

The Influence of Paul Graham on Me

This blog post was translated by ChatGPT 4o.

Paul Graham has been the most influential person in my life over the past year. I've learned a lot from his ideas. He often recommends an article to anyone he considers ambitious — “You and Your Research” by Richard Hamming, a computer scientist who made significant contributions. Hamming suggests that people should ask themselves three questions:

- What are the most important problems in your field?
- Are you working on one of them?
- If not, why not?

Hamming asked these questions at Bell Labs, where he gave a speech that the mentioned article is based on. One would think that people at Bell Labs were all working on important problems, but that wasn't the case. Compared to Hamming, most of them fell short.

In his article, Hamming believes that to become an outstanding scientist, one must: 1) Be emotionally invested in their field; 2) Acknowledge that lack of effort or investment is due to personal shortcomings, not external conditions; 3) Continuously ask oneself the three questions.

Paul Graham also emphasizes in many of his articles that to stay focused, one must set aside trivial tasks. Choose one or two genuinely important things and devote all your time to them, letting other tasks fall by the wayside. For example, my laptop bag has a torn inner lining. Although I wanted to buy a new one online, I decided to ignore it and continued programming. After a semester, the bag was more damaged, but still usable. I ended up liking the bag more, as it served its purpose. I saved time I would have spent shopping for a new bag. Similarly, after a semester in Beijing, I realized I had been showering too frequently in the South. Back home, my sister complained about my lack of showers. But in the southern winter, daily showers seemed like a waste of time. Time saved from such activities could be used for more meaningful pursuits. Many small, unimportant tasks, if not done immediately, might become unnecessary. The time saved can be used to create greater value. Showering doesn't create value. I mean creating products people want and generating wealth for society.

Paul Graham, who runs a startup incubator, has written extensively about entrepreneurship. He states that the fastest way to create wealth is through entrepreneurship. Technology significantly increases productivity, and small teams make it easier to measure individual contributions. In large companies, individual contributions are harder to measure. Thus, IT startups can lead to quicker wealth accumulation. First, IT is high-tech, with high productivity and a good market. Second, in a small startup team, if you work hard, you'll earn a significant reward if the startup succeeds. However, the high failure rate of startups poses a

great risk. So why take this risk?

To survive, we need to work and earn money. There's a conservation law: to earn a million, you must endure a million's worth of hardship; to earn ten million, you must endure ten million's worth of hardship. There are two ways to bear this hardship to earn enough for a lifetime: work slowly in a low-pressure environment for 40 years, or work quickly in a high-pressure environment for 5 years. This perspective makes the risk seem worthwhile. Our lives are precious, and we don't want to spend our entire lives worrying about making ends meet. Look at adults; they've worked their whole lives, constantly worried about money. I want to solve this problem before I'm 30, so I can enjoy life, like watching an NBA game in the US or racing cars.

Starting a business isn't about making lots of money or becoming a billionaire. It's not about buying expensive things or indulging in luxury, but about becoming someone who doesn't worry about money, gaining a sense of security and freedom to do what you love. As Carmack said, when you have a lot of money, no company or person can control you, giving you a great sense of freedom.

The people around us significantly influence our lives. Find friends with similar ambitions. On weekends, if you wake up to find your roommates still sleeping, you might go back to sleep too. In high school, participating in informatics contests, I looked up to top students like Chen Lijie and Lou Tiancheng, feeling weak in comparison and pushing myself to learn algorithms and code. Conversely, if you focus on trivial matters, you'll spend your life seeking attention for trivial things.

Paul Graham says that people in the entrepreneurial world talk less and do more compared to the outside world. Returning to my hometown reinforces this. People chat with neighbors, sometimes play cards or mahjong, talking a lot and doing little. Rural areas can't create much value or impact the rest of the world significantly. If machines were used for farming, they'd replace much human labor. Currently, people in rural areas waste time and energy on tasks machines could handle, wasting their lives. But with many people, machines' development is hindered.

Ambition can be greater. I never considered starting a business, thinking it too troublesome and difficult. After reading Paul Graham's articles, I see entrepreneurship as a necessity for survival. I need to create wealth to support myself, and the fastest way is through entrepreneurship. This idea makes me more daring to consider entrepreneurship. If others can do it, why can't I? I met a sophomore from United University at Garage Café who created a college application website and was preparing to register a company in September. He's impressive. Reading his posts about working through the night to create a mobile app made me realize my lack of productivity. Am I really that bad? That's just an excuse! Admitting I'm not as good gives me an excuse not to work hard.