



How To Future-Proof Your Career

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The first

co-working space was opened in San Francisco in 2005. Today, there are over 2500 co-working spaces in existence around the world. Cellphones first began to be used by the general population in 2000. Now, roughly 85% of the world has access to a mobile phone. Facebook was founded less than 10 years ago. Today, 1.25 billion people use the service. (That's 1 out of every 7 people on planet Earth.)

Today, the way we interact with people, the tools we use, and the way we work are all changing at an incredibly rapid pace. This has huge implications for the way we run our careers. In fact, it demands that we utterly reinvent our approach, shifting from a focus on past accomplishments—the “resumé model”—to constant self-iteration, or what I think of as the “learner’s model.”

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RULE #1 | Traditional careers are dead.

We're at an interesting crossroads in terms of careers. We still want them, but they don't exist anymore. In the US, the typical job tenure is now 4 years, with most workers cycling through about 11 jobs in their lifetime.

If the 20th-century career was a ladder that we climbed from one predictable rung to the next, the 21st-century career is more like a broad rock face that we are all free climbing. There's no defined route, and we must use our own ingenuity, training, and strength to rise to the top.

The lightning-fast evolution of technology means that jobs can now become indispensable or outmoded in a matter of years or even months. Who knew what a "Community Manager" was ten years ago? What about an "iPad App Designer"? Or what about "Chief Scientist" at a tech company?

A substantive portion of the working population now earns its livelihood doing a job that didn't exist 10 or 20 years ago. And if your job itself hasn't changed, chances are you're using new and unanticipated technology and/or skills to perform that job. (E.g. You're a designer who blogs, a comedian who uses Twitter, or a branding consultant turned e-tailer.)

RULE #2 | An ever-growing skillset is your greatest asset.

It follows then that 10 years from now, we'll probably all be doing some new type of work that we couldn't even possibly imagine today. Which means that ultimate competitive advantage is not acquiring this skill or that skill, but rather taking a proactive approach to educating oneself on an ongoing basis. Or, as Fast Company editor Bob Safian put it in a recent interview with me: "The most important skill in the age of flux is the ability to get new skills."

This style of on-the-job learning is epitomized by the most in-demand employee of the Information Age: the developer. No one is at the mercy of rapid technological change more than the coder, who is only as valuable as his or her ability to work in the language that reigns supreme right now. While PHP, MySQL, and Javascript are the languages that rule most of the Internet today, just five years ago a developer might have learned C++ or Java to earn their Computer Science degree.

In short, to land a new job or keep an existing one, developers must be constantly updating, tweaking, and expanding their skill sets. If they stop moving, it's game over. The same holds true for all of us now.

RULE #3 | Forget about finding a mentor, become a maker.

The days of “grooming” young employees for senior positions are over. No one is going to spend more time thinking about your career than you are. (And, honestly, why would you expect them to?) As NY Times op-ed columnist Thomas Friedman writes, employers “are all looking for the same kind of people—people who not only have the critical thinking skills to do the value-adding jobs that technology can’t, but also people who can invent, adapt and reinvent their jobs every day, in a market that changes faster than ever.”

To see a perfect example of this new way of operating, one need look no further than Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s cultural mantra: “Move fast and break things.” Keeping your head down, playing by the rules, and waiting for a promotion may have worked in the past, but it’s hardly the way to get ahead now.

The new model for career development is DIY. The most coveted team members are initiators and instigators. Those brave few who can identify new opportunities and seize them, those who can rally and lead a team, and those who can take an idea from start to finish with little oversight or hand-holding. Those who can make something.

RULE #4 | Size does matter. (Start small and stay small.)

The rise of the Internet has finally made Shakespeare's classic statement "all the world's a stage" undeniably true. Where we used to seek a publisher's greenlight in order to distribute content, we can now easily push writing to the masses via blogs and ebooks. Where we used to rely on dealers to share our artwork with the world, we can now simply build an online gallery to share new work as we produce it. Where we used to turn to a small cadre of investors to approve our ideas for creation, we can now pitch our projects to the masses and crowd-source funding online.

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In short, new technologies have largely eradicated a host of long-standing barriers to creating and sharing new products, new art, and new ideas. We now have an untold amount of resources and “access” at our fingertips. With the upshot being that the infrastructure and money of a large company are no longer required to produce something great.

Where the entire creative process was once distributed across tens or hundreds of people, now teams of 1, 3, and 10 people are creating world-changing products. Just take MakerBot, founded by Bre Pettis, Zach Smith, and Adam Mayer, as an example. This group of just three individuals played a huge role in launching what's now known as the "second industrial revolution" by bringing 3-D printing to the masses via the invention of the Thing-O-Matic, a low-cost 3-D printer, and the creation of Thingiverse, a website where users share open-source hardware designs.

With the means of production growing ever more accessible, individuals and small teams can now quickly launch and iterate on world-changing ideas. And rather than being hampered by their small size, the increased agility that comes from operating in a lean environment often gives these micro teams an edge over larger, more established companies.

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RULE #5 | Get used to wearing 17 hats.

But it's not all gravy. There's a flipside to this newfound creative empowerment: When you get rid of a typical management structure and collapse what used to be the responsibility of a large team into 1-3 people, someone still has to do the dirty work. Aka, the less creative stuff. The rise of the maker doesn't mean we've gotten rid of managers, it just means that we now have to play both roles. To do so: We must learn how to shift between creative, admin, finance, fulfillment, and other tasks all within the course of a single week, or even a single day.

The challenge is that these two types of work demand very different approaches to time management. Makers need long stretches of uninterrupted time to make progress on a project, while managers can organize their entire day around hourly tasks and meetings. To shift between the two roles successfully requires two things: 1) That you supplement your area of "maker" expertise with a very broad skillset of management-related abilities, and 2) That you become extremely adept at managing your time well so that you can shift between modes.

Whether it's constantly optimizing your individual approach to time management or expanding your creative arsenal to encompass an understanding of how supply chains work, those rare creatives that are able to wear more than one hat will be the ones who thrive.

RULE #6 | The learners will inherit the future.

What, where, and how the next generation should educate themselves is an open question these days. The debate about the relative merits of getting a college degree rages on, sparked by such creations as the Thiel Fellowships, which literally require young entrepreneurs to drop out of school so that they can just start making stuff already. Bloggers point to a small cadre of successful white men (Jack Dorsey! Steve Jobs! Mark Zuckerberg!) who dropped out of college, and use it as a shortcut to dismiss the value of an entire institution.

Yet the answer is not so black and white. Whether or not we go to college, the new world of work demands that we embrace learning as a lifelong project. It's not something that stops after high school, or after college, or even after you find your career path, land your first book deal, or sell your first company. And it's not something that happens only in a classroom, or only in books. In fact, the real learning usually happens anywhere but those places.

As those of us who have been through it know, the most interesting thing about leaving high school or college and diving into the world of work is that you instantly realize just how much you still have to learn. You get your first job, or you start hustling on your own, and you discover a massive new learning curve.

The learning curve that happens when you step outside of a safe, pre-planned environment and try to create something that no one has created before. The learning curve that happens when you face a great, wide world filled with uncertainty for the first time.

And today, there is more uncertainty than ever. No one, including me, knows what the world will look like 5 years from now, much less 20. What I do know is that this is exactly why curiosity—and a relentless thirst for learning—is the creator's greatest asset.

As the social philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote, **“In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future,” while “the learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.”** 📖

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | As editor-in-chief and director, Jocelyn K. Gleason leads the 99U in its mission to provide the “missing curriculum” on making ideas happen. She oversees [the 99u.com website](#)—which has won two Webby Awards for Best Cultural Blog—and leads the curation and execution of the popular [99U Conference](#), which has presented talks from visionary creatives including Jack Dorsey, John Maeda, Brené Brown, Jonathan Adler, Stefan Sagmeister, Jad Abumrad, AJ Jacobs, and many more. She is also the editor of the 99U book series, which includes *Manage Your Day-to-Day* and *Maximize Your Potential*.

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