

Book 9:

Building a machine

**(\$40,000/month,
year 6)**

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Not Business Advice

How I made a million from my personal projects

Book 9: Building a machine

(\$40,000/month, year 6)

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Introduction

I'm lying on the sofa. Reading a book on how to build a team.

It says that I should empower my employees. Align them with the vision and core values of the company. And define the culture.

Seriously, is this what I've become?

These things are exactly why I quit my job.

Part 1: Building a tribe

I never wanted to hire anyone and become their boss. Probably because I disliked all of the bosses I ever had. The thought of being that person to someone else scared me.

But if I'm being completely honest, there was something else.

Being solo was cool in my mind.

Building a \$1M solo business was rare and unique. Whereas building a \$1M business with a team was normal.

I guess I'm not cool anymore.

Working with family and friends

Ok, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it my way.

Work with my closest and favorite people. The ones I love the most, know the best and trust.

Girlfriend. Best friend. Childhood friends. Siblings.

No suits. No politics. Just us.

What could possibly go wrong?

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Well, everything went wrong.

My girlfriend at the time was insulted that I sent her money for helping me. Me and my sister were disagreeing on everything. And

my best friend was moving very slowly.

I'll never forget one day specifically. I was trying to contact my best friend but he wasn't picking up the phone.

I called him a few times back to back. And when he finally picked up, we started talking about work straight away.

During our conversation, we have a 10 second period of silence. No words at all. But many unspoken words.

We were dancing on the thin lines between friends, colleagues, bosses and employees. And the surface was very slippery.

Part 2: Building a team

My romantic vision of working like a loving tribe failed. So I decided to become cold and strategic.

Maybe I should fight the world by myself, make money, and then treat my loved ones. Yes. That puts my mind at ease.

But I need to figure something out fast. I am still drowning in client work and working all day.

I started researching and was overwhelmed with all the options.

South Africa for sales roles. Colombia and Brazil for working in US timezones. Egypt for finance roles. Eastern Europe for software engineering. Philippines for virtual assistants. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka for the cheapest options.

I even considered Greece, but I knew from working with my best friend that I don't like talking about business in Greek.

I went with the Philippines, since the things I wanted to delegate were very simple and all I needed was a virtual assistant.

My first hire

I went to a hiring platform and started messaging people.

One of them replied to me within 10 minutes, and we scheduled a call for the very next morning.

We jumped on a call and I was impressed. Insanely good English. Extremely proactive. And seemed like a good person.

I hired her instantly. Her name was Nneka.

Damn. That was fast. The whole process took like 12 hours.

Did I do something wrong?

It's not about being the best

While giving this person access to my Slack, all her tasks and her instructions, I had a realization.

I was not hiring her because she was the best in the world.

I was hiring her because she seemed competent enough, a good person, reliable, and she replied fast.

I wonder if the same applies to me.

Do I have to be the best at email marketing in the world?

Or do I just have to be competent enough, reliable, trustworthy, show that I care and be proactive.

Things slowly changing

A few days later, I opened my laptop and realized that some things had started to change already.

When it comes to automations, I used to run them myself, programmatically, on my laptop. Now we had a dashboard where you could sign in and run automations by clicking on buttons.

On the platform we communicated, there were channels now for different topics, threads and conversations.

And on the platform with our TODOs, our tasks were automatically created through automations every morning with detailed instructions.

It felt more corporate. But Nneka had already finished all of her tasks by the time I woke up, since her timezone was ahead of mine.

I didn't know how to feel.

Flying to the wrong city

Up until this point, I had 3 options.

I could either eliminate tasks, automate them, or do them myself.

But now, at last, I had a fourth option. For everything that fell in between those categories. Delegating.

Of course, I took it too far. I wanted to delegate everything.

I even delegated some personal stuff. Who knows, maybe I could have a personal assistant.

Things like sending cards and buying presents for family and friends. Helping me figure out where to travel next. The best area to stay in, hotels and flights.

Well, I ended up sending very weird gifts to my family members, flying into one city while my hotel was in another, and the hotel being a hostel so bad that I couldn't even stay there.

Beyond trying to find the humour in this, I actually realized that it wasn't their fault.

First of all, my own personal stuff shouldn't be included at all as they interfere with work. And secondly, I realized that quarterly, yearly and one-off tasks are better and easier to just do myself.

Where I found delegation to truly shine was daily and weekly tasks. The feedback loop was fast enough and frequent enough for us to correct errors, improve, perfect and not forget.

Also, text and image instructions were far superior to video instructions. I could edit the documents, remove or add text, and change the images and screenshots. I could not do the same for video. And it was easier to search through text instructions, rather than skimming through videos.

Goldilocks Zone

Through this trial and error process, I had many realizations.

- Not everything that can be automated should be automated.

Initially I was trying to automate everything. After all, my goal was to turn this service into a SaaS. But some automations became too complicated and broke all the time. Ironically, for these tasks, it was easier and more reliable to delegate them to a human instead of automating and maintaining them. Or automate the first 90% of the task and have a human finalize it.

- Not everything that can be strictly defined should be.

I used to define things as strictly as possible, to avoid errors. But many times that froze quality, when the point for some tasks was to keep improving, like writing client campaigns for example.

- That you shouldn't delegate things as fast as possible.

Sometimes I would perform a task once, create instructions and hand it off straight away. But sometimes it was only the 3rd or 4th time I performed a task that I realized it could be done in a completely different way and be automated, or that we don't need it.

- And that some things shouldn't be delegated at all.

Turns out some tasks were actually good for me to do. Like going through client and business numbers every week. Doing it myself, slowly and manually, sparked ideas in my brain and got me fired up for the week. When I automated or delegated it, it didn't. I think it's like going to the gym. The point is for you to lift the weights, not bring a crane or employee to do it for you.

Still chaos

Even though I started delegating things and I had more time now, I was still the one running around servicing clients all day.

And I was still messing up. It was still too much work. And there were days I thought I was going crazy.

Going from building systems, to marketing, to managing clients and putting out fires, to sales, and then back to systems again, was difficult. The context switching was killing me.

One evening, I realized that nothing had changed.

"I still want to shut this whole thing down."

Maybe I should hire someone to handle clients for me.

Then I can focus completely on systems, marketing and sales. The things I'm actually good at and don't even feel like work.

Yes. That will fix everything.

My second hire

I decided to hire someone to help me handle clients.

Even though my first hire had worked out perfectly, I decided to do things a little bit different this time.

I interviewed a few people first, and was left with 2 candidates. From those, I ended up going with one of them, because he had relevant experience and was an extremely warm person.

His name was Joel.

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All the repetitive tasks like gathering leads, setting up platforms, forwarding leads and sending presents went to Nneka.

Client onboarding, client management and client communication tasks went to Joel.

These tasks were different. They were not simply following instructions. There was nuance to them. How to respond, what the tone should be like, and what to say.

So instead of a set of explicit instructions, we had to work on a set of heuristics, examples and best practices.

It was very interesting to me that even these tasks could be broken down into steps you could follow. Just a little more abstract.

We had to spend many hours on calls with Joel explaining, reviewing and improving things, until things started to click.

It took months. And at times I questioned the whole process.

It was frustrating, but it also was fun. We laughed a lot. And eventually made things work.

Pandora's inbox

Over the next few months, things started to improve. At last I was working less and my stress levels had started going down.

Since I started this service offering, my biggest stress of the day was opening my inbox in the morning.

I was afraid of all the fires I would have to put out.

Complaints. Custom requests. Questions. Cancelations.

But now, since my team was ahead in timezone, my inbox was already checked multiple times and I had a daily client report ready for me when I woke up.

I would go through the client report in 10 seconds in the morning and know the status of each client. And if anything urgent had to be done for them, Joel would have already started working on it.

Somehow, this was a million times less stressful than going through my inbox myself, trying to remember all of my clients and wondering if I have forgotten to do anything for them.

If the report was good and everything was under control, it was already an amazing day for me.

Flipping the painting

I hired an agency to see what it's like being on the other end. I had a lot of realizations here too.

During the sales call, I realized that I didn't care if they were the best, but if I could trust them and if they seemed like they cared and would truly try their best.

During the onboarding, we were moving slow because I was late delivering the things they wanted from me. I realized that I actually wanted them to act as my co-founder, not my employee. I am busy, just tell me exactly what you need from me, when do you want it, remind me if I'm late or drag me on a call to do it together. Be direct with me and push back if you disagree with my ideas.

Finally, while running campaigns, I realized that a small message they sent me with an example of a new idea we could implement in the future made me feel safer than if we had a good week of results or not.

It was a weird experience.

A drink at a bar

I was recently at a fancy bar with a girl in London.

We ordered drinks but they were super late. Everyone else was getting theirs before us. And it felt very disrespectful.

Finally, the drinks arrived and the barman said.

"Thank you for your patience. I had actually made the cocktail already but I wasn't happy with it. So I made it all again to get it perfect. Please try it and let me know what you think."

Then he waited for us to try and get our feedback. He won us over big time. He turned a negative into a positive.

I had a lightbulb moment. I'm stealing this.

Ironically, I've had more success increasing client satisfaction through soft skills and intangibles like this, than working hard on technological innovations and improving performance.

Still the bottleneck

At this point, I had delegated most tasks, but I still had a few client related tasks left for me.

Crafting the campaigns. Reviewing them. Launching them. And tweaking them if we're not hitting our numbers.

These were the most creative and important tasks of the whole process. Which arguably shouldn't be delegated and I should keep doing.

But, once again, I found myself procrastinating on them. A 10 minute task of tweaking a client's campaign would take me a week to do.

I would even ghost my own team. One of Joel's tasks was to remind me of client tasks that I had to do, and I had told him explicitly to bug me if I'm procrastinating.

I check our conversation. He has been messaging me back to back for a week now, and I've either been ignoring him or telling him I will do it and then don't do anything.

"Man, this is not professional. I am not a serious person."

Nneka is doing an excellent job with all of her tasks. Joel is doing

great at managing clients. And I am the bottleneck.

We lost a client today because we were late launching their campaigns.

Or, to be precise, we lost a client today because I was late with crafting and launching their campaigns.

I think I have to remove myself completely. I see no other way.

My third hire

I decided to hire a third person.

This was definitely going to be my last.

Even though both of my hires were successful so far, I decided to do things a little different again.

I uploaded a job post and assigned a little writing exercise.

Out of 100 submissions, 5 caught my eye, and from those interviews there was 1 clear winner.

A young and smart guy called Rayvin. He was younger than me, which felt weird. I was used to being the youngest person in the room.

No training needed this time. I only needed to say things once and he was off to the races. He was excellent.

I felt so lucky to have found him.

After this process was done, I also shared the top applicants I could not hire with fellow business owners, like Andreas from Product Hunt

did for me 5 years ago. And texted him to thank him again and explain that it's my time now to pay it forward.

It was a cool full circle moment.

Iterating, Perfecting or Procrastinating

I had more time now. I had delegated all of my tasks. And I found that the real work begins when the TODO list ends.

I focused on systematizing everything. And I felt productive.

But many times it was fake productivity. So while working, I would try to ask myself the following.

"Am I iterating? Perfecting? Or procrastinating right now?"

- On most days, I found myself creatively procrastinating.

I would work on tasks that were not important while ignoring the ones that were. Like improving my accounting systems and processes while client campaigns were not getting any results.

- Other days, I would find myself being a perfectionist.

I would work on tasks that were important, but I was trying to make them perfect from the start. Like building a complicated automation that would take me a week to build, instead of creating a quick little document with instructions in a few hours for an employee to do.

- Thankfully, on some days, I would find myself iterating.

These were my most productive days. The days I was actually moved the business forward. I would work on the most important tasks, in a somewhat efficient way, even if it wasn't elegant.

I found that almost everything has a "next day version". You want to build and launch a product? There is a version of it you could launch tomorrow. You want to automate this? There is a version you could hand off to an employee today.

Finally, a little heuristic I used to decide if something is worth doing. It has to satisfy at least 2 of 3 constraints.

1. Does it make me money.
2. Is it easy.
3. Does it make my customers or team happy.

Part 3: Distancing myself from the company

Over the next few months, things started to change.

We had reports for everything. We all had tasks on our boards.

Work was compounding. And everything was systematized.

For the first time ever, things were finally looking perfect.

Distancing myself from clients

My favorite part of the day was waking up, grabbing a coffee and going through the client report in 10 seconds.

I instantly knew for each client what the next task for them is, how long we've been working together, if we are hitting our performance numbers for their campaigns, if they have closed any deals, if anyone is blocked on a task, and a million other metrics. Also, it would show if they sent us any emails, and if yes, it would explain what the email was about and Joel would have drafted a reply for them already.

Now, after closing a client, I didn't do anything else apart from keeping a bird's eye view through the client report and reviewing their campaigns internally with Rayvin once per week.

Sometimes I would even forget who the client was.

Their face. Our conversation. Where they live. Or what they do. I would have to refer to my notes to remember everything.

It was weird.

Scoring a beautiful goal

I'll never forget one morning. I was at a cafe and had just ordered my morning coffee.

I sit down, open my laptop and go through the client report. Everything was under control for all clients.

Then I check Slack. Rayvin had finalized some campaigns and sent them for approval. Joel saw that they were approved and launched them. The campaigns started getting leads within a few hours. And Nneka found the leads and forwarded them to the client.

The leads were all strong, startups that had recently raised millions and were interested in the client's services. And the client replied expressing how insanely happy and impressed he was with everything.

I couldn't help but smile proudly.

I felt like a coach, watching my team from the sidelines score the most beautiful goal. Whereas on most days it feels like I am still on the field running and playing alongside them, as the captain.

I sent this message to everyone and then went on with my day.

"Hey all, I don't want to sound cheesy, but this morning I woke up and just wanted to say a big thank you from the bottom of my heart.

For the past year or so I've been working 12-16 hour days. This morning I woke up and everything was done perfectly.

I don't know what to say.. just thank you "

Running a cult

I was so happy with my little team and with the results we were delivering. And I wanted to keep things this way forever.

I was afraid of losing them. And I also felt a bit guilty.

At this point, on a good day I would work for just 2 hours. And I was traveling the world and enjoying life.

I felt like they should be doing the same.

I remember one day, thinking of how I could structure bonuses and work in a way that can help them also travel and enjoy life.

"Maybe a dedicated travel budget? A gym membership paid by me? A budget for business courses? Maybe a yealy retreat where we do something cool all together?"

I caught myself off guard.

"Why am I trying to force my own ideals on them?"

Nneka just moved in with her fiance and took a loan to buy a car. Joel is opening a gym, and is busy raising a family and kids. Rayvin just closed a second client but doesn't want to travel.

Maybe they don't want the same things as you.

Stop trying to run a cult."

Distancing myself from the team

I decided to become cold and pragmatic. And take a step back.

The only bonus and incentive was money. Specifically, they all had a base salary, plus a monthly bonus for every active paying client.

Everytime they did a great job, I would thank them with a bonus. Even if it was a small one.

The only thing I tracked was if they completed their tasks. We had zero meetings. And we only communicated through text.

I kept paying them full time, but the goal was for all of us to work 2 hours per day. After automating and eliminating things that took a lot of their time, we achieved this.

But even then, maybe they don't want to work for two hours per day like I do. So I encouraged them to find more clients if they wanted to, as long as it didn't interfere with our work. And referred them to a few business owner friends of mine.

Clients results were great. My homepage flooded with testimonials from clients that closed hundreds of thousands in deals.

And we were all happy.

Half of the days, it felt like my team was working for me. The other half, it felt like I was working for them.

I tried to remind myself that it's actually true. They don't owe me anything and they could go work for anyone else in the world. So I should try to create an amazing environment for them to work.

This way they never leave me. I keep making all this money. And we all win.

Work compounds

Sometimes I forget how much work has gone into CyberLeads.

Recently, an automation we use to forward leads to clients broke.

Instead of rushing to fix it, I told Nneka to do it manually until I found some time. Actually, I even wondered if we needed this automation at all, since it was connected to a bunch of APIs and it would be pretty complicated to fix.

Nneka told me that it took her 1 hour to forward 3 leads.

I couldn't believe her, so I told her that I would forward the next leads for the day. But she was right. It took me hours to manually collect all the information, draft the emails and send them.

I immediately put everything aside and fixed it.

A single automation was saving us hours every day. But it was working in the background and I had completely forgotten about it.

It was invisible work from the past, paying dividends today.

New York

A few months later, I'm in New York.

I'm in a helicopter, going from the airport to Manhattan in 5 minutes. Spending my money for a change, to see if these fancy things are really worth it.

I'm going to work from here for a while. And meet some good friends I made in Colombia.

One of them was Jonathan, a young hustler who also used to run an agency pretty similar to CyberLeads.

He's younger than me too. Shit, I'm getting older.

We were all talking, late at night, in a little New York City apartment, the ones with the external fire staircase and the best rooftop views of the whole city, the perfect place for a cigarette.

Jonathan asked me if I wanted to work together. He could help me run the agency, deal with all the daily fires and even take the sales calls for me. All I would have to do is marketing.

It was the perfect proposition. But I said no, since the business was running almost perfectly already. I wasn't dealing with too many fires and I only had sales calls on Friday.

But the seed was planted.

Part 4: Building a machine

No matter how hard I tried, there was always chaos and issues that I had to personally respond to.

And when I would try to move on to marketing, systems and sales, I couldn't.

It was strange.

Adrenaline dump

My team would handle almost everything, but somehow entropy always found a way through the cracks of our systems.

I would deal with these fires for maybe 1 hour in the morning. And then I had all day to work on other stuff.

But something interesting was happening.

The adrenaline dump of dealing with these little fires every morning was enough to kill my energy and drive for the day.

After I was done, I couldn't do anything else, apart from monitoring the situation in case another fire showed up. I wasn't really working, but my brain was still occupied in the background.

I was angry at myself.

"Am I getting soft and lazy?"

I used to get up and work at 5am every morning when I had a full time job. And last year I worked for 16 hours every day.

Now I can't work for 1 hour on clients in the morning and then go on to work on other things?"

I remembered my conversation with Jonathan, from a few months ago.

My final hire

I never intended to build a team. My initial thought was that I was going to turn the service into a SaaS and run it by myself.

Then I accepted that I was going to hire one virtual assistant to handle the few things that could not be automated.

Then one more person to handle clients. Then one more to handle the campaigns and that's it.

And now I'm thinking of hiring an operator, Jonathan.

Is this ever going to end? And is it always going to be chaos, no matter how many people we are?

I called Jonathan and we decided to give it a go. I honestly thought I couldn't work with friends. And I told him that on the first call.

But this was different. We promised we would have no ego in work. And we never had a single issue or argument. We were on calls all day, chatting and laughing while improving everything.

We removed excess weight by eliminating everything we didn't need. We reduced drag by automating processes we could. And we improved the cockpit by adding functionalities that were helpful to everyone.

CyberLeads felt like a machine.

Levels of instructions

An interesting observation was that the higher up I went with delegating, the more abstract the instructions became.

Tech automations were insanely dumb and specific, like "left click on the button that says 'Next' and then left click on the button that says 'Download CSV'". If the text on any of the buttons changed for whatever reason, the whole automation broke.

With the virtual assistant tasks Nneka did, instructions were also extremely defined, like "left click on the 'Next' button", but if the button had changed, I would trust her judgement to catch that, update the screenshot and text in our instructions and move forward.

With the client management tasks Joel did, instructions were pretty abstract, like "draft weekly reports or email replies to clients according to all these past examples and heuristics we have".

With the copywriting tasks Rayvin did, instructions were even more abstract, like "write good campaigns that generate leads, based on these best practices and our most successful past campaigns".

Finally, with Jonathan's tasks as the operator, instructions were extremely abstract. It was simply "run the day to day with the team, handle edge cases, take the sales calls and close clients".

To be honest, I would rather have only robots working for me.

Allowing inefficiencies

Some days I saw my business and felt bad because I saw so many inefficiencies.

One of them was my expenses blowing up.

The devil would whisper in my ear, telling me that if I really wanted to, I could start working all day again, keep just one contractor, pay them no more than a competitive local salary and use cheaper tools.

That would save me thousands of dollars per month in expenses. But the irony is that these savings would still be less than 2 paying clients.

So I don't do it. But it's funny because not too long ago I used to make fun of people like this. For example, all of my past bosses.

"What an absolute idiot. If only he knew we are not truly working 8 hours per day. And that he could fire some of us, cut expenses and still get the job done. How do these idiots even become successful."

But now that I'm on the other end, I get it. This inefficiency is actually optimal. It's a shock absorber.

First of all, because you can afford things going wrong. Like someone getting sick or quitting.

And secondly, because enjoyable is optimal. If things are more chill for everyone, we will all keep going and keep improving over time.

The alternative is me burning out. My single contractor burning out. Hating my life. And even the slightest inconvenience causing chaos. Like my washing machine breaking.

I've drawn a line in the sand, which for me is 80% margins. As long as I'm above that, I try not to stress about it.

Fighting thermodynamics

Fighting with edge cases and entropy every day felt like trying to keep my bedroom tidy.

It has actually made me revisit my childhood. I think all of my life I had it backwards. My teenage bedroom's natural state was chaos, not order, after all.

There was only 1 state for order, my clothes in the wardrobe. But there were infinite states for disorder. My clothes on the floor, the chair, the bed, the hanger, the desk or anywhere else.

The states of disorder were far more than the states of order. So I had to fight to keep it in order.

It's the same for CyberLeads. The states of disorder are way more than the states of order, so I constantly have to intervene.

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This was a mind blowing experience. I realized that most of what I used to call order was not normal, it was actually the opposite.

It was humans fighting entropy.

The clean smooth pavement I walked on was not normal. Whereas the tree roots coming out it, breaking it and turning my neighborhood into a forest, was. Gardens and parks I visited were not normal, either. Whereas jungles and rivers with parasites and animals that wanted to eat me alive, were. You could draw this analogy as far as you want, even houses, cities, civilization and life are not normal, whereas the vast emptiness of space is.

And CyberLeads is unnatural too.

It's a garden that starts turning into a jungle as soon as I turn my head for a second. And I need a full time gardener.

Handing everything off

Jonathan started dealing with fires on his own. He knew exactly what to do as he had been doing it for years already.

Then we jumped on a few sales calls. I was worried

But he was actually a better fit than me. A true native English speaker. Young, likeable and a true extrovert. He loved being on sales calls and chatting to people.

The payment structure was simple: 10% of the profits of the service part of the business. In exchange for taking all of the sales calls and handling the edge cases in fulfillment.

It felt too good to be true.

I think I've made it

A few weeks later, I was at the airport, flying to Asia.

Walking slowly, wandering around, looking at books, magazines and colognes, excited for the new chapter coming up.

I check my phone. Everyone had completed their tasks for the day.

Joel and Rayvin are handling clients. Nneka has forwarded 5 leads this morning. And Jonathan just closed a client on a sales call.

I remembered that just one year before I was taking sales calls at the airport. And then replying to emails, in front of my gate, up until my flight started boarding.

I haven't grown in revenue. And my margins have dropped. But I feel

like I've made it.

I actually did it. I have a real business now.

Hard work pays after all.

First team meeting

It was time to officially introduce Jonathan to the team.

We were 5 people on the call. It felt very corporate and reminded me of my past job. I was actually stressed.

We even had that awkward small talk you have at the beginning of the meeting while waiting for everyone to join. Painful.

When we were all there, I start the meeting with *"Okay guys.."*

And I close the meeting with *"I just wanted to make sure we are all aligned with the new business structure and process."*

I wanted to punch myself.

Distancing myself from everything

I took a step back and went full time on marketing and systems.

And simply kept a high level overview of the business.

I would still go through the client report in the morning. And I had a weekly meeting with Jonathan where we went through every single

number and metric of the business.

I didn't recognize some of the clients now. I had never met them. I didn't even call them by their name. I would call them by their business name or something like "Client 15".

It was weird.

Jonathan also had a very different style to me.

He enjoyed the chaos. Breaking the rules. Bypassing processes and systems. And jumping on calls with others from the team or clients to sort things out.

Some days it felt like I gave my baby to someone to babysit it. And they were handling it differently than I would. My business was running in a different way to what I was used to. And I wasn't sure if Rayvin, Nneka and Joel were happier now or before.

I asked them once but that was it. They told me everything is ok and that was all I needed to hear.

From my side, it was like a dream. On most days there was absolutely nothing for me to do.

So I decided to embrace it and take another step back.

A cold machine

I remember one night, slightly high, looking at my Slack, eyes sparkling with amazement and pride.

I saw a global team spanning across all timezones. Jonathan in the US. Me in Europe. Nneka, Rayvin and Joel in Asia.

Clients from all over the world. From New York, to London, to Singapore and Australia. Automations firing and working around the clock. My marketing channels reaching millions of people.

Wow.. somehow I have managed to build something that works.

Half of the days, I feel like the captain of a small pirate ship, with my loyal crew, fighting against the world, taking on the big guys. Million dollar bounty on my head.

The other half of the days I feel extremely guilty.

"Am I arbitaging everyone?"

My employees are working more than me, building my freedom and nest egg, while they might be stuck in their own lives.

My clients could do what I do, internally, for less money, with more care and effort.

I'm charging dollars, while being based in Europe and paying minimum taxes, while traveling and enjoying my life in Asia.

I'm arbitraging currencies, taxes, countries, clients and employees."

On those days I don't feel like the captain of a little pirate ship, fighting against the world.

I feel like I've built a cold arbitrage machine.

Joel's kids

One evening, I was on my laptop going through revenue and margin numbers for the month.

Things were good. More than \$40k in revenue. Around 80% margins.

And most client campaigns were hitting the minimum benchmarks.

I have a private message from Joel. I haven't spoken to him lately.

It's a video of his two little sons. They are running up and down the house, screaming with joy. He bought them new toys with his last bonus. And he sent me the video to thank me.

I didn't say much. I just replied and closed my laptop. But I felt a wave of love going through my chest. His family is real.

I also remembered that CyberLeads has statistically saved lives through charities. Most likely kids, since Malaria usually kills children below the age of five.

I wonder if those kids are just as real as Joel's, after all.

Joel is opening his own gym. Nneka just bought a car. And Rayvin just closed another client and wants to start traveling.

Appendix

I remember when I first started this journey. My ultimate goal was \$500/month.

Then I told myself that when I surpass my salary and quit my job, I would finally relax.

Then, that if I go from the thousands to the tens of thousands, I would never complain again in my life.

Then, that I need to escape the business to finally enjoy life.

And now, the sirens are back and singing.

"\$1M/year before turning 30. What beautiful round numbers."

Business is not a science

The irony is that as the years go by, the less certain I feel.

When I first started, I would read every business book I could find. I thought that business was a science and something I could learn by studying it.

But it turns out that most of them were bullshit.

I think that business is not a science.

- Hiring is not a science.

I hired Nneka based on pure luck. She was the first and only person I interviewed for that role.

I hired Joel almost entirely based on character and trained him. And I hired Rayvin almost entirely based on skills.

Finally, I hired Jonathan through my personal network.

They all worked out.

- Management is not a science.

Nneka will do any task on her TODO list and is extremely reliable. Joel needs a lot of training, but once he learns, he will go above and beyond anyone else. Rayvin is amazing and needs no training but is not as reliable, but if you remind him he'll do it instantly.

Nneka likes things on their TODO list, Joel will remember to do things on his own, Rayvin likes to be reminded.

Nneka prefers talking through comments on her tasks. Joel prefers

jumping on calls to ask questions. Rayvin prefers texting.

Everyone is different.

- Incentives are not a science.

The money incentive worked better than anything else. But!

Nneka prefers a higher stable salary. Joel loves chasing bonuses. And Rayvin doesn't seem to be motivated by money.

I even offered him a \$1k bonus for every deal a client closes, but it didn't seem to motivate him further.

Same incentive, different result.

- Business structures are not a science.

My initial setup was each contractor executing their tasks and me handling all the edge cases.

Then I tried a setup where all contractors were responsible for dealing with their own edge cases.

And now I'm trying a hybrid system, where contractors are doing their tasks and an operator is handling all edge cases.

A few contractors following explicit tasks. And one entropy fighter putting out all the fires. A barbel style management setup.

None of them is better, they all have benefits and drawbacks.

- Sales is not a science.

Some people are allergic to bullshit. Others don't want to hear the truth and want to be lied to.

I remember someone asking me if I can absolutely guarantee they will close a big six figure deal like the testimonials on my homepage.

I replied to him truthfully.

"Man, if I could 110% guarantee that you would close a \$250,000 deal in 3 months, like those testimonials, do you think I'd charge you \$6k? I would charge you \$60k. There is some risk in this process and that's why I have the money back guarantee."

He didn't like it. I lost the deal. And he probably went with someone else that told him exactly what he wanted to hear.

- Marketing is not a science.

I have ran the exact same campaigns for different clients.

Word for word, comma for comma. Same offer, same target customer, same market conditions. Wildly different results.

You could also post the same thing from two Twitter accounts, and have vastly different results. And you could run two identical ad campaigns from the same account with wildly different results.

I realized that marketing is not only about the message, it's also about the messenger and a million other things. Which I can't control.

This is actually the reason I don't take on friends as clients. It is impossible to guarantee results.

Even though, on average, my clients make multiple times their money back, the median client doesn't.

Whenever you hear someone talk about total numbers, assume that they are hiding the average. And whenever you hear someone talk about the average, assume that they are hiding the median.

Business is like jazz

Actually, I think that is more like jazz. And not just business, but most things in life.

Because most things in life are simply not a science. And if you try too hard to turn them into a science by simplifying your model of the real world, you end up with academia.

I was afraid to admit it. But over the last few years, I've started to feel more and more comfortable in this uncertainty.

I've even started to love the fact that I can just jam.

What's next?

Honestly, I don't know.

Half of the days, I want to make as much as possible while working as little as possible, travel and enjoy life.

The other half I want to see how far I can take this.

I guess we'll see.

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 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.

Wall of love

Thanks to everyone that has been reading for the past years.

- I just finished the mini book series by @alexwestco and it's awesome. He brings you to his startup journey, and go personal in every stage: from shouting in the void for 2 years, to désillusion, to finally making it. It's raw and honest. It feels like you're with him. Much better than most biographies made to be published. The books are free. Go read them!

@marc_louvion

- Got a long day ahead traveling back home so I got myself some nice books to read

@florinpop1705

- Finished all of them in one go. I could not stop. Oh, the pain!! Such an eye opener..

I am on my 3rd (failed) project in 6 months, but now I feel
@alexwestco saved me months, possibly years. thanks
@Andrei0Vlad

- The time is never right!!
@thepatwalls

- This is perfect!
@dvassallo

- That is the most inspirational piece of content I read. Bookmarking
this for my future references
@tejas3732

- The most honest, powerful and inspiring thing I've read all year.
Gives me so much hope to see that I can have a stable life without
giving my life to a boring 9-5 desk job. Congratulations man.
@consolerod

- When I was a child I remember reading The Eternaut comic at night
I was completely hooked up, waiting for the next night to read again
and continue the story.

Yesterday I had the same feeling reading @alexwestco books and I
woke up desperately to finish the sixth book.
Looking forward to the rest of the books
@AgustinVqz

- "Most advice is bullshit". I'm sold.
@martinrue

- Reading @alexwestco's third book and it's blowing my mind. His
mini books aren't playbooks, but I've learned a ton from them. Really
appreciate it.
@dzung_fz

- This is really a great read for aspiring indie hackers. Raw, authentic
and super honest. I used to read @alexwestco blogs 4 years ago
and this part feels super relatable to me.

Yeah, those cute little side projects.
@ShresthaBheart

- Just started reading Alex's books.
Finished the first 2 today.
So much value + it's FREE.
Thank you so much Alex!!
@HsanC_

- halfway through @alexwestco's book one, and i gotta say im surprised how brutally honest it is.
wish for more books to show the real mess of being an entrepreneur instead of handpicked highlights
@todorovskiognxn

- This is exactly what I needed. Great read.
@Renatello

- this feels like holding a mirror
this isn't some polished picture-perfect fairytale
just a raw, gritty, and accurate depiction of what figuring it out looks and feels like
reminds me that this shit is hard for everyone
@luisgnet

- Book 2 done, on to Book 3
but maybe I should get some work done first
Thanks for sharing all this knowledge Alex.
@lovish888

- I'm currently reading the books of @alexwestco and I had to laugh very loud in public at one part. A lesson every indiehacker/founder has to learn the hard way.
@TweetsOfSumit

- Feels illegal to read all these for free! Amazing stuff, zero BS, great work.

Already waiting for the last two books.

@mysancaktutan

- Been reading @alexwestco books and they are fire. so authentic and real, you feel like he's talking directly to you. Hella inspiring brother, keep going!

@MaximilianDrago

- On to book 3 @alexwestco

This speaks a lot as well to me. Humbling.

"The world is random and chaotic"

I can't go around and making sense of everything.

@cyphorous

- These words from the book 1 of @alexwestco hits different for the perfectionist I used to be.

Reading is a leverage for your actions.

Without action it's just a form of procrastination.

Damn, it's even a good sign, it means you're growing.

@kevin_miguet

- I am only fishing up the book 1 @alexwestco but I can see myself at the very beginning of this journey. Thanks for sharing, it gives me the strength to build and document as well

@YAVIIN

- Goated quote by @alexwestco.

"Someone holds a gun to your head: "You have to generate revenue online by the end of the week. If you don't, you're dead." Extreme. But effective. All the pretend work goes out of the window.

@byteberserker

- "Life is chaotic. And you shouldn't try to change that. Embrace it's unpredictability and make it work for you. Not against you."

Please, never stop writing man.

Thank you very much for sharing

@luisetelo

- Exited to dive into @alexwestco's second book. I am a total newbie and I find it interesting to read his experience when starting out.
@lastFitStanding

- Yesterday went to the beach, brought the tablet with me to start reading N1, got so hooked, read until 50% of N5 haha
Thanks for such a nice write!
@rrmdp

- I'm reading the first one now.
Great writing and very honest. Love it!
@fisheryeah

- Just finished book 6, tight in time
@rasulkireev

- Loved the book - been reading your tweets for years now, and it was really interesting to hear the whole story. Can't wait for the next one :)
@scalingspencer

- Loved reading this, excited for the next one. Remember reading your blogs from when you were working in Milan. Inspired me to pursue my own thing and very happy I did
@alexandraeswan

- I read this in one sitting thanks for sharing man.
It is really eye opening the amount of struggle that is required to building something. Thank you for being this honest.
@JacobSchwarz963

- Great work, and great thoughts
@jdnoc

- Can't wait for book 2!
@GlitchPhoton

- Hey Alex, anxiously awaiting the next drop. Didn't see it yesterday. Any idea when we might expect it?

@KevinSidwar

- "It's easier to become 10x luckier by increasing your exposure, than it is to become 10x better at understanding and predicting the world." Love this, man.

@colestriler

- great read. you write very concisely yet cover a lot of ideas. it also shows that you are building mental fortitude to handle anything. congrats!

@swyx

- Mate, at the end of your article "Two Years" I was like: This is so sad, but here comes the happy part about the sales...nothing. Great read. I'm literally in the exact same spot!

@rubenkenes

- "You can't make people buy. All you can do is keep them in your orbit by showing them what you do and staying top of mind." Love this from @alexwestco

@fredrivett

- Reviewing 300 applications for notJust Incubator, I saw many founders doing the same mistakes we all go through at the beginning Just read the first book by @alexwestco, and this hits home

@VadimNotJustDev

- Just finished @alexwestco Book 3. Learning Through Scars - a raw, unfiltered journey of building a \$3K/month business without selling courses. No fluff, just real talk about failure, luck, and the grind. If you're tired of gurus and want a real story, this one's for you. Davide Agostini

- Amigos, this is my truth that I have been drowning in for the last five years. Alex's book are a must-read

@Amigov_AI

- Had to add @alexwestco as a case study in my upcoming Solopreneur Masterclass, among other incredible solopreneurs and small business owners we can all get inspiration from!

@flaviocopes

- I've never read a book in my life but I'm halfway on book 1. It's inspiring and makes me want to start a business.

@bel4dm

- Recently read @alexwestco's two Kindle books. Really is a great reminder that it may seem like everyone knows what they're doing... But we usually see only the successes, not the uncertainty, building + getting no traction, etc

You just gotta keep moving forward + building

@gavin_wiener

- Last Sunday evening downloaded all @alexwestco books by chance opened the number 6 and started to read it I couldn't stop until I finished it such a nice, authentic and hooking reading a real not BS entrepreneurship story Nice one Alex.

@rrmdp

- I'm getting a lot of motivation out of these. Seems like all of builder X is reading them right now Alex!

@martinrue

- It seems like everyone is reading them right now!

@MahdiEzz_code

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.
- Patrick and John Collison, thank you for building the tool that has allowed us all to make a living online. No joke, Stripe changed our lives. In awe of what you're building with Arc Institute. And huge fan of your podcast "Cheeky Pint".
- 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.
- Jason Fried, thank you for sharing your contrarian views regarding work. It's inspiring to see how ahead of the culture you were with remote work and SaaS. Your books are awesome too.
- 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. Finally, thank you for showing us the power of focusing on one business, which you can 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.
- 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 sharing my little business with your audience. Even more importantly, thank you for always being nothing but kind and generous to me. Funnily enough, your show, "My First Million", helped me make my first million.
- Derek Sivers, thank you for having the most awesome blog on the planet. Also for writing all your books and giving everything back to charity. You are awesome.
- 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 till today is 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 us 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. And for your talk on boutique bootstrapped businesses. Seriously, that talk helped me niche down, raise my prices and change my life.

- Dru Riley, thank you for running an amazing campaign for CyberLeads together, back in 2020. Those high revenue months were the final push and confidence I needed to quit my job. Thank you my brother. Forever grateful.
- 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.
- Vic, thank you for helping me find the next lever of growth for CyberLeads. No joke, you helped me change my life.
- Mubs, thank you for launching 50+ projects in public throughout the years and showing us how fast one can build.
- Andrey Azimov, thank you for your epic 2018 run, becoming Maker of the Year and changing your life. Your scrappiness and determination were infectious.
- 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 Tsoniotis and Stefanos Tsiakmakis, thank you for accepting me in your startup incubator back when I knew nothing. 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.
- Justin Jackson, thank you for your essays and podcasts 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 and change my life.

- Josh Pigford, thank you for being one of the first people to show your complete list of failed products before your big success. I remember seeing the list and preparing mentally to go through the same. I built 19 failed products, then the 20th changed my life. Thank you.
- Nathan Barry, thank you for being one of the few people continuing to share revenue numbers after reaching millions in revenue. We have small businesses like myself doing that. We also have huge public companies doing that. It's great to have companies in the middle, like yours, do that too. Also, thank you for showing me the value of niching down and focusing on one segment of the market at a time. It really helped me grow CyberLeads and change my life.
- 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 is inspiring. Reminds me of my own journey.
- Reilly 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.
- 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 gueststalk 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.
- 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, thank you for sharing the good and the bad so openly and authentically. Not only in business, but in life too. Your story is inspiring.
- 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.
- Arvid Kahl, thank you for sharing the story of exiting your SaaS business. It's been awesome to see you re-invent yourself and write your books.
- 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 is awesome.
- David Perell, thank you for spreading the benefits of writing and specifically of writing daily. Your essays, podcasts and newsletters are fantastic.

- Noah Kagan, thank you for building AppSumo and for always keeping it real and honest. Seeing you embark on random new side quests like YouTube and being successful is cool to see also.
- Andrew Wilkinson, thank you for showing me that you can build insane wealth with boring businesses. Your essays and books are amazing. 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, to running a portfolio of companies, to 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 I've ever had 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 really proud of you exiting your business and re-inventing yourself.
- 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 Muay Thai fight.
- Niklas Christl, thank you for being one of the most successful yet humble and honest people I've met. That contrast is amazing and inspiring. Hope to see you soon and catch up again.
- 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. We had many amazing chats and nights out. Hope to visit 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.
- 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.
- Mohammad, thank you for giving me perspective on life and how you can continue being happy and positive no matter what happens.
- All the staff and friends at Cafe Nero for giving me free coffee and letting 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, it's not on purpose.

Constantly updating this list.