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HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

How Minimalism Leads to Success: Lessons from the Writing Habits of George R.R. Martin

In 1971, a young writer named George R.R. Martin graduated with his Masters degree in Journalism from Northwestern University. For the first 13 years of his career he wrote professionally and made a living out of it, but did not have any major success.

In 1983, he released his fourth book, *The Armageddon Rag*. The book was a huge flop – nobody read it. In his own words, “It essentially destroyed my career as a novelist at the time.”

However, he was determined and found ways to keep writing. He landed a job writing television scripts for the CBS network, but soon thereafter the show was cancelled. He managed to work his way onto another TV series, this time on the ABC network, but it was also cancelled. Only in 1991, after nearly a decade of job-hopping, he decided to start writing fiction again.

Two million words later, George R.R. Martin was famous.

Martin is the author of the best-selling fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The first book in the series, *A Game of Thrones*, has turned into a blockbuster television series. The 7-part series has not yet finished (Martin is currently working on the sixth book), but it has already sold more than 25 million copies.

What is most impressive isn't how good the books are, but rather **how** Martin writes his best-selling works...

The Power of WordStar

In total, Martin has written almost 2 million words for the series thus far...

- Book 1: *A Game of Thrones* – 298,000 words
- Book 2: *A Clash of Kings* – 326,000 words
- Book 3: *A Storm of Swords* – 424,000 words
- Book 4: *A Feast for Crows* – 300,000 words
- Book 5: *A Dance with Dragons* – 422,000 words

That is a total of 1,770,000 words – an incredible feat. At this point you may ask what sophisticated program does Martin use to produce such an amazing volume of work?

Well, he writes the novels with a program most people have never even heard of called WordStar 4.0. In order to understand the simplicity of the program, here is a picture of the typical WordStar screen.



Martin says, “I still do all my writing on an old DOS machine running WordStar 4.0, it is very old – but unsurpassed in terms of simplicity.”

He further mentions, “I am not on Facebook. I am not on Twitter. Neither will I be on the next big thing that comes along, the one that makes Facebook or Twitter obsolete.”

The Minimum You Need to Succeed

George R.R. Martin is selling more books than nearly anyone on the planet, yet his computer can’t even send an email. Think about that for a moment.

We are inclined to think that in order to be successful, we need more productivity tools, more and bigger business contacts, a bigger network of clients or perhaps more fancy workout gear or clothes.

But perhaps what we really need is less. Maybe we really need fewer distractions and more focus. Perhaps we need a few carefully chosen constraints that narrow our energy onto what really matters instead of collecting a bunch of resources that distract us from what we really need to do.

Focus, Consistency and Patience

The minimalistic manner in which George R.R. Martin writes his novels is so effective because he applies the principles of focus, consistency and patience in the way he conducts his work.

(1) Focus: Unfortunately, we cannot be good at everything and it is hard to be great at more than one thing. So make sure you pick the one thing you would like to become great at and focus on it.

Martin writes on a computer without Internet, social media, applications, distractions or graphics. But his computer can do one very important thing – type words and ultimately typing is his craft. It will determine success in his field. He is 100 percent focused on doing the work that matters and has completely eliminated anything that impedes that goal.

(2) Consistency: Focus is pretty useless if you are only focused now and then. It is the ability to show up time after time that makes the difference.

Martin was working as a writer for twenty years before he sat down to write *A Game of Thrones*. He worked on multiple shows that were cancelled and ultimately found himself without a job. He even wrote early books that flopped commercially.

However, I am willing to bet that even if *A Game of Thrones* was a flop, he would have found a way to keep writing. You see, he is not just focused on writing when it is easy. He is focused on writing regardless of the circumstances, plain and simple. He in fact persisted with his writing despite everything suggesting he should not.

(3) Patience: If you are focused and consistent, then allow time to work for you. The results will invariably come. Remember to focus on the process, not the goal.

I am sure Martin wanted to achieve glorious success and commercial fame as quickly as we all do. He probably would have liked his first book to sell 25 million copies. It is unlikely that he wanted to put in 20 years of work to eventually attain commercial success with his novels. The difference is that he did not let the urge for overnight success derail his commitment to his daily work. Remember, the greatest display of patience is reflected by continued commitment to the process when you are not rewarded for it yet.

Perhaps the best way to maximize our potential is to eliminate distractions, not accumulate more resources.

Maybe we should start implementing a minimalistic approach where we apply focus, consistency and patience in the challenges we undertake.

What if we really understood the minimum we need to succeed?