

By **LOUISA DEVADASON**
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THE phrase “Jack of all trades, master of none” has taken on several forms – with both negative and positive connotations. In fact, in its initial appearances during the early 1600s the phrase was just “Jack of all trades” and flip-flopped between being a form of praise and a diss.

This term was popularly used by Robert Greene in 1592 to dismiss William Shakespeare – an actor turned playwright. However, by the 17th century, the phrase was generally used as a term of praise – at least until the phrase “master of none” was tacked on, making its meaning less ambiguous.

An alternate version of the phrase now goes: “Jack of all trades, master of none is oftentimes better than master of one.”

Yes, this phrase goes in circles. And so does the debate: Which is superior at work, being a jack-of-all-trades or a master of one? Generalisation or specialisation?

THE PROS OF BEING JACK

There are a few obvious benefits to having developed skills in several fields; you are adaptable and have significantly more transferable skills than the average Joe. Maybe you can do a little bit of programming, a little bit of social media management, and you know copywriting and how to make lattes well enough to get a job in any of these areas.

You can definitely use your other skills in whichever job you go for to be more effective at your role or you could use them just to bond and network with peers (a good cup of coffee is always welcome!).

Furthermore, a common driver of the jack-of-all-trades is the thirst to expand one's skills, and learn, and an insatiable curiosity for the things in one's surroundings. Whether you realise it or not, these qualities have made you a skilled learner.

You are adept at learning and have developed shortcuts to consume as much knowledge in that area as possible. This passion for knowledge and curiosity was undoubtedly what drove the genius that was Leonardo da Vinci to invent, paint, and write, as well as explore science, medicine and music.

Entrepreneur and author of the popular “4-hour” themed self-help books, Timothy Ferriss, had this to say about the generalist approach: “In a world of dogmatic specialists, it's the generalist who ends up running the show. Is the CEO a better accountant than the CFO or CPA? Was Steve Jobs a better programmer than top coders at Apple? No, but he had a broad range of skills and saw the unseen interconnectedness. As technology becomes a commodity with the democratisation of information, it's the big-picture generalists who will predict, innovate, and rise to power fastest. There is a reason military ‘generals’ are called such.”

Particularly in this day and age when most industries are becoming increasing-

JACK OF ALL TRADES VS MASTER OF ONE

WHY MASTERING ONE AREA WHILE KNOWING A BIT OF EVERYTHING WILL CARRY YOU FAR



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ly intersectional, the need for people who can bring together skills from multiple areas to address these complex issues, is on the rise.

JACK OF ALL TRADES ≠ MEDIOCRE AT EVERYTHING

In order to consider oneself a jack-of-all-trades, it is important to be confident and well-versed in whichever skills you're touting. Ideally, you'd have on average an intermediate level of skill, but James Liu, founder and developer of BoxCat Games, says at least one of your skills should clock into the competence or master zone.

He said, “Over my many years of learning, iterating, and teaching, I've arrived at the conclusion that the process of learning, as humans, can be abused, tuned, and scaled easily.

“There comes a specific point in your life where you can reach or obtain near mastery of one specific subject. After that, there's a base of knowledge that you can (and will) build analogies on. By doing so, you take one industry and mirror it into another. I would emphasise, **you cannot be a jack-of-all-trades without being a master of at least one.**

“Perhaps it is social skill, doll-making, mathematics, language, emotional awareness – you must be a master of at least one in order to be a jack of many others. Mastery of one trade can be converted into a catalyst for learning other fields. You have something to pull from, complex ideas you can pattern match,

and metaphoric analogies that can complete a picture.

“The more you learn, the faster you learn.”

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

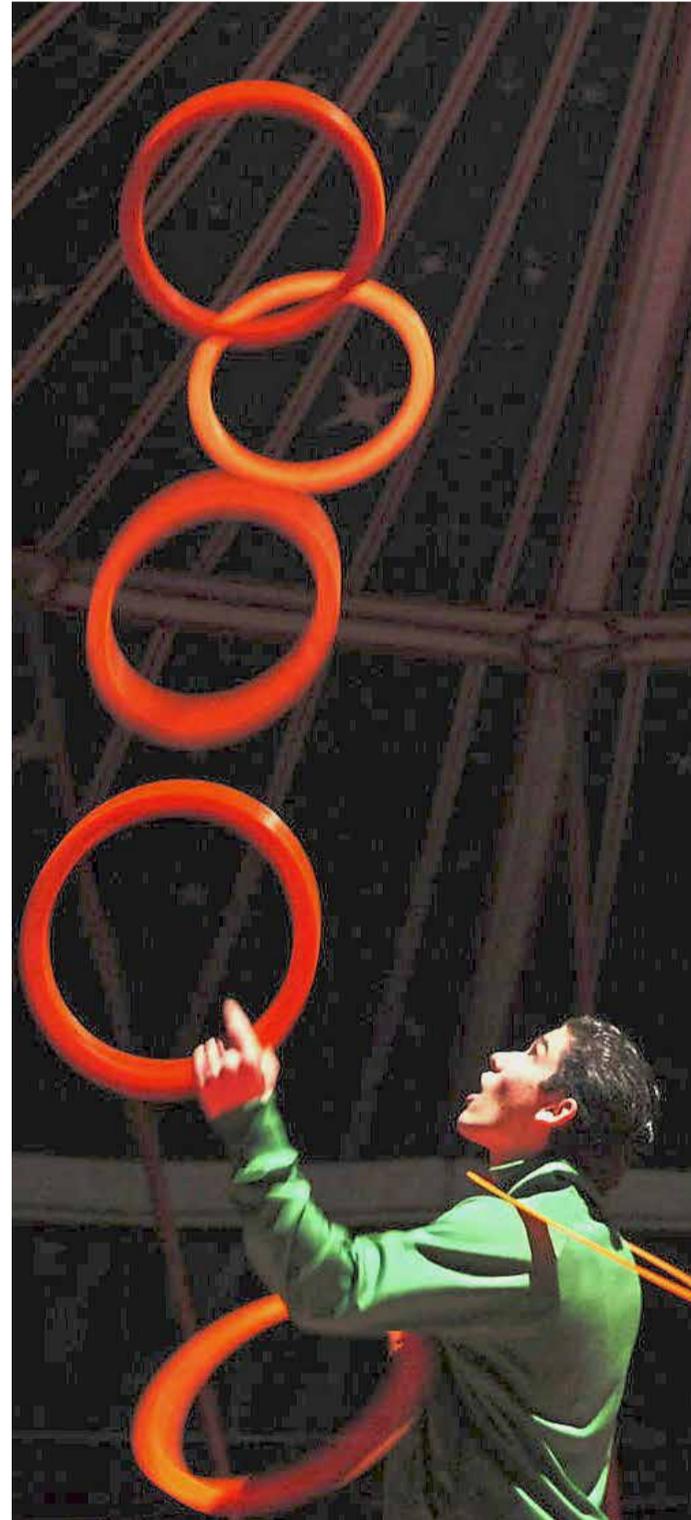
If you identify with being a jack-of-all-trades, chances are you get bored once you've satisfied your curiosity in an area or if you feel like you have too many interests and abilities to just pick a job.

Thankfully, we are in an era where many jobs come with diversified roles or have two or more roles rolled into one. While tough, these areas are dynamic and engaging and allow you to marry your various skills in new and exciting ways.

However, it is important to mindfully and purposefully put time and effort into becoming a master of one or more areas, as specialisation is still prized and greatly valued, especially in large firms. This attitude will take you far. The upside of mastery in several trades is that it opens you up to divergent thinking, innovative problem-solving and new ideas – capabilities that are increasingly in demand in the current economy.

So, expand your horizons but explore them thoroughly.

■ *Louisa is a psychology major and freelance writer for Leaderonomics. She believes the time to change and be greater than you've ever been is now. To reach out to Louisa, e-mail louisa.allycyn@leaderonomics.com*



Juggle at developing a wide range of skills to stay versatile, but don't neglect to cultivate deep expertise in one or two selected areas.

STEPS TO MASTERY

While everyone's journey to success may look different, here's a simple list of tips to use as a reference point on where you are in your journey to mastery:

1

PONDER, OBJECTIVELY, AND SEEK AN ACCURATE AWARENESS OF SELF

It's important to know and be clear about how much you know and how well you can perform in a certain area. It's important to assess what you know and what you need to know before you can call yourself a master.

2

BE CURIOUS AND KEEP WANTING TO LEARN.

Every field is always expanding and evolving. It's important to be mindful of that and always be hungry to know more. Staying on top of the latest in your areas of interest will keep you a cut above the rest.

3

TRANSLATE THIS KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION.

While it's great to know stuff, it's better to do something with all that knowledge. Be prepared to suck a little at first, though, because it's all about learning from mistakes and real-world scenarios. Stay resilient and you will press on to master whatever you have thrown yourself into.

4

BE WILLING TO COMMIT

To master something, one must be willing to put in the time needed. You do not necessarily have to block out everything and only focus on one thing, but you do have to commit time and energy regularly to master something.

5

EVALUATE YOURSELF

Someone can be considered a master where they're successful about 80% of the time, so pay attention to the feedback you're receiving and keep a journal of your progress. This way, you know how long you take to resolve similar issues or even the outcome of various strategies which you can then further evaluate.