

Book 5: Into the wild (\$5k/month, mid 2021)

*How I made \$1M without
selling courses - V*

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How I made \$1M without selling courses

From my daily blogs that I've been writing for the last 5+ years.

Book 5:

Into the wild

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Preface

Before we begin. A disclaimer.

1. Zero advice

Most advice is bullshit. Or someone trying to sell something.

So I'm not going to give you any advice in this book. I want that to be clear from the start.

You only learn by doing. Not by studying. Listening. Or even reading books like this one.

So when you're done, close this book and go build a business. Experiment. Try things. And learn.

2. I don't own any of these ideas

If you find that I'm talking about things that you have thought, said, or even written before, I believe you.

Don't be stupid like me, I sometimes get mad when that happens.

At the end of the day, you are reading this. So we are somewhat similar.

3. This book is not a playbook

I have no idea what I'm doing. This is just my journey.

As far as I can tell, there are no secret recipes.

I could tell you that I made my first million in my late twenties. Worked at an MIT startup. Traveled the world. Competed in Muay Thai, kickboxing, BJJ, marathon and triathlon. Became part of a Cambridge research study. Invented software that helps people with epilepsy. And even got to meet and have coffee with one of the inventors of the internet.

That's all true. But none of it was intentional. I don't have any of the answers you're looking for.

I was and still am a total idiot. I just kept going and got lucky. You'll see that very clearly in these books.

Cause luck is a real factor. And if anyone tells you it's not, they are full of shit.

4. I'm not only against courses

Yes. I've never sold a course or book in my life.

But I have nothing against courses specifically. Many of the people in the credits of this book have launched courses.

What I do have a problem with is people getting rich by promising the world and delivering nothing of substance.

And that could be anything. Most agencies suck. Most consultants suck. Most marketers suck. Most AI products suck.

Of course, courses are the kings of this category.

I've seen way too many 19 year old gurus with rented lambos get rich by selling courses on how to get rich.

5. Too personal, too much information

Finally, this book might become too personal at times.

You can skip those parts.

If you actually end up reading these books to completion, you will know me better than some of my closest friends.

Which is weird. I know. But hey, at least you can call me your friend. And I mean that.

Book a time and we can setup a virtual coffee.

So now, let's begin, my friend.

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Introduction

Yooohoo! It actually happened. I have officially quit my job.

I am about to experience complete freedom for the first time in my life and be self employed. Hopefully forever.

Let's talk about what comes right after gaining your freedom. Maybe it can help you be prepared when it's your time.

So, let's rewind the tape back to the 6th of January.

I'm in Milan, Italy and it's a rainy morning...

Timeline

Before we begin, here's a quick recap:

- 2018 and 2019 were the years of building and failing. I went from no product experience, to building 19 products and reaching \$200/month in revenue.
- 2020 was the craziest year of my life. Launched and grew CyberLeads to \$2k MRR, hit \$5k revenue months and quit my job.
- So far, 2021 has been kinda underwhelming. I'm half way through the year, writing this. I didn't experience much growth in revenue. To the point where I was thinking of not even writing this book.

But maybe revenue isn't the only metric that matters.

Maybe I did experience growth, just in different areas.

Let's see.

Part 1: Into the wild

It's happening.

It's my last day at work.

Freedom at last

Normally a rainy winter morning would be depressing. But this particular one was anything but that.

It was one of the happiest days of my life.

Actually, I really want to say it was my happiest day so far. And I'm not sure what that says about my personality and life.

I worked my ass off for so many years for this.

And today I am returning my laptop to the office. Saying goodbye to everyone and I am done.

As I'm going down the staircase to exit the company building, I can't help but smile.

I smell the disinfectant from the sterilized medical equipment and look at all the white walls. I can't help but think that they remind me of the aesthetics of a psychiatry clinic.

As I approach the front door of the building I am almost running. I take a deep breath and cherish the moment. I want to save it in my memory.

I promise to myself that whatever happens I will never go back to working in an office.

I don't care about material success. Or becoming a millionaire.

All I want is to be free.

Stress: Expectation vs Reality

A few hours later, as I was relaxing at home, it hit me.

"Oh shit. I am completely by myself now.

I hunt what I eat. And I eat what I hunt. No more salary. No more safety net."

I remember wondering what the stress would feel like from now on. Will it increase? Will it decrease? Or will it remain the same?

The next morning the answer was obvious.

I woke up without an alarm clock. Checked my calendar. Empty.

Wow. So now I can focus fully on CyberLeads?

I instantly had more time to do everything I wanted to.

And I don't mean business stuff. The little things.

Like exercising. Cooking. Writing. And socializing.

A few weeks go by. My FitBit shows that my resting heart rate has dropped by 5 beats per minute. And I feel 10X calmer.

I started questioning what I was told growing up. I'm sure you've heard of it too:

"Well kid, you either work for someone else, make less money and have less stress. Or you work for yourself, make a lot of money but have a lot of stress."

That hasn't been my experience. At all.

Working for someone else was stressful too. Every single meeting with my team and manager was stressful.

If you are someone contemplating going full time but are afraid of the stress of being self employed, listen to me.

Being self employed can be less stressful than being employed if you have designed your business and life the right way.

This was one of those moments where I started wondering if I should start questioning everything like a kid again.

Working for yourself

Even though I had less stress and was calmer, I felt more alert and alive.

How was this possible?

This is something else I'm discovering as I'm growing older.

That our vocabulary is very limited in certain cases.

For example, we have one word to describe stress. When I can describe at least 5 different types of stress.

Physical, mental, acute, chronic, creative, and so on.

And these are literally just off the top of my head.

The stress of the wild

Let's talk about stress and working for yourself.

It's not that you have less stress or more stress.

It's that the stress is different.

When you work for someone else, the stress you experience is chronic, predictable and consistent. Daily meetings, deadlines, performance reviews and presentations never stop.

When you work for yourself, the stress you experience is acute and fluctuates wildly.

Sometimes you are super stressed and work all day. Like when you find a new competitor coming after you.

Other times, everything is cruising nicely and you are sleeping like a baby. Hardly even working.

In the end, this type of stress and the fluctuations make you feel alive. And in my opinion, more alert and smarter.

Reminds me of my favorite Paul Graham essay:

"You Weren't Meant To Have A Boss".

He draws a beautiful parallel between people working for themselves and wild animals.

He says that wild lions in the savanna feel, move and look 10x more alive than the lions you've seen in zoos.

Almost like different species. They are alert. Smart. Calculated. Their hostile environment keeps them thinking, moving, learning and adapting.

On the other hand, lions in the zoo sit around all day.

With a cow's gaze. Their mouths half open. Drooling. Just waiting to be fed. They don't have to do much to survive.

Sadly, they end up worthless and helpless. In many cases it's not even possible to re-introduce them into the wild.

I believe it's the same with humans.

Spend enough time in academia or the corporate world, and you might be incapable of being introduced into the wild world of free markets.

Escaping the zoo

I believe it could've been the same for me.

If I had never built projects before starting my job at a company, I might have never built one.

I would think that you need a full team of designers, marketers, developers, advisors and investors to build a successful product and business.

I wrote about this in detail in my previous book, in the chapter called "The dark side of the show".

But luckily for me, I had already built projects and generated revenue for myself. I kinda knew what the wild looked like.

And now I was back in the wild.

And was ready to face all the stressors. Like the unpredictability of the market. Competition. Changing distribution channels. New technologies. Laws and regulations changing.

I felt sharp. Alert. Alive. Free.

And, on a side note, healthier. Look up the amazing talk on the subject by Robert Sapolsky, called "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers".

Steep learning curve

Here I am, a few weeks after becoming self-employed.

And I'm forced to learn straight away.

I have a call with my accountant, who is helping me register myself as a self employed person in Italy. I quickly realize that I have no idea how taxes work.

I buy a two books on accounting and taxes and read them in a weekend. One general. One specific to Italy. I am excited because I am learning new things.

And not for the sake of learning. But because I had to.

I quickly realized how naive and stupid I was.

I had a 90% income tax exemption as an expat in Italy, so I logically thought that I would be paying almost no taxes.

Makes sense, right?

Then I discovered that income tax is just one type of tax. Out of many. Crazy!

You have social contributions, regional taxes, corporate taxes, VAT, capital gains taxes, etc. The list goes on.

I run a little simulation on paper. I see that I would be pocketing 75% to 70% of the profit I make.

Wait a minute. If I am taking home 70% of what I make, with the cleanest and simplest online business in the world, with zero employees and zero expenses, and a crazy tax benefit on top of that, what is everyone else truly making?

The intangibles

At this point I was fascinated.

I started decoupling revenue and actual money made.

I wanted to understand what founders of companies making millions are truly making, aka taking home.

And compare it to myself to understand where I stand in the grand scheme of things.

And... Ok, maybe feel a little better for myself.

I post a realization of mine that goes viral but makes some people very upset:

"• \$10K/mo solo business, 90% net profit margin:

- Founder takes home \$9K per month.

- \$1M/year biz with two co-founders, 25% net profit margin:

- Founders take home \$10K per month.

Yet they call the first one a side gig and the second one a real business."

People gave me their arguments. The second one can scale. The second one can be sold. And so on.

But they couldn't argue with the math.

I run a few more simulations with:

- million dollar businesses
- with multiple founders
- a few employees
- in a Western country with high taxes

I quickly realize that taking home \$5k - \$10k per month is rare. Even if you're the founder of a multi-million dollar company.

Many times, I found out that they take home even less, since they reinvest their profits into the business and live off of a salary.

Now, that could be either because they are not profitable enough and don't want to admit it, so they just say "yeah we don't take anything out, we reinvest everything into the business".

Or their acquisition channel is paid, so they are incentivized to never stop throwing money in.

Maybe these things sound obvious to you. But they were all new to me.

Damn. So it's not only about revenue after all.

It's also about the intangibles.

- Profit margins.
- Number of founders.
- Taxes.
- Organic vs paid acquisition channels.
- Take home money.
- Hours worked per day.
- Quality of life.
- Stress.

Stability vs Growth

After the above analysis, I realized that I have it good already.

I am already successful. At 25, I'm making good money and have a great quality of life.

Making good money, doing what I love, working on my own schedule, with an empty calendar and low stress.

Even if my tiny little project never gets the respect of an established business. Who cares.

I am taking home anywhere between \$4k and \$6k per month.

So maybe I shouldn't aim for growth at all costs after all.

Maybe I should just aim for stability first.

Secure this lifestyle. And then we'll see if I want more.

I love my new life. And I want to protect it at all costs.

My first big mistake

Just as I thought I had things figured out and knew everything, I made a massive, massive mistake.

I was chilling on the sofa at a girls house, when I received a notification from my digital bank, Revolut.

For anyone unfamiliar, Revolut is a fintech startup in Europe.

The notification explained that they got their banking license. Which means that if something happens and they go bust, the Central European Bank will cover up to EUR 100,000.

So what did my dumbass do? I moved almost all of my money, more than \$40k+ of my \$50k there. In one big transfer.

Just so I can look at the big number and check my analytics and all my expenses in one place.

As soon as I made the transfer, it flagged the system:

- Where is this money coming from?
- How did you get this money?
- Provide statements and documents of proof.

Initially I thought I had nothing to worry about.

But while trying to contact customer support for further clarification, I quickly realized that it was non-existent.

I went online and somehow ended up on some Reddit threads. And that's when the nightmare started. All of a sudden, I was reading real life horror stories.

People losing their money forever. Having their accounts frozen for months. Even people that were running legitimate businesses, with employees on payroll.

Just canned, automated responses. Because a third-party agency does the proof checking. And that third-party agency is forbidden to share the status of the process.

I was freaking out. I had 90% of my money in this account. And now, my account was under investigation.

I collect myself. I take a deep breath, and I send some paperwork. Rejected. No explanation or feedback as to why.

I try not to panic yet, and I re-send some paperwork after correcting some things I thought could be wrong. Rejected again. This time I also received a SMS message telling me that they temporarily froze my account.

WHAAT?! Ok, this is going exactly like the Reddit stories. Word for word. I am one of the unlucky ones that will never be able to prove their source of funds. For months. Or worse.

I'm sweating. I'm paranoid. I'm fucked.

What can I say. Congratulations. You just put all your money in a single account and now it's frozen.

And I have so many expenses coming up.

\$3k to setup my business and pay for accounting for the year. Expenses to move to another city. Deposits for houses, etc.

I take my time to really think about it and correct my files. I am already thinking of the worst possible scenario.

And trying to think of how I could handle my upcoming expenses. I'm not sure if I can.

I sent paperwork for a third time, after correcting them again. A few hours later, at eleven o'clock at night, I received a notification saying they were accepted. My account is back to normal.

I instantly feel 10 kilos lighter. I pour myself a glass of wine and I enjoy it with a huge smile on my face and red cheeks. Haha.

I feel rich and safe again.

A glass of wine

Sounds cheesy, but that glass of wine was kinda enlightening.

As I was smiling with red cheeks enjoying it, I realized that I wasn't happy because I now had money back to buy things.

Yes, I had expenses coming up. But beyond that, I was happy because I had money to feel safe and relax.

I had my runway back. My piece of mind. My safety net. My defense against a rainy day.

It reminded me 80% of my money's value was:

- Taking my stress away
- Providing me with the basics
- And enabling me to own my time

That's it. That's all I needed right now.

Playing with fire

You know what's crazy? And scary?

That I knew that I shouldn't have all my money in one bank account.

But I still did it. And then I got burned.

And I knew that I shouldn't send all the money in one go.

But again, I did it.

Just like I knew from day one that I should launch a scrappy MVP or launch without a product at all.

But it still took me 2 years and 19 failed attempts to really understand it and stop overpolishing my products.

I'm not sure if this is a feature or a bug of human behavior, but it seems that we learn by making mistakes. Like kids that don't understand that playing with fire is dangerous until they get burned.

Becoming a big fish

As you can imagine, the idea of protecting my business and lifestyle at all costs felt far more serious now.

I have to accept that I'll make mistakes. Many of them.

But I have to avoid the potential catastrophic ones. And the ones that I could avoid. Like the mistake I just made.

The world is cruel and doesn't care about me. I'm not special. Bad shit can happen to me. And will happen to me.

The same way you can get lucky, you can also get unlucky.

At the end of the day, the goal isn't to be the smartest. The goal is to survive.

Sounds stupid, but I was reminded of this by two quotes I heard in a film I saw recently, called "Big Fish".

Quote number one:

"A goldfish grows according to the size of it's bowl."

Although this is somewhat of an urban myth, it's partly true. And it's definitely true in business. No matter how good or talented you are, you are mostly going to grow in accordance to your market.

Quote number two:

- "How does the biggest fish in the river become the biggest?"
- "How?"
- "By not getting caught."

That's it. It doesn't have to do anything crazy. It just has to avoid death.

I believe it's the same in business. And that's what I'm planning to do, and why I decided to move from Milan to Sicily. My burn rate will be less than before. My taxes will be less. I will have infinite runway. And with every month that goes by, I develop a stronger base and set even more money aside.

I'm on my way to becoming a big fish. Not by doing anything crazy. But by simply avoiding ruin and playing the long game.

Part 2: Staying alive

Ok, part one of my plan is to protect this lifestyle.

The first thing I wanted to address in order to protect my new dream lifestyle and business is eliminate single points of failure.

In other words, things that could go terribly wrong (either now or in the future) that could destroy me.

Avoid ruin so I can continue to grow into a big fish.

Let's do this.

Single points of failure

I had a few single points of failure staring at me.

Banking

Let's start with the obvious one.

As soon as I solved the banking issue with Revolut, I split my money in multiple bank accounts, in multiple countries.

And I started transferring money between accounts in multiple, smaller transactions.

Lesson learned.

Tech stack

My tech stack was all no code tools. These were constantly shifting and changing and it felt like I was building on an unstable surface.

What I'm afraid of is 1 or 2 years from now they shut down and I'm left with no tech. Some things I might be able to rewrite fast, but others might be a pain. Not to mention I might lose all my hard work with SEO.

After looking for open source no code tools and being disappointed, I went back to my roots and rewrote CyberLeads in code. My favorite framework, Ruby on Rails.

An open source technology that will be here for a few more decades at least.

One less thing to worry about.

Payment provider

Up until now I was using Gumroad.

Even though I'm a huge fan of the product and its founder, I decided to move to Stripe.

The main reason for that Gumroad is a "Merchant of Record".

If you don't know what that is, it's ok. Basically it's a company that sells your stuff on their behalf. And from your side, you only have one customer, that Merchant of Record.

Which is awesome. At the moment, I only have to send a single invoice every month to my accountant. And I don't have to deal with VAT.

But the first negative is that they won't take responsibility for me if anything goes sideways. And in some regions, selling B2B data has become a grey area. Like in the EU with GDPR rules.

If that happens, all my subscriptions will be canceled. And I'm back to zero. It has happened to other people.

Secondly, Merchants of Record don't allow complex integrations. And I might want to turn CyberLeads into a SaaS platform in the future, like a B2B platform/database.

Thirdly, they don't allow selling services, in case I ever need to do that. I doubt it. But still.

Last but not least, merchants of record send automated receipts every month to every single subscriber with a huge "Cancel Subscription" button. That drives churn up. I think.

On the other hand, Stripe is a payment provider. Which means that I will have to deal with the accounting hassle. But it's completely versatile so you can build SaaS flows, it's more lenient from a legal standpoint and you can sell services.

I checked with them and they told me B2B data businesses are completely fine. Also, all my large competitors are there.

Migrated to Stripe. Done.

Security

Another point of failure that I thought of is security.

I realized this when I killed another project of mine in January (GitGardener) by just logging into my Stripe account and canceling every single subscription by clicking around.

"Wait, it's that easy to take my business to zero?"

Someone just needs to log into my Stripe account and they can click away and cancel every single subscription? And what could they do with my API key?

At the same time, my sister's social media accounts were hacked and we talked about it.

Since I'm building a personal brand and my business online. I might become someone's target one day. And a hack could destroy me.

I renewed and restricted all my api keys, updated all my code, started using a password manager, changed all my passwords, cleaned up my code on GitHub, added 2FA everywhere, bought Ubikeys.

And made up a policy and set reminders to clean up everything and change passwords every 6 months.

Acquisition channel

The final single point of failure I could see was my acquisition channel.

All of my customers came from Twitter and word of mouth. And I have a feeling that even word of mouth could be attributed to people from Twitter recommending it to friends.

One exception was a partnership with an affiliate partner, but that was a one-off thing I was never able to replicate again.

My goal for the year was to build a second channel. And I wanted to implement programmatic SEO.

This deserves a chapter of it's own, so we'll talk about it later.

The important thing for now is to know that I started working on building a second channel.

How much to diversify

A question that kept popping into my mind. How much should I diversify?

Well, first of all, why do we actually diversify?

To avoid ruin. To survive another day in case things go wrong. It's insurance.

So do you need 10 different streams of income? Or 10 different distribution channels?

No. Two is enough for most things.

Having a second option to fall back on in case things go wrong. And have enough time to recover your main option.

Hear me out.

I know 2 options doesn't sound like much, but think about it:

Let's say there is a 10% chance that your main distribution channel goes down. And another 10% chance that your second distribution channel goes down.

That sounds pretty high. But the possibility of both happening at once is 1%. They are independent variables, so you multiply the probabilities.

Being 99% safe is good enough. Anything beyond that is probably paranoia.

So my goal is to have two bank accounts and two acquisition channels.

And two girlfriends.

Part 3: Searching for the next lever of growth

Ok, part two of the plan is to grow.

I re-read the book "Traction" and started brainstorming different acquisition channels.

I thought my business would fly.

But actually it didn't.

Disappointing growth

We are almost half way through the year.

And 6 months after going full time...

My average revenue went around \$1k.

Wait, seriously? That's it?

Seriously, I thought with all this extra work time my business would 10X this year.

What the fuck.

Even though I knew that my inputs and outputs are not correlated.

You could work for 1 hour on the right things and progress. Or work on the wrong things for 10 hours and go nowhere.

I knew this already. I worked all day on my failed products back in Greece. And only 2 hours per day on CyberLeads.

But I was still surprised and disappointed.

From vine, to vine, to vine

For several reasons (which I'm not sure I agree with now) I decided to embrace the following concept.

- The first level of scaling is direct sales and launching on platforms. You are investing time in a one off thing.
- The second level of scaling is something like social media. You are investing time in a one to many thing that has a very small half life. Like a few hours to a day.
- The third level of scaling for me felt like SEO. You are investing time in a one to many thing that has a half life of a few years.

Damn. It's like going from hunting with a spear, to fishing with a net, to farming by planting seeds.

Takes a long time to get going, but after it starts having results you are golden.

The goal of scaling is to make the gap between your inputs and outputs larger and larger as time goes on.

At least in theory.

Planting seeds and patience

I decided to work on programmatic SEO.

Basically, use code and automation to create pages for all the companies I had gathered over the past years:

- Contact information page
- Founder information page
- Tech stack information page

I had a database of 25,000 companies. So the end result was tens of thousands of pages. And I submitted them to Google.

A few months later, after countless iterations and improvements, they started ranking.

And now I get just as much traffic from these pages as I get from Twitter.

But here is the big difference:

- For Twitter, I have to come up with content every single day. But the traffic is high intent and converts easily.
- For Google, I don't have to do anything. But I have to find a way to convert that traffic.

After trying to crack the code for months, I got my first customers from SEO. Never been more excited.

If this works I think I've reached my goals, secured my business and lifestyle and achieved my dreams.

Let's see.

Yes, I haven't grown exponentially this year. Yet.

But having patience and expecting non linear results is key.

Being lost is normal

Here I want to make an important point.

As with everything and all the previous experiments or products I've built, I have no idea if this SEO experiment will actually work out.

Actually, I have no idea if CyberLeads will work out in general.

The reality is that I don't know anything.

I don't even know why my revenue grew by \$1k this year.

- Could it be that I'm doing the right things?
- Could it be that I just keep going?
- Could it be that I'm just raising my prices?

Could I have grown just as much if I worked on marketing 10 minutes a day, simply scheduling a tweet?

Maybe. Not knowing what you're doing is part of the journey.

Embrace it.

Part 4: Making decisions

Since being lost is normal, there are many times when you don't know if you should zig or if you should zag.

Because there is no right or wrong decision.

Just a bunch of options with benefits and drawbacks.

So in these cases, how do you decide which option to choose?

Deciding where to live

I just moved to Sicily to extend my runway.

I'm not going to lie, I experienced a culture shock. Even though I was still in the same country.

Milan was like Europe. Skyscrapers. Electric cars. Fashion. Business. People from all over the world.

Palermo was like northern Africa. Chaotic. Loud. Rough. And no one spoke English. Even rougher than Greece, actually.

Even though I ended up loving Sicily, I didn't expect such a huge cultural difference within the same country.

Initially, my plan was to be a cockroach.

Spend as little as possible to stretch my runway.

So I went with the cheapest Airbnb I could find.

However, I started realizing something. I'm working with my mind. And I'm working from home. So the quality of my life and my environment play a huge role in the growth of my business.

The better I feel, the better I work. And the better I work, the more money I make.

Yes, it's a bit of "guy math". Meaning that you can justify anything you want this way. But I honestly believe it's true.

Example:

- In house no1 I'll feel like shit and pay \$1,000 per month.
- In house no2 I'll feel like a king and pay \$1,500 per month.

The percentage difference is huge. House two is 50% more expensive. But the absolute value is not.

It's \$500/month. That's three CyberLeads subscribers.

Could I make up for those 3 subscribers if I felt far more productive and happy?

After debating that for a long time, I decided that the answer is probably yes.

And in general, I decided to start working backwards.

Why don't you start living your ultimate lifestyle today? Or at least as close as you reasonably can?

Don't procrastinate or delay your happiness.

After many conversations with family members and friends, I decided to almost double my budget for rent. Anyway, it's the only major expense I have.

So let me paint a picture for you:

- In my cost effective AirBnb in the historical old town of Palermo, I would see people warm up their spoon and shoot heroine right outside my doorstep at 5:00 PM. All the buildings were destroyed and ruined. The streets were littered and full of shit. It smelled accordingly and didn't feel safe at all.

- In my new house, I am ten meters away from a huge beautiful crystal clear beach. In an extremely safe area. Where people are running, exercising, playing beach volley and sailing every day.

All for \$500/month. Or 3 extra CyberLeads subscribers.

So what is the lesson here?

Yes, be a cockroach. But learn which things are worth saving money on and which are not.

It's counter intuitive when you don't have a fixed income. Quality of life trickles into your business, because you are the business.

Investing in yourself becomes investing in your business.

Thinking back, I believe this was the wisest move I made. Even though you should never judge a decision from it's outcome.

That's called resulting.

Resulting

A human bias we all have.

If you ask 10 people what was the best decision they made in their life, they will all say ones that went well.

- "When I quit my job and started my own business" (when the business worked out).
- "When I decided to marry my wife" (when the marriage worked out).
- "When I moved abroad and started a new life" (when the new life worked out).

In all of these cases, the outcome was positive.

And we usually judge the quality of our decision based on the outcome.

Which is wrong.

Many times we take the wrong decision but things go well.

- "I went to the casino and bet all my life savings on red and I won and doubled my money! Best decision of my life!"

And many times we make the right decision but things go bad.

- "I had a stable job for many years and decided to get a mortgage to buy a house. Shortly after the market crashed. Worst decision of my life."

You cannot judge the quality of a decision based on the outcome. Only based on the data you had at the time.

Optionality

For me, the key to taking safe business decisions is optionality.

Basically, you want to experiment a lot, because you never know what will work.

And you want the option to revert changes if it doesn't work out.

For example, here is one of the countless experiments I ran.

I realized that I don't know of any lead generation newsletters making a lot of money.

But I know of many B2B databases that are making millions.

So I experimented with turning CyberLeads into a B2B database. I compiled all my data together into a database and updated the landing page.

I spent weeks preparing and coding this, but built it in a reversible manner.

In a single day I could revert everything back.

Pandora's box

Spoiler alert. The database experiment above failed.

Actually, it failed pretty spectacularly.

I ran this new experiment for two weeks.

Week one goes by. Zero customers. Crickets. Usually I would get 1 or 2 with the newsletter.

That was the first red flag.

Week two goes by. Again, crickets. Only on the last day of the experiment, on Sunday, I got a paying customer!

I got the notification while I was out for a walk and looking for a restaurant to eat with a girl I was with.

Initially I was excited. But then it started... Pandora's box had opened.

While we were trying to sit down and order, an angry support message came in.

That was the second red flag.

The person was very confused as to how the database worked. He was mostly interested in the monthly updates to the database. In other words, the newsletter.

He also stumbled upon a bug, which made me sweat in my clothes. The database wasn't loading. He was not happy and made it very clear.

Picture this: Instead of being present on a Sunday evening, having a nice time eating and chatting by the sea, I was stressed and glued to my phone like a teenager, doing customer support for someone on the other side of the world.

I remember the waiter coming to our table and me being glued to my phone. My girlfriend ordered for both of us, while I was still glued to my phone and the waiter looked at me confused, as if I was mentally challenged or something.

Eventually, I replied to the new customer and told him that I will fix the bug as soon as I get home and even issue a refund. I put the phone down and lifted my head at last.

I take a deep breath and smile...

Ahhh...

What an idiot.

I'm so lucky to be running a newsletter.

It's low tech. It has no bugs. No support. I can put all my energy into building distribution instead of spreading myself thin. And I can experience a great work-life balance.

That's it. When I get back home I will revert everything.

Which I did.

Part 5: Lifestyle design

A book I recently read made me think about life:

- "It is not that we have a short space of time, but that we waste much of it."

- "It takes the whole of life to learn how to live."

Seneca, "On the Shortness of Life", 49 AD

Acceleration of time

I am working, exercising and being very productive. I am in the zone.

However, one morning I realized that we are half way through the year.

And I would have to try very hard to find memorable moments.

My mind's hard drive decided that nothing was worth saving into my long term memory, since 99% of my life had been routine since I've moved to Sicily.

It's scary to admit, but the past few years have been like that, actually. It almost feels like I looked down at my screen at 20, started coding, then looked up a few moments later and I'm 25.

And now another half a year just went by. Just like that.

Being in flow feels amazing. And I changed my life during these 5 years too. Hopefully forever.

But flow can be dangerous too. Time flies and you aren't creating any memories. Life is enjoyable in the moment but short looking back.

And every year feels faster.

Remember the 1st year of primary school? When each year was a whole chapter of our lives? And the three month summer break was endless?

Now you snap your fingers and that time goes by.

I thought about it, and there is only one remedy I have found for this. Creating memories by doing new things and traveling.

Breaking the flow. As much as it pains to do so, cause I love my work and routine.

I started taking more time off and going on road trips.

It's funny. I was in Sicily for 6 months. Yet, the main thing that comes to mind when I think "Sicily" is moving to my new house by the sea and a 5 day road trip I did around the island.

It's cool that I have a great lifestyle. And that I enjoy my everyday life.

That's the meat and potatoes.

But I also want a life that feels long when looking back.

The spices.

A cautionary tale

Growing up without a father in the household, my grandfather naturally became my first role model.

He was a really hard worker and would fly out to Greece every year to see me, my sister and my mother.

He started working at 15. Changed one company in all of his life. Loyal. Hard working. He's what you'd call "a good guy".

Cranking at work, day shifts and night shifts, taking care of everyone else, and patiently waiting for his retirement.

Ran the playbook of his generation perfectly. Started working, got a mortgage, bought a house, worked hard, paid off the house, sold it, got another mortgage to buy a bigger house, and so on and so forth.

The goal was to do that until 65. And then retire and enjoy the fruits of his labour.

This will sound crazy. Because it's so tragic. But it's the truth. It sounds like a made up story. Because you can't even script these things.

One day after his last day at work, literally the next morning, he woke up complaining about some chest pain.

I remember it because I was there.

Less than a year and many chemotherapies later, he was dead.

Lung cancer.

Worked from the age of 15. And waited for a retirement that never came.

Even more tragically, his work literally killed him. The cancer was caused by chemicals used at the printing press he worked at.

I won't let his tragic story go to waste. Thank you Pappoo (greek word for grandpa) for the expensive lesson. Showing me that there are no guarantees in this life.

There is no guarantee I'll live into my 80s or 90s. Actually, not even my 60s.

Maybe I've lived half of my life already. I want to start living.

Side quests

There are still travel restrictions due to the pandemic.

So I started picking up new hobbies.

And after years of prioritizing business above everything else, I decided to put my health first.

Ran a marathon. Completed a triathlon.

I've always been good at endurance sports.

I also trained and competed in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu.

I had trained in the past, but now I took it seriously.

I competed in the Gi and in no-Gi. It was cool.

The nerves leading up to the fight were kinda similar to fighting in Muay Thai or kickboxing. In the build up, I felt like I was preparing for a fight to the death. And I was super stressed.

But the actual fight experience, after the first 10 seconds, was different. I'm sorry, but it's not real fighting.

Finally, I trained and dieted off all the fat I had been accumulating over the years. My goal was to get a six pack.

Many months later, I did it. I wasn't big, but I was ripped.

I was skinny ripped. I still have a long way to go and realistically I should build more muscle.

I became obsessed with all of these things as I was learning and experiencing newbie gains.

It was so fun. Life is cool when you have side quests.

Timelessness

One final idea I've been fascinated with is timelessness.

Why are some thoughts timeless? Books? Or jewelry?

How can a woman wear 2 thousand year old golden earrings, and at the same time she can't wear clothes from the 80s without looking ridiculous?

Why do I get goosebumps reading an ancient book from the Greeks or Romans?

We are 2 thousand years apart. Yet I understand and relate to every word written. Kinda bizarre, right?

In an everchanging world, some things remain the same.

What are those things, and why?

I have a feeling it has something to do with simplicity and biology.

Technology is changing almost every year. Society is changing slowly, but still faster than our biology. But our biology changes very slowly, it's almost stuck in time compared to the rest.

Anything related to our biology is timeless.

I don't remember where, but I remember reading this some years ago.

"We live in a world where we:

- Have paleolithic brains
- Live in medieval societies
- And use superhuman alien technology."

These three pillars are progressing at different rates. And they are constantly pulling us, that exist in between them, in different directions.

And that causes stress to the human experience.

In my opinion, a timeless lifestyle comes from focusing on the biological pillar.

It's not about being a caveman.

It's about not losing touch with your human nature.

Ancient Athens

Ok, assume we have a time machine. Trust me, I'm not on drugs.

We are going to ancient Athens for the afternoon. To have a glass of wine and observe the people.

Most people are not that interesting. Just normal people that happened to be born in that era.

Probably just like you and me. Nothing exceptional. Simply born in a different time.

But two of them really grab our attention and force us into deep thought and introspection. We wonder if we would ever exchange lives with them.

...

The first one is a very materially successful person. He has one of the fastest and most glamorous carts in the city.

He has a lot of golden coins. And a lot of slaves he can order around and beat up daily at home.

And 5-6 people in the local market recognize him and give him some kind of nod of respect.

In the context of his time, he is successful. But compared to us, he is living like a pig. And even worse, behaving like an animal.

So, naturally, I would never exchange lives with this person.

...

Now the second person is going by.

No one is really recognizing him. He isn't famous or anything like that. Doesn't want to be either.

He is not rich. But he is not a slave either. He is his own boss. He is a trader.

He is in great physical shape. Handsome. Strong. Healthy. Always smiling and kind to everyone. Always cracking jokes and making people laugh.

He has an amazing relationship with his family. Many kids. And a strong group of friends. Some are new. Others from his travels. Others from childhood.

He has an amazing active sex life. Has traveled the known world. And has many scars and stories to tell.

He ponders the meaning of life and has deep conversations with others or alone. And creates art from time to time.

...

Might sound like a very guided question, but who of the above two people would you rather switch lives with?

I would pick the second.

Escaping the Zeigest

Sadly, even though I would theoretically choose the second person, my actions say that I am trying to become the first.

Both are equally as hard. And both are attainable.

It's just that in my opinion the second person's lifestyle is timeless. Even 2 thousand years later, I would be envious of his life.

My goal is to stop being a sheep and a prisoner of my era and it's zeitgeist. Open my mind and focus on what truly matters.

A life that even my great-great-great-great grandkids would be jealous of.

Not because you want them to feel jealous. I wouldn't wish the feeling of jealousy or envy on my worst enemy.

But as a heuristic. As a compass for life.

Live a timeless life. A life that would be enviable in ancient Rome, modern day New York, and futuristic Shanghai.

Appendix

Maybe I didn't experience insane growth in my business.

But I experienced insane growth in my quality of life.

And that's more than enough.

Actually, it's more important.

What's next?

So, what's next.

Not sure. I'm still looking for that next lever of growth.

And I'm still planning to figure out what my ideal lifestyle looks like.

Let's see what happens.

Time travel

Hey. This is Alex from 2025 writing this.

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

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

These books are for free.

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

- Share it on X or LinkedIn
- DM me on X and we can set up a virtual coffee

Thank you for reading. Love you

Credits

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.
- 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. Your books are great.
- Jason Fried, 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. Your books are great.
- Pat Walls (and Demi), thank you for replying to my emails back in 2021. Also for your awesome daily blog, which definitely inspired me to continue to write daily. Also, thank you for showing us the power of focusing on one business, which you can continuously adapt and evolve over time.
- Daniel Vassallo, thank you for introducing me to Taleb's books and philosophy, they changed my world view and helped me with my journey. Also for sharing your authentic thoughts and taking a

stance, even if it's not popular. Also, contrary to this book series title, your Twitter course is actually the only course I share with others.

- Stamos Venios, thank you for inspiring me to start this journey and for teaching me that you learn by doing, not studying. Your story inspired me a lot. I've told you this directly, but it's true. You are one of the main reasons I'm here today.
- Sam Parr, thank you for showcasing CyberLeads to your hard earned and loyal audience and for always being nothing but kind and generous to me. Funnily enough, your show "My First Million" helped me make my first million. Forever grateful.
- Jon Yongfook, thank you for building and failing products at the same time as me, from 2018 to 2020. You launched BannerBear roughly at the same time I found CyberLeads, after roughly the amount number of failures. It was cool to not fail and succeed alone.
- Damon Cheng, thank you for showing us that even indie makers can acquire and grow businesses. Your run from quitting your job to matching your corporate salary was legendary.
- Marc Köhlbrugge, thank you for building WIP.chat. Seeing other successful makers' public TODOs made me realize that everyone just builds things, fixes bugs and makes mistakes. Like me. This was actually one of my most important realizations. It was frame breaking.
- Danny Postma, thank you for showing me that even indie products can exit to a larger company. And that even after an exit, if you want it bad enough, you can go back to square one and try again and again until you succeed again.
- Jason Cohen, thank you for your amazing blog and talks. Probably the best business blog in the world. By the way, I think you should try to turn your blog into a book.
- Dru Riley, thank you for running an amazing affiliate campaign together back in 2020. Those high revenue months were the final

push and confidence I needed to quit my job. Thank you my brother. Nothing but class always.

- Andreas Klinger, thank you for being a class act and making an effort to help me find a job when I needed one. Also, for always replying to my emails and DMs.
- Andrey Azimov, thank you for your epic 2018 run, becoming Maker of the Year and changing your life. Your scrappiness and determination were infectious. We would all love to see you in our feeds again and see what you're up to and what you're building.
- Dimitris Raptis, thank you for being one of the very few people from our little hometown that is in our little bubble and industry. Also, thank you for reminding me that working on products you enjoy is more important than the money you make.
- Katerina Limpitsouni, thank you for being the final person from our little hometown that is in our little bubble and industry. I've used your designs and illustrations countless of times. They are awesome.
- Dimitris Kourtesis, Nikos and Christos, thank you for helping me back when I knew nothing about anything. Thank you for teaching me that killing projects is just as productive as building them. This was one of the biggest lessons I ever learned. It helped me build a lot, which helped me find CyberLeads, which ended up changing my life.
- Justin Jackson, thank you for your essays and podcast episodes regarding the importance of markets. You might not know it, but they were super impactful to me and helped me end up in the lead generation market, which helped me find CyberLeads, which changed my life.
- Josh Pigford, thank you for being one of the first people to show us your ugly list of failures before your big success. I remember seeing it and being mentally prepared to fail tens of times before succeeding. Which is exactly what happened.

- Nathan Barry, thank you for building Kit (ConvertKit at the time) and for showing us the value of niching down and focusing on one segment of the market at a time.
- Ali Salah, thank you for being one of the OGs from 2018 and showing me that slow, consistent growth, in a saturated market, while focusing on product, can actually happen. This hasn't been my own experience and it's another example that anything and everything can work, there are no magic recipes.
- Michael Aubrey, thank you for being another story of hard work. Seeing you try for multiple years before finally achieving success was inspiring. Reminds me of my own journey.
- Reily Chase, thank you for showing me that you can build a boring business, on top of an existing platform, and grow alongside it. Been inspiring to watch you grow over the years, build a team, a house and a life for yourself and your family. PS. your beef with the platform was entertaining.
- Rob Walling, thank you for your books and for your amazing podcast. I've listened to so many episodes over the years and there is always something interesting to take from them, because you and your guests talk from experience, not theory.
- Jack Butcher, Bilal Zaidi and Trung Phan, thank you for the awesome podcast, the great art and the funny memes you've all been sharing with us for the past many years.
- Nico Jeannen, thank you for showing us that building and exiting multiple little businesses is possible. Also for keeping it real and sharing the good and the bad. There aren't that many people that do that and it's inspiring to see.
- Marc Lou, thank you for setting a new standard on shipping fast. I thought I was prolific for shipping 20 products from 2018 to 2020, but you took it to a whole new level. Respect.

- Justin Welsh, thank you for promoting work life balance and for being one of the main people popularizing the term "solopreneur". You have helped and inspired many people, including me.
- Peter Askew, thank you for blurring the lines between boring and cool. Selling onions online is simultaneously one of the most boring and one of the coolest businesses in the world!
- John O' Nollan, thank you for inspiring me to build a remote business and travel the world. You were one of the first entrepreneurs I looked up to, and still a massive fan.
- Harry Dry, thank you for showing me the power of storytelling and copywriting. Seeing your Yeezy.Dating saga unfold in real time back in 2018 was awesome and your climb to the top of the copywriting world is inspiring.
- Jordan O' Connor, thank you for your amazing blog. I remember reading every single post, multiple times, as you grew your business from zero to tens of thousands of dollars per month, changing your life for yourself and your ever growing family.
- Sahil Lavingia, thank you for building Gumroad, it helped me make my first \$100K online. Also, thank you for challenging the status quo, thinking out of the box, doing things your own way and never being too busy to reply to my DMs back in the day. Truly grateful.
- AJ from Carrd, thank you for showing us that you can build and grow a simple, elegant and useful product by yourself and make great money without charging high prices. Frame breaking.
- Alex Napier Holland, thank you for being real and having authentic thoughts and opinions. You are one of the very few non BS and non cringe people on my timeline.
- Florin Pop, Mr Purple, thank you for staying humble and ambitious at the same time. It's inspiring to see you set goals and then go after them.

- David Park,
- Andrea Bosoni, thank you for showing me the value of being consistent and for being one of my Italian brothers. It's been great your amazing content for all these years, whenever I see your posts I always get a nice feeling of familiarity.
- Flavio Copes, thank you for showing me the value of writing daily, with the simple heuristic of "do stuff, encounter problems, write about the solution". Your website and blog remind me of what the internet was originally made for, real and authentic.
- Lim How Wey, thank you for sharing all of your knowledge around SEO. It was really helpful to me. And thank you for always being kind and supportive, I truly appreciate it.
- Swyx, thank you for inviting me on your podcast back in the day and for always being kind and supportive. Also for being prolific and constantly working on new things and technologies, it's contagious.
- Dmytro Krasun, thank you for showing me that progress happens slowly, then all at once. Your journey, transparency and authenticity are inspiring.
- David Perell, thank you for spreading the benefits of writing and specifically of writing daily. Your essays, podcasts, newsletter (and even your past cohorts) are fantastic.
- Noah Kagan, thank you for building AppSumo and for always keeping it real and honest. Seeing you embark on new side quests like YouTube and being successful is inspiring.
- Andrew Wilkinson, thank you for showing me that you can build insane wealth with boring businesses. Your essays and books are legendary. It's great to see your progress from being a freelancer, to running a small studio and being afraid to hire people, to managing hundreds of employees, then CEOs and a portfolio of companies and finally going public. Insane.

- Andrew Gazdecki, thank you for building Acquire (formerly MicroAcquire) and helping indies like myself exit our companies and change our lives. Gazdecki style.
- Steph Smith, thank you for all the amazing essays. I remember reading "How to Be Great? Just Be Good, Repeatably" and realizing that I don't have to be fancy, just consistent. Also, every single one of your MFM appearances was great.
- George Mack, thank you for being one of the few, modern, original thinkers, popularizing new terms and expanding the lexicon. Your newsletter is one of the best I've read in my life, your ability to explain concepts is on another level.
- Jonathan Garces, thank you for all the amazing memories working on CyberLeads together. You are the only business partner and you truly came in and helped me more than I could even imagine. It was a blast, my favorite business era.
- Lachlan Kirkwood, thank you for all the amazing chats over the years, going through similar milestones and challenges with our very different businesses. I'm proud of you exiting your business and re-inventing yourself in real time.
- Vytas Bu, thank you for believing in me and trusting me to work together. Even more importantly, I'm grateful to call you a true friend and thank you for treating me like a brother.
- Andreas Asprou, thank you for reminding me what true wealth is and for pushing me to take a break and write these books. I wouldn't have done it without you.
- Max DeMarco, thank you for inspiring me to continue being the main character of my life. You always have main character energy and it's contagious. Seeing you grow and always challenge yourself was amazing. Hope to make it to your next last Muay Thai or grappling fight.

- Giuseppe Ettore, thank you for growing side by side since 2020. I still remember showing you CyberLeads when it was just an idea, during lunch break at the office. Time flies. We started our jobs on the same day in Milan, we both quit our jobs since then, have achieved a lot and always support each other. And I believe we always will.
- Justin Gluska, thank you for the amazing chats in New York. I hope to see you again somewhere around the world.
- Eracle, thank you for welcoming me to Las Palmas, Grand Canaria. We had many amazing chats and nights out. Hope to visit you again.
- Nikolas Konstantinou, thank you for welcoming me to the island of Cyprus. You have always helped me when I needed help, without asking for anything in return. I'm grateful for your support and friendship.
- Dawid Cedrych, thank you for being a dream client and for showing me that true business is a win-win game. I'm forever grateful for your trust in me, for encouraging me to write and for always being humble and real.
- Pete Codes, thank you for featuring me in your awesome newsletter and for being supportive over the years. It was also cool meeting in person a few years back.
- Jonny Ward, Daniel Ward, Doug Ward and David Carter, thank you all so much for being generous enough to invite me one of the impactful coffee/dinners of my life, when you had absolutely nothing to gain from me. I will never forget and I'm forever grateful to you all.
- Daniel Lockyer, it's cool to see you become a rockstar in an underappreciated industry. Also, thank you for inspiring me to run again. Maybe I'll run another marathon one day.
- Rico Go, thank you for showing me the value of hard work even after initial success and fame. It's inspiring to see you grow and become a superstar on the island.

- Alex & Books, thank you for sharing the same name and the same love for books. I'm happy that there are people like you promoting the benefits of reading.
- Mohammad, thank you for giving me perspective on life and how you can continue being happy and positive no matter what happens in life.
- All the staff and friends at Cafe Nero for giving me free coffee and let me write my books all day.
- Eneas Lari, for being my best friend in life.
- My family.

And to all the people that have supported me over the years or have shared my books, if I missed you sorry.

Constantly updating this list.