



Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 112: JD Roth

Transcript

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Our guest this week is J.D. Roth started blogging in 1997, before "blog" was even a word. In 2006, he founded GetRichSlowly.org, a site devoted to common-sense personal finance. He sold Get Rich Slowly in 2009 then bought it back in 2017. His mission in life is to help everyday people master their money and achieve their financial goals.

Mark: Welcome to the Cool Tools Show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, editor-in-chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us as at Cool-Tools.org. I'm joined by my cohost, Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools. Hey, Kevin.

Kevin: Hey, it's great to be here.

Mark: In each episode of the Cool Tools Show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or favorite uncommon and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about.

Our guest this week J.D. Roth. JD started blogging in 1997 before "blog" was even a word. In 2006, he founded GetRichSlowly.org, a site devoted to commonsense personal finance. He sold Get Rich Slowly in 2009 and then bought it back in 2017. His mission in life is to help everyday people master their money and achieve their financial goals. It's so great to have you, J.D. How are you?

JD: I'm great. Thanks for having me.

Mark: Good. Yeah, I'm ... Kevin and I were just talking before this about the fact that we reviewed your book that came out a number of years ago. What was it called, Kevin?

Kevin: Money You're Missing Manual? No, it's the ...

JD: Yeah. Your Money: The Missing Manual.

Kevin: Right.

Mark: Your Money: The Missing Manual.

Kevin: Which was sort of a line of ... The Missing Manuals was sort of a brand of books. And I have recommended it as the best book about financial habits and discipline in general. It's a kind of a ... I found it was the best in rounding up all the different ways you could approach this so that ... It wasn't very dogmatic in that sense. I don't know how it's doing, but I was wondering whether you were considering doing an update to it, because it's a number of years and things have changed. Maybe you've changed.

JD: Yeah. Well, I have considered doing an update. I've consider approaching O'Reilly about it, because it ... The book itself, one of the things I tried to do was provide a lot of links. So I basically said, "Here are all these resources. I don't want to put them all in the book. If you want more information about investing or you want more information about setting goals, follow these links and go learn more yourself." And of course, over time those links die, so that's the drawback of doing it that way. So I would love to update the book from that side, but also in the past eight or nine years since the book was published ... I've learned a lot more about money, I guess, a lot more about person finance, and so it would be great to be able to share some of this information without ... You're right, Kevin, it's not a dogmatic book and I'm not a dogmatic person, but I do think there are some best practices that I could now share with people.

Kevin: So this may be, for one example ... Is there one thing that you've maybe changed your mind about that maybe surprised you in the last nine years about money?

JD: Well, I used to think ... Well, okay, first of all, my website is called Get Rich Slowly, so you can tell from that that I used to think that there ... What I used to say is there's no reliable way to get rich quickly, but there are reliable ways to get rich slowly, and I'd say the biggest change I've made in the past eight or nine years is I've learned that, well, there is a reliable way to get rich quickly if you're willing to bite the bullet and make the sacrifices in the short term. And that's increasing your saving rate to 70%, 80%, which I know sounds impossible to a lot of people. But if you can increase your saving rate to 70% or 80%, you can retire in seven or eight years. It's just math. It's not a scam or anything, it's just math. That was a big revelation to me when I learned the math behind that.

Kevin: That is awesome. So I definitely think you need to do a new edition of your book.

Mark: Absolutely, yeah. And it's funny, I just looked on Amazon. I mean, reviews are still rolling in. It's very highly rated on Amazon, and so I think that you need to do it.

Kevin: And if O'Reilly says ...

Mark: [crosstalk 00:04:19] demanding a new version.

Kevin: Yeah. If O'Reilly says no, do a Kickstarter and publish it yourself.

Mark: Yeah.

JD: Yeah. I've done an ebook ... Well, a couple of ebooks in the interim, and I'd love to incorporate the material and make something bigger and better.

Kevin: Yeah.

JD: It'd be fun.

Kevin: No, I think the world needs that, because it is, as you know, it's a regime where there's lots of self-dealing, conflict of interest, and et cetera, and so I think the world needs a sane, non-dogmatic approach to the possibilities. I was talking to somebody yesterday. We were talking about how to live, and he said, "Well, the thing about it is there's a million ways to live." And so there's a million ways to earn a living, and there's a million ways to manage your investment, and I think having some sense of the landscape is probably one of the most valuable things to have. The landscape of possibilities is what I mean.

JD: Yeah, and I agree. It's like life and money, just this vast menu, and you've got to figure out what do you want out of life, what do you want to do with your money, and once you figure out what it is you want to do, then you can make decisions that support those goals.

Kevin: I'd like to see someone write a book about money that's really talking about time, because as one gets older you find out that you have ... often have more money than time, and time is a thing that you really want to ... that's the scarce wealth, resource, and ...

JD: Absolutely.

Kevin: ... and how to sort of invest in time and manage your time, et cetera. It's not just about productivity, it's about life, it's about living.

JD: Yeah, and you know, I always say ... People say, "Oh, well, J.D., you're a personal finance writer. You write about money." And secretly what I'm actually writing about ... It's not time. I'm not writing about time. But I'm writing about happiness, because happiness is this concept that I find so fascinating, and it's been something humans have been interested in for thousands and thousands of years. I mean, Aristotle was writing about this. So for me, when I'm writing about money I'm actually writing about happiness and how to achieve happiness using money as a tool.

Kevin: Well. So what kinds of other tools are you excited by these days?

JD: Nice transition. Well, you know, I am a writer, and I do most of my writing on a computer like most writers do nowadays, and that's not very exciting. Everyone has their favorite computers. But I also do a surprising amount of writing by hand, and ... So for this, I don't know what your experiences are, 'cause you both write, but I've noticed that a lot of writers actually do this. They write by hand, and they use cheap notebooks.

And I have my own favorite cheap notebooks. I use a couple of the models from a company called National Brand, and basically there's this law ... or legal supply store here in Portland, and I go down there and I stock up on these notebooks or ... They're a little more expensive than Mead spiral notebooks, but they're also a heavier quality paper. And then I buy Dixon Ticonderoga pencil and BIC Cristal ballpoint pens. I buy them by the case from Amazon. And I do a lot of my writing ... I mean, that's what I've got right here on my desk right now is a couple of open notebooks. So those are kind of unsexy tools, but they're very much tools that I use every day.

Kevin: So is the idea that you write by hand in these notebooks, and then at some point you rewrite them on your computer or you go through? Do you have a system for extracting that information?

JD: I wish I had a better system. It's not very systemized, but, yeah. When I write by hand, it slows me down, so I'm able to write at a speed that allows me to form more coherent sentences, I guess, whereas if I'm trying to write on the keyboard I'm writing too fast and I'm getting ahead of myself, and I'm just not able to keep up with my thoughts ... or I'm going faster than my thoughts, I guess, whereas if I'm writing by hand it's a more natural pace. So I do then, I go back and I have a process for transcribing the handwritten material, basically, and editing as I go. And I find that if I do this, the quality of my work is much higher than if I just compose in my text editor.

Kevin: Okay.

Mark: I noticed that the ones you picked, that you have links to, they're green paper. Is that ... Do you like that? Is it easier on the eyes?

JD: You know, I've never thought about that, Mark. It is easier on the eyes, honestly. But again, it's higher quality paper, and it's just ... I didn't do it because it was green or anything like that, I just it because I was in this legal supply store, these notebooks were there, they were relatively inexpensive, and they ... I needed a notebook that day, and then I got hooked.

Kevin: And you're using BIC Cristal ballpoints. Have you tried any of the Pilot gels?

JD: I have, but for whatever reason, maybe because I grew up with ... I mean, these were the pens back in the 1970s, right?

Kevin: I know.

JD: These BIC Cristal, and they were in the "in" thing. I can't even find them in the supermarket or the office supply store anymore. I actually have to go on Amazon and order them by the case.

Kevin: Special ordering [crosstalk 00:10:08] specialty [inaudible 00:10:10].

JD: And most people would hate them, but I go through them constantly, and so I'm glad to have them.

Mark: And what about this Hobonichi Techo calendar?

JD: Oh, yeah. Okay, so for a guy who makes his living on the computer, you'd think I'd be much more tech savvy than I actually am, and it was only recently that I learned how to use a computer calendar. My girlfriend had finally had enough ...

Kevin: Oh my gosh. [inaudible 00:10:42].

JD: ... and she said, "Look, you've gotta figure this out." So before that and still, I use this calendar. It's a Japanese calendar. It's A6 size. I don't know what that really translates to, it's just ... it's some ...

Mark: About four by six.

JD: Yeah, it looks like it's about that. Anyway this ... It's by a company Hobonichi, and it's the Techo model calendar, and it's just a big ... Instead of having all sorts of lines and times and all that, it's basically just a big blank slate. Each page has a date, and it shows noon, and it shows dinnertime, and other than that it's just squared paper for you to jot down your thoughts or to jot down your schedule. And for me, it works like a charm. Until my girlfriend convinced me to go digital, this was my source. I carried this with me everywhere.

Kevin: Oh, yeah. Well, the reason ... I mean, I was one ... I think I was one of the first Google Calendar users because it was sharable, and we had a family, lots of kids going on, people working. My wife works at ... far away, so just to coordinate ... So it's ... That kind of a calendar is really good if you're the only one looking at it, but if you have to share your calendar in any way it really does need to be digital.

JD: Yeah, I could just never make it work. I had tried it many times before, and I have all ... I have my iPhone, I have my iPad, I have two laptops, I have my desktop, and so I could never make everything coordinate. And there's always new calendars popping up, and I'm like, "Where the hell did this come from?" And so ... But for two months

now, I've managed to make it work. Fingers crossed it continues to work. But I still ... I cling to by Hobonichi just 'cause I like the paper so much.

Mark: Yeah, and it looks really cool. I like that. It's funny. We just had a podcast guest who told us about the bullet journal, Zach Supalla from Particle. You mentioned the bullet journal, too. Are you a bullet journalist?

JD: I am not. I love the idea of it, but it's just yet another layer that I'd have to put on top of my life that would suck time away from me. I know it's supposed to save you time, but it would suck time. But I know that many people use the Hobonichi Techo bullet journals. It's one of the selling points they try to get people to latch onto it.

Mark: Okay. So for your next tool that you want to talk about, I assume this is something that you hold all of your notebooks and BIC Cristal pens [inaudible 00:13:28].

Kevin: So you're still using analog bags?

JD: Analog bags, that's right. Not [inaudible 00:13:35].

Kevin: You haven't gotten a digital bag yet?

Mark: You're behind the curve.

JD: Well, I actually I have. So, we were talking earlier about the book I wrote, and it was actually ... While I was writing that book, my computer crashed, one of those literal crash ... It was the day the book was due, the final manuscript.

Kevin: Oh my gosh.

JD: And the hard drive started going out, and I was like, "Holy cats, what do I do?" And fortunately this was right around when Dropbox was becoming a thing, and so I ... I don't remember exactly the process, but I managed to get my digital bag, Dropbox, set up, and now I use that.

But you're right, I also ... I'm a big fan of analog bags. I have far too many. Whenever I see a great messenger bag or a great backpack, I get it. I mean, I shouldn't, but I do. And I have a lot of REI stuff. But I think my favorite one, the one that I've been using for the past couple of years, it's called the Maker's Bag — that's a good name for Mark there, Maker's Bag — from TOM BIHN. Or Tom [Bean 00:14:43]. I don't actually know how to pronounce the last [inaudible 00:14:45].

Kevin: I've always said "Bihn."

Mark: I don't know either.

Kevin: I've always said "Bihn," but I don't know. Yeah, TOM BIHN bags have been around for a decade at least, right? And they make many models. Why do you like the Maker Bag?

JD: I like it because it's not overly complicated, for one. Well, I wouldn't say it's small, but it holds ... It'll hold a 15-inch laptop but not much more than that. And then it will hold several books and magazines, plus there are ... I don't know, there's maybe a dozen pockets. Maybe I'm exaggerating, but it seems like there's tons of different pockets and zippered places so that I can tuck all sorts of different stuff in there. I tend to travel a lot for work, and so on the plane I want to be able to have all of my stuff compartmentalized, and with the Maker's Bag I'm able to do that, and yet it's not overwhelming. There's not so many compartments that I'm losing my way in it.

Kevin: Yeah, I have a [inaudible 00:15:49] bag from Japan that has at least 35 pockets, and I just ... I'm always having to search all the pockets, 'cause I can't remember where I put it in.

Mark: Yeah, I wish there was a system for that.

Kevin: Yeah. You can have too many pockets.

Mark: You can, yeah.

JD: I found that ... As I said, I travel a lot, and so I've learned over time to trust certain bags, and then I develop routines for those bags. So, for example, with the Maker's Bag I have my routine. As I pack I know what's going in which pockets. Or my travel backpack is actually this discontinued model from REI, and I know where everything goes in that, and it just, it gives me a feeling of comfort to know where things are when I'm traveling.

Kevin: When you travel you take the Maker's Bag and a ... You have a backpack instead of a wheelee?

JD: Yes, correct. I don't like dragging my stuff. I like having it on my body at all times, so those are two bags.

Kevin: Okay. And so you said you've been through, or you keep trying the new bags. What are some other bags that you tried and have stopped using? Just so we have a comparison.

JD: Well, I'm a still a big fan of a company called Filson out of Seattle. I'm a fan of their bags and luggage, not their clothing. I actually ... I don't really like their clothing. But I still ... I've retained a couple of the Filson bags, and every once in a while I'll use those instead of the Maker's Bag. I don't actually have the models in front of me. I can't remember what they're called, but they're essentially messenger-style bags. And they're very useful and they're durable and waterproof, which is handy here in Portland.

Kevin: What about Timbuktu? They have a bag that was sort of like the Maker Bag. Are they on your horizon?

JD: You know, I think ... Matt [Haughey 00:18:08] lives up here, and I think he uses a Timbuktu bag. I haven't actually looked them over myself, though.

Kevin: All right.

Mark: So you have another tool you want to talk about. These are called SleepPhones, and I actually some so I want to hear your take on them.

JD: Oh, is that right? Oh, this is interesting. I've never met anyone else that has these. So, this is something I originally got for travel. So what SleepPhones are is if you can imagine an elastic headband that inside is a set of earbuds, but they don't actually go in your ear, they just kind of rest outside ear. That's what SleepPhones are, and the kind I have are wireless. You do need to plug them in to charge them, although I think they have a model now that uses induction charging. So you put the ... At night, when you're getting ready to go to sleep, if you want to listen to something you put the SleepPhones around your head like a headband — or I actually use it to double as an eye mask to keep out light — and then you listen to whatever you want to listen to. And like I said, I originally got them for travel, but because my girlfriend and I both have trouble sleeping, we now both use them to listen to stuff at night.

And we like that ... She loves them. I like them, but the battery life isn't exactly what I'd like it to be, and it's a pain to recharge. So I don't want to sound like I'm hedging here, 'cause I do love them and I want to recommend them to your listeners, but I would love to try the model with the induction charger.

Kevin: Do you fall asleep with them, or is there some way, once they recognize that you're not listening anymore and it'll stop whatever you're listening to?

JD: No. No, no. You fall asleep with them on. [crosstalk 00:19:48] my girlfriend-

Kevin: So if you're listening to an audiobook, it's just gonna keep going, and then you'll lose your place.

JD: Yeah. But, you know, most audio ... And that's what I use it for is I listen to audiobooks when I fall asleep, but most audiobook players have settings so that you can have it turn off at a set time. In my case, I listen to audiobooks that I'm very familiar with. So, for example, I've listened to The Lord of the Rings dozens and dozens of times. Or True Grit or To Kill a Mockingbird. These are books that I know by heart, so it doesn't matter if I fall and wake up [crosstalk 00:20:23].

Kevin: I see.

Mark: That's so interesting.

Kevin: So it's like comfort reading or something.

Mark: Yeah.

JD: It is.

Mark: I use mine to fall asleep, and there's a great podcast that I listen to called Mysteries Abound, read by this guy with a very kind of pleasant, I think it's an Australian accent, maybe New Zealand. And he reads just long form stories, kind of weird things that he's found from newspapers. They're great stories. And I set the time for 30 minutes, put it on, and I listen to like 15 minutes as I fall asleep, and then the next night do the same thing over again, and it works really well for me.

JD: And do you use it like an eye mask, too, or do you just wear it like a headband?

Mark: I wear it like a headband, and I have the kind that's not the wireless. It's plugged into my phone, so I don't have to worry about charging or anything.

JD: Yeah. Oh, I never thought about that. That would be a good thing to do. And I would say that one of the reasons ... I forget that another reason that I got these was I had been using earbuds at night, and I was getting ... My ears just got really itchy, and so with the SleepPhone, because there's nothing actually in your ear, it's much more comfortable for me.

Mark: Oh, yeah. So comfortable. That's the thing, they're very flat profile, so with your head on the pillow you don't feel that little speaker.

JD: Mm-mm (negative).

Mark: They do it good.

Kevin: Okay. So, [inaudible 00:21:50], I know you have ... I'd like to have you talk about a little bit about some money tools, but before you do you also some clothing that you are enamored of. Tell us about that.

JD: Yeah [inaudible 00:22:03]. I'll mention the clothing first, because this ... We're kind of talking about stuff I use for travel, the bag and the SleepPhones. So I'm a big fan of a company called Icebreaker, which is out of New Zealand. Their U.S. offices are here in Portland, I think. And Icebreaker produces clothing from Marino wool, so they have Marino wool T-shirts, Marino wool socks, Marino wool underwear, you name it. And I don't remember where I first learned about this, but I remember when I first started traveling internationally I picked up a couple of their shirts, and I found them surprisingly comfortable. I always thought that wool would be itchy, and while there's a little bit of itchiness at first, it goes away quickly.

And the wonderful thing about the Icebreaker shirts is that they keep you warm when it's cool out and they keep you cool when it's warm out. And best of all, they don't retain odor, so if you're on an extended trip and you want to pack light, you can take two or three of these shirts, not have to worry about laundry because they're not gonna stink at all, and they're gonna be comfortable and look good.

Kevin: And when you wash them, do you have to wash them by hand, or do they wash well if you're traveling? Wash and dry?

JD: When I travel I wash them by hand. At home, I wash them with cold water and, if I can remember, I pull them out and I dry them flat. Otherwise, I just dry on low.

Kevin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay. And they're not cheap, my recollection, or are they?

JD: They are not cheap. However, you can ... If you're lucky like me and you live near the headquarters, there's an Icebreaker outlet, so you can go get them at vast discounts. And I think REI ... You know, REI has periodic sales. I think they often have Icebreaker clothing.

Mark: And it's ... They're ... A lot of Icebreaker Marino clothes are available on Amazon, too, so they generally are at a discount. And I see there's some stuff you can get pretty inexpensively, like a long sleeve shirt for \$60.

JD: And, you know, Smartwool ... I think people are probably more familiar with Smartwool, and they're clothing is just fine, too, and you can probably get [crosstalk 00:24:28] ...

Kevin: What's the difference? Is there a difference between Smartwool and Icebreaker?

JD: I don't ... Well, different companies, obviously, but other than that ... In my experience, Icebreaker tries to be a little more trendy and fashionable, maybe, and Smartwool tries to be more functional, but I'm just ... that's just me and my perception making that up.

Kevin: And do you ever try their pants or?

JD: I have not. I tried their underwear, and I didn't really like it, so I'm not recommending their underwear.

Kevin: So this is mostly just about their shirts, then.

JD: For me, it is. Oh, and their jackets. I love their jackets. I'm wearing one right now.

Mark: Cool.

Kevin: Okay.

Mark: Just in interest of time, we should probably have you tell as a little bit about ... You have a couple of tools, online tools, that you like that are money-related, so why don't you run through those.

JD: So, because I'm a personal finance writer I get exposed to a lot of different tools online, and I feel like most of the companies producing these tools, their hearts are in the right place, but the tools aren't always the most useful things in the world. So over the past 12 years of writing about money, I was ... As I was getting ready for the show I was trying to think, you know, what are the tools that I recommend most often to people? So I've got three different tools for three different purposes.

The first is for people who are wanting to track their spending and get a budget set up. There's a tool called You Need a Budget, which you can find at YNAB.com. And You Need a Budget is ... It's like Quicken but with more structure, and its users, the people who use it, love it. I cling to a 2007 edition of Quicken still just because all my data's in that, but I'm gonna be moving to You Need a Budget in the next couple of years.

For people who don't need to watch their money so closely, I'm a big fan of a tool called Personal Capital, which you can get as an app on your phone or on your iPad, or you can go to the website. And Personal Capital basically tracks all of your accounts, including your investment accounts, and just lets you keep up to date with this dashboard view of where everything is, and I think it's very useful. There are a lot of tools out there like it. This just happens to be the one that I prefer, partly because of the retirement calculator.

Kevin: Is it like Mint in that sense?

JD: It is like Mint, but I feel like Mint ... I like Mint okay, but I feel like Mint tries to push signing up for credit cards and things a little bit too much for my personal taste. And Personal Capital, their monetization strategy is a little bit different, and so they're not bombarding me with offers, and so I like the clean interface.

Kevin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JD: And then the last tool I was gonna mention is one called New Retirement, and a lot of people want to know how much do I need to save for retirement. What are the other factors going into it? And if you go online and search for retirement calculators, a lot of them, I feel like they use faulty assumptions or their priorities are wrong or they don't account for all sorts of different things, and New Retirement is very, very robust. You do have to create an account, which is a drawback, but they don't spam you. So you create an account and then you put in your parameters, and you're able to see this is how long I have to work in order to be able to retire, this is how much I have to save. And, well, what if I change some of my parameters? How would that affect things? And I think it's just an excellent tool.

Kevin: Fantastic. Really great. And of course there's also your site, which is probably the best of the bunch, and you're back there now, right?

JD: Yeah, that's ... I hope it's good. I've put a lot of effort into it. So the site is Get Rich Slowly, and that's .org, not .com. And I started Get Rich Slowly in 2006 as a way to kind of document my journey getting out of debt and learning about money, 'cause I didn't know anything at the time. And I wrote there for three years before I sold it. Stuck around for another three years after I sold because I just couldn't let go. Kind of retired for a few years, and then just bought it back in October, and I've been writing every day going gangbusters.

Kevin: There's a story there that we may not have time to hear about that journey, but I'm so glad you're back and sharing what you know. It's really been ... It's a very important thing that you're doing here.

JD: Thank you.

Mark: I agree. I agree, J.D. Your book, I read and I thought that it was wonderful. A lot of good advice in there, and if you figure out a way to do another one with the updated information, I'm sure you'll have a lot of people grateful for that.

JD: Yeah, I think it would be awesome, and I think it would be ... I want to help as many people as possible. I feel lucky to have enjoyed the financial success that I've enjoyed, and so I'm motivated to try to help other people achieve this kind of thing, too.

Mark: That sounds great.

Kevin: Wonderful. Thanks for sharing your tools.

Mark: Thanks, J.D.

JD: Yeah, thanks, guys.