

Book 4:

Burning the boats

**(\$4,000/month,
early 2021)**

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Not Business Advice

How I made \$1M from my personal projects

Book 4

Burning the boats

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Introduction

That's it. It's done.

I just quit my job to go full time on Cyberleads.

It's been a long time coming. I launched CyberLeads nearly one year ago. But it's been three years since I first started building products seriously and dreaming about this moment.

My first 19 products failed. CyberLeads was my 20th.

In this book we'll talk about something special.

Probably the most important milestone.

Quitting your job to go full time.

Recap

Here is a quick recap of the journey so far.

While in university, I spent 2 years perfecting and launching an app that went nowhere.

Then, I discovered bootstrapping and started building products.

In my first year of building products, I launched 10+ products and managed to get up to \$100/month.

In my second year of building products, I focused on one of those products and managed to get up to \$200/month.

That wasn't enough, so I had to throw in the towel and get a full time job.

Then, in my third year of building products, while working a full time job, I launched CyberLeads and surpassed my salary.

Now I'm about to quit my job and go full time.

Part 1: Why I quit my job

Many people ask me why I decided to quit my job.

And why now, as opposed to sooner, or later.

Well, here are my reasons.

1. I realized that dream jobs don't exist

The first reason I quit my job was because I realized that dream jobs don't exist.

I thought that this would be my dream job.

Or to be more precise, I was afraid that it would be my dream job.

I was afraid that I would fall in love with the company and forget all about my dreams and side projects.

After all, it ticked all of the boxes:

- It was an MIT startup
- With founders that were MIT professors and graduates
- They worked with NASA
- Built life saving medical devices
- Offered a good salary, perks and benefits
- Sounded cool at parties and to my parents
- And was the best job I could get

Thankfully, I was wrong.

It was just another job.

2. I've had consistent results

The second reason I quit my job was because I've had consistent results.

I could worry all I want. And I could come up with excuses all day long.

But CyberLeads has made more than my salary six months in a row.

Some months even double my salary.

Even though my systems are not ideal. Even though I still don't feel like I'm standing on solid ground.

There are many things I don't like about my business.

- Twitter is my main marketing channel, which is unstable
- I'm in a market with high churn, customers don't stick around
- My revenue is wild and fluctuates, it's not like a salary
- My growth is not as smooth as I would like it to be
- People compete with me all the time

But I cannot argue with the numbers and the facts.

In a perfect world, I would like to have predictable, scalable systems that work while I sleep. Be in market with super low churn and customers sticking around for years. Get customers on autopilot through Google.

But we don't live in a perfect world.

I have to adjust my sails to the wind. Not try to change the weather.

Yes, my business is wild. But it has been growing consistently.

3. I fell out of love with engineering

The third reason I quit my job was that I fell out of love with engineering.

For years I thought that I loved coding. However, as soon as I started working as a software engineer, I realized that I didn't love coding, but creating. Software was just my tool of use.

Writing unit tests and building internal dashboards is not what I call peak creativity.

Actually, writing code for eight hours every day made me sick of it. That's the reason why many parts of CyberLeads are built without code.

Also, meetings about scalability, legacy codebases, updating our clusters with the latest tech and sharding our databases for peak performance were not my thing either.

The only things I enjoyed talking about were product related. Competition. Positioning. Features we should add or remove. Funding. Pivots into other markets.

Higher level stuff. Not tweaking and perfecting small components of larger systems.

Maybe I'm not an engineer at heart.

4. I stopped learning

The fourth reason I quit my job is that I stopped learning.

I hardly learned any new technical stuff.

The things I learned and took with me were all intangible.

- Like seeing what companies look like from the inside. Understanding that they are slow. That it's not scary to compete with them. And that most employees are lazy, including myself.
- Flipping my priorities 180 degrees. Instead of wanting to create a unique product that changes the world, deciding to change my world first. Make money and escape the rat race. Then, I can worry about changing the rest of the world also.
- Understanding that I don't have to work all day to progress. I only worked for two hours per day, and I made those hours count.

But, I learned those things straight away. Like in the first 2-3 months.

After that, I was just coding dashboards and attending meetings.

5. I was spinning my wheels

The fifth reason I quit my job is that I was spinning my wheels.

After learning all the intangibles above, my day job became mundane.

I was present in meetings, and completed the tasks that were assigned to me, at a speed that was just fast enough to not get complaints from my manager and team.

However, this is the truth:

- When I wanted to focus on my day job to get shit done, CyberLeads' growth would slow down.
- And when I focused on growing CyberLeads, my performance would dip at my day job.

It was impossible to do great work, at both, at the same time.

6. I was blind but now I see

The sixth reason I quit my job was that I saw another way.

There was a specific day that changed everything for me.

It was the day I realized that CyberLeads' monthly revenue surpassed my monthly salary.

I shared it online and the post blew up, resulting in even greater revenue.

Many people congratulated me and commented small nuggets of wisdom. But there is one comment I will never forget.

I'm paraphrasing, but it went something like this:

"You'll never be able to go back now. It's one of those things that once you see it, you can never unsee it again. It happened to me as well. Many, many years ago."

I gained confidence. I knew there was another way now. And I knew that my days working for someone else were limited.

Every meeting. Every performance review. Every 1 on 1 with my manager. They all felt different.

I will never forget one day specifically, when my manager asked me what I want to achieve in the future.

I wasn't sure if he meant personally, professionally or specifically within the company, so I asked for an example.

With a smile on his face, as if he was proposing something I could not possibly resist, he told me:

"Well.. for example.. you may want to become the respected, go-to guy for the 'X company dashboard'."

What. The. Fuck. At that moment, I wanted to laugh. But to be honest, if I didn't have CyberLeads, I would probably want to cry.

7. I want to embrace risks

The seventh reason I quit my job is that I want to embrace risks.

Everything good that has happened to me has been through some amount of healthy risk taking.

You cannot live in bubble wrap and expect to grow. You need to leave your comfort zone.

Nassim Taleb's books really changed my perspective on risk, randomness and life.

They remind you that life is chaotic. And you shouldn't try to change that. Embrace it's unpredictability and make it work for you. Not against you.

You will have to take risks. But not all risks are the same.

With some risks, you should be super conservative. Risks that could ruin you if they go wrong.

Like taking a massive loan from criminals. Or robbing a bank. Or putting all of your money on a new crypto coin. You get the point.

Take enough of these risks, and you will pay for it.

But with other risks, you should be the opposite. Wild, experimental, and playful. Risks that won't ruin you if things go wrong. And that will bring you a lot of upside if they go right.

Like starting a new business with zero capital. Or moving to another country. Or starting a new hobby. Or going to a party. Or even tweeting. Best case scenario, you get customers, build an audience, and make friends. Worst case scenario.. well, there is none!

Take enough of these risks, and you will be "blessed with luck".

And finally, you should also avoid taking medium risk bets with medium upside. This is the trap most smart people fall into.

Like climbing the corporate ladder for years on end. For a somewhat guaranteed result. And a somewhat fulfilled life.

It reminded me of my own way of thinking. But I was never able to articulate or formalize it.

It made me think, what does leaving my day job look like?

In which category of risks does it fall into?

8. I've stacked the odds in my favor

The eighth reason I quit my job is that I believe I've stacked the odds in my favor.

Instead of leaving right away when I could, I decided to stay at my day job longer.

One reason was to honor the contract I had signed. I didn't want to leave the company and my team out of the blue.

Another reason was to continue saving up money.

I managed to set aside almost \$50k. Which means that even if for some crazy reason I was to start making zero dollars per month starting from tomorrow, I would still have enough runway for 2 years.

Specifically:

- \$10k from my Greek grandpa, Alex.
- \$10k from my day job.
- \$30k from CyberLeads.

Thank you pappoo. You don't know it, but you helped your grandson achieve his dreams. Rest in peace. I love you.

If things go well, I am free for life. I gain my freedom. I scale CyberLeads. I travel the world. I set even more money aside.

If not, and for some reason CyberLeads goes to zero, I still have two years of runway to figure things out.

And again, even if for some even crazier reason I am completely incapable of generating a single dollar in the next two years, I can always just find another job and try again.

At least I will have a cool story to tell, and I probably will have travelled a lot.

Hmm.. That's a good bet. I'll take it.

9. I want clarity of mind

The most important reason I'm leaving my day job is to have a clear mind. To stop having to think about things that are irrelevant to CyberLeads. Like meetings. Or sprint deadlines. Or what my manager thinks of my performance.

That being said, I'm not planning to work ten hours per day on CyberLeads, either.

The same way I don't want to be dragged into meetings all day long, I don't want to work on CyberLeads all day long, either.

Actually, I don't even think it's necessary.

I remember working 10 hours per day on the wrong things back in Greece, going nowhere.

And this year working for 2 hours per day on the right things and changing my life.

So I don't want more time. I want clarity of mind to make sure that I'm rowing in the right direction.

10. I want to feel alive

The final reason I want to quit my day job is to feel alive.

Sometimes you just want to throw yourself in the fire. This is one of those times.

I want a big change. Similar to how this time last year I left Greece and moved to Italy, to start this full time job.

Small incremental improvements are great. Small habits can change your life. Yes. But sometimes you are not looking for a small incremental change, but for a big earthquake that will shake your foundations.

That's when you have the best chances of growing exponentially.

Similar to how conquistadors intentionally burned their ships upon arrival.

Of course, that's just a figure of speech. I'm just typing on a keyboard.

And I could always find another job if things don't work out.

The time is never right

I'm very confident in my decision.

I took my time, and I didn't rush anything. I've stacked the odds in my favor, and I honestly believe that I will make it.

I had predicted that when the time is right, leaving won't even be a dilemma anymore. And that's how it feels. It's not a dilemma. I see absolutely no reason to stay.

Staying one more year at my day job to save an extra \$10k or \$20k from my day job will change nothing. It will probably just keep me back.

At the same time, I understand that I cannot predict the future.

Sometimes, you just have to say "fuck it" and go for it.

Part 2: Quitting my job

Ok, it's happening.

I talk to my manager and announced that I'm quitting.

Specifically, I explain that I won't be renewing my contract at the beginning of the new year.

He's cool. Or at least he seems to be.

Technically I could have not notified them at all. But I decided to notify them 1 month in advance, to have my conscience clear.

I had 4 weeks left.

Escaping the circus

From the moment I handed in my notice, all meetings felt meaningless.

No one cared about my opinion anymore. And it was awkward talking about things that would be built after I'm gone.

During those meetings, I would either work on CyberLeads, or just open my notes, write and daydream.

Actually, everything you read above was written during those meetings.

With my new, sober, third person perspective, I remember realizing how we were all playing a game.

We were all playing "business". Pretending to be serious, professional adults performing complicated activities.

Overcomplicating what we do to justify our salaries and positions.

Software engineers overcomplicating software. Designers overcomplicating design. Marketers overcomplicating marketing. And so on.

It felt like the story with the emperor's new clothes.

We all know it but no one is admitting it.

Enjoying the game

My daily updates became one sentence long again.

Similar to how they were when I first started working at the company, when I was still pure and naive.

"I fixed the bug we found yesterday and now I've moved on to the next feature from the backlog. That's it from my side. Thanks."

On the other hand, some of my teammates were still playing the game:

"I ran an investigation for the new service that we want to deploy and scale on AWS and took into account the different parameters, especially given that cost is an important factor. I also started working on our migration to AuroraDB and started working on the implementation of blah blah blah blah..."

I couldn't even understand what he was talking about.

One year ago, I thought it was because I was new. Or dumb.

But now I understand that it was on purpose. By design.

If me, a fellow engineer from the same damn team could not understand, how could a non technical product manager, designer, marketer or founder from the company understand?

Well, they couldn't. And that was the point. He was playing the game and appeared as a rocket scientist. A genius at work.

I was also playing that game up until a month ago.

The dark side of the show

However, there is a dark side to this game.

If I had joined the company before building any products of my own, maybe I would have never built products.

Everything would have seemed too complicated to me.

- You need a team of engineers to build your product
- You need a team of designers to design your product
- You need a team of marketers to market your product
- You need a team of salespeople to sell your product
- You need a CTO to make sure you can scale to the millions
- You need a CEO to come up with the vision

- You need a CFO to take care of the finances
- And you probably need funding to hire all these people.

You cannot do everything by yourself.

That's crazy.

Cloak and dagger

My manager was not happy with me.

Completely out of character, he fired me 1 day before my last day.

- Maybe he was mad because I was leaving early. He asked me to stay another 3 months to help with some deadlines, but I refused.
- Maybe he was mad because I wasn't vocal in the meetings anymore and did the absolute bare minimum after handing in my notice.
- Or maybe he was mad because he was following me on Twitter and saw me focusing on CyberLeads more than my job.

In any case, all he said was that the reason was "bad performance in my final 2 weeks at work after handing in my notice".

Up until then, in every single 1-1 we had ever had, he had nothing but great things to say. Zero complaints ever.

I was shocked.

It's all about the money

Looking back, I think I know what happened.

And it's way simpler. It's just money.

A few months back, they had fired a bunch of people due to the pandemic. And cut salaries for the rest of us that stayed.

They promised to give us back the money at the start of the new year. But they didn't want to give me the money now that I would be leaving. Even though I was legally eligible for it.

Their response was to fire me. Which technically they couldn't do, but I still didn't want to risk it.

I was setting up my business and my accountant told me that if I get fired I might lose all of my tax benefits.

So we made a deal.

An offer I couldn't refuse

I have a meeting with my manager and one of the co-founders and CFO, who had descended from Olympus to talk to the mortals.

I explained that firing me would cause me huge legal issues and financial problems.

They explained that they wouldn't fire me if I signed and agreed that I didn't want the money.

"This would have been a warm goodbye, but now it has turned into a cold goodbye and a fuck you", I said.

The founder agreed, *"Yes, it has turned into a fuck you"*.

It was obvious. He was the one behind this, not my manager.

I got flashbacks of my boss in Greece, who didn't want to pay me and I had to go and collect the money by myself in person.

I had to remind myself that it was just a speeding ticket. And that not every fight is worth fighting.

So I accepted. All this drama for \$1,500.

They kicked me out of all of the accounts, not even allowing me to say goodbye to my teammates or the company in the weekly meeting, as was standard practice.

I went home a few minutes later.

Strip tease show

Actually, the company doing this to me felt symbolic.

I was not meant to work for a company.

Walking back, I had already forgotten about them, the money and the drama. It was over. A new chapter had began.

When I got home, I put on some stupid music and started dancing and tearing my clothes off, performing a strip show to my girlfriend.

So much laughing. So much happiness.

I'm so happy.

I'm leaving the circus.

I'm going into the wild.

Appendix

Update from the future, so I can be precise and correct.

A few months later, I received a payment from the company.

No communication. No explanation. Nothing.

I thought it was an extra salary or a payment sent to me by accident. Which I never thought about again.

But while polishing this book years later, I realized that it might have been that money that they owed me.

I checked the amount and it was indeed that.

So yes, they actually paid me.

I'm not sure why. Maybe they were afraid I would put them on blast on Twitter. Maybe they just changed their mind. Or maybe it was

indeed by accident.

We'll never know. But as we say in Greece, the good should always be told.

What's next?

I just quit my job to go full time on CyberLeads.

Super happy. But also a little scared.

I have so many things to do:

- Incorporate my business
- Move to a different city
- Design my new lifestyle
- And much more

I have absolutely no idea how I'll do them.

I have no idea if CyberLeads will keep on growing.

And I have no idea how I'll handle the weight of having zero constraints.

But I've never been more excited.

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
- 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.

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Constantly updating this list.