

CHAPTER
2

The Master Plan

SHORTLY AFTER I RETURNED TO WORK FROM MATERNITY LEAVE IN the spring of 2010, the economy felt like it was grinding to a halt. A series of never-ending what-ifs started running through my head. What if I lost my job? What if my husband, Sujay, lost his job? What if both happened at the same time? The stakes had never seemed so high. As a twenty-something, child- and mortgage-free reporter, I could pretend that everything would be okay. If I lost my job, I could take an entry- to mid-level position, even with a pay cut, if necessary. But now that I was a mom and a homeowner, I knew that if I lost my job, things would be very, very bad. What if we couldn't pay our mortgage? What if, down the road, we couldn't afford college for our daughter? Or retirement?

Those thoughts sent me into spirals of anxiety in the middle of the night, when I was hardly sleeping anyway due to our daughter's frequent wake-ups. It was a recipe for a jittery, stressful return to work, but it hatched a latent daydream that I had long entertained—to make money outside of my full-time job. For years, I had looked enviously on people who seemed to effortlessly find financial success and fulfillment by selling crocheted scarves on Etsy, or by teaching woodworking on the weekends to clients found through Craigslist.

The concept of earning income from multiple sources seemed like the Holy Grail of financial security to me; I dreamed about finding my multiple streams the way a romantic sixteen-year-old might dream of one day walking down the aisle.

I figured I could start by focusing more on freelance writing, although it required a hefty time investment for relatively meager pay. Also, the influx of laid-off journalists into the marketplace, along with thinning advertising pages in the few print magazines that had managed to continue publishing, meant this freelance work was getting harder to find.

I also wanted to speak more, especially after one author told me that she regularly collected \$5,000 speaking engagement fees, which was what allowed her to pay the bills while she spent most of her time on the less-lucrative pursuit of writing. I had received several speaking requests since my personal finance book *Generation Earn* came out, and while none of them came with a \$5,000 fee, they did pay something, and I enjoyed connecting with audiences and feeling like I was helping spread the message of financial literacy. If I redesigned my website to feature my speaking and workshop offerings, and perhaps reached out to credit unions and other organizations that might want to host me, perhaps that could eventually turn into a solid income stream.

In the short term, though, I wanted something else—something fun, creative, and potentially profitable, and I had an idea of what it could be. A reader had sent me an email asking if a workbook for my first book was available; she said it would be easier for her to get organized if all of the exercises and to-dos were laid out in one place where she could take notes. Since no workbook currently existed, I figured I could create one, and sell it, perhaps as an e-book through Amazon.com.

Around the same time, I interviewed Amy Stringer-Mowat, a thirty-something former architect with an Etsy shop, for a story on recovering from a layoff. She had lost her job in retail design during the recession and had been working as a freelance architect out of Brooklyn when she created state-shaped cutting boards for her wedding in April 2010. Her design experience meant she knew how to

design and manufacture wood products, and she had access to the necessary tools and equipment. After she got married, she posted three of her cutting boards on Etsy. Within two months, she had been interviewed by editors at the *Food Network Magazine* and *Real Simple*, which featured her products in its annual holiday gift guide. “We weren’t completely prepared, but since I had past experience with manufacturing on a small scale, we had the space and the machines, and we knew how to order boxes,” says Amy. By the end of the year, she had sold over five thousand cutting boards and was earning a six-figure income.

As I was researching her shop before our interview, I found myself drawn to the “paper goods” section on Etsy. Sellers wrote and designed calendars, meal planners, and even party planners, and many of them were sold as PDFs, which meant no shipping was involved. The idea hit me quickly: Instead of a workbook, which sounded too much like homework anyway, I could create money planners and sell them on Etsy as digital files. They would help people get their finances organized and be based around big life events and goals, from having a baby to paying off debt to buying a home.

I quickly flew into execution mode. I drafted my first money planner, which walked readers through my best tips on better budgeting, smarter saving, and savvy spending. The first few pages asked people to reflect on their big money goals and personal definition of financial success. Charts helped them map out their net worth and organize all their accounts and passwords; strategies sprinkled throughout, such as how to create a budget that works and where to park savings to get the best return, were designed to help them make smarter money decisions. Given the emphasis on aesthetics at Etsy, I tried to make the planner as visually appealing as possible. I hired an illustrator to create a turquoise and white cover, and then sprinkled her drawings throughout the text. And I studied up on Etsy, scouring a book on how to make money on the website and learning how others had found success. Clear, enticing copy and beautiful photos appeared to be key. I spent hours choosing and cropping the best images to display.

Within two weeks of conceiving of the idea, my first planner was for sale and my shop, which I dubbed Palmer’s Planners, was open for

business. I felt a rush every time I logged on to see my visitor stats, which hovered at around ten people a day (and most likely consisted largely of my own family members). Still, creating that storefront gave me an unexpected sense of pride; it felt different from when my magazine stories are published, because even though they have my name on them, they are usually group projects, created by my editors as much as by me. My planners, though, were all me. And I was proud of them.

That sense of pride dimmed only slightly when the first week passed and no orders came in. But luckily, that dry spell was only temporary.

GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Many of the side-giggers I interviewed found their pursuits by simply paying attention to the world around them—a single experience, or combination of experiences, often sparked the idea that turned into a mini-business. Tara Heuser, a thirty-something with an art history degree, based in Washington, D.C., started pet-sitting after a friend asked her to watch her two cats while she was away. After Tara got laid off from her job at a custom framing company she put word out that she was looking for more pet-sitting clients, and she also placed an ad in Craigslist. Now, even though she's back at a full-time office job, she maintains six pet-sitting clients and is looking for more. That cash—she charges around \$60 per night to pet sit—supplements her modest income from her nine-to-five job.

Married couple Beena Katekar and Sudhansu Samal, who both hold down information technology jobs outside of Boston, had their aha moment at the grocery store. Their five-year-old daughter kept asking them to buy toys. “We kept saying, ‘no, no, no,’ and she asked, ‘Why not?’” says Beena. To make it easier to say “no” (and to minimize the chances of a mid-aisle meltdown), Beena and Sudhansu wrote a simple program for their iPhones that compared how much their daughter had in her piggy bank to the cost of the toy. If the cost was

higher than the amount she had saved, the program denied her request. If she had enough, then it said, “Yes.”

It worked so well that Beena and Sudhansu soon began wondering how they could create a “grown-up” version to sell as an app to adults. They ended up designing a program that asks users about savings, expenses, debt, and other factors, as well as the cost of the desired item, and then spits out an answer: approved or denied. The answer comes with an explanation: “You don’t have enough savings,” or “you need to pay off debt first.” Beena and Sudhansu say part of the benefit is simply getting people to look up their own financial numbers.

Soon after making their app, *Can I Buy?*, available through Apple’s App store for \$1.99, it was featured as a top money app in *Parade* magazine. Beena and Sudhansu quickly sold over 1,000 copies, and they have plans to expand with more upgrades and features in the works.

Chris Hardy’s idea came from a radio talk show. He was a repairman for school band instruments in North Carolina when he heard about Fiverr.com, a website that lets people sell products and services for \$5. “I started thinking, ‘What can I do for \$5?’” he recalls. A former voiceover actor now in his late forties, Chris tried out one of his talents, speaking in cartoon voices. “I will speak your message in a cartoon voice of your choosing,” he posted.

Within two weeks, Fiverr featured his offering on the homepage, which led to a burst of sales. Now, he gets up to twenty orders a day and is on track to earn close to \$10,000 this year. He spends between two and five hours a day working on his voice recordings and editing them. “I charge \$5 for a quick edit, and an extra \$5 for a more professional-level edit,” he says.

As a result, Chris says, “It seems like a constant stream of money is going into my PayPal account.” At first, he used the money to pay for his wife’s college costs, including \$800 worth of textbooks. Then, he and his wife decided to move to Augusta, Georgia, and his Fiverr income became even more important as he switched to working as an independent contractor for a family-owned music store. “Fiverr is a third of my income right now, and I can set my own hours,” he says in

his authoritative voice. (Whenever I talk to him, I feel like I'm interrupting the narrator of a movie trailer.)

As Tara, Beena and Sudhansu, and Chris show, choosing a side-gig is deeply personal; the right one fits like a favorite pair of jeans, stretchy in all the right places. Side-giggers find ways to exploit their unique skills and interests along with what's currently marketable. A side-gig offers the chance to return to a childhood hobby or long-abandoned skill. Or it can be the opportunity to quickly pull in cash from a talent that's currently in demand, from voice impersonations to clever Tweets.

If you're reading this book, you might already have a budding idea of what your side-gig could be, or perhaps you've already launched one. But if you're still looking for that initial spark, these kinds of big-picture questions can help jostle loose any latent ideas:

- 1.** What do you read about in your free time, or browse on the web?
- 2.** What topics do you most often discuss or email with friends?
- 3.** What are friends or family members most likely to ask for your advice about?
- 4.** What makes you jealous—any friends' accomplishments, or Facebook posts, that make you think, "I wish I was doing that?"
- 5.** How do you most enjoy helping people?
- 6.** What can only you create?
- 7.** What services do you enjoy providing for free?
- 8.** What do people you consider role models do to find new sources of income?
- 9.** What is easy for you to do that other people find difficult?
- 10.** What part of your full-time job do you most love and wish you could do more of?

Asking friends to answer these questions for you can also shed light on how others perceive you and may open your eyes to side-gig strengths. You might be surprised to hear that they think of you as their go-to party-planning expert, or that you give the best relationship advice. For more ideas and inspiration, you can flip to *The Economy of You Handbook* in the back of the book. The exercises are designed to help generate and launch side-gig ideas, and the list of top fifty side-gigs shows what is currently popular and profitable. (You can also download “Find Your Gig” at economyofyou.com.)

Fishing for Gigs

Websites where other side-giggers advertise their own products and services can help spark the idea for your own venture. Here are some top resources:

Craigslist.org: Its old-school feel also makes the site easy to use; people market skills ranging from tutoring to lawn services.

Elance.com: Creative professionals gather here to offer their marketing, writing, sales, and technical skills.

Etsy.com: This site features handmade and vintage items created by artists and other creative types, with a strong emphasis on visual appeal.

Fiverr.com: Among the quirkier new sites, Fiverr.com makes it easy to sell any product or service for \$5.

Freelancer.com: Like Elance.com, this site caters to online professionals, both technical and creative, looking for work.

Guru.com: Projects related to e-commerce, engineering, and design are most popular on this freelance site.

Odesk.com: This site features web development, writing, design, and other online skills.

ON-THE-JOB INSPIRATION

One of the richest sources of side-gig ideas, in fact, might be your day job. Many of the side-giggers I interviewed created their gigs from some variation or offshoot of their full-time career. Maia Heyck-Merlin, senior advisor at Achievement First, an educational nonprofit in New York City, discovered her side-gig after noticing that many of the teachers, principals, and nonprofit managers she works with struggle to stay organized. As someone who's always been naturally well organized, Maia started sharing her tricks with her coworkers. "I would have staff members over and we would spread out papers on the floor," she says. As a former teacher herself, she developed a method of what she calls "togetherness" that was particularly useful to educators, who often have information coming at them all day long from different sources. "When you're behind a desk and have no time for a bathroom break and no time for emails or text messages from parents or messages over the intercom, it's really hard to stay organized," she says.

As Maia, now in her mid-thirties, developed her strategies, more and more teachers started asking for her help. She started giving workshops for teachers and school leaders. A former colleague from Teach for America connected her with education executives interested in one-on-one coaching. Then, a local graduate school, the Relay Graduate School of Education in New York, heard about her work and hired her as an adjunct professor, and she picked up even more clients. She juggles her full-time office job with her company, Brass Tacks, by applying her time management techniques to her own life: She starts her day in the office early, leaves by 4:45 p.m., has family time with her two-year-old daughter and husband until 7 p.m., and then two nights a week gets back on the phone to coach clients or talk with teachers until 9:30 p.m.

While she recently scaled back her Achievement First working hours to 50 percent and might soon downgrade her hours further to help her spend more time on her coaching business and promote her book, *The Together Teacher*, Maia has no plans to give up her job entirely. "I love it. I have no desire to leave," she says. And she's found that her bosses love her side-business, too. "It's helpful for their

branding,” she says. Her nonprofit gains an employee who’s an expert in time management and organization for educators.

Any stress that comes from that balance is well worth the satisfaction she gets from feeling like she’s helping teachers do their jobs better. Teachers often tell her, “Thank you, now I think I can do this job for longer,” and with so many teachers burning out and leaving the profession, she feels like she’s found the perfect intersection of her own skill set and passion with what the world needs.

Field hockey coach Emily Beach, a childhood neighbor of mine, also found inspiration on the job. She first came up with the idea for a field hockey stick that would make it easier to teach players how to dribble with their left hands when she was sitting in a meeting with her boss, planning a youth hockey camp for three-, four-, and five-year-olds. “I was thinking, ‘This is going to be a disaster’—I was picturing them not comprehending the idea or just not being strong enough to use their left hand,” she says.

While some coaches slide an empty toilet paper roll over sticks to prevent players from controlling them with their right hands, there’s no more durable product on the market to impart those skills. So on a piece of scrap paper in that meeting, Emily sketched out her idea for a stick with a rotating grip. Then, that night, she went home and took a hand chisel to an old wooden stick. Over the course of four hours, she wedged out a gap in the stick that would allow her to slide a plastic pipe over it. She had her prototype. “I said, ‘I’m not letting this out of the house’—I don’t want it to get stolen. The next day, I started contacting people to find an [intellectual property] attorney,” she recalls.

As soon as she got the patent approved two years later, in 2009, she started taking her creation, which she named the Dribble Dr., on the road with her. Since her job as a coach requires her to travel to conferences and tournaments, she had a built-in network of potential customers.

Emily soon set up a workspace at her parents’ house in suburban Washington, D.C. Tucked away in a back room in their basement, next to wrapping paper and Christmas decorations, about 150 sticks hang from the rafters, waiting for Emily to turn them into Dribble Drs. The real work happens outside, in the garage: Donning sweatpants, long

sleeves, goggles, and a mask to protect herself from flying splinters, Emily spends hours leaning over the belt sander, shaving down the wooden sticks so she can slide the piping over top, and then finishes them off with grip tape. The stick supplier she found in Pakistan has already added her Dribble Dr. logo to the sticks for 25 cents each.

Emily, who's now in her early thirties, launched her business while she worked as a field hockey coach at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., but she soon got a call from the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, recruiting her to coach the field hockey team. At the job interview, her future employers asked her about her patent. They said they hoped she would talk to the players, many of whom plan to go into engineering or technology fields and dream of creating patented designs themselves, about the legal and business aspects of her design, along with imparting her hockey skills. "It comes up, and I'm always happy to share," she says.

In addition to coaching work, Emily continues to build her company. She's now sold over two hundred sticks for between forty and sixty dollars each, and has had preliminary discussions with some athletic companies about potentially purchasing her patent, which could lead to a big payday.

Maia and Emily show that pursuing a side-gig that's closely related to your full-time work can actually be a boon to your employer, too. Finding a pursuit that makes your employer look good, or teaches you extra skills, such as html coding or public relations, that your employer can then use to its advantage, offers a double payout—earnings from the side-gig as well as increased value at your job. In fact, even the experience of running a side-business itself is a skill employers increasingly look for. A 2012 survey by Generation Y consultancy Millennial Branding found that one in three employers say they now look for entrepreneurship experience when evaluating potential hires. (If your employer doesn't welcome side-gigs as warmly, or your two jobs are in conflict with each other, you can find suggestions on how to handle that in more detail in Chapter 6.)

As Dan Pink observes in *Free Agent Nation*, "Moonlighting, once a way to get fired, now may have become a way to get hired."

Now that we've stirred up some potential ideas to serve as your

financial parachute, let's figure out which ones will really be able to open up and whisk you off to the land of financial security.

GETTING REAL

In addition to focusing on what they want to do, successful side-giggers also zero in on the flip side of the equation: what people will actually pay them to do. Some side-gig proponents don't like this part of the conversation, because they think if you work hard enough, then anything is possible. To some degree, they might be right. Sell hand-made purses out of cat hair? Sure—in fact, somebody is doing that right now on Etsy. Earn thousands by blogging about your immense pop culture knowledge? The author of *Suri's Burn Book*, a policy consultant by day, is proof that it can work. But paying attention to the market, and what it will realistically support, can make finding side-gig success a whole lot easier.

Solid side-gig ideas—ones that can take you to the next level financially—usually share the following characteristics:

1. They have low start-up costs.
2. They have a large potential upside and are easily scalable.
3. They fit well with full-time work (or at least do not pose a conflict), which usually means they can be done on your own schedule.
4. They take advantage of your own unique creativity and skill set.
5. They are fun to do.

That's why many highly trumpeted but ultimately disappointing ideas don't make the cut, including taking online surveys, working minimum-wage part-time jobs, or viewing online ads for two cents a click.

Instead, successful side-giggers ask: What fields are growing? What does this world need? What problems can I solve? In general,

many of the fields with the most job security are the ones that can't be automated or outsourced. One-on-one services, anything involving creativity, or a complex task requiring a highly educated brain tend to be solid bets. If your own passions and skills happen to overlap with any of those in-demand fields, you're in luck.

Research from popular freelance websites, including Elance.com and Freelancer.com, show that demand for creative, online services is booming, as corporations and smaller businesses opt to outsource more work. Freelancers increasingly handle web content creation, design, marketing, social media, and even data analysis. The July 2012 Global Online Employment Report from Elance found that web design postings increased almost six-fold and content writing three-fold over the previous year. That's convenient for side-giggers, because those types of jobs are also easiest to fit in alongside more traditional, full-time careers.

TESTING THE WATERS

Many side-giggers opt to launch a test run before getting too far into the planning process. It's easy to create a product listing online or start a blog and offer services, and taking that step gives you a chance to fine-tune what you want to offer—and lets you see who might buy those products or services. If you're thinking of starting a copyediting business, for example, then you can create a listing on Craigslist.com or another popular listing site to see if anyone bites. If you want to become any kind of coach or other service provider, then you can start your blog or website and clearly describe the services. If you want to start selling your photos online, then you can create an Etsy or Red-Bubble.com account and start uploading your art. In addition to letting you check out your potential client pool, taking this step is also big psychologically: As soon as you open up your virtual shop, you're officially in business!

Finding a side-gig that can bring in significant amounts of cash is often about experimentation in those early stages. Kylie Ofiu, a hair-

dresser in her late twenties in Sydney, Australia, knew she wanted to supplement her income—in fact, she has big dreams of becoming a millionaire one day. She launched her quest to earn more first with a blog, kylieofiu.com, where she writes about money-saving and money-earning techniques. She started running advertising on the blog, which brought in a small amount of money, and also tried selling things she no longer needed, such as old jeans and old furniture, on eBay. In addition, she tried her hand at freelance writing for companies and affiliate marketing. At the same time, she continued cutting hair.

As Kylie honed some of her techniques, she realized that she had the potential to earn much more by focusing on her professional writing. She landed a book contract to write *365 Ways to Make Money*, which was released in Australia, and that project led to paid speaking gigs. Her blog helped her grow her audience and make connections with potential speaking sponsors, so she invested her time in that, as well. She's now able to support herself and her family (she has two children) primarily through her writing, along with some speaking gigs at blogging conferences. "My blog itself is not my main source of income, but it has given me opportunities to earn that I wouldn't have had otherwise," she says. Still, Kylie says she constantly reviews and updates her earning strategies every few months to see if she should make any adjustments.

Todd Henry also took the baby-step approach, and started what would later become a thriving business, when he launched a podcast on creativity. As the creative director of a nonprofit in Cincinnati, Todd struggled to figure out how best to keep his team of thirty motivated to constantly think up and develop new ideas. So he started talking about that challenge online, through his podcast, *The Accidental Creative*. On each episode, he explored creativity-boosting ideas, such as eliminating clutter from your desktop, or eating more energizing food. Soon, he had a steady following of fans who downloaded his podcasts from iTunes. (I first heard about the podcast when a college friend, a graphic designer, emailed them to me because she thought they were so useful.)

"I realized people were listening to it, so that raised the stakes," says Todd. He created a companion website, accidentalcreative.com,

and started waking up at 5:15 a.m., before his children, to put in two hours of work before heading to his office. As his costs related to podcast and website management started adding up, he looked into how he could monetize his work. First, he created a membership community, so people could pay to get extra content and interact with Todd himself. He also started selling products, including personal idea pads with prompts. Then, companies began asking him to speak to their employees, often about how to increase their own creativity. That last one turned out to be the big winner, and became the main revenue stream for his company. (He has since left his nonprofit to work on *The Accidental Creative* full time.)

Taking those experimental steps also gives you the chance to see how easily (or not easily) your side-gig idea blends with your full-time job. For some people, especially for those who work in highly technical or regulated fields with strict ethics codes, this can be a minefield. A doctor, for example, cannot, or at least, should not, moonlight as a sales rep for a pharmaceutical company. A federal worker who approves contracts cannot accept money from potential contractors for after-hours services. A software coder for a big company cannot launch a competing product outside of office hours. (In addition to making sure it doesn't conflict with your job, you might also need to make sure the side-gig doesn't conflict with your living arrangements. Certain residential areas, rental units, condo associations, and local governments prohibit residents from pursuing business activities on the premises without permission or a license; a quick check of your contract or bylaws can determine if you need to take any extra steps to keep your gig legal.)

The perception of an ethical lapse can be just as harmful as an actual breach. Suze Orman found herself under heavy criticism when she launched a prepaid debit card and then used her journalism to hawk the benefits of the card. Heather Armstrong, who writes the popular blog *Dooce*, was famously fired from her full-time job after writing about work on her site, even though she didn't identify the people or company by name. Actress Hilary Swank's reputation took a hit after she collected a big appearance fee from Chechen leader and alleged human rights violator Ramzan Kadyrov. Successful side-giggers usually go out of their way to make sure their side-pursuits don't jeopardize their full-time

jobs, which are still, after all, their primary source of income. But fear of crossing a nonexistent line often prevents people from ever finding a way to pursue their side-gig, and that can be an even bigger mistake than making a minor error that requires an apology.

PREPARING TO LAUNCH

When I launched Palmer's Planners on Etsy, my plan was pretty simple: I would create my products, adding more over time, and promote them by reaching out to personal finance bloggers and writers interested in hosting giveaways and guest posts by me. Then, as I slowly grew my lineup of planners, I would look for bigger distribution networks. I dreamed of a national company like the Paper Source or Container Store eventually licensing my products.

When I sold only one planner after two weeks, I started to get a little frustrated. Where were my customers? And why hadn't the Container Store called me yet? It turns out that thinking too big, too quickly is a common mistake that can actually end up thwarting success. BJ Fogg, director of Stanford's Persuasive Technology Lab and an expert on behavior change, says that people often fail to reach their big goals, such as losing weight or becoming rich, because they focus on that abstract outcome instead of the behavior changes required to get there. He recommends breaking goals into smaller ones that are more manageable.

For those of us intent on launching a successful side-gig, that means taking a series of modest steps to get there, which could include:

- ▶ Purchasing a domain name for your product or service.
- ▶ Opening up a Twitter account.
- ▶ Creating a website describing your services.
- ▶ Calling someone in your field to ask how they became successful.
- ▶ Reading a blog related to your pursuit.

BJ, in fact, launched his own side-gig based on this premise. Through his website, bjfogg.com, he offers an online program based on spending just three minutes a day on a new habit, such as writing a single sentence in order to become a novelist. With that gradual approach, the new habit can turn into something significant, he says. He spends about half his time at Stanford and half on his outside projects, which includes corporate workshops and group coaching.

In other words, I shouldn't be discouraged that Paper Source hasn't yet contacted me about licensing my planners. According to BJ, I'll have a better chance of meeting my big goal of financial security through my side-gig if I focus instead on the interim goalposts that will take me in the right direction.

So I slowed my pace and came up with a more realistic, step-by-step plan, and one that could fit with my demanding day job, too. Instead of rushing to launch more planners, I focused on promoting the handful already available. That, it turns out, would be a much bigger job than I realized.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

- ✿ Side-giggers often find their entrepreneurial pursuit after an experience that turns them on to a particular need or demand in the world.
 - ✿ Ideas often grow out of skills gained in full-time jobs.
 - ✿ Successful side-giggers usually spend significant amounts of time honing and testing their ideas.
 - ✿ Small steps toward building a side-gig can be more productive than big ones.
-