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Don't live your life passively. Don't rely on luck or serendipity. You can create your own opportunities, your own success and *Smartcuts* can help you along the way.

Smartcuts (“smart shortcuts”) are tools to shorten the path to success. There are several basic categories of smartcuts. First, you can find ways to shorten the job, cutting out unnecessary steps, people and processes. Once you've abridged the task at hand, you can use your energy more efficiently and maximize your effort. Finally, use your momentum to soar, gaining momentum so that you never stop.

In *Smartcuts: How Hackers, Innovators and Icons Accelerate Success*, Shane Snow offers a lot of counterintuitive ideas. Some readers are likely to feel uncomfortable

with so much common wisdom under attack, but however unsettling such ideas may be, they are quite rational and the arguments for them are sound. Snow has a unique intellect, and he is able to frame issues in new and refreshing ways. This is his first book, and it would be well worth it to follow his career.

There are countless ways to think smarter and to work more efficiently, but there's no substitute for hard work. There are many examples of successful people in this book, each of whom were willing to work hard for their achievements. The tools and techniques presented here will increase the odds of success, but only when accompanied by earnest and sustained effort.

Of course, the obvious problem with this subject matter is that the people who are capable of outside-the-box thinking probably already know how to engage in this kind of thinking (so don't need the advice). Those who need to learn this skill the most (and need the advice) are unlikely to get much help from being told to think outside the box—telling people to do something doesn't mean they will do it. Nonetheless, *Smartcuts* is likely to help those people who just need some clarification and a few pointers to make the leap.

PART I: SHORTEN

Chapter 1: Hacking the Ladder

U.S. presidents are, on average, younger when they take office than U.S. senators are when they start their terms: the average age for presidents, senators and members of the House is 55, 62 and 57, respectively. This trend has held true since the founding of the country, and it is perplexing, as service in the legislature is commonly viewed as a stepping stone to presidential office. The job of president is more complex than that of a legislator (and harder to get), yet presidents are, on average, younger than legislators. It's counterintuitive, to say the least.

When we analyze the career paths of American presidents, it becomes clear that they spend less time climbing the governmental career ladder than do their counterparts in the legislature. American presidents tend to have unique career paths. This pattern can also be seen with other highly successful people—rather than follow the prescribed strategies for success, they create their own paths to achievement. They aren't ladder climbers; they're ladder hackers.

At Brigham Young University, students play “Bigger or Better,” which is a kind of a scavenger hunt where participants go door to door trading everyday objects with those in the neighborhood. The point of the game is to trade up. Students start small, with toothpicks for example, and at the end of the night they have scored items like stereos and televisions. Snow leverages this example to explain that there's an

advantage to be gained in switching ladders, shifting skills and other resources to a different paradigm to gain profit. It's a sort of existential arbitrage.

Many U.S. presidents started on one ladder, demonstrating their leadership skills in one arena, then switched ladders. Woodrow Wilson, for example, was a university president. Frank Sinatra said of New York, "If I can make it here, I'll make it anywhere." And he had a point. People judge you by a different standard if you can succeed in the competitive jungle of New York. People also judge presidential candidates by a different standard; they judge them by their leadership skills.

Playing the game and paying your dues is really a trap that results in you getting stuck. This is a new day, and the old paradigms don't work anymore. To succeed, we need to be more like Sinatra. We need to be college students continuously trading up, trading bigger and better. We need to jump sideways like cheetahs. We need to think like entrepreneurs. We need to hack the ladder.

Chapter 2: Training With Masters

Some people, like comedian Louis C.K., pay their dues and struggle for years before they find success. Others, like singer Justin Bieber, catapult quickly to the top of their field. Snow parallels these experiences with the story of Homer's *Odyssey*. When Odysseus went to war, he put his son in the care of his good friend Mentor, who was goddess Athena in disguise. Athena gave Odysseus's son so much good advice that he became a hero. Just like Odysseus's son, Bieber had good mentors.

Throughout literature, there are countless stories of mentors. Fiction is populated with the likes of Obi Wan Kenobi and Micky Goldmill. Mentor narratives resonate with audiences, probably because mentors really do help their pupils. People recognize the truth in these stories and gravitate to them. Mentorship, however, does not of itself guarantee success. It must be accompanied by a lot of hard work.

But don't wait for a mentor—it's like waiting for prince charming. Pursue your goal, and if you happen to find a good mentor, cool. If not, cool. In that case, study the people who went before you. You can't always get a mentor, but you can always learn from history. Jimmy Fallon's manager was his personal mentor, but Fallon also looked for inspiration from comedians who came before him, even though he didn't know them. Louis C.K. struggled for a long time. Eventually he did find a mentor in George Carlin, and consciously studied and mimicked Carlin's delivery and style of humor. After he adopted this strategy he quickly rose to stardom.

Chapter 3: Rapid Feedback

Upworthy began when founder Eli Pariser noticed that trashy stories were circulating on the internet, but little edifying content was popular. Pariser wanted a site that

would help positive stories go viral. Media companies take a long time to build audiences, and Upworthy took a long time to catch on.

Now we're in New York, at a mock funeral for startups. Techies have decided that failure is cool.

Actually, people who fail at their first business are more likely fail at the next one, too. People who are successful have a better chance of succeeding again.

We tend to blame failure on outside sources, which keeps us from learning from them. But we do learn from other people's failures, and when we see someone else fail, we tend to blame them. We don't want to be like them, so we learn from their mistake.

Feedback doesn't usually work, because people are too self-conscious to take it to heart. And if feedback makes us self-conscious, it can make us perform worse. Nevertheless, negative feedback can be immensely helpful, if we can manage to focus on the task rather than on ourselves. It's hard to be objective about ourselves and our performance, but that's exactly what we must do — put egos aside and accept the feedback. To learn from negative feedback, you've got to get comfortable with failure.

Take, for example, students at Second City comedy school who analyze their performance so that they can learn from failure. Feedback should come immediately after performance, whenever possible, so every night after the show, the cast returns to the stage and practices new bits for any audience members who choose to stick around. It's a casual performance, and the audience is solicited for suggestions on how to improve the gags. Second City's process helps comedians get into the right headspace to do this.

Case Study: Upworthy posted a touching video about a boy who died of cancer. They posted in same video with a variety of headlines. Some of the headlines proved more popular than others. After they got more data, they reworked the headlines again. Finally they found a headline that improved clicks by an impressive 116%. Then they added a thumbnail picture which improved the click-through rate another 69%, for a total improvement of 186%. The good people at Upworthy used feedback to craft a headline that made the video so popular that ultimately 10 million people viewed it.

PART II: LEVERAGE

Chapter 4: Platforms

Roads often started out as bumpy dirt lanes, improving in stages. Eventually they get paved. In the same way, computers have improved in stages. No one need understand binary code anymore to use a computer; layers of improvement have made them

easier to use. To paraphrase Isaac Newton, when technological improvements rely on previous improvements, they stand on the shoulders of giants.

Snow offers a different definition of “platforms” than you’ve likely seen elsewhere. According to his definition, a platform is something that’s part of the process of translating what the user types into code that the computer can understand, as well as the layers of improvement that each new iteration adds. Platforms are more about the interface of computer and user.

Famous scientist and mathematician Freeman Dyson doesn’t think schools should teach kids math; rather, schools should teach kids the tools they need to do math. Instead of memorizing multiplication tables, kids should learn to use calculators. It turns out that people actually do learn math faster with calculators; hands-on learning makes us want to learn. Similarly, platforms help us master the basics much quicker. What we all need is to learn to use platforms. Platforms can be tools like calculators. They can also be environments, like schools. More innovation happens in urban areas, because cities are platforms.

Chapter 5: Waves

Surfers wait for the right wave. They study the ocean and paddle to a good spot. Some people are really good at reading the water; they develop an instinct from pattern recognition. We can also deliberately look for patterns.

Pattern recognition will help you determine when to jump in and surf. Being first in a market is traditionally thought to give companies a first-mover advantage, but this isn’t necessarily the case. Sometimes the second or third wave in a set will have more power than the first. It is good to understand patterns and to watch the waves and figure out which one to ride.

First movers have a high failure rate. Early leaders do not. The first movers have to do all the heavy lifting, like getting the infrastructure set up. Early leaders can then come in and get a free ride. But sometimes the first wave is the best one, after all.

Sonny Moore was in a band called From First to Last. They were dropped by their label and they broke up. Moore started messing around on his computer, creating electronic music. He had a friend who was a DJ, and the pair started hosting dance parties in L.A. warehouses. Electronic dance music was a new genre that was exploding in popularity. Technology made it easier for the average person to create music, and the internet made it easier for this music to spread.

Moore started releasing EDM tracks online for free, and one day a producer asked if he wanted to work with an up-and-coming singer named Lady Gaga. Gaga became famous, Moore’s star began to rise, he changed his name to Skillrex and the rest is

history. It wasn't luck that brought Moore to his achievements, it was his ability to read the waves.

Sometimes hard work isn't enough. Sometimes you have to get in the water and know which wave to ride.

Chapter 6: Superconnectors

Imagine you're at a party where you don't know anyone. If you're outgoing, you might walk up to someone and start talking to them. If you're an introvert, you might wait for someone to talk to you. Either of these tactics might lead to conversations with a couple of people. Now imagine you have a friend at the party who is outgoing and talkative. Your friend introduces you to everyone she thinks you should know, and you end up talking to 12 different people. Your friend has played the role of a superconnector.

Mass media acts as a superconnector in society. In Cuba, there were several attempts to take power out of the corrupt hands of the dictatorship and the mob, but the revolutionaries had trouble finding allies and gaining followers. The Batista regime succeeded in chasing the rebels, including one Fidel Castro, into the jungle highlands. Although the rebels managed to hold on to a tiny piece of land and conduct raids from there, the group was tiny and powerless compared to the might of the government. And there was no way for the revolution to spread, as most Cubans didn't even know it was a thing.

Then, someone brought a ham radio transmitter and it changed everything. The peasants had radios (and precious little else), and they listened to the revolutionaries. More and more of them began to join the cause. Support for the rebels snowballed, and on January 1, 1959, Batista fled the country and the revolution was over. Castro and his peasant rebels had control of the island nation.

Che Guevara started literacy courses for the people; he also taught farming and self-defense. Guevara understood that their radio station couldn't just be a channel for revolutionary propaganda. He insisted that everything they broadcasted should be completely true. Because of this stance, the rebels gained the people's trust. Whatever you might think about Castro—and no matter how bad Cuban-American relations might be—some of the lasting effects of the revolution still help the people to this day. The literacy rate, for example, is at 99.8%, which is higher than literacy in the United States.

The radio is a superconnector.

PART III: SOAR

Chapter 7: Momentum

Wealthy people get depressed once they no longer have anything to work toward. Astronauts have this problem as well. So it turns out that people in dead-end jobs and really successful people have more in common than you might guess: they both get depressed because they feel they aren't progressing or moving forward. People need to feel progress and feel they are moving forward. In fact, momentum is more important than quality or financials or most anything else. And sometimes the perception of momentum is as good as momentum itself.

In 2010, Paul Vasquez posted a funny video on YouTube, and it became a viral sensation. Vasquez was on fire. Around the same time, Michelle Phan posted a makeup tutorial video, which also became a viral hit. Phan's tutorial became as popular as Vasquez's comic video.

Vasquez continued to make videos, trying to capitalize on his early success. He sold t-shirts with the theme of his hit video. But he never again saw the success of that first video. Phan, on the other hand, has become wildly popular on YouTube. She's one of the top producers of videos on the site and has contracts with makeup companies. Her star continues to rise.

These two people with similar early successes had very different outcomes.

Michelle Phan's interest in art started when she was a teenager. She had a blog which featured her creative projects, and eventually she made it into art school. The video that would catapult her to fame was a tutorial on how to copy Lady Gaga's makeup on her Bad Romance video. Phan analyzed how videos became hits and developed a strategy for success on the site. After her Gaga video, people looked at the other videos she'd created. She had enough of a backlog to keep people entertained, and she continued to post new ones to take advantage of the momentum. Her approach worked and she now has a successful YouTube channel.

Vasquez, on the other hand, was a one-hit wonder with a mundane back catalog of ordinary home movies. He had never planned on the fame that came to him so suddenly. He was as surprised as anyone by his initial success. He had no strategy for how to perpetuate it beyond selling a few t-shirts.

We have learned some important lessons here. Capture momentum when it happens. Strike while the iron is hot. Build up potential so you can jump on unexpected lucky breaks. You also have to pay your dues, lay the groundwork. Prime the engine of opportunity.

Chapter 8: Simplicity

Incubators are made for hospitals (big institutions with big budgets), and technological improvements make them more expensive with each iteration. They consume large amounts of electricity, because of which, most third-world hospitals can't afford these lifesaving devices. Even those managing to acquire incubators can have trouble generating the electricity needed to run them.

Jane Chen wanted to do something about this. At first, she and her team considered making cheaper incubators, but they never could strip enough features to make a cheaper version work. They reconsidered the problem and realized that what a premature baby needs more than any other thing is warmth. An incubator's other features, like life sign monitors, were nice to have, but they weren't as important as keeping the baby warm.

With that insight, they went on to invent something akin to a preemie sleeping bag, which was insulated and came with a hot pad. The invention worked. It kept babies warm, it was easy to use and it required much less energy than an incubator. The outcome was that babies' lives were saved and continue to be every day. Sometimes the simple solutions are the best ones. Bigger is not always better.

To innovate is to do something new. Disruptive innovation is when something new changes the game so completely as to eliminate all the established players. Disruptive innovations usually save either time or money. These technologies are simplifiers. They make things easier; they make things simpler.

Innovators have a talent for simplification, for zeroing in on what matters, and for focusing on the important challenges that they face. And innovative geniuses eliminate unimportant decisions from their lives. Steve Jobs, for example, stuck to black turtlenecks and one style of jeans so he didn't have to waste time deciding what to wear. A study at the University of Minnesota showed that having to make multiple small and inconsequential decisions can sap a person's subsequent self-control, and deplete patience and willpower. Clearing out the clutter of minor decisions can improve the quality of big decisions.

Sometimes the momentum to move forward keeps us on the wrong track. When this happens, simplification allows you to focus on what's important. Constraints help creativity. If I ask you to say something funny, you'll likely freeze and have trouble thinking of anything to say. On the other hand, if I ask you to specifically tell me a knock-knock joke, it's much easier. Constraints make the task easier.

As Steve Jobs said, simplicity is "the ultimate sophistication."

Chapter 9: 10x Thinking

Entrepreneur Elon Musk sold his first video game at age 12, and by 31, he had started and sold two companies. With time and money on his hands, he began to study space travel. He felt that, like most other technologies, it should get cheaper over time. But it did not. Only governments invested in space, and because it was so expensive, they didn't invest in big-ticket outcomes, like sending people to Mars.

Musk, however, thought that sending people to Mars would be an important step in human development. So he did the unthinkable: he put a team of rocket scientists together and began working on the problem as a private enterprise, SpaceX. Because he wasn't the government, he didn't do things the government way, and he managed to find ways to cut costs significantly.

The kind of smartcuts that drive Musk's success is called *10x Thinking*—the art of taking a big swing. To really make big improvements, you have to change things, sometimes drastically. And to do this, you have to let go of some assumptions. You can't just look for improvement, which will get you just 10% better. You're looking for 10x better.

Aiming high results in better performance, because people try harder. Also, when there's just a few competitors, our performance improves compared to when there are none. When people know there's lots of competition, they underperform; this is called the N-Effect. People like big swings. It's part of who we are; the grand gesture captures our attention.

Elon Musk's rockets kept crashing, but he kept trying. His third rocket, Falcon 1, was launched in August 2008, and like the two before it, it crashed. He rallied his supporters and convinced them that it was worthwhile to keep trying. He was right, and his next attempt on September 28, 2008 successfully launched into orbit. It flew perfectly.

After he'd successfully launched a rocket into space, it was easy for him to get funding. People, including investors, were excited, because Musk had done what no private party had ever done before: he had radically changed the playing field. He had made a 10x change. This captured people's imagination much more than any incremental change ever could have.

People who achieve these sorts of big dreams are role models for the rest of us. They let us know that we can achieve the implausible.

Epilogue

D'Wayne Edwards grew up in Joliet, Ill. He had a disadvantaged childhood. His mother was disabled and from her Social Security disability insurance, she raised six children.

Edwards was attracted to art. In middle school, he became enamored with sneakers and they became the focus of his drawing. He became such a good artist that by high school, he exceeded his art teacher's abilities. The school encouraged him to make a lateral move to drafting class, which fostered discipline in his drawing.

He spent a lot of money on shoes and worked in fast food to pay for this addiction. After winning a design competition, Edwards became determined to become a shoe designer when he grew up. When he graduated high school, he couldn't afford art school so went to community college instead. He got a temp job doing filing at LA Gear, where a suggestion box sat in the office. Edwards kept submitting design ideas to the suggestion box—ultimately, he got the boss' attention and was offered a job designing shoes.

Sneakers were enjoying immense popularity among young men and boys at the time. Most of the people who designed sneakers didn't know much about the young people who were buying their shoes, but Edwards did. He was one of those kids. His designs spoke to them in a way that other designers could not. Edwards rose in the field, moving from company to company in a variety of jobs. By the time he was 30 years old, he was one of eight people to design Air Jordan sneakers. He had achieved the pinnacle of his field.

He wished there were more African American shoe designers. To fill this gap, he founded a design academy. He got high rollers in the industry to fund scholarships for disadvantaged students and other populations that were underrepresented in the shoe business. He used his own experience to teach the students how to succeed. Edwards' story exemplifies the smartcuts framework.

To summarize the ideas presented in this book, the following is a list of the nine important principles:

- Make lateral moves
- Train with masters
- Facilitate rapid feedback
- Platforms will determine how many people and who you can reach
- Catch waves
- Super connection unites talent and industry
- Generate momentum
- Simplify
- Engage in 10x thinking

[West Stringfellow](#) from medium.com