

Interview with Emilie Wapnick, Author of *How To Be Everything*

Interviewed by: Melanie Buford // University of Cincinnati

Abstract

Emilie Wapnick is a nationally-known thought-leader on career satisfaction. She has authored the book, *How to Be Everything*, a text used in University of Cincinnati's Academic Internship Program to offer students an alternative to traditional models of work. Wapnick has popularized the term "multipotentialite," an individual with multiple talents and creative interests, and manages an online community to support multipotentialites in gaining relevant experience and building satisfying careers. Her popular TED Talk "Why some of us don't have one true calling," has more than 6 million views.

This article features an interview with Emilie Wapnick, during which she expands upon her innovative approach to career and answers hard-hitting questions about the viability of career design in today's competitive market.

As students and professionals alike pursue creative and meaningful work, innovative authors like Emilie Wapnick continue to inspire and challenge us to ask more from our evolving global market.

Wapnick is known for coining the term "multipotentialite," a name for those who juggle multiple passions and creative pursuits. The concept of multipotentiality has quickly caught on, drawing a number of Millennials and Gen-z-ers in particular.

On October 12, 2018, I had the opportunity to interview Emilie to learn more about her thinking on multipotentiality and how professionals can realistically apply her ideas in their own lives and careers.

1. What all are you working on now?

Any new initiatives in the works?

I've just finished developing a new course that will be out in late October called *Work Your Work! A Crash Course on Building a Multipotentialite-Friendly Career*. I felt there was a need for a quick, accessible/affordable way to help those who've just discovered they're a multipotentialite learn about how other multipotentialites structure their careers. The course includes short lessons, worksheets, and audio prompts. My hope is that students will come away with, not just an understanding of how to sustainably integrate multiple passions into their lives, but an actual, customized list of multifaceted career ideas.

Other than that, I'm continually working on improving the Puttylike and Puttytribe communities. We just hired a new managing editor and we're looking to add more writers to the blog, with an emphasis on including a greater diversity of voices. There's a website redesign in our future, too.

In non-Puttylike related news, I just finished writing an original television pilot script. It's a coming-of-age show about a queer 16-year-old girl growing up in Montreal, Quebec in the early 2000s. It's sort of an AFTER-coming out story about someone trying to find their place in the queer scene, navigate relationships, and deal with the standard emotional angst of just being a teenager. I'm not sure where this project will go, but I'm having a lot of fun with it right now.

2. As you know, your book, *How to Be Everything*, is one of my students' 3 textbook options in the Professional Development course I teach. I ask them to critically engage with the text and I'd like to get your take on one of the questions that has often come up. Many of my students express concerns about financial freedom and pursuing multiple careers. Do you have any advice for balancing financial realities and pursuing passions?

I don't believe that you need to choose between pursuing your passions and having financial stability. The multipotentialites I interviewed and learned from while writing *How to Be Everything* were all people who self-described as being both happy and financially comfortable.

It's important to get clear on your financial goals, and to take them into account when considering and experimenting with different career ideas. Having enough income (whatever

"enough" means for you) is necessary to flourish creatively and not be in a continuous state of stress. As a multipotentialite, you also need a sense of meaning in your life, plus a degree of variety. Each of these ingredients—money, meaning, and variety—needs to be present in the right amount for a career to really feel fulfilling.

3. Do you feel that everyone should feel empowered to pursue their passions, regardless of circumstance, education or skillset?

You need to be able to eat, pay the bills, and live safely and securely. That's always priority number one. It's difficult to pursue your passions when you're under intense financial or emotional stress. I believe that everyone should have a right to pursue their passions, but building a career that you love takes time, and sometimes you need to do whatever you can—for now, to survive—and worry about building your dream career once you have more stability in your life.

4. Are you familiar with the work of Cal Newport? He argues that the way to find professional freedom is to hone a rare and valuable skill over many years, in other words to focus on one area and get uncommonly good. Do you feel that there's anything to be said for building a skill over time? What place might this kind of thinking have for multipotentialites?

There's no one way—no one approach that works for everybody. Clearly, Cal Newport's model works for some people. But in my experience, many multipotentialites who try to focus on a single, narrow professional path end up being profoundly unhappy. I think we should all design careers that align with how we're wired and how we like to work. If you're someone

who's passionate about a number of different subjects, then you'll be much happier with a life and career that provides you with some variety.

Of course there's something to be said for building a skill—or rather, skills—over time. Multipotentialites aren't inherently unskilled or unfocused. Most multipotentialites develop expertise in several areas and actually become quite good at what they do. Multipotentialites also tend to connect and combine disparate areas to develop their own forms of expertise.

5. As I'm sure you know, many multipotentialites experience burnout while balancing multiple passions. I'm both a writer and a full-time professor, for example, and have to work hard to manage energy. What advice do you have for managing burnout? Have you experienced this in your work?

One of the biggest challenges faced by multipotentialites is figuring out the balance between exploration and making progress on your projects. That usually involves experimenting to see how many different things you can handle at once, and how many is too many. As far as managing energy and burnout goes, I've found that taking on fewer projects at once, lowering my expectations for what I accomplish each day, and just generally paying attention to how I feel physically and emotionally and practicing healthy self-care, really helps.

6. How do you feel about the role of talent in pursuing passions? If a multipotentialite is pursuing a skill, let's say visual art for example, and they're receiving feedback that they aren't demonstrating natural talent for the area, how would you suggest they respond to this?

I think it's pretty cruel to tell someone they aren't "naturally talented" at something... I believe that if you're passionate about a particular area and you put in the time and work, you will develop skills. So, I guess I don't put much weight into "natural talent."

Also, it's okay to pursue your interests purely for fun and/or to be kinda crappy at things (especially at first... That's just normal). A lot of people feel nervous about trying new things because they worry that they won't be very good. But everyone's somewhat incompetent when they begin learning something new. The fear of being unskilled or looking stupid holds many people back from learning, growing, and seeing where things lead.

If someone is rude enough to tell you you aren't "naturally talented," I would suggest ignoring the comment and getting around other people who are more supportive. Keep doing you.

7. What is your personal vision for Puttylike and the work you've been doing on multipotentiality? How do you want the world to be different?

I want Puttylike to be a space where multipotentialites can be themselves, feel supported, and get help as they navigate their lives and careers. I would like to reach a great deal more people because I think there are a lot of folks out there who don't understand "what's wrong with them" (i.e. that nothing is), and are really struggling. I think multipotentialites are super talented and interesting, and I want to empower more of them to embrace their plurality and bring their gifts to the world.

Thanks Emilie.