

FUTURE PROOF: REINVENTING WORK IN AN AGE OF ACCELERATION

Diana Wu David

“I’m at the top of my game,

55 years old and retirement age is 60. I worked hard to get here but I’m not sure what I need to do to best prepare myself for a healthy, happy and productive next stage. I don’t want to retire, but I don’t really want to work the way I do now, forever.”

Over the the last six years of preparing successful, global professionals for encore careers as effective independent board directors, this conversation has been echoed across non-profit leaders, fine art specialists, fashion buyers, and CEOs. Professionals over 55 years old are moving from the smallest segment of the workforce to the largest by 2024. As more people live in good health for longer, they are asking, “how can I continue to add value amidst massive technological and industry disruption?” This question spurred me to research trends and ask dozens of people about their stories of transformation to find the breadcrumbs on the path to the future.

The future of work looks bewildering. The perpetual mention of accelerating change gives us motion sickness. The arguments for and against artificial intelligence, robotics, and trade are so complex and abstract it is hard to relate them to our own lives beyond an addiction to our smartphones and round-the-clock calls and emails.

In darker moments we wonder where it’s all leading. If we all live to one hundred, will we still be sitting at the same desk, slowly withering away as work becomes more tedious and insane? Can we afford to do anything else?

Globalization, disruption, and longevity are colliding to transform our careers. With a longer lifespan and an end to the linear learn, earn, and retire model, the whole rhythm of work is transforming before our eyes. Across the world, the lifespan of a corporation has declined. The average tenure of a firm in the S&P 500 was twenty-four years in 2016 and is forecast to halve by 2027. Jobs tenures are shorter than ever, while our work life seems to go on to infinity and beyond. Exponential change means that everyone is perpetually considering how to re-invent themselves to keep up with shifting careers and mores.

Big shifts in work include a need to embrace agility and experimentation. Adopting the agile mindset used in business innovation, we can experiment and find opportunities to apply our knowledge and passion to new projects. Today, it's all about perpetually testing, analyzing the data, and trying new routes to success. We "learn how to learn," repackage, and add value and relevance to serve the company's, customer's, and society's changing needs. In doing so, we can more flexibly serve our own needs.

Another shift is from hierarchy to networks. Enabling technologies such as 5G on the horizon, interaction through Slack, Trello, or Google documents, new platforms like Upwork and Fiverr, or memberships like Onda Life are making the idea of working from the beach or co-working spaces around the world seem more commonplace and effective. Our tribes of trusted collaborators become more interesting than who is on what level of the company organizational chart.

Finally, forget reading, writing, and arithmetic or even coding as the single golden ticket to success. Soft skills are the new career makers. According to the World Economic Forum, OECD, and the Institute of the Future, our mindset shift should also embrace so-called "soft skills," personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people, as the new career makers in the twenty-first century. Character traits and competencies including creativity, collaboration, adaptability, and initiative make up the increasingly popular future skills, indices driving new educational assessments and hiring practices.

What Got You Here, Won't Get You There

The pace of change has accelerated and complexity has increased. Your “Adaptability Quotient” or AQ is moving head of IQ, and EQ is the new must have to deal with such an environment. In order to respond to the changes, you have to develop your agility muscle. Like a tennis player, training body and mind to be able to respond in multiple ways to the ball, we have to train ourselves to anticipate and take advantage to each new opportunity or challenge. Henny Sender of the *Financial Times* put it succinctly when he wrote (of my new book, *Future Proof*), “It is both a curse and a blessing of our fraught times that reinvention is no longer an option, but an obligation. Resilience rather than any formal qualification has become the key to both success and satisfaction.”

Preparing for these accelerating shifts means moving beyond reliance on what you know to developing a practice that will allow you to keep up with change. Three commonalities stood out as keys to future-proofing:

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- 1. A focus on core values.** People worry about the future of work, old and young alike. How could you not with the dire headlines about robots taking away everyone's jobs? However, the professionals I spoke to that took the time to consider their core values were able to move beyond the status anxiety of leaving a big title or company brand and the fear of what other people would think of them. Instead they started with reflection about what a well-lived life looked like and started to experiment and leverage new ways of work to make that happen. They used their values to filter out the noise and determine what to pursue in terms of new ideas, skills, and projects to take advantage of changes on the horizon. As Stephen Covey notes in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "people can't live with change if there's not a changeless core inside them. The key to the ability to change is a changeless sense of who you are, what you are about and what you value."

Brian Tang, whose story is profiled in my book, could have stayed at a global investment bank for decades and been handsomely rewarded until the winds shifted. Instead he left to start up both a tech4good startup and a non-profit institute to help his industry navigate new regulation. He is now a go-to person for regtech and fintech across Asia, and founding executive director for Hong Kong University's interdisciplinary Law, Innovation, Technology and Entrepreneurship (LITE) program with many more interesting possibilities ahead.

- 2. Agility.** Developing an adaptive muscle allowed the people I interviewed to pivot to adjacent opportunities or to translate past experience to new contributions. Taking small bets, relying on tight feedback loops to assess outcomes and doubling down was a skill that proved useful. Steve Stine, head of Asia Inside, started his podcast on the side of his executive recruiting career, taking advantage of his relationships in industry to tell the inside story of a quickly developing Asia. He found huge success and doubled down, leaving his corporate career behind to dedicate more time to growing his new media business.

- 3. Learning Capacity.** Martin Lau, CEO of Tencent, said at a recent educational conference that learning to learn is the new key to success. When you're not sure where to invest, invest in understanding *how* you learn. In an age of lifelong learning, it is worth investing in specific practices to enhance how you learn for exponential long-term gain. You can, in the words of musicians Daft Punk: "Work it harder, Make it better, Do it faster, Makes us stronger." As new information comes in, you can then understand the best way to understand, process, and connect it to your existing knowledge. You are ready to use it to create new value. This is ramping up even more with the advent of neurofeedback, and even biohacking, but at the moment there is more stress on understanding your unique learner profile, chunking information and connecting the dots.

Professor of Engineering Dr. Barbara Oakley has created one of the most popular online courses in the world: "Learning How to Learn." In it, she recommends a few tips:

- a) Focus and then don't.** The brain has two modes of thinking—a 'focus' mode which, like my ski instruction, allows us to concentrate on materials, and a second, more diffuse neural resting state where consolidation of information occurs—and we need to employ both.
- b) Take regular breaks.** In the land of productivity, the "Pomodoro technique" is king. Set a timer for 25-minutes and reward yourself with a break. It helps overcome procrastination and allows for that diffuse learning to kick in.
- c) Practice.** Developing a neural pattern that can be reactivated when needed accelerates your learning. Remember the times tables in math? Despite being rote memorization, having the ability to quickly recall the answers to these simple equations is a core building block for future learning. The ability to call upon well-rehearsed neural chunks and add to them in number and complexity leads to greater procedural fluency and flow.
- d) Know your own learning style.** people learn differently and knowing your own learning style can ensure you adapt to the pace that suits you.

You may decide to learn to code, improve your Spanish or run a marathon this year but understanding how you learn will make the process faster, better, stronger and more successful.

Work hard for the life you want, don't settle for the one that's been given to you.

“You now have the potential for a more stimulating future as a result of having more time.”

- Lynda Gratton & Andrew Scott, *The 100-Year Life: Living and Working in an Age of Longevity*

We have the chance for a more stimulating future and present as a result of knowing we have more time. We can take more time to enjoy life as a journey: live each day, pursue multiple talents and roles, take a sabbatical. We might have multiple careers, with time off for further education in between. That leaves time to explore other passions and interests and take time to be with our friends and family. These trends give us opportunity to pause and focus some energy in other important areas of our lives; to step outside the safety of living on autopilot and really live.

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Your professional development can only go as far as your own personal development. Success rests on investing in the fundamentals of values, connection, and commitment to stay grounded and resilient in the face of accelerating change.

The good news is that the future of work is not a clarion call for our demise. It's our magic portal to more balance and rhythm in our lives. In the same way that Millennials have transformed the workforce by showing us new priorities including purpose and well-being, an older generation of "Perennials", are forging a path on which they can determine what a well-lived life and career look like well into their 70s or 80s.

Today's challenges, from climate change to healthcare to inequality, are so complex and so vast that whole new configurations of specialists and interdisciplinary thinkers need to come together to find solutions and deliver outcomes. Developing the skills to adapt, collaborate and learn across geographies, functions, industries, and generations will be key.

Future-Proof Your Life

When I changed my life balance, I returned to Bronnie Ware's article, "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying." Her regrets list is a great platform for a meaningful, agile, and fulfilling life. Here is what she found:

"I wish I hadn't worked so hard... I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me... I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings... I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends... I wish that I had let myself be happier."

Investing in your own happiness, having authentic relationships, and expressing your feelings is ultimately a life without regret.

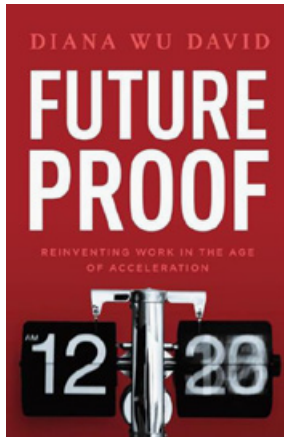
There has never been a better or more important time to do this. Jobs today are becoming more fluid, with people moving among teams and between fields far more often.

Self-awareness is the new success and the only way to survive. Don't define yourself too narrowly. Learn to ground yourself at your core in the values of connection, commitment, and resiliency. It will help you see more clearly how your skills can take you much farther than your present position or job title.

Futurists, economists, and politicians tell us that robotics, automation, and artificial intelligence will not completely replace jobs but will drastically change them. **Things are changing fast, but those who are adaptable and forward thinking will find a place to succeed and thrive in the new workplace.** 📖



Info



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About the author

Diana Wu David is a former *Financial Times* executive, author of *Future Proof: Reinventing Work in an Age of Acceleration* and adjunct professor at Columbia Business School's EMBA Global Asia. She works with global leaders to enhance their ability to adapt, contribute, collaborate, and grow and with organizations and boards that seek a competitive edge by enhancing leadership and engaging multigenerational talent.

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