

Tim Ferriss on tolerable mediocrity, false idols, diversifying your identity, and the advice he gives startups



[Matt Linderman](#) wrote this on Jan 13 2011 / [70 comments](#)

When 37signals began writing [REWORK](#), author [Tim Ferriss](#) offered us helpful advice on the publishing world and book marketing. We've admired his lean writing style, focus on efficiency, and outsider-to-bestselling-author ascent for a while now. Recently, I sat down with him at The ACE Hotel in NYC to find out more about his views on the workplace and the advice he gives to startups.

Do you hate your job? Good. At least, you're not bored with it. That's how [Tim Ferriss](#) looks at it. According to Ferriss, feeling comfortable at your job can be a trap. "It's worse to tolerate your job than to hate it because, if the pain is painful enough, you'll make a change," he says. "But if it's tolerable mediocrity, and you're like, 'Well, you know it could be worse. At least I'm getting paid.' Then you wind up in a job that is slowly killing your soul and you're allowing that to happen. Comfort can be a very, very dangerous thing."



So how do you break out of a comfort rut? Ferriss says, "It's very valuable to amplify the pain. If your job is mediocre, sit down and do an exercise on paper to really run through what your life is going to look like in two, three, five years if you continue to do what you're doing. What options are you going to have? If you don't have kids now, but you're going to have kids in five years, do you want to be in the same job at that point? What are your options going to be then? What is your risk tolerance going to be then?"

"When people telescope out a few years to the natural conclusion of their current behavior, it can be really terrifying. And I think that's what more people need. It's certainly what I needed. I was doing extremely well financially in mid-2004. And then I had a long term girlfriend break-up with me because of my 7am – 9pm schedule. It was a huge eye-opener for me. And I needed that pain, or I would not have changed my behavior."

The end goal is not idleness

That change of behavior led Ferriss to slash his time commitments, which became the basis of [his breakthrough book](#). But is constantly searching for workplace hacks a worthy goal? If you're doing something you love, do you really need to constantly search for shortcuts?

"I think one of the ways my message is misinterpreted is viewing the end goal as idleness," responds Ferriss. "That is a false idol. And it's a very sad destination when you do arrive, because you recognize that it is not a worthwhile destination."

“Idleness is a false idol.”

"For me, the objective has always been: How do you improve per-hour output to the greatest extent possible? And how do you concurrently design the lifestyle that you want to have? Because I do believe that life is intended to be enjoyed. For many people, they love what they do, but they don't want to do it 80 hours a week. For them, it would be dialing back from 80 to 40, let's just say. Whether that's a teacher, pastor, or writer — just being more efficient and effective with your time.

"In the second category, you have people who don't love what they do. It comes back to that comfortable mediocrity. And for them, it's about replacement. It's not about reduction. For them, the goal is to get to the point where they're doing what they love. And that is the objective of everything that I teach. It's not to be idle, but it's to get to the point where you control your time and allocate it to the things that will give you the most joy and also provide the greatest impact. For each person, that will be very individual."

Diversifying your identity

With his latest book ([#1 bestseller The 4-Hour Body](#)), Ferriss is evolving out of being the "The 4-Hour Workweek" guy. He says, "I don't want to put out 'The 3 1/2 Hour Workweek' or 'The 3-Hour Workweek.' It would be boring for me to produce and it would be boring, I think, for many people to consume. So, 'The 4-Hour Body' for me, was the opportunity to focus on what I've been obsessed with for a much longer time than time management.

"A big part of it was diversifying my identity. I didn't want to paint myself into a corner where I felt obligated to maintain a certain level of 'success.' Even if 'The 4-Hour Body' were to do far worse than 'The 4-Hour Workweek,' I felt this was a necessary step for my own personal preservation.

"I also wanted to diversify the public perception of my expertise. I want people, hopefully, to read my material because of the way I deconstruct problems, not because of the specific subject matter. I would rather be in the same vein as [Malcolm Gladwell](#) or [George Plimpton](#) than someone who's known for just being an expert in one subject matter."

Ferriss has also spread out by becoming an angel investor ([StumbleUpon](#), [Digg](#), and [Twitter](#) among others) and advisor to startups. He gives don't-put-all-your-ego-in-one-basket advice to the people he works with too. "One of the recommendations that I make to many of the startup founders I advise is to have at least three or four areas of interest outside the business," he explains. "Don't become a Dow Joneser, someone whose mood and self-worth goes up or down dependent on the Dow Jones, which you have no control over.

"If your entire ego and identity is vested in your startup, where there are certainly factors outside of your control, you can get into a depressive funk that affects your ability to function. So, you should also, let's say, join a rock climbing gym. Try to improve your time in the mile. Something

like that. I recommend at least one physical activity. Then even if everything goes south — you have some horrible divorce agreement with your co-founder — if you had a good week and set a personal record in the gym or on the track or wherever, that can still be a good week."

According to Ferriss, embracing diversity can also be an important step for starters looking to enter a new arena. "For people who are considering becoming an entrepreneur and taking the plunge, if their identity is vested in being a lawyer, being a graphic designer, it can be very harrowing and terrifying. And I know it was for me, to make the jump into sacrificing some of that to pursue an entrepreneurial venture.

"But it doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing wager. You don't have to sacrifice all of one to have the other. I think, for most people, it makes a lot of sense to moonlight and to test the waters for a period of time until you have income coming in, and you're confident that you have what's required — not only financially, but psychologically — to be an entrepreneur."

Plus, slowly segueing is much less intimidating than making a big jump. "The 4-Hour Workweek' is still out there. I still write on these topics. I haven't gone cold turkey from one to the other. But I am slowly segueing into a broader selection of subject matter. And I think that's very applicable to many people who are making a jump from a company or employment to self-employment, or from simply one startup to another, or from one industry to another. I think ensuring that you diversify your identity is very, very helpful — and it's a big safety net."

How to measure data

Ferriss [famously used Google AdWords and in-store A/B testing](#) to come up with the title to his first book [Full title: "The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9-5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich"].

He took 6 prospective titles that everyone could live with: including 'Broadband and White Sand', 'Millionaire Chameleon' and 'The 4-Hour Workweek' and developed a Google Adwords campaign for each. He bid on keywords related to the book's content including '401k' and 'language learning': when those keywords formed part of someone's search on Google the prospective title popped up as a headline and the advertisement text would be the subtitle. Ferriss was interested to see which of the sponsored links would be clicked on most, knowing that he needed his title to compete with over 200,000 books published in the US each year. At the end of the week, for less than \$200 he knew that "The 4-Hour Workweek" had the best click-through rate by far and he went with that title.

His experimentation didn't stop there, he decided to test various covers by printing them on high quality paper and placing them on existing similar sized books in the new non-fiction rack at Borders, Palo Alto. He sat with a coffee and observed,

learning which cover really was most appealing.

What advice does he give to the businesses he advises when it comes to studying data? "Don't measure too many things," he says. "People often become overwhelmed with a deluge of data because they're looking at 1,500 variables. And that can be paralyzing because you end up sitting there looking at your analytics program all day long as opposed to doing the more uncomfortable thing that you should be doing, like calling that big customer. And usually, the most uncomfortable thing to do is the one that people need to act on soonest."

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"I'll give you an example of how you might think about this. When I was testing the subtitle for the 'Four-Hour Body,' there were dozens of different subtitles. And I tested first with 50 people who knew how to market. They were very top-tier, world-class marketers. They came back with winner number one, number two, etc.

"Then I wanted to also test the response to those headlines by my readers, using Twitter and Facebook. But those didn't match at all; What the marketers liked and the responders at Facebook and Twitter liked were not the same.

"I wanted to ensure some degree of statistical significance, so then I polled once again, asking about 5,000 people two different things. 'What's your first choice?' had five different options. And then I said, 'What's your second choice?' and I had another five options.

"What I found is that people over-analyzed their first response. They were too intellectual about it. It didn't reflect the knee-jerk response. And then for the 'What is your second choice?', the favorite second choice was more than 50 percent a single answer.

"And so, I ended up tweaking that second response and putting it back into the group for the first five. It ended up being the best performing. And that ['An Uncommon Guide to Rapid Fat-Loss, Incredible Sex, and Becoming Superhuman'] is the title we ended up using."

One killer feature

When working with startups, Ferriss sees one problem popping up over and over. "The biggest weakness I see is companies getting focused on implementing new features," he says. "That's the biggest waste of time that I see. They have a viable product that people are paying for and instead of identifying their cheapest avenue for acquiring profitable customers or focusing on polishing the product they already have, they focus on adding ten new features."

["Mike Maples"](#) is one of the angel investors I most respect in Silicon Valley. He says the startup that perfects their one feature and is the best at that is usually the startup that wins. It's not the startup that's an 8 out of 10 on 10 features. It is the startup that is 10 out of 10 on one feature — that just kills it. And you see it over and over again. They might have other features, but they absolutely kill it on one feature.

"And I think that's where many startups get derailed. They feel like they are not profitable enough, because they lack just one more feature. They have people asking for this one feature. And, in some cases, it makes sense if everyone is bitching about something to fix it. But if you are constantly chasing the vocal minority, you are never going to be done building your product. And you will constantly be a 5 out of 10 on all of your features and you will run out of money. Or you will just have a product that really isn't that awesome. That's a pretty shitty fate too. Focusing on just one or two features is really important."

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Responding to critics

With success comes critics, and Ferriss has collected his fair share of them. Many find his outlandish claims troublesome. He laughs when I read him [this comment from a Hacker News thread](#):

*Tim's Next Book: Go to heaven in just 4 hours a day.
He'll show you how to guarantee entrance into heaven when you pass into the beyond, no matter what sins are committed in real life through a combination of Zen, Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism.*

So how does he feel about people who view him as a snake oil salesman? "I think people *should* be skeptical," he says. "I'm sure I have a few things wrong in the book, without a doubt. But I would say: Look at the data. I'm not asking you to just trust me and take my opinion. I have data.

"The vast majority of people who agree with you, or benefit from your product or book, will not say anything. Then there's a small minority who will praise you. And then there's a much more vocal minority who will be the people who absolutely hate not so much the product, but whatever they believe you stand for. If there's something factual that I feel I need to respond to, I'll respond. But if it's just 'this guy's a bullshit artist,' then I don't view that as worthy of a legitimate answer."

And what's on the agenda for his next book? "I don't know if I'll ever do another book," he says. "I'm actually eager to try a different portion of my brain. So maybe a screenplay or fiction. I'm not convinced that I'll be good at either of those things, but I'd like to try something new." Sounds like more diversifying is on the way.

Related:

[Tim Ferriss explains how "The 4-Hour Body" came to life with Basecamp and Highrise](#) [Product Blog]

[The Four Hour Body: Lessons Learned From Tim Ferriss' Book Launch](#) [The Creative Penn]

[Kevin Rose and Tim Ferriss Discuss Angel Investing and Naming Companies](#) [fourhourworkweek.com]

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About Matt Linderman

Now: The creator of [Vooza](#), "the Spinal Tap of startups." Previously: Employee #1 at 37signals and co-author of the books *Rework* and *Getting Real*.

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