Twitter Thread by Venkatesh Rao



Venkatesh Rao
@vgr

I'm guessing these responses really reflect people's weighted averages (age*current average effort fraction) though I kept it simple and asked for just averages.

> Poll: where is the temporal center of gravity of all your live projects based on average age of start-dates?
>
> — Venkatesh Rao (@vgr) January 17, 2021

I suspect a healthy weighted average should be ~ (age-20)/2. So a 30 year old should be at 5, a 40 year old at 10, a 50 year old at 15 etc.

Standard deviation should be ~average/3 maybe, so distribution spreads as you age and accumulate projects and get better at them.

Other things being equal, people get good at starting in their 20s, at follow through in 30s, at finishing in 40s.

No point learning food follow through until you've found a few good starts to bet on. No point getting good at finishing until a few projects have aged gracefully.

I'm in the 7+ range myself. Probably 8-9. Slightly less than healthy for my age.

I suspect most self-judgments on being good starters/follow-through-ers/finishers are really flawed because of the non-ergodicity of project management skill learning. You can't learn good practices for the 3 phases in an arbitrary order. On,y one order actually works.

My oldest live project, rather appropriately is probably "time studies." Ongoing since at least 2003. 17y old.

Second oldest is ribbonfarm at 13 years old.

Then sparring-style consulting-fu, 10 years old.

Breaking smart, 6 years old.

My portfolio is getting long in the tooth

Most projects worth pursuing long term don't even actually start until they come alive after a year or two of futzing around and tinkering. Ribbonfarm took to years to get to ignition. My interest in time took 3 years to get to ignition with a journal paper (2004-07).

The "ignition" moment is when an opinionated understanding of the thing meets enough stuff on the canvas already so you can see where you're going. "Vision" requires not a blank canvas but an incoherently full one, the detritus of sufficient futzing, muddling, trial and error.

Being a good starter in ambiguous, uncertain domains is about having a calibrated sense of how many false starts you can expect vs how many you can afford, to make commitment decisions. If it's going to take 2y+10 false starts and you only have 1 y/5 starts in you, don't bother.

Good follow through is about getting "married" to a project and committing to it long term, once you decide you're off to a good start. https://t.co/yeswAStdYm

> This sounds like yet another sermon about long-term thinking, but it isn't. It's a sermon about long-term *commitment.* It doesn't take much upfront thinking. I mean, fairly dim people seem to get married at 22 without much thought and make a successful 30-40 marriage out of it.
>
> — Venkatesh Rao (@vgr) January 15, 2021

Good finishing (n=4 experience, all in the 2-5 year range) is about caring enough to stick the landing elegantly. I'd rate myself a B- on this, though I've never yet fumbled an important finish when it mattered.

While I rarely choke or quit on a finish, I also don't have that magic strong-finish switch some seem to. Maybe 1 in 4 finishes I'll get that closer-energy burst and sprint to the finish line, but 3 of 4 times I'll kind huff and puff and stagger across the finish line.

Quitting is a strength if you typically do it early, but a weakness if you typically do it late. If you're gonna quit, do it before the ignite moment. For me the trigger is realizing something will take more false starts than I care to invest.