



THE FINCH EFFECT

HOW ADAPTABILITY WILL SAVE
YOUR CAREER {AND HAPPINESS}

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Our job market is in a perpetual state of turmoil these days. Every month, we hold our breaths waiting for some positive sign in the unemployment numbers, and every month it seems we are disappointed.

The gains that have been made since the official end of the recession in 2009 have been minimal, and the changes we see in jobless rates each month are nominal at best.

This economic twilight zone puts everything is on hold—our careers, our dreams for our family, our most basic happiness. We bite our nails and turn to one another asking “How long can this go on? When will things go back to normal?”

But in our modern age, this age of Vocational Darwinism, the only people we can truly expect the answers to come from is ourselves.

And the only way to answer those questions and take life off hold is to adapt.

The Human Experience and Adaptation

Adaptation is a scary prospect because of how clearly it smacks of change. It never fails to amaze me how averse to change humans are, in spite of the fact that it is a most basic biological facet of our existence. Every minute we live, our bodies are changing: cells are splitting or dying; organs are aging; our perspective is shifting.

And yet we fight change, and loath it, and resent its coming. We fear it—or more specifically fear its unknown quality. It is uncomfortable, difficult, and signals the end of something—be it an era in our life or a particular way of doing things. It is out of our control.

But adaptation is not change.

Or, more clearly, adaptation and change are not synonymous. While adaptation implies change, it is not the kind of change that happens to you—the change that comes upon your life at 3pm on a Thursday afternoon through an unexpected phone call or missed bus or national event. It is the kind of change that you make happen, for adaptation implies a conscious response to shifts in your environment.

There is something comforting in that fact: adaptation is change that we control.

Adaptation is programmed into the root of our biology, and we are not alone in this programming: everything on our planet is called to adapt eventually or face extinction. But we are alone in the fact that—unlike the plants and animals—we have the power to direct our own adaptation.

Take the finches of the Galapagos Islands. They were “discovered” by Charles Darwin in the 1830s when he was circling the globe as part of a scientific voyage. When stopping at the islands, Darwin noted that there was evidence that some of the birds he saw rapidly adapted to changes in their environment (a beak shape change here, a different food source there) and, as a result, were thriving. His encounter with these little creatures helped inspire his famous theory of evolution, and today they are known as “Darwin’s Finches.”

The finches are a simple and elegant example of how life is programmed to survive through adaptation. But they are also a great example of what sets humans apart in the adaptive sense: the finches have no conscious control over how they respond to environmental changes—they can no more change the shape of their beaks than they can form a soccer team and win the World Cup.

But as humans, we have the power to direct our response. We can consciously choose how to change the shape of our beaks... or at least consciously choose how we respond to the changes in our environment.

And that environmental change we face now, today, is an economic one.

Adaptability Will Save Your Career

I started to think about how adaptation relates to our working lives in 2009.

As a newly-minted freelance writer, I found myself in a strange bubble of protection during the earliest days of the recession. Maybe I was just lucky with the clients I had; maybe I was insulated because I already saw my newfound career as one that inherently lacked stability. But whatever the reason, the truth remained that my friends and family found their careers stagnated by the sharp economic decline while my vocational adventure carried on unscathed.

I was making my own schedule, working when I wanted and where I wanted, and having a grand old time with this new freedom while those around me asked those most vulnerable questions: “How long can this go on? When will things go back to normal?”

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And it wasn't until my college-age brother asked me a simple question that the ramifications of our new working world really came home to me. One day, over a plate of greasy nachos, he furrowed his brows and asked, "Nacie, what's going to happen to me when I graduate?"

That question rolled around in my mind for days. What would happen to him, or to my friends, or other members of my family, or to me, if things didn't change? What would happen to all of us if things got worse?

Yet there had to be people out there who were finding success and keeping their careers moving forward, in spite of the roadblocks of the recession. I thought that if I could find those people and study their techniques I'd have some answers to share with both the people I cared about and myself to keep us from professionally going the way of the dinosaur.

So I set out to find those people and figure out their secrets.

After 2 years, more than 100 interviews, and a few more plates of nachos, what I discovered was startlingly simple yet daunting. What I discovered was, as you may have guessed, adaptation.

Adaptation was the trend that emerged over and over from the people I interviewed who had found a way to keep their careers moving forward—in fact improve them—during the recession and post-recession years. It was the root of every story, the starting place of all the revelations.

In fact, I'd go so far as to assert that based on what I've learned, adaptability—being agile, flexible, and open—is the most important career skill that any of us can master in our modern world. It is what can save our careers from stagnation and irrelevance. It can stave off competition and open up new opportunities in both good economies and tragic ones.

And I realize now, looking back over the last few years, that it is what was centered at the heart of my own successes—humble as they may be. I had adapted, although that wasn't a word that I identified with at the time.

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But what exactly does adaptability mean? How, as professionals, can we put our arms around a topic that is so mighty in concept and basic in biology?

I suppose we can't fully—I am still discovering new facets of what it means to be professionally adaptable in spite of the fact I've been steeped in it for years.

But what we can do is reframe it to a more basic element: career ownership.

Adaptability is Career Ownership

What do you think impacts your career more: you, what happens in your company or industry, the job market, government policies, or the economy?

Among the people I have interviewed, a very specific pattern has emerged: those who are moving their careers forward in spite of our current situation—those who are adaptable—all say they are the most impactful element on their careers. And those who feel stagnated, helpless, or vulnerable—those who are not adapting—all say the most impactful element on their careers is anything but them.

Because being more adaptable allows you to take on total ownership for your career and free yourself from being a victim of external change.

When you increase your adaptability, you decrease the earth-shattering power of anything that can happen to you: a layoff, a lost promotion, a customer dry-spell, or a collapsed job market. To the non-adaptable professional, these kinds of events are sucker-punches to the vocational stomach that leave you wheezing and helpless on the pavement in the fetal position. They are full-stops. They are the periods at the end of the working sentence. (period.)

Yet to the adaptable professional, these kinds of events are the ellipses in the working sentences, the moment's pause for thought and recalculation before a new phrase is started. They are not endings, they do stop forward motion. They simply call for a reassessment and change of strategy.

As the change we can control—the change we can own—adaptability opens us up to all the security and opportunity that control provides. Career success is in your hands and no job market, be it a good one or a bad one, is going to define who you are as a professional or keep you from moving forward.

However, there is considerable responsibility that comes with ownership. If you are the most impactful element on your career, then you are responsible for the outcome when things go right and when things go wrong. All those external elements (your corporation, the economy) are no longer to blame for what happens in your career—it's on you.

Adaptability is really a state of mind, a way of looking at the world and your own agency within your career. To truly feel its benefits you cannot employ it only when it's convenient. You need to accept the ownership it bestows—with its benefits and liabilities—absolutely.

If the idea of warming up to that ownership, that responsibility, is feeling a bit daunting or unrealistic, try using what I've come to know as “the right questions” to increase your comfort level.

What makes a “right question?” It must meet specific criteria: it takes a contrarian approach, it places ownership on you, and it promotes actionable response.

Here are some great examples of “right questions.” Please tailor them to your specific situation:

- For the sake of argument, let’s say the job market is never going back to how it was pre-recession. Is my original career path realistic?
- Let’s assume I won’t be able to find employment in my field over the next six months. What other fields of employment can I pursue?
- What if I never make partner thanks to the company tightening its belt. What else could I work toward that would make my career a success by my standards?”

If you can answer these questions, or even imagine an answer to these questions, then complete career ownership isn’t daunting or unrealistic at all. Sure, it is a little more work. And sure, things will still happen in the outside world that affect you and are beyond your control. But when you can answer those kinds of questions, the larger questions (“How long can this go on? When will things go back to normal?”) feel less scary, and less relevant to you.

Adaptability is resilience. It is ownership. It is proactivity. It is being the master of your vocational fate and captain of your professional soul.

Adaptability Will Save Your Happiness

There are other things that come along with ownership of your career besides responsibility, and one of those things is happiness.

“Adaptability is resilience. It is ownership. It is proactivity. It is being the master of your fate and captain of your professional soul.”

Maybe not the kind of happiness that has you twirling on top of a mountain a la *The Sound of Music*, but the kind of happiness that comes with empowerment. It is a happiness rooted in capability, possibility, and a sense of being able to handle whatever's next: good and bad. It is the removal of unnecessary worry and anxiety—those two most disruptive emotions that have a lack of control and helplessness at their core.

And hopefully for you, it is the kind of happiness that is rooted in enthusiasm and joie de vivre—for adaptability not only means you get to overcome the hurdles that pop up in your career path, but also that you get to access and leverage opportunities outside of your current conception of your career.

If you're open to adaptation—open to change—what might you accomplish you hadn't planned on? How much further can you go? What else might you be able to do? By increasing your adaptability, you are letting go of waiting for someone else to dictate what happens next in your career. It is open, it is unknown, and it isn't scary: it is exciting.

What has been true for eons in the natural world holds true for us today in our vocational world: adaptability is the only way forward—the only way to survive. 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Nacie Carson is a professional development explorer and author who focuses her research and work on career evolution, entrepreneurship, the gig economy, and the Millennial work experience. Her book on those topics, entitled *The Finch Effect*, was published with Jossey-Bass in May 2012. You can contact her directly at [nacie \(at\) TheLifeUncommon.net](mailto:nacie@thelifeuncommon.net).

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