The Lion King*) storyboard organized by the twelve stages of the hero’s journey, his memo pinned to the corkboard. The memo grew into *The Writer’s Journey* (1992). Sources: Vogler, chrisvogler.wordpress.com (August 2019); *Los Angeles Times* (November 1994); Vogler, *Journal of Genius and Eminence* (2017).
9. Films structured around the hero’s journey include *Star Wars* (1977), *The Lion King* (1994), *The Matrix* (1999), the *Harry Potter* series, *Batman Begins* (2005), *Iron Man* (2008), and numerous Pixar and Marvel productions. Sources: Vogler, *Journal of Genius and Eminence* (2017); Collider (July 2023).

10. Time magazine named *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* one of the 100 most influential books written in English since 1923 (2011 list).
11. The method section references stories from earlier chapters: Jay Yang (Ch6), Andy Weir and Fei-Fei Li (Ch4), Paul Graham (Ch5), Beth Portesi and Ailin Werner (Ch8), Melanie Perkins and Bill Tai (Ch7), Carly Stein (Ch6), Vera Wang (Ch9). All facts sourced in their respective chapter notes.
12. Campbell's cave quote. The popular version ("The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek") is a paraphrase. Campbell's actual words: "It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure. The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for." Source: Diane K. Osbon, ed., *Reflections on the Art of Living* (1991), pp. 8 and 24. Verified via Quote Investigator.

Your Playbook

- 1. Find a problem in a field you genuinely care about.**
- 2. Imagine the project that solves the problem and start building it today.**
- 3. Ship your work publicly, gather feedback, revise, and ship again.**
- 4. Find mentors and peers on the same journey.**
- 5. Make the proof compound by earning referrals and learning through iterations.**

Starting This Week

If you are in school: Build a prototype this weekend with AI and share it with the people most likely to benefit.

If you are in a job you want to grow in: Find the bottleneck your colleagues complain about, build the fix with AI, and show your team the working result.

If you are pivoting to a new career: Build a project that proves you can deliver value and share it publicly. When asked "What have you built?", send the links.

You do not advance your own career. Strangers advance it for you.

Think about the last real turn in your career: the admission letter, job offer, promotion, investor term sheet, or client signature.

Someone who barely knew you placed a bet on you.

How do these gatekeepers decide the fate of your career with such limited information about you?

They look for signals.

Over the past decades, the most reliable signal has been promising credentials on your resume: Ivy League degrees, top MBA and PhD programs, or experience at big tech, MBB, or Goldman Sachs.

Most of us spend years and hundreds of thousands of tuition dollars on these promising detours, believing they will help us impress the gatekeepers of our future careers.

The problem is that the signal of promising credentials is depreciating.

Master's degrees in the US have nearly quadrupled since 1971. When a record number of people hold the same credential, it separates no one.

Meanwhile, AI can perform knowledge work that once required years of specialized training, shrinking the premium on the expertise these degrees once certified.

So what signal still works to stand out in front of the gatekeepers?

The answer is revealed in Proof Over Promise: How to Build an Undeniable Career in the Age of AI.

If you have ever asked yourself any of these questions, this book is written for you:

- **Should I pursue an MBA, a PhD, or another certificate?**
- **How do I stand out when everyone has the same credentials?**
- **What should I or my kids study in college?**
- **How do I get promoted, find investors, or land my dream role?**
- **How should I use AI to stay ahead instead of getting replaced?**