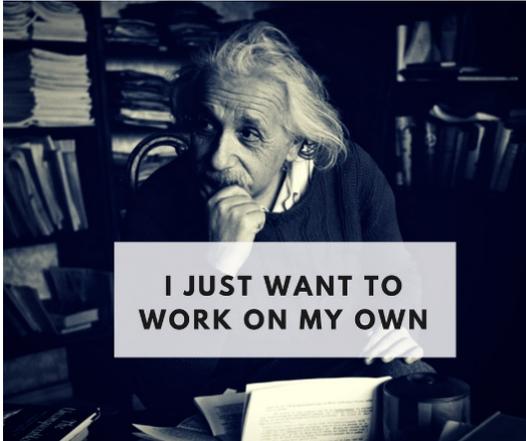


by Mike Hawkins  
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Careers generally go in two directions – mastery or management. Either you focus on a domain and work toward being a respected subject matter expert or you pursue management and work your way up the proverbial corporate ladder. Which is better? Which pays more? Which adds more value? Which is more satisfying?

Many people believe they must take on the management career track to grow in responsibility, compensation, and respect. Company policies and managers often nudge people in this direction, if not explicitly, implicitly by giving more attention to those in management. Some even promote a philosophy of “up or out” meaning that if you don’t keep taking on more management responsibility, you plateau.

You then lose relevance and ultimately your job. But for people who desire a career track in management, these companies offer opportunity for advancement.

Other companies give employees the option to grow in their career through hands-on domain contributions. People in these companies who add value through their expertise and individual contributor skills are respected as much as those who manage and lead people. Titles for people at the top levels of domain expertise include fellows and principles. Fellows and principles are highly regarded and consulted on some of their company’s most important issues. They conduct research and provide input to new products. They are innovators and thought leaders. They are internal and external evangelists.

There is much debate regarding which career path is best in terms of job satisfaction, compensation, and employability. Counterintuitively to many, the most significant contributions to a company’s success often come from masters. Of course there are many leaders who also make significant contributions. Maybe it depends on if you want to work on your own or as part of a team. As the legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden said, “Go alone if you want to go fast. Go as a team if you want to go far.”

In small companies and regions such as Silicon Valley there is pressure on employees to be both – masters and managers. The role of Chief Technology Officer is an example where people are expected to maintain deep subject matter expertise as well as lead a team of architects, researchers, and evangelists. Managers with small teams, particularly in small companies, also do both. Company founders are often masters and managers.

I started my career as an engineer focused on building and applying my subject matter expertise. I then moved into sales and continued building and applying my individual expertise, although in the sales domain rather than the engineering domain. I then moved into management and spent the next 15 years of my career managing and leading people. But in my mid-forties, decided to pursue a career in mastery. Mastery for me, being in the people domain, uniquely allows me to utilize my individual contributor skills as well as my management skills. As a small business owner, I have employees, but spend most of my energy applying my domain expertise. So I do both. My days are typically a blend of mastery and management.



## Career in Management, Mastery, or Both?

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Pursuing domain mastery and people management is not possible or ideal for many people. It can be the equivalent of two full-time jobs. When a master has responsibility for more than a few people, the job becomes unwieldy. Employees who work for masters generally don't receive the motivation, encouragement, coaching, guiding, managing, and advocacy that come from good managers. The master is too busy attending meetings, reading technical journals, researching, experimenting, speaking, writing, and making individual contributions. Both jobs combined result in compromises and frustrations, especially for the employees who get ignored.

Which path are you on—mastery or management? Are you adding value indirectly through people or directly through your domain expertise and hands-on contributions? Or are you trying to do both?

Here is a brief questionnaire to help you decide if mastery or management is right for you. Score each question on a scale of 0-10:

[http://www.alpinelink.com/docs/Management\\_vs\\_Mastery\\_Potential\\_Assessment.pdf](http://www.alpinelink.com/docs/Management_vs_Mastery_Potential_Assessment.pdf)

If you scored above 100, you are ideally suited for a career in mastery. If you scored below 50, you are ideally suited for a career in management. If you scored between 50 -100, you have interests in both and may be well suited for a career that involves both. If both, proceed with caution. Pursuing both could result in doing a mediocre job at one or both. Do yourself and your team a favor, limit the number of people you manage to a few.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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