

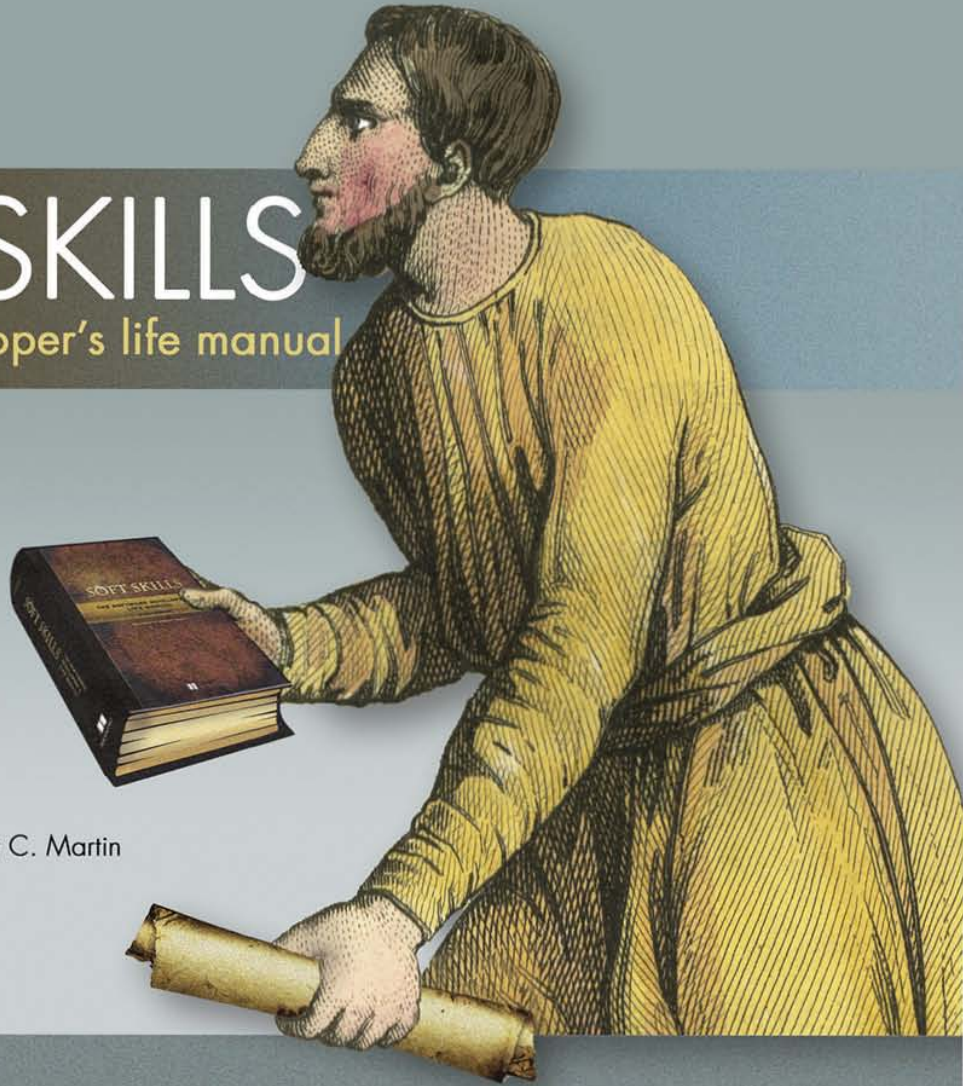
EXCERPT

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

Forewords by
Scott Hanselman and Robert C. Martin





Soft Skills

by John Z. Sonmez

Chapters 1 and 36

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Why this book is unlike any book you've ever read

Most software development books are about...software development—this one isn't. There are plenty of books out there about writing good code and using various technologies, but I've been hard-pressed to find a book that told me how to be a good software developer.

When I say “good software developer,” I'm not talking about being good at writing code, solving problems, or hacking out unit tests. Instead, I'm talking about being a good software developer in terms of managing your career, reaching your goals, and enjoying your life. Sure, all those other skills are important, but I'm going to assume that you can go elsewhere to figure out how to implement a good sorting algorithm in C++ or write the kind of code that doesn't make the next person who maintains it want to run you over with their car.

This book isn't about what you can do. This book is about...you. That's right. It's about your career, your life, your body, your mind, and—if you believe there is such a thing—your soul. Now, I don't want you to think I'm some kind of lunatic. I'm not a transcendentalist monk sitting on the floor meditating while smoking Peyote leaves, trying to help you ascend to a higher state of consciousness. On the contrary, I think you'll find I'm a pretty down-to-earth kind of guy who just happens to think that being a software developer is about a whole lot more than writing code.

I embrace a holistic approach to software development. This means that I think that if you want to be a better software developer—a better

anything, really—you need to focus on the entire person, not just one or two areas of your life.

That's both where this book came from and what it's designed to do. Now, obviously I can't cover everything there is to cover about life in this short book—nor would I have the experience or wisdom to tackle such a broad subject—but what I can do with this book is focus on the main areas of a software developer's life that I have some experience and expertise in and that will probably benefit you the most.

In the pages of this book you'll find quite a few seemingly unrelated topics strung together, but there is some semblance of reasoning behind this madness. This book is divided into seven sections, each focusing on a different aspect of your life as a software developer. If you wanted to categorize and group these sections it would be easiest to look at them as career, mind, body, and spirit.

We'll start off by talking about your career, because I feel that this is one of the most important areas to focus on for most software developers. I've found that very few software developers really give much thought to actively managing their career. In section 1, "Career," I'm going to help remedy that problem—at least in your case—as I teach you exactly how you can actively manage your career to reach the outcome you're looking for, whether that may be climbing the corporate ladder, starting your own consulting business, or even becoming an entrepreneur and creating your own product. I've done all three, and I've interviewed countless software developers who have as well, so you'll learn from our collective mistakes and avoiding some of the black eyes we got along the way. I'll also cover some important skills you need to have regardless of your career goal, like creating an eye-catching resume, mastering interviews, working remotely, and getting those good ol' people skills everyone is talking about these days.

In section 2, "Marketing yourself", we'll touch on a topic that's near and dear to my own heart—selling yourself. "Marketing"—how does that word make you feel? Most software developers get uncomfortable and possibly a bit queasy when I mention the word, but by the end of this section, you'll get a whole new appreciation for the word and

understand why it's so important. Everyone is a salesperson; some of us just do a lousy job of selling. In this section, I'll help you learn how to become a better salesperson and to know exactly what it is you're selling. This won't involve any slimy tactic or sending spam mail offering get-rich-quick schemes. Instead, it will contain practical advice about how to build a personal brand, how to create a successful blog, and how to get your name out there by speaking, teaching, writing, and a whole bunch of other ways you've probably never even considered. With these skills in place, you'll be able to take what you learned from section 1 and multiply it to achieve an even greater result.

With the career stuff out of the way, it will be time to transition into the realm of your mind, when we get to section 3, "Learning." Learning is a critical part of any software developer's life. I probably don't need to tell you that one of the most common things a software developer or any IT professional does is learn. Learning how to learn, or rather how to teach yourself, is one of the most valuable skills you can acquire, because the skill of self-teaching is a skill that literally enables you to do just about anything you can imagine. Unfortunately, most of the educational systems we've had forced upon us while growing up are broken, because they rely on a false premise that says you must have a teacher to learn and that learning only flows in one direction. I'm not saying teachers or mentors aren't important, but in this section, I'll show you how to first rely on your own abilities and common sense mixed with a little courage and curiosity to achieve a greater result than you can by listening to a boring lecture and furiously scribbling down notes. I'll take you through the 10-step self-learning process I developed over my career and the same process that helped me learn everything I needed to know in record time to produce over 50 complete online developer training courses in just over two years for an online training company, Pluralsight. I'll also cover some critical topics like finding a good mentor, being a mentor, and whether or not you need a traditional education and degree to be successful.

Continuing with the theme of mind, section 4, "Productivity," is all about—you guessed it—being more productive. This section is designed to kick you in the behind and put your butt in gear. Productivity is a

great struggle for many software developers and it's one of the single biggest things that hold you back from being as successful as you can be. You can have everything else fine-tuned in your life, but if you don't know how to overcome the hurdles of procrastination, disorganization, and just plain laziness, you'll have a hard time getting out of first gear. I've done my fair share of gear-grinding, but I eventually figured out a system that has me cruising down the highway at top speed. In this section, I'll share that system with you. I'll also tackle some difficult topics like burnout, watching too much TV, and finding motivation to dig in and do some plain old-fashioned hard work.

In section 5, "Financial," we'll handle one more mental topic that often gets completely ignored, personal finance. You can be the most successful software developer in the world, but if you can't effectively manage all that money you're making, some day you might end up on a street corner holding up a sign that says "Will code for food." In this section, I'll take you on a wild ride through the world of economics and personal finance and give you the basics you need to know to be able to make smart financial decisions and actually start planning out your financial future. I'm not a financial planner or professional stock trader, but in addition to being a software developer, I've been a professional real estate investor since I was 18, so I have a pretty good idea of what I'm talking about. We won't go too far into this topic, because the topic is deep enough to fill volumes of books, but I'll teach you the basics of managing your income, how the stock market really works, how to do real estate investing, and avoiding debt. As an additional bonus, I'll share with you my story and how I used these principles to effectively retire at the age of 33 without hitting it big selling a startup. (It's really not that hard and just about anyone can do it.)

Now we get to the fun part and work on your body. Are you ready for boot camp? In section 6, "Fitness," I'll teach you everything you need to know about how to lose fat, gain muscle, and get in shape. Most software developers I know are overweight, have poor health, and feel powerless to do anything about it. Well, knowledge is power, and as a software developer who has competed in bodybuilding competitions and hosted a podcast about fitness for programmers, I'm excited to

share what I've learned to equip you with the knowledge you need to finally take control of your life. In this section, I'll take you through the basics of diet and nutrition and explain how what you eat affects your body. I'll also show you how to set up a successful fitness plan and diet to lose weight, gain muscle, or do both. I'll even cover some tech-specific topics like standing desks and fitness gear for geeks.

Finally, in section 7, "Spirit," we'll head into the metaphysical world and look for the illusive "ghost in the machine." Even though the title is "Spirit," don't let this section fool you; I'll give you some real, practical advice about topics that affect your emotional state and attitude. I suppose you could call this the self-help section of the book—although I'm not particularly fond of that phrase. In this section, I'll focus mainly on helping you rewire your brain to create the positive attitude necessary for success. We'll also briefly cover love and relationships, because this area is a difficult one for many of those who excel in technology. I'll also give you my personal success book list: a list of books I've compiled over the years by simply asking every famous or hypersuccessful person I've ever met to tell me the one book they'd recommend everyone read.

So go ahead and make yourself comfortable, give your analytical mind the day off for a change, and get ready to dive into a quite different book about software development.



It all starts with focus

There is no big secret to productivity. If you want to be more productive, you need to get more work done faster. Now, being productive doesn't guarantee you'll be effective. Producing a lot will make you very productive, but getting the *right* work done will make you effective. But for right now, we'll just focus on being productive; I'll assume you can solve the problem of choosing what to work on, once you can produce consistently.

How do you get more work done...faster? Well, it all starts with focus. Focus is critical to getting any task done. Right now, I'm focused on the task of writing this chapter. I've got my headphones on, I'm ignoring my email, I'm looking at my screen and typing, because I know this chapter could take me all day to write, or it could take me a couple hours. It all depends on focus.

In this chapter, we'll discuss what focus is, why it's so important, and—most importantly—how you can get more of it. Resist the temptation to flip the pages ahead, put your phone on vibrate, and let's get started.

What is focus?

Put simply, focus is the opposite of distraction. The problem is we live in a world that's so distracting that many people don't actually know what true focus is. It's easy to work an entire day and never reach a point of focus. The constant bombarding of emails, phone calls, text messages, distractions, and interruptions tends to rob us of focus and make us forget what it even feels like to be focused. Let me take a second to remind you what true focus is—in case you're having trouble recalling the last time you had it.

Remember the last time you were working a really hard problem? Perhaps you were trying to fix some bug or trying to figure out why your code didn't work. Time seemed to fly by as you forwent food, drink, and sleep laboring at your task. Anyone who dared distract you was greeted by an angry growl and you poured all your attention into a single task.

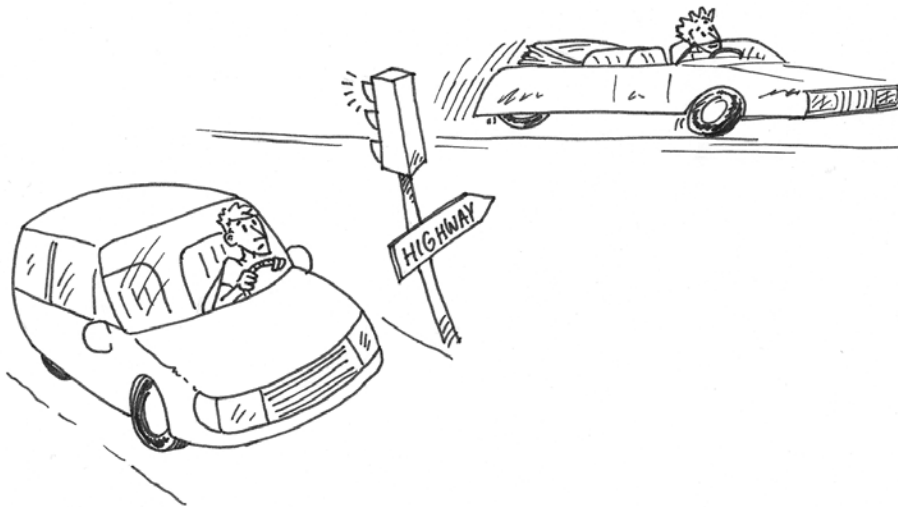
That's focus. We've all felt it from time to time, but the problem is that most of the time we aren't focusing. Most of the time, we're in quite the opposite mode of working—we're easily distracted and can't seem to settle down into the task we know we should be doing. Focus, like many things in life, is a game of momentum. It's harder to get focused, but relatively easy to remain focused once you've pushed the ball up the hill.

The magic of focus

I don't usually believe in magic pills, but I do believe focus is the magic pill for productivity. If I could buy focus, I'd whip out the credit card and max it out, knowing full well the return on my investment was all but guaranteed. Focus is that important.

The problem is, without focus, tasks end up getting stretched out over a very long period of time. Distractions that break our focus—or prevent us from ever getting it—end up costing us more than the time they take away. We'll discuss this more in chapter 41, when we talk about multitasking, but many tasks we take on have a context-switching cost. When we switch from one task to another, we end up having to regain some lost ground before we can begin again.

Focus is important, because it keeps us from having to keep laying that foundation over and over again when we're trying to work on a task. It can take some time to get everything set in our mind so that we can actually perform at our peak. Think of it like a car getting up to highway speed. It takes a few gear shifts before that car can maintain a highway speed. If you have to constantly stop and start, you'll be forced to go at a much slower speed overall. It takes time to get that car back up to highway speed again and shift it into fifth gear. But once you're there, you can cruise along with very little effort.



Focus helps you maintain speed.

I'm sure you've probably experienced situations where you were able to work very hard, yet it seemed effortless. In those situations it often takes some time to get to that point, but once you're there, you can really get a lot done in a short period of time (unless you're chasing your tail trying to track down an elusive bug).

Getting more focus

I probably don't have to take any more time to convince you of how important focus is. But you're probably wondering how you can get more of it. (No, sorry, I haven't figured out how to get it in pill form, but I'll let you know if I do.) In fact, it's pretty critical that you learn how to get focused, because most of the rest of this section will be of little help to you without the ability to stay focused. I can tell you all the productivity hacks and techniques in the world, but if you can't sit down and focus on a task, it won't do you much good.

Now is as good a time as any to put this into practice. Is there some task you can pick up right now that will take you around 15–30 minutes? Put a bookmark in this book and do it now. But concentrate on doing it with complete focus. Don't think about anything else, just work on the task. See how that feels.

As I said before, focus has its own kind of momentum. If you want to get into a focused mode, you have to realize that it isn't an instant switch that you can flip. You'd be kind of a strange person if you could instantly flip into focus mode. I think you'd probably scare people when you sat down at your computer and in an instant your eyes glazed over as you started typing frantically.

To get into a focused mode, you have to push through the initial pain of contorting your mind to a single task. And unless your task is something you thoroughly enjoy doing, it's pretty painful—at first. But that's the key. You have to realize that the pain and discomfort is only temporary and doesn't really last that long.

When I first sat down to write this chapter, I felt a burning urge to check my email, urinate, and get some coffee all at the same time—and I don't even drink coffee anymore. My brain was doing anything it could to stop me from focusing. I had to subdue it and force my fingers to start typing. Now I'm in a zone where I could keep typing for hours—well, maybe half hours. The point is that I had to sit down and force myself to get going to get into a focused mode.

Most of the techniques I use to be productive are rooted in this backbone of productivity, reaching a point of focus. In chapter 38 we'll talk about the Pomodoro Technique, which is a formalized way to force you to sit down and work long enough on a task to build up the momentum that will take you to focus nirvana.

It's not as easy as it sounds

Now, I may have made it seem a little easier than it is. Focusing isn't as simple as just sitting down at the keyboard and typing. You've got to actively fight against the distractions that will come at you while you're upshifting to the high gear that will send you cruising. Fighting these distractions requires some forethought.

Before you begin a task, make sure you have done everything you can to protect yourself from interruptions—both internal and external. Silence your phone, close distracting browser windows, disable popups on your screen, and you may even consider hanging a sign up on your

door or cubicle entrance that says you're busy. You might think I'm joking about the sign part, but I'm absolutely serious. Your coworkers and boss might be a bit resistant at first, but once you start producing like a madman, they'll understand—in fact, they'll want to buy some of your magic pills.

Okay, so you're ready to start working. You sit down at your computer and start typing. No distractions in sight, but wait—oh, what's that? You can't think of what to say. You feel like you just have to see if someone liked your post on Facebook. Stop it. Don't even think about it. Now it's up to you to use your willpower to remain glued to the task at hand. At first the focus will be forced, but eventually the momentum will build up and carry you through. Your goal is just to survive the first 5 or 10 minutes. If you can make it to 10 minutes, chances are you'll have enough momentum to continue. At that point, even a minor distraction will be unlikely to break your focus.

Taking action

- ⚙ Think about a time when you were extremely focused. What did it feel like? What caused you to get into that focused mode? What eventually caused you to break the focus?
- ⚙ Time to practice focus. Pick a task that will take you a half hour or more and block off the time needed to complete that task, giving it complete focus. Force yourself to concentrate on that task and that task only. Make a mental note of what it feels like when you're in the "zone."

About the Author

John Sonmez is the founder of Simple Programmer (<http://simpleprogrammer.com>), where he tirelessly pursues his vision of transforming complex issues into simple solutions. He has published over 50 courses on topics such as iOS, Android, .NET, Java, and game development for the online developer training resource Pluralsight. He also hosts the Get Up and CODE podcast, where he talks about fitness for programmers (<http://getupandcode.com>), and the Entre-programmers podcast, where he and three other developers/entrepreneurs share their real stories of building their online businesses (<http://entreprogrammers.com>).



John is a life coach for software developers, and helps software engineers, programmers, and other technical professionals boost their careers and live a more fulfilled life. He empowers them to accomplish their goals by making the complex simple.

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

For most software developers, coding is the fun part. The hard bits are dealing with clients, peers, and managers, staying productive, achieving financial security, keeping yourself in shape, and finding true love. This book is here to help.

Soft Skills: The software developer's life manual is a guide to a well-rounded, satisfying life as a technology professional. In it, developer and life coach John Sonmez offers advice to developers on important “soft” subjects like career and productivity, personal finance and investing, and even fitness and relationships.

Arranged as a collection of 71 short chapters, this fun-to-read book invites you to dip in wherever you like. A Taking Action section at the end of each chapter shows you how to get quick results. *Soft Skills* will help make you a better programmer, a more valuable employee, and a happier, healthier person.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Boost your career by building a personal brand
- John's secret ten-step process for learning quickly
- Fitness advice to turn your geekiness to your advantage
- Unique strategies for investment and early retirement

John Sonmez is a developer, teacher, and life coach who helps technical professionals boost their careers and live a more fulfilled life.



“Useful, practical, and actionable advice on a wide array of topics.”

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—Heather Campbell, Kainos

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