

Try Making the Things You Take for Granted

One of the first things I learned at BitPay was how to ship a UPS package. You wouldn't think that a first day at an innovative tech company would involve such a lesson.

It's embarrassing, but it's true. At the age of 18, I had never shipped a package myself before. Packages and mail and all that was something other people did.

Moving out to a new city and taking up this new job started to reveal to me how little I knew about many of the things – the things “other people do” – that make the world work. It's very easy to go through many years relying on services and technologies and goods without learning how to make them work yourself.

Four years later I'm still discovering little life skills I've never tried, or things I consume that are complete black boxes of mystery to me. I've learned how to replace a toilet handle, how to clean a house (still learning this, really), how to cook, how to hire cleaning services, how to print designs, how to execute events, how to move into and move out of apartments, how to pay taxes, and how to set up a personal website.

This isn't an exhaustive list. And normally it's OK not to know how to do many of the things we take for granted. The reason why I don't know how to grow a field of wheat, or build a marketing automation platform is because other people have specialized in doing those things.

But from time to time chaos breaks in on my known world, where these things are provided for me. That's when I have to learn how to make the things myself that I can normally assume will be done or made for me. This may be inconvenient, but as I found on my first day at BitPay, this is an opportunity that (even if embarrassing) is priceless.

When you learn how to make or do something you can normally afford to take for granted, you become less afraid. After all, a thing once far beyond your grasp is now understandable. It loses its magic. Shipping, for instance, becomes just another everyday task.

When you become less afraid, you become better prepared to look for quality, to look for options, and to exercise judgment and negotiation in what you use and how you use it. I can now do comparisons of shipping options without a lot of fear that I will ship too late.

And once you know roughly how something is done, it's quite alright to let someone else do it. You've got to respect specialization and the division of labor. But having done it yourself, you're going to be able to engage in that division of labor with new wisdom and appreciation.

And finally, learning these things - which all convenience allows you *not* to do - is a meta-skill that carries easily. If I can learn from pretty much scratch how to ship packages, I can learn almost anything.