

**Book 11:**

**Highest highs,  
lowest lows**

**(\$50,000/month,  
late 2024)**

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# **Not Business Advice**

How I made a million from my personal projects

## **Book 11: Highest highs, lowest lows**

(\$50,000/month, late 2024)

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## **Introduction**

That's it. It's done. I just made my first million.

To be honest, I don't even know what to say. Or how to feel.

Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I went back in time and sat next to myself while building my first projects.

Tell myself that everything will come true.

That it will way longer than I think. That it will always be hard. And that I will always feel lost.

That nothing will go according to plan. And yet, everything will.

I think I would start crying of happiness.

## **Part 1: Making my first million**

Ok. It's June 1st.

I'm in my hometown, visiting my family for the week.

I woke up extra early today. I've been looking forward to this.

I have Gumroad, PayPal, all my bank accounts and all of my Stripe accounts open. Typing numbers into the calculator app.

Every single dollar I've made since I started this journey.

I think today is the day.

## **Making my first dollar**

Let's rewind the tape and travel back in time.

It's June 1st, 2018.

I'm in my hometown. And I recently launched the premium version of GitGardener for \$5/month.

I was so excited I even told my father about it. I usually never tell my family or anyone else what I'm up to.

*"Remember that product I told you I have hundreds of free users for? Well now I've added a \$5/month plan, so let's see what happens!"*

My father's reply killed me.

*"Alex.. have you thought of finding a job?"*

I go to my room because I have a weird feeling. I want to check my Stripe dashboard again.

I open the dashboard and find my 2 first customers for \$5/month each.

*"I fucking knew it.. Destiny.."*

## **Celebrating the little things**

Every year, on June 1st, I remember that moment.

It's my "first dollar" anniversary.

But it's not just June 1st. I have many dates that I know by heart and celebrate every year like anniversaries.

January 1st, 2018. Started indie hacking. May 13th, 2018. First successful launch. June 1st, 2018. Made my first dollar.

January 4th, 2020. Moved to Milan. February 14th, 2020. Launched CyberLeads. April 22nd, 2020. First time blowing up on Twitter.

July 27th, 2020. Surpassed my salary. January 6th, 2021. First day of self employment. March 22nd, 2021. Moved to Sicily.

November 1st, 2021. Discovered the service. February 1st, 2022. Started the service. June 1st, 2024. Made my first million.

I also know every date of every one of my fights. Every date I hired people. And so on.

I believe it's important to celebrate the little things.

Even if they mean nothing. Even if they are insignificant.

They mean something to you. So they are important.

## **Calculator**

Ok, back to the calculator. I hit enter. And boom.

*"\$1,001,490"*

There it was. The magic number with the two commas. Staring at me.

*"I guess I did it. Not only a few days before my big birthday. Not only on my first dollar anniversary. But also sitting in the same house and the same chair."*

It felt kinda poetic. But beyond that, I didn't know how to feel.

Should it feel like nothing? Or should it feel like everything?

All I know is I want to go for a walk. And I don't want to work today.

## **Reaching the summit**

As I'm walking down the sea front, the same place I dreamt about everything, I cannot help but wonder.

Did I actually achieve my goal?

My goal was to reach \$1M/year by the time I'm 30.

I didn't do that. Technically, I didn't even come close.

I made \$1M a few days before my 30th birthday. In revenue. Not even in profit or income. Both should happen in a few months.

But the truth is that I'm happy. Even though I didn't reach my goal.

For the first time in my life leading up to a birthday, all my anxieties about my age, the future and my accomplishments are gone.

I am not envious of anyone. I would not trade my life with anyone. And I don't want anything from anyone. I have everything.

I don't care if you have money. I don't care if you're famous. And I don't care if you're a big deal.

You can shove all that up your ass.

All I care about is if you're kind, authentic, and fun to be around.

How do you treat the waiter. The doorman. The taxi driver. Can we have a conversation about something other than business, investments and money. Can we find something to laugh and joke about.

For the first time in my life, even though my business is crumbling, I finally feel enough. I did it.

I managed to climb and see the summit, even for a split second.

### **Short term happiness vs long term fulfillment**

I asked myself this question.

*"Will this moment matter in a day from now? A month? A year?"*

I usually ask myself this question when something negative or bad has happened. But I felt like asking myself again today.

Almost always, the answer is no. Most things come and go. And you forget all about them in the blink of an eye.

But even though this actual moment felt anticlimactic and bland, I have a strong feeling that it will matter to me and give me fulfillment for the rest of my life.

Some things give you a spike of happiness but it's fleeting. Like exercise, swimming, food, or sex.

But other things give you a slow release of fulfillment. Like my fighting journey in the past. My entrepreneurship journey now. Or these books when they are completed in the future.

I think I want both.

Enjoy the day to day. But also chase long term goals.

Sometimes I want to be a grasshopper. Live completely for the day. Do the minimum for my work and business. And indulge in pleasures and the simplest, fleeting things of life.

Other times I want to be an ant. Live completely for the future. And dedicate myself completely to a project.

I don't think these are contradicting. I think they are complementary.

But at the same time, I'm not aiming for some psychotically engineered "balance", every day, week, month or moment. I try to let life swing naturally. And take me where it takes me.

The last few years it has alternated between one easy year and one hard year. For you it might be different.

After all, it's called work-life balance. Not work-day balance.

I just want to be conscious of the phase I'm in. Feel zero guilt for it. And realize that not everything can be postponed forever.

If there's something I really want to do, maybe I should do it now.

### **Hostels, backpacks and hangovers**

I never did the whole 20 year old backpacking, staying at hostels thing. I always told myself that life is long, and that the world would always be there and waiting for me.

And even though I was correct in that the world was indeed there waiting for me a few years later, I wasn't there anymore.

I had changed. By the time I started traveling, I was 25 years old, had a business and wanted different things.

I didn't want to backpack and live with another 20 people in bunk beds. I didn't want to live in chaos, go out and drink every night.

I wanted a nice apartment, a nice routine and to work on my business. And I wanted to wake up every morning with a fresh mind to work.

So I actually never got to experience that dream.

Which is scary. Because the reality is that whatever you don't experience today, you might never experience.

Not because the opportunity will be gone. But because you will.

You might decide you don't want it anymore. Or you might go and experience it but not like it now.

It's easy to underestimate how much you will change in some ways, and how little we will change in others.

## **Part 2: Maps and compasses**

Obviously, this is not a guide on how to make your first million.

And it's definitely not a guide on how to live your life.

Ironically, I find myself recommending this path to less and less people as the years go by.

Even though, back in the day I wouldn't shut up and stop telling people to do exactly the same thing as me.

## **Helping an old friend**

I am always reminded of how difficult this is whenever I try to help others. I recently helped a friend of mine launch a new product.

I posted it on Product Hunt from my own personal account that has tens of thousands of followers.

I posted it on my Twitter that gets millions of views. I posted it on my newsletter that has 5,000 businesses.

I helped him run email campaigns almost identical to the ones I ran for clients and helped them make millions.

And consulted him for hours on end, trying to improve his idea, his offer and product, telling him exactly what I would do.

The result? Crickets. Zero clients. Zero customers.

### **The days after the launch**

The days after the launch, we kept talking over the phone.

My friend went from excited.

*"Yo we launched! When can we expect the first customers?"*

To neutral.

*"Ok.. still no results.. is this normal?"*

To disappointed.

*"Ok.. what does this mean and what do I do now?"*

After everything was done, and we had both given it our all, the only advice I could give him was this.

*"Well, welcome to the real world, my friend. This is how it goes. But this is normal. As you can see, there are no recipes. I don't know what you should do. But you have to keep trying, either with this or another idea, until you figure it out. I know it sucks, but try to find the*

*beauty in it, and remember that you only have to figure it out once to change your life. For reference, it took me 20 tries."*

My goal was to sound cool, be real and get him inspired.

But maybe I made him feel lost.

### **Consulting calls**

Recently, a client of mine insisted that I should meet with his business coach. And introduced me to him.

In his words, this is what he told me.

*"Man, this guy is the real deal. Trust me. With his help I managed to transform my business."*

I am usually skeptical with these things, but I accepted. And booked a couple of calls to see what it's all about.

To be honest.. it felt like founder therapy. He was mostly asking me if I'm stressed. If I exercise. What my goals are. If I'm hiring. And if I know how to delegate.

His ideas on how to grow CyberLeads were all things I had thought a million times before. Other things that I had tried already. Or other things that were just plain stupid and irrelevant.

And I don't blame him. How could he know everything about my business in 2 hours, when I've been working on it, and looking at it from every different angle, for half a decade, every single day?

I do the same when I'm trying to help others. I just think out loud and throw shit at the wall.

These conversations can change your life. That's how I discovered the service. So I see the value in it.

But it's nothing more than thinking out loud. It's never one person giving a precise map to the other.

At least in my experience.

## **Maps**

It's easy to forget what it's like starting from scratch. Let alone without a platform, experience, network or audience.

I don't want to become the guy who becomes successful and suddenly thinks that it's easy and that anyone can do it. And anyone who can't, it's because they are lazy or stupid.

It's fucking hard. I am very lucky. And the terrain is changing all the time. My advice and experience from what I did 5 years ago might not apply anymore.

Giving advice feels like drawing a treasure map.

I can tell you what I did and how I made my first million, but it doesn't mean that the map is correct.

I might remember things wrong. Forgotten important things. Or confused luck for skill, and skill for luck.

And even if my treasure map was perfect, it almost probably won't align perfectly with the terrain in front of you.

Especially as time goes on. Because the terrain is changing.

Some things might be timeless and solid advice.

For example, don't camp at night near water, because large animals go to drink water from there and you might be in danger.

But other advice may be outdated and even dangerous.

For example, at the tall oak tree, I took a left turn and I found this amazing path that took me all the way to the top of the mountain.

Maybe the oak tree doesn't exist anymore. The path has disappeared. Or it now leads to a lake with crocodiles.

## **Compasses**

I always used tried to navigate the world with maps.

Guess the position I'm in. Decide where I want to go. And then start looking for maps on the topic and learn from experts.

Because, after all, I couldn't trust myself. I had no experience, and I am full of cognitive biases and instincts that will sabotage me.

I believed that I had to rely on my brain. And that I had to ignore my instincts, intuition or anecdotal experiences.

So I would learn mental models. Apply decision making frameworks. And follow playbooks. And read didactic work.

How to become a millionaire. These are the 5 laws of marketing. The 3 best business models. This is the ultimate guide to hiring.

It helped me a lot. Because it works. Especially early on.

But as time went on, it started backfiring.

My situation started becoming more and more unique, so it was becoming harder and harder for someone else's map to match it perfectly.

I slowly had to admit that making decisions and learning based on my own experiences, intuition and instincts worked better.

I had to start relying on my own internal compass.

## **Navigating**

I believe that the earlier you are in your journey within a specific domain or subject, the more you have to rely on external knowledge. Other peoples maps.

But the more experience you gain, the more you should trust your own intuition and experience. Your own compass.

Maps are extremely accurate and explicit. But they are hard to overlap with your own specific circumstances, especially as time goes on, and they can get outdated fast.

Compasses are not very accurate and vague. They are only directionally correct at best. But they can be applied to a vast amount of cases and don't get outdated as fast.

You don't burn the maps or throw them in the bin. And you also don't follow your compass blindly.

You consult them both.

### **Part 3: Highest highs and lowest lows**

How I got here following broken maps and broken compasses, I don't know. But I'm here now. And I'm happy.

I decided to call my mother and my sister. I wanted to share this huge milestone with them.

I told my sister everything about it. In detail.

The fact that it happened on my "first dollar anniversary". The fact that it was like a birthday present for my 30th birthday. And the fact that it happened in our hometown, where it all began.

She congratulated me. Said that she was proud of me. And two seconds later she switched the conversation.

She just started working at her dream job. And she is dealing with some issues there. She's stressed about it.

I then talked to my mother.

She congratulated me for 2 seconds. And then switched the topic.

She's excited because she's going on a holiday. But she is also stressed because her husband is scheduled for an operation.

Same experience with my father. My brother. And my best friend.

## **Everyone has their own Odyssey**

Of course. It's so obvious. Everyone has their own Odyssey. Everyone is the hero of their own life. And that's the beauty.

My father has his own Odyssey.

He left his village in Greece and went to study in Italy at 18, not knowing a single word of Italian. He came back, went to the army, worked as an architect for a couple of years and then started his business at 28. He discovered his own life and spiritual philosophy at 33, and designed his whole life around that. He had a family. Registered his own patent for a medical device. Won photography awards. Writes songs and builds furniture from time to time.

My mother has her own Odyssey too.

She was the first of her family to go to university. The first of her family to move abroad. And the first of her family to travel the world. At 21, she waved goodbye to her parents at Victoria station in London, and took the magic bus to go to a random city in Greece she couldn't even pronounce. No phones. No nothing. She was gone. A few years later, she wanted to travel more. So she became an airhostess. Then, somewhat tragically, she ended up trapped for 15 years with two kids, alone, in a foreign country. She met her life partner at 45, and they have been traveling and enjoying retirement ever since.

My Greek grandfather had his own Odyssey too.

Fought and survived World War II, in the special forces. Took care of his wife with cancer for years. Worked in coal mines. And finally returned back to Greece for his final years.

And my British great-grandfather had his own Odyssey too. Although his was cut short.

He died in World War II at the age of 26 and is buried at the military graveyard in Malta. I don't know anything else about him.

## **Same lives, different times**

It's funny. In some ways I am a blend of my parents.

My father was an entrepreneur. My mother was a traveler. And I am a traveling entrepreneur. How original.

My mother had to become an airhostess to travel. I could build an online business.

My father had to hire, train and delegate to work less. I could use code, automations and AI.

My sister worked extremely hard and pursued academia. I also worked hard but pursued entrepreneurship.

In some ways, our lives and dreams are different. But in others, they are somewhat similar, just set and adapted to our different times and circumstances.

In every era, people wanted to travel. To fall in love. To be attractive to the opposite sex. To be successful. To impress others. To hear that their parents are proud of them. To build a family. To leave the world a little better than they found it. To be happy.

They went about it in different ways, constrained by their options.

In the deep past, people became sailors to travel the world. My mother became an airhostess. I built an online business. And in the deep future, people might take rockets to visit other planets.

In the deep past, people exploited peasants so they could work less. My dad hired and delegated. I used code and automations. And in the deep future, people might have robots doing everything for them.

Maybe we are all living similar lives under different conditions.

And not just on a personal level, but on a global level too.

Today we have NATO. Back in the day we had the Delian League, the Alliance of Greek City States. Today we have oil as the ultimate resource, back in the day it was grain. Today we have computer chips for information technology, back in the day it was papyri scrolls.

We still have love. We still have war. We still have humanity at it's best and at it's worse.

Many times I wonder how different the world is going to be like in 1,000 years from now. And it saddens me that I won't be able to know.

But the more I think about it, the more I tend compare today with the past and see how much has remained the same.

And when I do that, it kinda relaxes me.

The world will be very different in some ways. But in many ways, it will be exactly the same.

### **You have to mythologize yourself**

Regardless of the era or time you live in, I believe you have to mythologize yourself.

If you are to be crushed by the waves and randomness of life, it's better to feel like a little ant that is being tested by the gods, on it's quest for glory, than just feel bad for yourself.

I remember when I was a kid, I had somehow fractured both of my heels.

My mother took me to doctors and put soles in my shoes, but I still felt pain, no matter what we did or tried.

After months of complaining, the pain was still there.

Eventually, I realized that it was a million times easier to tell myself I am Achilles than make the pain magically go away.

The embarrassing thing is that I always did this. I still do this. And I'll probably still do this as an old man.

Because life can get ugly. And things can go wrong. Even if you have an easy life like I did.

A broken back. An injured sternum that clicks and pops. A broken nose. A dropped eyebrow. A cut tendon. And a broken rib.

More than 100 stitches. Attacked and slapped around by gangs. Saying goodbye to my mother at 15 to go live with my father. Heartbreaks.

Hospitalized from a street fight at 13. Three motorbike crashes from 15 to 18. And multiple fights from 19 to 21.

There is nothing glorious about these, by the way. If I could snap my fingers and take them all away, I would.

But they happened. And since they happened, I prefer to own them instead of complaining and feeling bad about myself.

One of my good friends, Moch, who is probably reading this, grew up in a warzone and was shot in the leg at 7. He lost his mother, father, brother and uncle to the war.

My best friend's father walked from Albania to Greece, on foot, through the mountains, nine times.

Everytime he got his face smashed and his teeth knocked out by the police and sent back home. And one time he almost drowned off the coast of Italy because the authorities sank their boat.

His life philosophy is this.

*"If I have food to eat, I have everything".*

## **Ugly scar**

Damn. I never expected that I would write about this when I started writing these books, but here we are.

I almost died in that street fight at 13.

I got sucker headbutted, fell on the concrete and fainted. And then punched countless of times in the head while everyone watched.

I ended up in the hospital with bleeding inside my brain.

If we were not so young but 16 or 17, the doctors told us that I could've been dead or a vegetable in a wheelchair.

My parents pressed charges against my will. And I lost every single ounce of street credit and self respect I had.

No matter how much I tried, I couldn't find anything heroic about it.

My only salvation was moving to my father's house a couple of years later and starting my life from scratch.

This is my ugly scar. I hid this from everyone for years.

### **Little crab**

My solution to this was to pretend to be tough.

Even though I never was. Because I hated my real nature.

I blush easily. I smile and nod. And I pay the bill.

I hold the door open for people. I stand up when I shake peoples hands. And I give up my seat to old people on the bus.

I pick up trash from the street. I buy food for homeless people to eat. And I say good morning to random people while walking.

I was an angel in primary school. I remember my mother couldn't stop crying because my school teacher said in front of every parent that I'm the best kid she had ever had in her 20 year career.

I hated all these things about me.

So I hid inside a tough shell.

I went from a school where it was cool to break noses and steal motorbikes, to a school where it was cool to be a good student.

I started studying. Picking and reading philosophy books from my father's library. And started thinking bigger.

All of my life, I used the term "rich kid" like a slur. While I was a rich kid all along.

### **Comedies and tragedies**

While writing about my personal life here, I try to be careful.

Because the reality is, I can make it sound way different than I experienced it.

For example, I could write about growing up poor with an immigrant single mom. That we claimed benefits. That we didn't have a car. That my clothes were second hand. Or that my room was so small that I didn't even have enough space to do pushups.

But it would be extremely misleading. And an insult to my mother.

Because the reality is that my childhood is filled with nothing but beautiful memories I wouldn't trade for any other childhood.

Playing outside with my friends every day. Climbing trees. My mom shouting my name from the balcony to come back home and eat lunch.

For the sad person, life is a terrible tragedy. For the happy person, life is a wonderful comedy.

### **Younger brother**

I was recently talking to my younger brother, who is currently finishing university and living his best life.

I was trying to persuade him to continue having fun, but also to set a big goal and chase it.

I was telling him that it doesn't matter what it is. It could be anything. It could be having lines on your stomach.

Just say who you want to be. And then go become that person.

And it doesn't matter what your motivations are either. It could be to get girls and look good naked.

I started Muay Thai because I got beaten up. And I started building businesses because I wanted to prove to everyone around me and to myself that I'm better.

What matters is that you start. From anywhere. Towards any direction. And that you improve over time and adjust your sails.

Because a great story can start from anywhere.

What I find fascinating is that the first word of the greatest story of all time, The Iliad, is "Rage".

Specifically, these are the first words of Western literature.

*"Rage! Goddess, sing of the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, murderous, doomed.."*

I asked my brother if he felt rage too. Because I did at his age. I felt a silent rage when I returned home after university.

I was 23 years old. Over 6 feet tall. Almost 200 pounds. Had fought and knocked people out. And was a fully grown man.

I had a beard. I had a girlfriend. And I even had baby fever.

Yet, even though I was fully mature from a biological standpoint, from a societal standpoint, I was completely useless.

And that tension tortured me and killed me inside. I felt useless. Even though I knew I wasn't. And I was angry at the whole world.

I towered over our father, yet he was feeding me every day. I felt like a cuckoo bird, living in a nest I don't belong in anymore.

My brother didn't get it. And in that moment it made me wonder if all the stories we tell ourselves are an illusion.

Like Don Quichot, maybe I was fighting windmills and imaginary enemies that were all in my head.

## **Edo Japan**

The reason I don't think it matters what you pick, is because if you take anything to great depths, it will teach you things about the rest of the world too.

Because many skills are transferable and universal. They don't live in a vacuum or categories humans have come up with.

They are somehow connected. And you'll be able to draw parallels and transfer knowledge from one domain to another.

Musashi describes this perfectly in the Book of Five Rings.

He wrote this book 400 years ago. When he was old and beaten down. He was 60 years old. He had more than 60 duels under his belt. And he was undefeated. Otherwise he wouldn't have written this book, since many duels were to the death.

If I was to summarize it in two lines, it would be the following.

*"Learn the rules. Abide by the rules. Break the rules."*

But you cannot skip the sequence. He calls it "The Way".

You start by studying maps. And switch to your compass overtime.

Whether you want to become a good samurai. A good fighter. A good entrepreneur. Or you want to have lines on your stomach.

## **Imaginary kids**

If I ever have kids and give them the gift of life, this will be the only thing I would wish for them.

I just want them to be kind to others. And go and live their own adventure. Go grab life by the horns.

Because everyone deserves their own adventure.

On one hand, life is everything. And life is enough already.

You don't need to do anything. Every breath and every beat is a celebration of itself.

But, at the same time, life is everything. So it deserves for you to give it everything you've got until the very end.

Set big goals. And try to do everything you want to do. Even if you fail. Go through all the emotions and the rollercoaster of life.

Set a big goal. Pick an adventure. Learn from your mistakes. Listen to the wind. And continuously adjust your sails.

I love this story from UFC Champion, Frank Mir.

He had 3 kids and 2 world championship belts. And he always said that his regret is that he didn't manage to get a 3rd belt, 1 for each kid.

His oldest daughter turned to him and told him.

*"You don't need to get a belt for me dad. I'll get my own."*

She is also a fighter, undefeated, and climbing the ranks fast. She is getting within striking distance of challenging for a world title.

### **Broken dreams**

But just because you set goals and chase them, it doesn't mean you will necessarily achieve them.

Sometimes you might get close enough. Other times you might realize that you don't want them anymore. And sometimes you might never achieve them and waste years of your precious life.

I recently talked to a good friend of mine from school.

For the past five years, every time I talk to him, he's always one week away from hitting it big and transforming his life.

*"This is going to be the one."*

I'm also guilty of encouraging him.

*"Yes man. This will be the one. I can feel it."*

And every time, it doesn't happen for some reason.

Usually he tells me about something that is out of his control. But I've also caught him self sabotaging himself a lot.

His entire life is on hold. No socializing. No girls. No going out. Only gym and work. Every day. Until the dream comes true.

But we're both 30 now. We're not young anymore.

Sometimes I tell him to write down exactly what he thinks he would do, feel or experience if all of his craziest dreams came true.

Maybe he could find a great remote job, reach almost all of the way there and start enjoying life.

Start traveling. Start a new hobby like photography or music. Write a book. Learn a new language. Date girls. Or build a family.

Work isn't the only place you can get fulfillment from.

## **Appendix**

Just a few months ago, I hit a record month of \$50k/month.

Right now, my business is free falling.

On one hand, I want to complain. And I do complain.

But on the other hand, I have to accept it.

Fighters, entrepreneurs, artists. This is the life we have chosen.

The highest highs and the lowest lows.

### **What's next?**

Honestly, I'm not sure, but it's scary.

I'm trying to figure out what's going wrong.

Let's see if I can fix this and grow CyberLeads to new heights.

I hope I can.

### **Time travel**

Hey. This is Alex from the future writing this.

I decided to clean up and re-post my blog posts as free books.

Nothing changed. Even if I disagree with things I said back then.

Regardless of marketing or algorithms, the greatest books have always ended up in my hands through recommendations.

So if you you enjoyed them, you can do the following:

- Share them on X or LinkedIn
- Leave a review on Amazon
- And message me so we can have a chat

Or don't. It's ok.

Thank you for reading.

### **Credits**

Finally, special thanks to everyone that inspired and supported me, whether they know it or not.

- Pieter Levels, thank you for building in the open and making this movement happen for all of us. It was your revenue tweets and blog posts that made me realize that I could do the same.

- Courtland and Channing Allen, thank you for building Indie Hackers and putting a name to our little movement. I have read every single post, listened to every single podcast and have day dreamed countless times being on your show.
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- DHH, thank you for bringing common sense to the tech industry. Reminding us that you don't need to run a VC company and become a billionaire to be successful. And that you can have work life balance.
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Constantly updating this list.