

“Clearly explains key principles and defines a structured process that can help anyone learn to see what’s coming next.”

—Trip Hawkins, Founder, Electronic Arts

**2022 EDITION: THE NEXT NORMAL™ — BUILDING A POST-PANDEMIC FUTURE
INCLUDES ALL-NEW STRATEGY GUIDES AND BONUS CHAPTERS**



THINK LIKE A FUTURIST™

**HOW TO PLAN AROUND UNCERTAINTY AND
FUTURE-PROOF YOUR BUSINESS**

BY

SCOTT STEINBERG

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF MAKE CHANGE WORK FOR YOU™

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THINK LIKE A FUTURIST™

2022 EDITION

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Dedication

**T, Z, N and co. - and the countless
everyday heroes finding new ways
to make change work each day**





Time and the world do not stand still. Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.”

—John F. Kennedy



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Introduction

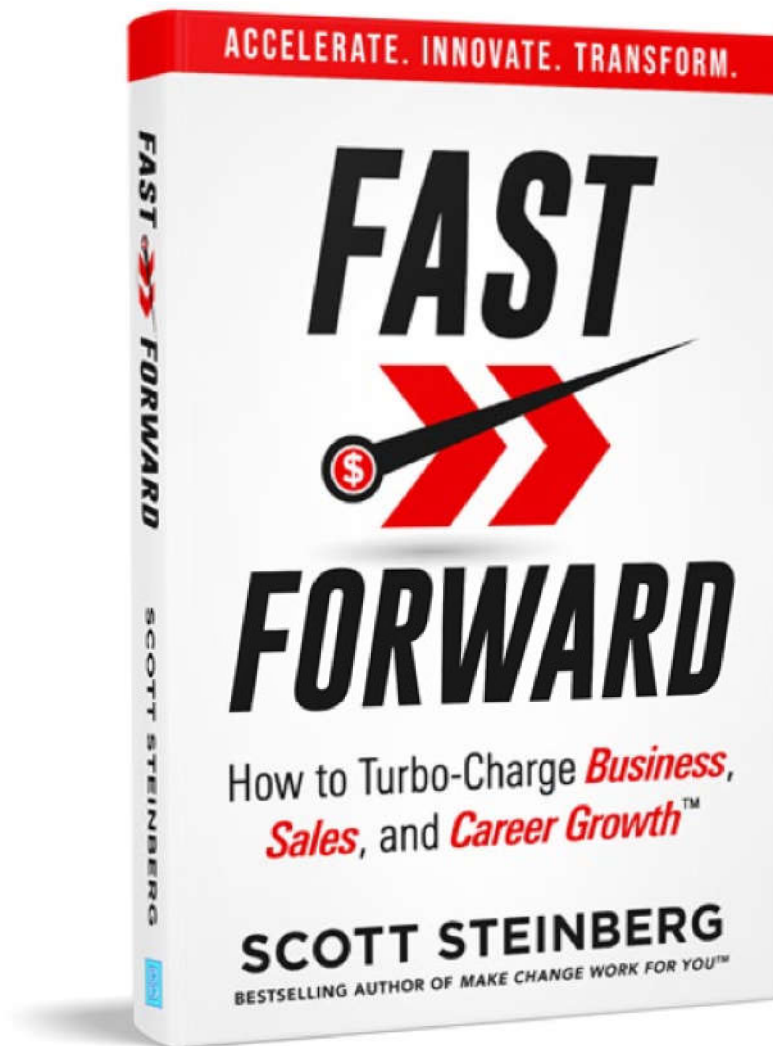
Arriving out of nowhere, COVID-19 swept through the world of business and finance like a tsunami in Spring 2020, wiping \$22 trillion off company valuations in weeks and forcing entire industries to rethink how they operate. What's more, the tidal waves of disruption and digital transformation its arrival has brought on only continue to buffet organizations in every field. As described in *Make Change Work for You*, our bestselling guide to trendspotting and innovation, unpredictability now remains the only thing we can predict and uncertainty the only certainty for working professionals going forward. In effect, disruptive events will only continue to further influence and transform the fundamental way in which countless individuals and organizations do business in coming years. But while the pandemic's impact continues to upend traditional operating systems and business models as we speak, don't forget: The seismic shifts occurring will only continue to drive forward-thinking firms and business leaders to spark ongoing and positive transformation at every turn as well.

As futurists and trends experts for over 1500 of today's best-known household brands and organizations, FutureProof Strategies: The Futurist Consulting Firm™ has worked tirelessly to help hundreds of Fortune 500 leaders and associations identify rising trends and adapt business strategies and working models around them. Like we often remind partners, while change and disruption may seem uncomfortable at first, they can also prove powerful catalysts for growth and innovation. Moreover, after spending nearly 25 years focused on answering one pivotal question – What's coming next? – we've also discovered that learning to future-proof a business or brand is also far less difficult and time-consuming than most would suspect. Inside the following guide, you'll find myriad strategies and solutions for helping yourself and your organization stay ahead of the post-pandemic curve, reimagine the future of work, and learn to spot and capitalize on opportunities before rivals can react. As we prepare to return to offices and attempt to get back to something resembling a new operating reality, it's our hope that it will prove a helpful tool in your efforts to plan around uncertainty, future-proof your business, and build a career roadmap that can withstand any unexpected twist or turn that the market takes.

While we can't always say for certain what the future will bring, it bears reminding. We always have the ability to think ahead, plan in advance, and – even if we should find ourselves unprepared for whatever happens – steer the future towards more positive outcomes by actively exercising a little ingenuity and hard work. Furthermore, even when surprise happenings and events call the best-laid plans into question, don't forget: You can always learn from every circumstance and pivot accordingly. True: We live in extraordinary and eventful times. But as you'll see time and again throughout this guide, you don't have to be psychic to see what's coming around the corner. More importantly, when you adopt a can-do attitude and relentlessly-practical approach to problem-solving, a little flexibility (and a knack for asking more forward-thinking questions) is all it often takes to successfully bridge the gap from where you're looking to go to where you're at.

In other words, welcome to The Next Normal: The future is not a fact that's written in stone, but rather an opportunity that is yours to create – one that will be shaped and reshaped by the countless choices and decisions that you choose to make.

- Scott Steinberg



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How to Think Like a Futurist

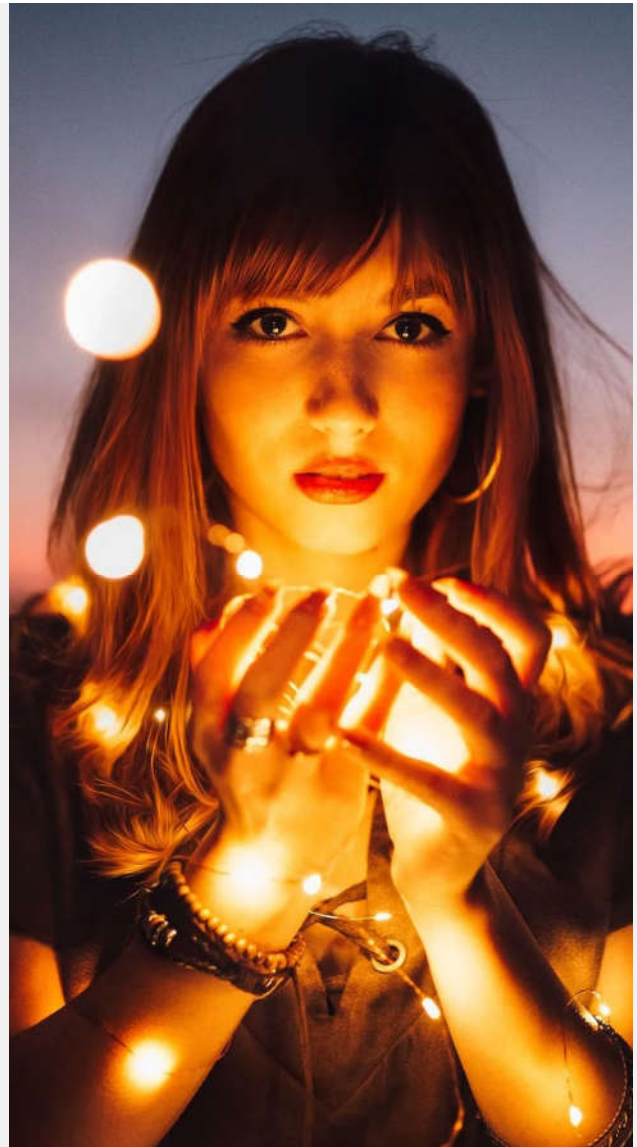
You say you want to get better at planning around uncertainty and learning to stay one step ahead of the curve? No surprise there: While we'd all like to improve our ability to see what's coming next, it often seems difficult to anticipate what's coming around the bend.

But despite common misperceptions, the good news is that in actuality, it's far easier and far less time-consuming than most of us would suspect. Better yet, you don't even have to be particularly talented or brilliant to do so either. So allow me to share a trade secret: You don't actually need to be a futurist in order to think like one. More than anything else, the key is simply knowing where to look for answers, the right questions to ask, and whom to turn to for insight.

Just ask Germany's Association for Chemistry and Economics (the VCW), which has over 30,000 members spread across hundreds of industries worldwide. Knowing that teamwork would be crucial to successfully staying one step ahead of the curve, and accelerating the speed at which it could adapt, the VCW recently wanted to create a solution that would allow these members to get better about working together to anticipate the future – and drive innovation on a huge scale. In addition, it was looking for a tool that would allow these folks to more easily collaborate with scientists in other fields as well.

Amusingly though, as intimidating as the prospect sounds, after studying the shape of the challenge before it, the VCW realized that all it had to do to get better about spotting new opportunities – and send its prospects soaring – was just bring a little ingenuity to bear. Because in the end, what the association wound up doing was simply coining the concept of “Social Chemistry,” and building an open online portal that allowed members to crowdsource ideas, team up with talent from outside the field, and pool resources across public and private organizations as needed. Incredibly, within just 5 weeks, not only was the VCW able to identify numerous trends and investment opportunities which weren't even remotely on the association's radar. It was also able to pinpoint hundreds of promising new ideas to explore, and spark dozens of new initiatives for the industry – not bad for a small, cost-affordable website.

As you can see, when it comes to maximizing your insight – and maximizing your opportunities – you don't necessarily have to be a genius to get ahead in business anymore... rather, just a little bit more clever and ingenious instead. Likewise, finding success today is less about being the most accomplished person in the room and more about being the one who's mastered the art of learning how to most quickly and effectively learn about any given topic instead as well. Moreover, when it comes to finding winning ideas to pursue,



you don't have to be exceptionally talented or creative either. Rather, just the type of leader who prizes diversity of thought and opinion, and actively makes a point to surround themselves with an army of trusted advisers by making leadership a concept that scales.

In effect, as much as we all love celebrating the Elon Musks and Steve Jobs of the world, succeeding in a business environment that's as fast-changing and unpredictable as today's marketplace isn't about having to be a single-minded or visionary leader anymore. Instead, it's about being able to draw upon the wisdom of crowds more frequently, and becoming more of what experts call an anticipatory leader ... Someone who's not only more skilled at anticipating the future, but also more clever and resilient when it comes to helping an organization consistently steer itself toward success no matter what the future brings.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves just yet. If you don't mind, before proceeding, I'd like to back up a little bit and start our examination of the ancient art of trendspotting by asking a simple question: What is a Futurist? I won't be offended if you roll your eyes here. After all, a lot of folks tend to think of us as the corporate version of late-night psychics. But the idea that we're in the business of reading tarot cards and tea leaves couldn't be further from the truth.



In fact – and I probably shouldn't tell you this – our dirty secret is that futurists don't actually predict the future for a living. Rather, we carefully study the current state of the market and society, as well as patterns and trends that appear to be slowly percolating upwards across both – then consider how likely it is that various developments will take shape, and the degree to which they'll impact any given organization. By doing so, we're able to challenge partners to think more critically about various scenarios – and how to create an action plan designed to deal with any given development that might come to pass.

Truth be told, we're market researchers and anthropologists more than anything else. Ultimately, we spend most of our time collecting data, analyzing information, and crafting scenarios that organizations can simulate working through to prepare themselves to greet new challenges. Put simply, it's our job to get business leaders to carefully consider which way that the future is trending – and help them determine which strategic direction to go in, as well as the best plan of attack to adopt. And you'd be amazed at the kind of insights you can surface when you apply similar approaches in thinking.

For example, a few years back, Coca-Cola Australia put on its futurist thinking cap and decided to study the shape of changing consumer markets, and quickly noticed that Millennials and Gen Zers were rapidly becoming two of the largest audiences for its carbonated beverages. In addition,

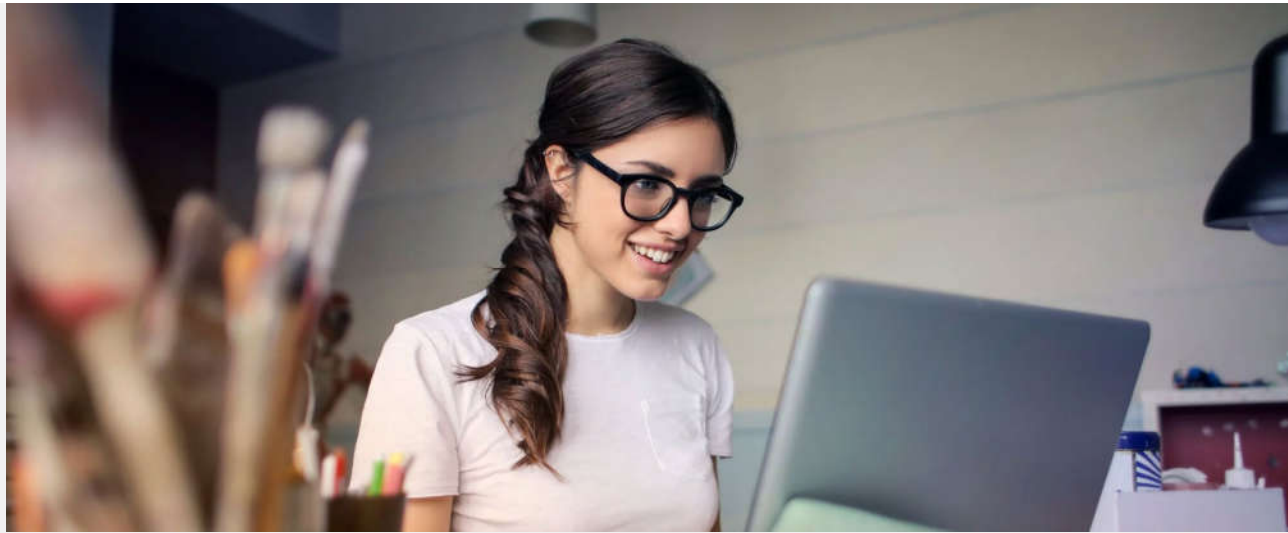
they also realized that these younger audiences – having been raised on the Internet and social networks – were less likely to engage in face-to-face interaction than previous generations. So over time, when young adults in Australia inevitably started getting together more often online than in real-life, and stopped drinking its soft drink products as much as in the past, the company was already well aware that it needed to radically reinvent its strategy to connect with them both online and off.

But rather than take out millions in TV or radio advertising, which it had already researched and realized wouldn't connect with digital natives? And rather than try and cook up all sorts of crazy new flavors, which it knew wouldn't fix the bigger underlying problem it faced? Coca-Cola instead decided to bridge the gap between the digital and physical worlds by printing the 150 most popular Australian boys' and girls' first names on Coke bottles (bottles it was already manufacturing and selling) and – via cost-effective social, online, and mobile media programs – invited citizens to share them and strike up a conversation, online and off.

Incredibly, within 3 months, the business had successfully blanketed the entire country and increased consumption among young adults by double digits. As you may have noticed, the campaign proved to be so clever and cost-effective that it later came to the U.S. and other territories in a big way as well. As you can see, a little advance planning and forethought can be a powerful tool for helping drive ongoing growth and success for any given business.



On the bright side though, like I was saying earlier, if you're hoping to become more of what management consultants Anika Savage and Michael Sales call an anticipatory leader, it may help to know that you don't need specialized training to do a futurist's job, though – or even a good publicist. In fact, as one of my peers put it, the truth is that we are all futurists at heart. After all, when we get married, it's not uncommon to assume that it will last a lifetime, and when we make an investment, it's not uncommon to think it will pay off in the long run, as futurist Sheryl Connelly reminds. But as we're all aware, these assumptions often don't pan out the way we anticipate. Which is exactly why we often find ourselves asking: What would we do if things changed and didn't go according to plan... how would we rethink our operating strategies as well? In effect, that's precisely what a futurist does – so congratulations, I'm officially giving you all a promotion. In case you're not busy doing enough different things at work these days, you can add yet another skill to your resume.



Anyways, as a working professional, you're no doubt already asking yourself all sorts of questions about what's coming next for various industries every day. So if you want to think like a futurist more effectively going forward? Mostly, all you need to do is make a point to ask more pointed questions here – and make a game of asking WHAT IF? at every turn, planning for an even wider range of eventualities. After all, the deeper the research you do, and more you practice mapping out specific actions that you can take in case unforeseen events suddenly upend your business plan, the more successful you'll be. And, of course, the more that you make a habit of regularly simulating and role-playing through scenarios such as these? The more you'll discover that the type of critical thinking futurists use is simply a basic mental muscle of sorts – and, like any muscle, is one that you can both get in the reflexive habit of using, and strengthen through repeat exercise.

For instance, we recently completed a project for the PGA that took a closer look at the future of golf. Unfortunately, as successful as this 600 year-old sport has been, it's having trouble connecting with young people, who see it as too time-consuming, too expensive, too elitist, too outdated, and too tough to master. But younger generations will become the largest audience for the game within 5 years, though – and would anyone care to guess what their average attention span is? It's 8 seconds. A goldfish's is 9 seconds by comparison. (Thanks Fortnite and Snapchat!)

So given that some of you probably have teens and twenty-somethings at home, some pointed questions you might ask yourself are: How likely are these young bucks to spend 4 minutes engaged in any given activity, let alone 4 hours lounging around a fairway? How many are open to blowing \$50 on a round of golf, not counting clothes, lessons, and equipment? And how many would prefer just casually hanging out and chatting with their friends in an online game to waking up early and teeing off at some stuffy country club anyway?

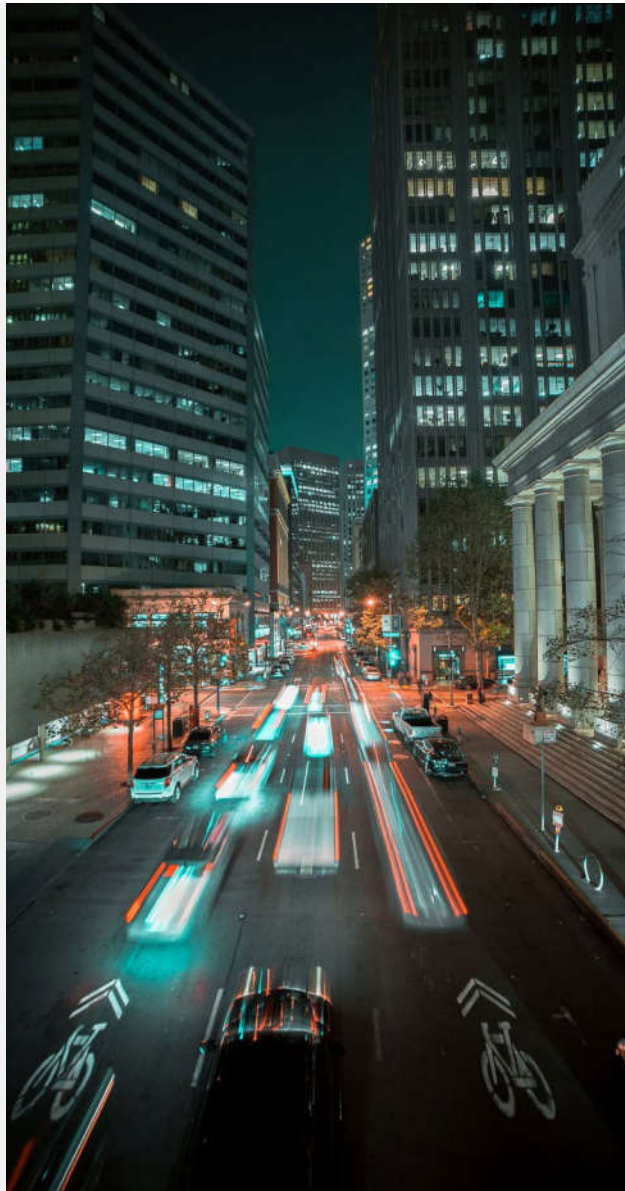
It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that fundamental sea changes are happening here that innovations like better equipment and cooler shoes alone won't solve. Or that the sport doesn't exactly lend itself towards the short-form and social experiences that today's youths thrive on. Which is precisely why businesses like TopGolf and Drive Shack asked themselves another, equally important question: What if we just made playing the sport of golf simpler – and helped

people get to the fun parts of the game sooner? And, in doing so, quickly became the hottest thing happening in the industry today.

If you haven't visited, you can think of these one-stop entertainment destinations – which combine high-tech driving ranges with restaurants, sports bars, and event spaces – as being equivalent to the sport of golf as what Dave & Busters is to traditional video game arcades. But as much as these firms have capitalized on cutting-edge technologies to grow their business, never mind smart viewscreens and micro-chipped balls... I'd argue that their core innovation is simply introducing a business model that makes the golfing experience shorter, more social, and more accessible to everyone. Again, a little bit of critical thinking is all it often takes to see the future taking shape more clearly, and a knack for asking better questions is all it takes to successfully plan around it.

However, if you want to become more of an anticipatory leader (someone who's capable of coming up with game changing solutions like these in coming years) it's also important to note. The trick to getting ahead going forward isn't just being able to accurately envision future scenarios, then think backwards and create a working roadmaps that bridge the gap from here to there. It's to also accept that other, alternate forces are in play and futures are constantly taking shape – and design your business and operating strategies in such a way that you've got multiple backup plans that you can put in motion if you suddenly need to rip up your playbook and rewrite it on the fly. Flexibility is the essence of future-proofing, as I always say.





Consider the case of Korean auto manufacturer Hyundai. A decade ago, its low-cost, high-quality vehicles were just starting to grow in popularity in US, and its fortunes were on the rise. But when the Great Recession hit, and it was suddenly and unexpectedly pummeled by a drop in consumer spending? Out of nowhere, it found that it had to quickly pump its brakes and veer in a different direction.

Unlike competitors though, Hyundai didn't immediately bump up ad spending or promote new product features or incentives. Instead, the company decided to be more strategic about looking for new opportunities, and created a program that allowed its salespeople and showroom employees (everyday frontline workers) to speak up and share their insights more readily. Hyundai then asked these workers to poll customers to find out what was going on, and discovered that the reason for spending drops had nothing to do with product feature sets or perceptions of overall quality – rather it was the risk that customers saw associated with buying big-ticket items like automobiles in such uncertain times.



So if you want to get better about planning for tomorrow, it's not enough to just get good at assessing various business and investment opportunities anymore. You've also got to make a point to get good at exercising strong, but weakly held opinions going forward. In other words, we're all going to be asked to make more important decisions on the fly going forward – even as, in such fast-changing times, the business intelligence we have to call upon becomes increasingly less reliable. So in addition to doing your homework as extensively as possible, and using the best information available when it comes to picking new business opportunities or new ventures to add to your portfolio? It's also vital that you keep enough of an open mind and eye on what's coming next that you're able to consistently revise these decisions as new information is gained. Considering that nine out of 10 companies – especially start-ups – who make it in the market tend to succeed with different business plans than those they first envisioned? Again, it pays to recognize that part of being a successful business leader in coming years won't just be about picking the right horses to back. It also means knowing when it's time to stop digging in your heels and start thinking about how to turn on a dime instead.

So instead of giving a knee-jerk response, and slashing price tags, Hyundai decided to slash risks for its customers instead, and started promoting a no-strings-attached money-back refund if shoppers lost their job for any reason within the next 12 months. As a result, the company's sales doubled in January 2009, while the industry's plummeted nearly 50%, its biggest drop since 1963 – not too shabby for a slight shift in steering, right? What's more, in case you hadn't noticed, everything old is apparently new again: In the midst of coronavirus-related concerns, a number of auto manufacturers are currently running similar promotions as we speak.

Of course, as any business leader can tell you, it's difficult trying to anticipate the future in a world that changes as often as the one we live in today, and these types of predictions will only get tougher to make going forward. But while the practice of engaging in futurism – making a point to actively contemplate future events and trends, and how they promise to impact you and your ventures – is becoming increasingly challenging? Futurism is also an important talent to get comfortable exercising, because it's a growingly critical skill for any working professional to master, especially when far-ranging decisions need making.



As a reminder, not only will the next 10 years bring more change than the prior 10,000 – change we'll all have to plan around. More than half of Fortune 500 firms will also be replaced by the time that 2030 arrives. In addition, thanks to our friends in the startup community, it now takes most organizations less than 30 days to deploy new products and business ideas, causing the lifespan of even today's most accomplished firms to shrink to just a single decade.

So if you want to enjoy any longevity as a business leader in coming years? It means that talent and smarts alone won't be enough to thrive in a world where even winners aren't surefire long-term bets anymore. Instead, like anticipatory leaders are aware, you'll also have to be far more proactive and agile when it comes to addressing emerging developments in the market. And more and more, the ability to successfully anticipate what's coming around the bend, and how to deal with what's coming next, will mean the difference between disrupting or being disrupted.

Anyway, if you want to become more of an anticipatory leader, it's no surprise that you'll have to start thinking like a futurist more often. And that not only means having to teach yourself to get better at weighing every decision. It also means having to craft more adaptable business plans as you go. Happily, asking yourself three simple questions can help as you go about considering how to build a more future-proof strategy, including:

- Financial gains aside, how can you always ensure you're finding ways to win from every opportunity – i.e. by gaining new capabilities, insights, and resources that can be applied to other business ventures?
- What level of flexibility do potential ventures you choose to undertake allow – and just how readily can you repurpose tools, technologies, and insights from them in new and novel ways if needed... or use them to quickly pivot or springboard to new opportunities?
- How successfully and rapidly can resources and learnings garnered from your efforts in any given area translate to other contexts, industries, or areas of business opportunity?

In effect, what I'm asking you to is look beyond balance sheets and research reports alone and always consider – how well does this investment bolster and augment my

overall business strategy and/or holdings? And if sudden, unexpected developments call even the best-laid plans into question, how much room to maneuver do different opportunities truly afford me? As you may have noticed, no matter how much time and money you can afford to invest in any given venture, more often, if there's one thing you can always bank on, it's the benefits to be recognized by exercising start-up-level ingenuity at every turn.

On the bright side, as we've discussed, you can certainly get better about anticipating the future by exercising a more forward-thinking mindset. Noting this, more than anything, three skills you'll want to cultivate more frequently going forward are critical analysis, inquisitiveness, and imagination – the ability to consistently ask Why, How, and What If at every turn, as it were. Doing so won't just help you practice the art of futurism more readily. It will also help give you the perspective you need to determine where holes in the marketplace (and holes in your investment portfolio) exist, plus the insight needed to make smarter decisions going forward.



Likewise, as we briefly touched on before, you can also improve your odds of finding success by embracing the wisdom of the crowd wherever possible. That's because change is now happening on a global and epic scale – and the more radically you can multiply the resources that are available to you, the more radically you can multiply the speed at which you can solve any given challenge. In essence, the key is getting ahead going forward isn't just to get good at evaluating business plans and financial models, but also to get good at researching, networking, and applying insights in context.



Because to stay on top of emerging trends, you've not only got to stay up to speed on what's happening in different markets. At the rate and scale that change can impact us today, you've also got to build a community of expert advisors around you who can help you stay better attuned to impending shifts, get smarter about any given topic faster, and operate at much greater scope if you want to stay competitive. After all, you might not know much about quantum computing or advanced robotics... But when it comes to staying on top of new developments in these spaces and evaluating new investment opportunities, which can pop up anytime, anywhere all over the world? It pays to have a really smart group of friends you can call upon who do.

Ultimately though, if you're looking for some quick, simple things that you can do from a personal standpoint to sharpen your future senses, there are five simple activities you can engage in if you want to get better at spotting and interpreting signals that the market is sending, according to leading futurists:

- **STAY UP-TO-DATE ON TRENDS** – A number of high-level socioeconomic and technological forces called megatrends promise to impact the future at all times – and you should be monitoring them at every turn, say industry experts. For example: Millennials – who think, learn, and operate differently from prior generations – are becoming the largest demographic in the workforce, just as artificial intelligence and robotics are transforming the shape of the workplace as we speak. Just a few ways you can stay on top of megatrends include reading up on the latest news, attending conferences, staying attuned to academic research, speaking with end-users and industry thought leaders, maintaining contacts across industry supply chains, and keeping on top of startup and investment activity. No matter how high a level that you find yourself operating at, never forget that grassroots research can yield tremendous insights, and you should never be too busy to engage in it.
- **IMAGINE TOMORROW TAKING SHAPE** – Once you've spotted an emerging trend, make a point to think ahead and imagine what the future looks like 3, 5, and 10 years

hence for an industry or market. Now work backwards and consider how it arrived there. Ask yourself questions about which trends prompted these shifts and their timing, as well as market conditions, business models, and technologies that came into play during these transitions. Now think about how you and your company can play a role in helping the market arrive at this future state. In the case of self-driving cars, for example, you might ask: How will current markets and industries be impacted by these vehicles? What business models will they upend – and to what extent? And what new opportunities will their arrival create?

- **TAKE A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO ANALYSIS**

– Having a strategic methodology for evaluating opportunities is essential. For example: You might start by deciding whether a new technology is an incremental innovation (such as a new feature or function) or disruptive innovation that produces a new product, service, or category. Afterwards, you could then identify prospective markets and audiences for it; pick a time period to examine; and put the idea through rigorous analysis to understand the business opportunity it introduces. Then you'll also want to consider the potential value to your organization, and the strategic rationale for pursuing it. In other words, it's all about right-sizing opportunities here – and once you've right-sized a concept, you can work backwards to put a tactical plan of action steps in place that can help you start achieving it if you decide it's something that you wish to pursue.

- **EMBRACE INVERSE APPROACHES TO INNOVATION** –

Great ideas can come from anywhere, right? That's why more organizations are practicing both outside-in and inside-out innovation. For example, many are turning to the concept of open innovation – inviting feedback and ideas from external sources such as the startup and academic communities (i.e. the outside in) – as a means of scaling and accelerating innovation. Likewise, others are turning to inside-out methods and taking tools and technologies that they've come up – i.e. platforms for data sharing and collaboration that they've developed – and incorporating them into others' innovation processes. Learning to effectively leverage both will become increasingly important in coming years.

- **MOVE FROM ANALYTICS TO ACTION** – With over 20 billion devices now talking to each other, data is the lifeblood of any modern organization. But studies tell us that less than 10% of relevant information is currently being used to enhance organizational value. Bearing this in mind, it's vital to become more data literate too, and tap into the mountain of information that's increasingly being collected by many of our businesses. After all, artificially-intelligent software programs can help you spot emerging patterns and leading indicators faster than the human eye. So as you go about envisioning the future? Don't forget to get technical as well. Not only should you have standardized data management systems in place that can help you aggregate and analyze information at every turn. You should also be leveraging AI-powered assistants to help you quickly go from analytics to actionable advice at a glance.

On the bright side, as you can see, while it pays to apply both qualitative and quantitative measures to weighing investments, learning to operate like a futurist doesn't require specialized skills or training. In fact, it's more about exercising critical thinking and creativity—the type of talents most of you have been honing your entire career. Lean into these types of forward-looking skills further, and you too can discover what it takes to see ahead of the curve.

However, that said, if you want to translate these insights into business gains, do be advised as well. It's also important to note that becoming an anticipatory leader requires more than just exercising your imagination and possessing a good instinct for where things are headed tomorrow. Rather, as authors Savage and Sales note, it demands thinking in three dimensions: As a Futurist, Strategist, and Integrator.

FUTURISTS, as we discussed, act as curators of sorts, (a) exploring developments in various industries, sciences, and markets (b) collecting ideas from conventional and obscure sources and (c) tracking patterns and trends to understand how they impact an organization.

STRATEGISTS see the possibilities that each trend holds, and can weave disparate information sources into useful connections and combinations. They build high-level strategies that tie these insights together to create positive business results.

INTEGRATORS go beyond observing and analyzing, and translate understanding into action – in other words, they know how to work within organizational systems, and inspire colleagues to produce positive results.

As you might note, to be an anticipatory leader means not only being able to see systems – industries, markets, etc. – as networks of interacting forces, and understanding the cause-and-effect relationships that these forces create. It also means being able to determine where these dynamics present opportunities for growth and innovation – and being able to take complex concepts and break them down into tactical day-to-day steps that an organization can take to achieve its goals.

Of course, when it comes to crafting real-world solutions, adapting your future insights into actionable strategies can be every bit as challenging as trying to spot the next big thing in business. So from a strategic perspective, it also pays to keep in mind a few handy tips and principles that can help you go from insight to innovation.

- **USING TIME CONES, NOT TIMELINES** – Many experts recommend using time cones, not timelines, when doing future projections, such as quantitative futurist Amy Webb. According to Webb, organizations often like to use fixed strategic timelines based around round numbers – e.g. 5- or 10-year plans – when doing high-level planning, because they're easy to communicate and categorize. But rather than used fixed timelines, as they're highly inflexible, and unexpected changes and disruptive events can often fall outside of their scope, she says, it's often better to use time cones when doing strategy planning instead. The process starts by sketching out your thoughts on four different categories: (1) Tactics (2)

Strategy (3) Vision and (4) Systems-Level Evolution.

- › Tactics help us plan specific actions for the next 12-24 months, since we have a good idea of what the next year or two will bring.
- › Strategy asks us to examine the general direction the organization will take over the next 2-5 years in terms of defining priorities and allocating resources.
- › Vision's 5-10 year scope refers to areas in which we choose to pursue research, make long-term investments, and develop tomorrow's workforce.
- › And Systems-Level Evolution planning asks us to take a closer look at how industries must evolve to meet rising technology and regulatory challenges, as well as challenges related to megatrends and similar forces.



A more flexible way to represent the future as it unfolds, notes Webb, time cones also offer greater room for your plans to change and evolve as more information is gained.

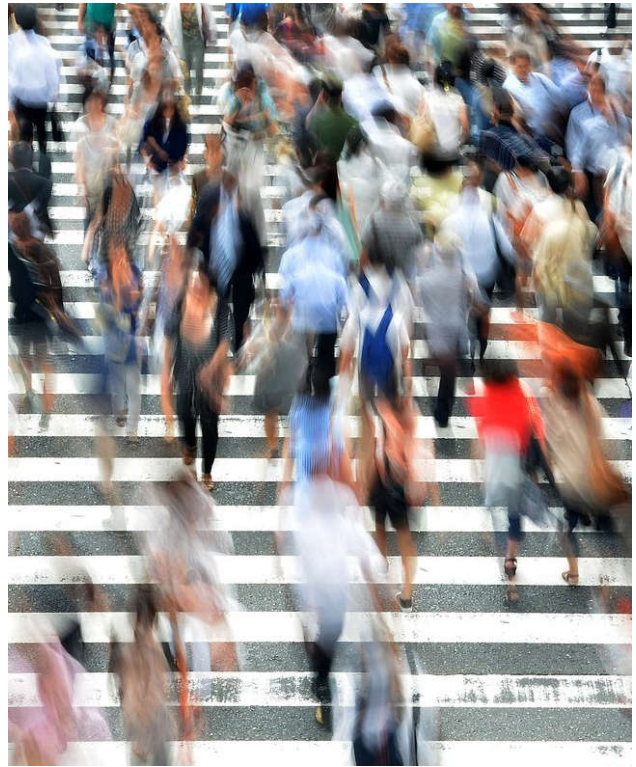
- **APPLYING FOUR STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES** – In addition, if you want to train yourself to get in the mindset of a futurist more readily, you can do so by applying several basic strategic principles, says Marina Gorbis, executive director for the Institute for the Future:

1. FOCUS ON TRENDS, NOT FADS – As discussed earlier, anticipating the future is a process of looking at complex, interrelated events and the connections between them – not simply studying the temporary effects that they're producing. So be sure you're staying laser-focused on the big picture at all times. A handy way to picture this concept, according to Gorbis, is to think about the difference between waves and tides. Waves are fleeting events that come and go – what we see on the surface, she says. But an anticipatory leader trains themselves to see tides – the deeper forces or megatrends at work happening underneath the surface that are causing these waves, or disturbances, in the market. For example: The fact that Taylor Swift's songs can still hit #1 on the charts, but not sell a million copies anymore is concerning. However, the changes in consumers' basic digital media habits and growth in online streaming services that are causing these sales to fall? Now that's a more important point to stay tuned into. Your goal, says Gorbis, is to determine which forces are at work at all times, how they impact the marketplace, and where you have the opportunity to shape the future for the positive.

2. KEEP A LOOKOUT FOR SIGNALS – The future is constantly changing. Unfortunately, historical data (which is mostly what we have) is notoriously unreliable at predicting it when things are in a state of change – especially if we’re at radical inflection points, notes Gorbis. That’s why paying attention to signals, which are little developments happening on the margins (things that may even look weird or strange to you) is important, she says. In effect, a signal is “a small or local innovation or disruption such as a new product, market strategy, or technology that has the potential to grow in scale and geographic distribution.” For example: The rise of biometrics – body- and face-tracking technology – hasn’t completely upended the market yet, but it’s rapidly being deployed at airports, laboratories, and manufacturing centers worldwide, and will cause a seismic impact in coming years. Futurists get in the habit of looking for signals like this constantly.

3. WATCH FOR EMERGING PATTERNS – The point of aggregating signals and determining how they connect to bigger-picture trends is to help us spot emerging patterns, reminds Gorbis. These patterns help tell a larger story – and point to where the future will head. By observing them, you can see which tools, technologies, and business models are on the decline, and which are on the rise. For example, looking at the media sector, we can see we’re moving from an age where big institutions such as corporations and news conglomerates control the flow of information to one where platforms such as Twitter – wherein large numbers of individuals operating independently are openly crowdsourcing journalism – are democratizing it instead.

4. CREATE EXPERT COMMUNITIES – No one alone can accurately predict the future 100% of the time. Rather, as we discussed earlier, if you want to improve your accuracy, these days it’s more of a collaborative and communal affair. This requires us to cultivate diversity of thought and perspective amongst our teams, and involve experts from many different domains when making decisions. And the more you can create a network of diverse people boasting different backgrounds and experiences who can help provide more robust feedback and insight when you’re working to envision the future, says Gorbis? The more successful that you’ll be. For instance, if you visit websites like Challenge.gov, you’ll see that even agencies like the EPA and NASA – which are staffed by some of the world’s brightest minds – are putting up cash bounties and contests asking the general public for help developing tomorrow’s most advanced technology solutions.



Ultimately, what we find is that practicing the art of futurism isn’t about having to predict the future. Rather, it’s about thinking more deeply about complex issues, connecting signals into larger patterns, using these patterns to imagine new possibilities, and aligning groups of people towards achieving the common goal of putting all these promising new ideas in motion.

And while the concept of becoming an anticipatory leader may be relatively new, keep in mind. The futurist thinking skills it champions will only become more important to exercise in the face of growing industry change and disruption going forward. Happily, the more you practice applying the art of futurism, and more frequently you strive to make leadership a concept that scales? The more skilled at spotting seemingly disparate connections that you’ll become, and more successful you’ll ultimately be.

In short, like we touched on before, you don’t have to be smarter, more talented, or more of a creative genius to spot the future taking shape. Instead, you simply need to know where to look for answers, the right questions to ask, and whom to turn to for insight if you want to get better about seeing around the corner. And the more you make a point to exercise all the skills and talents we’ve discussed here? The more you’ll be able to improve your odds of spotting what’s coming next, and the better equipped you’ll also be to stay ahead of the curve as well – no matter what the future may bring.

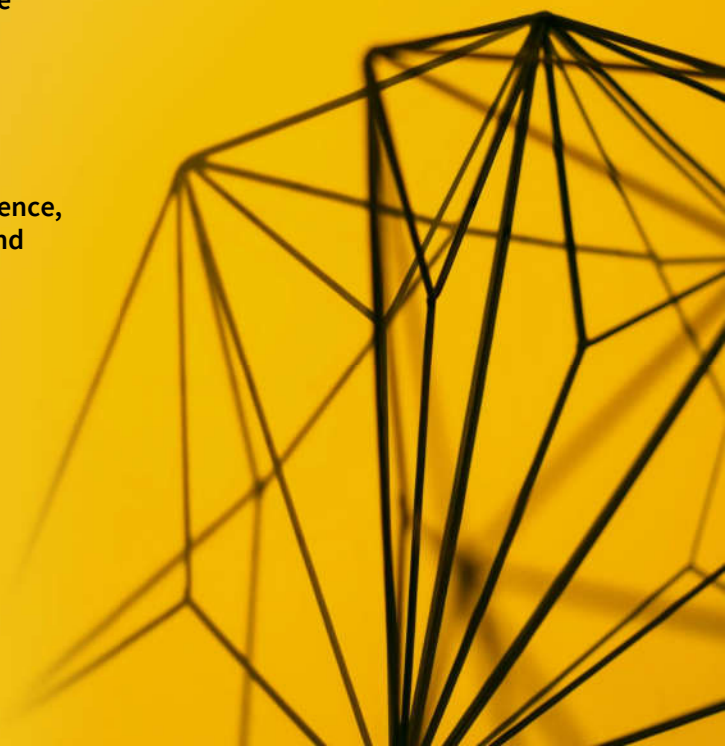


Future Planning Workshop: Strategy in Motion

Required time: 60-90 minutes

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Create a two-sentence summary and mission statement for a sample business
2. Brainstorm 10 unexpected new developments (unforeseen events or happenings) that might impact this business in the future – then place each unexpected development on a notecard, one per notecard
3. Divide exercise participants into tables of 5-8 individuals from different organizations, departments, and levels of seniority
4. Give each table a flipchart to take notes on, and ask each table to assign a leader who will take notes and present any findings
5. Present the audience with an overview of the sample business you've built, then give each table 5 minutes to come up with a business plan and investment strategy for this faux organization
6. Every 5 minutes, ask one member of each table to come up and pick a notecard containing an unexpected development and read it aloud to the entire group
7. Once they've picked an unexpected development, ask each table to take 5 minutes to write up their thoughts on how it impacts their business plan on the flipcharts – and how they can adapt to it
8. After repeating this process 8-10 times, ask all tables to take 5 minutes to summarize their findings on a single flipchart page
9. Then, one-by-one, ask each table leader to take 2-3 minutes to stand up and present their findings to the entire room
10. Quickly summarize the group's findings for your audience, and collect flipcharts (which should be full of ideas and insights) for later use

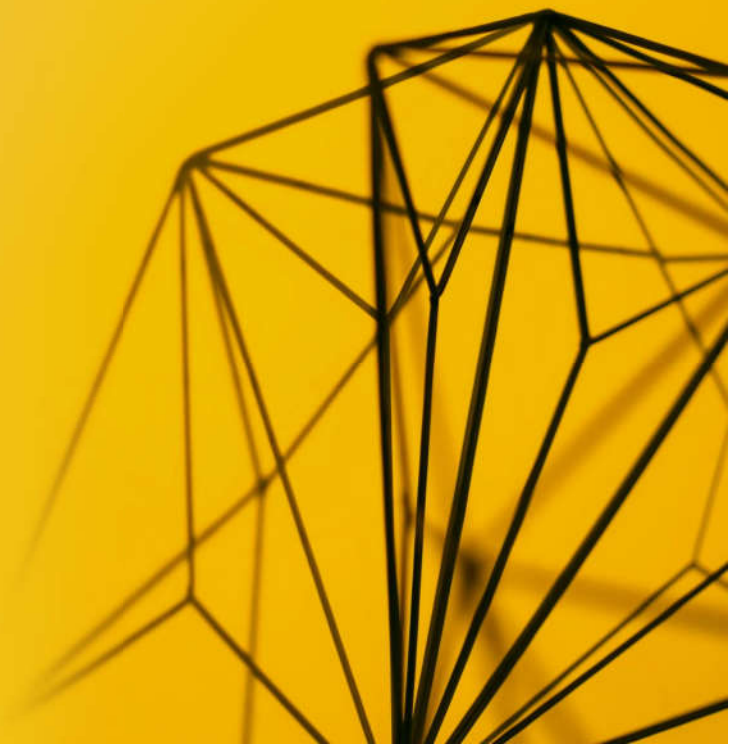


Sample Business

Pulse Capital

Operates \$500 Futurecare
Capital Investment Fund

Pulse Capital invests in early growth, revenue-stage firms that are leveraging emerging technologies to rethink the future of wellness and healthcare.



Unexpected Developments



Feverish Thinking

A global pandemic causes widespread disruption to your supply chain

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Seeing Green

Eco-consciousness and green solutions come to the forefront of consumer sentiment

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Going For Broke

Worldwide economies begin to lapse into recession, and investor confidence quickly pulls back

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Privacy and identity concerns overwhelmingly trend and dominate media headlines

This Means War

Rogue nations' unpredictable actions cause entire regions of the world to be thrown into chaos

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Rocking The Vote

Political upheaval rocks the marketplace, and leads to mounting uncertainty

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Bending The Rules

New regulations take effect that greatly inhibit your ability to do business

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Wait – What Just Happened?

Unexpected competitors emerge offering superior or more cost-effective solutions

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The Cost To Be The Boss

Economic realities shift, causing the price of production, distribution, and outreach to skyrocket

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Cashing Out

Unmoved by your current performance, investors suddenly begin making different success metrics a priority

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Discussion Guide:

Accelerating Growth + Innovation

Required time: 60-90 minutes

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Create a one-sentence write-up of 10 megatrends that promise to reshape a chosen industry – then place each megatrend on a notecard, one per notecard
2. Brainstorm 10 questions that you'd also like to ask participants about how each of these megatrends might evolve and impact their business – then place each question on a presentation slide, one per slide
3. Divide exercise participants into tables of 5-8 individuals from different organizations, departments, and levels of seniority
4. Give each table a flipchart to take notes on, and ask each table to assign a leader who will take notes and present any findings
5. Ask the leader from each table to come up and pick a single notecard containing a megatrend, which their table will be assigned to cover
6. Every 5 minutes, ask a question from one of your presentation slides to the entire group, and ask each table to take 5 minutes to write up their answers to these questions about the megatrend they've chosen on the flipcharts – and how it impacts their thinking on business
7. Repeat this process 8-10 times
8. Then ask all tables to take 5 minutes to summarize their findings on a single flipchart page
9. One-by-one, ask each table leader to take 2-3 minutes to stand up and present their findings to the entire room
10. Quickly summarize the group's findings for your audience, and collect flipcharts (which should be full of ideas and insights) for later use

Which new trends and innovations promise to most define or disrupt the shape of your chosen topic in the next 3, 5, and 10 years – and how can you quickly and effectively stay on top of them?

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Where can you turn for insights into breaking developments? And what solutions can you institute that can help colleagues and/or advisers share input and collaborate at scale when they spot rising challenges or opportunities?

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What areas of business are likeliest to be impacted by new innovations in your given space, to what extent, and how soon will these changes arrive?

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Which business and operating models do you expect to be upended the most – and fastest – by these new developments? What types of new business and operating models will be created as a result?

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What wildcards (unforeseen events) could most disrupt and alter the course of these subjects in the near- and long-term future? How can you design flexible enough business strategies to respond in turn?

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The biggest paradigm shifts we currently see emerging across our industry are? How are we preparing ourselves to proactively greet them?

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How are we promoting productive risk-taking across our organization, and encouraging our peers to speak up and take action more frequently in the face of rising challenges or opportunities?

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Which simple strategies can we use to quickly and successfully experiment with new ideas or initiatives – even if time and resources are sometimes hard to come by?

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What are we doing to adapt to changing audience demographics – and address future generations' changing interests and needs?

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What can we do to promote more diversity of thought and opinion across our organization – and incorporate more young and emerging leaders' voices into our decision-making process?

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What kind of benefits is tomorrow's customer or end-user most actively seeking, and – in addition to current perks – what are some additional upsides that we could easily be offering them?

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What steps are you taking to ensure that you win with every business venture (e.g. by gaining new insights and capabilities), and ensuring that – if you need to pivot – these resources can readily be applied to new ventures?

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How are you finding ways to capture and deploy learning, insights, and capabilities across your full range of business investments and activities, and repurpose these tools and resources as needed to help augment or fuel other initiatives?

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Quick, simple ideas you could immediately start implementing to design better working strategies and adapt to future change more successfully include?

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How to Future-Proof Your Business and Career



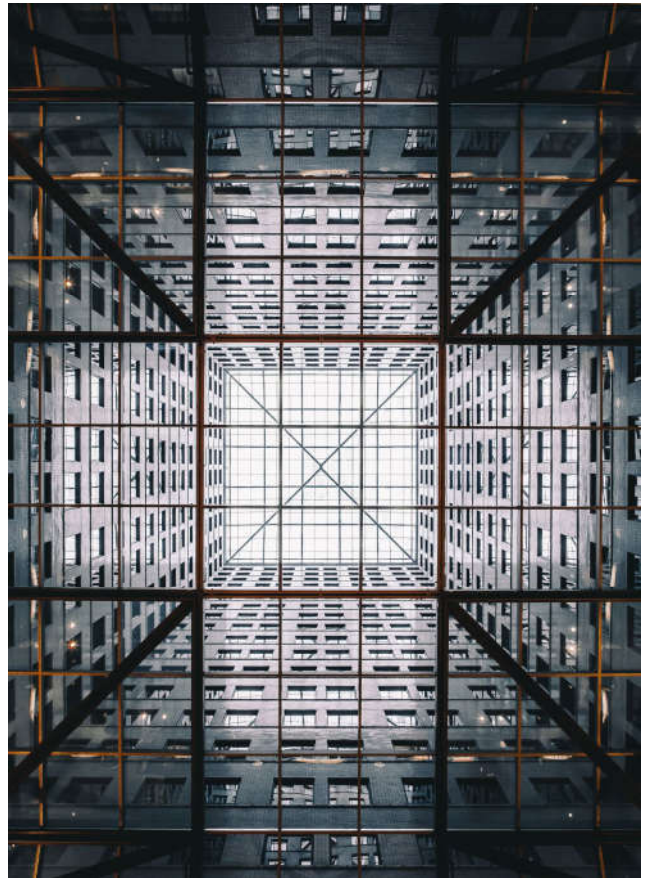
Lead and Succeed Despite Disruption

So much for the idea of “status quo.” While modern executives are no strangers to change and disruption, it bears reminding that things only get more topsy-turvy for working professionals from here. In fact, according to recent surveys by researchers at today’s top management consulting firms, no two days on the job will ever be the same again. That’s because across every region of the world, and every commercial sector, market leaders explain that the only consistent theme you can count on in coming years is unpredictability.

Think you’ve got a handle on how fast today’s business world moves? Think again. As we ourselves were shocked to find while researching recent book *Lead with Your Heart*, uncertainty is now the only certain at work; the next 10 years will bring more change than the prior 10,000; and – thanks to rapid advancements in technology and communications tools – the one thing organizational leaders can count on going forward is that they’ll only be hit with more unforeseen disruptions harder, faster, and from more angles than ever before. So what’s a forward-thinking executive to do if they want to help their enterprise stay ahead of the curve? Simple: Apply a simple accelerant, and learn to think faster, by changing up their leadership and management style to make leadership a concept that scales. In effect, by providing workers the insights that they need to make smarter decisions on the fly, and equipping staffers with all the tools that they need to stay better attuned to the now near-constant signals that the marketplace is sending them, it’s possible to become much faster about addressing and adapting to these emerging developments in turn.

Bearing this in mind, and that business and cultural trends are now evolving at an unprecedented pace, it’s no surprise that business leaders around the world note that strategic priorities for any organization hoping to get ahead in coming years must also evolve. Among the concepts they say it’s now vital to champion to your staff if you want to think and move faster as an enterprise are the need to:

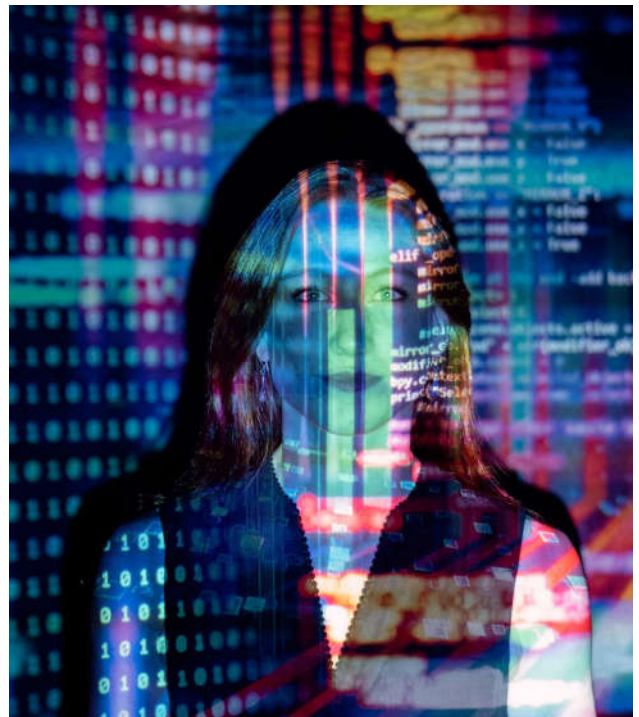
- Develop and maximize a globally-aware and -influenced pool of talent
- Foster a culture of employee engagement and continuous learning
- Put productivity, not process, at the heart of your operating strategy
- Dare to consistently disrupt your operations before outside forces disrupt them for you
- Make a commitment to ongoing organizational improvement



But most importantly, they also note that the best way to get ahead in uncertain times is to always be doubling down and reinvesting in your people – and that doing so can pay off in huge ways, because people are your most important asset today.

Taking this into account, today’s most effective leaders realize that here and now – while things are going well, and you can most afford to take chances – is the most opportune time to start making a host of smart investments in initiatives that drive constant learning and growth for their organization. And that it’s also the best time to start encouraging staffers to get behind the idea of making more insight-driven decisions, and educating themselves through a running process of trial and error that involves constantly brainstorming and testing a variety of new strategies and solutions.

Because in uncertain times, as we discovered by speaking with hundreds of market leaders, the irony is that you’ve got to take more risks, not fewer if you want to get ahead. However, these risks have to come in the form of small, smart, cost-effective bets designed as ongoing learning experiments that can help you quickly gain deeper insights into the shape of changing operating landscapes and make better and more informed choices as you become more knowledgeable. Likewise, to stay relevant – let alone ahead of the curve – organizations also have to start being more deliberate about putting systems and programs in place that can help frontline staffers quickly surface great ideas (whether suggested by customers, partners, or colleagues) and take on more of an ownership role in helping drive workplace decisions. Again, if you want to think and move faster, you’ve got to streamline your organizational structure to act as a springboard for growth – and remove the day-to-day roadblocks that often get in staffers’ way.



The New Tools Leaders Need to Stay Ahead of the Curve

Succeeding in hugely disruptive environments isn't about avoiding risks. In actuality, it's actually about taking more risks—albeit calculated and controlled ones. If you study leading innovators, you'll notice something interesting: They never stop innovating, and are always exploring an array of new business strategies and ventures. That's because staying ahead of the curve and making smarter decisions in disruptive environments is largely a process of controlled speculation: Being risk-averse, not risk-free.

Essentially, market leaders actively manage innovation the same way you would manage a financial portfolio. Diversify. Monitor. Consistently readjust. This means placing multiple bets. Some of these gambles will be high risk, high reward. Some will be low risk, low return. Not all will pay off. But by pursuing all, you help grow your organization's learning and capabilities, and gain deeper insights into changing markets.

Consider that Starbucks is the world's largest chain of coffee houses. It famously describes itself as “in the people biz serving coffee, not the coffee biz serving people.” The company would be crazy to upset its customers, right? But it constantly puts its Arabica beans on the line. Starbucks is routinely rolling out new business strategies and programs, such as new store concepts, products, and payment options, even before most of these concepts are finished and error-free. Why? Because it understands the power of moving faster, and says it would rather be first than flawless, make mistakes than miss an opportunity, and fall flat than fail to be swifter to establish market beachheads than rivals. And it makes a point to train its people in a simple, but hugely powerful principle that sets the business up to succeed time and again: In the face of ongoing change and disruption, the only thing to truly be afraid of is not changing as well.

Identifying Tomorrow's Leaders

Tomorrow's leaders will possess only two defining characteristics: The ability to solve problems and create results. Accordingly, it's vital to instill more bootstrapping values (for example, a culture of ownership, entrepreneurship, and accountability) in employees, and teach them how to more effectively think dynamically and solve problems in context.

Case in point: At Intuit, a personal finance software maker, senior management says its sole role now is “to remove the speed bumps in experimenters' way.” To this extent, its

employees are routinely encouraged to think like business owners and experiment like mad scientists, bringing new products and projects to market as fast as possible, learning from these efforts, and sharing their insights with the broader organization at large.

Workers are then encouraged to come up with still more new ideas, and use online collaboration tools to secure resources, support, and insights from peers. They then go to market with real-world prototypes as fast as possible. Intuit's employees can now do this without getting the management or legal team's approval (yet more speed bumps removed), and dozens of revenue-generating products and features have resulted.

Skills For the Future

The capabilities and tools needed to succeed in business today and tomorrow look very different from those that were needed to succeed yesterday. Below are the skills you should be teaching employees in a world where systems routinely break down, variables are constantly changing, and uncertainty is the only certain.

- **Make smarter decisions.** Time, effort, and energy are finite resources, meaning that every decision comes with two costs: Opportunity, as well as financial. Teach employees how to factor both in when making decisions and considering which ventures to pursue. The more they consider where efforts are best focused from a long-term perspective, the more successful they'll be.
- **Manage time.** Common wisdom says that “busy is good.” But truthfully, it's only good if you're spending this time steadily working toward achieving your stated goals. When deciding where to focus, teach employees to concentrate on accomplishing tasks that directly move them further toward achieving your organization's overarching objectives, and avoid becoming distracted by busywork or lower-priority demands that often cause us to lose focus on the big picture.
- **Maximize effort.** Successful leaders always find ways to win in every scenario besides pure profits. That way, they're always able to benefit from any given choice, and use what they've gained from the undertaking as a springboard to fuel continued growth and advancement. For example, by taking on a new project or client that helps you push your company's capabilities in new directions, you may gain invaluable new connections, insights, and experience into promising new avenues of growth or opportunity.
- **Focus on long-term goals.** Rather than simply concentrate on the here and now, train workers today to also be purposefully seeking out the tools, talents, and resources they'll need to succeed tomorrow. Perhaps transitioning a lower-ranking or lower-paying job role isn't such a bad idea if it gets them invaluable training and experience into emerging areas that will be in demand in the future. Likewise, maybe spending less time trying to sell more existing products and focusing on successfully launching innovative new ones is a better investment in your organization's growth capabilities as well.



- **Think fluidly.** Leaders need to learn to make firm business decisions despite uncertainty. The simplest way to do so is to exercise “strong, but weakly held opinions.” Teach leaders to do their homework up front and gather as much business intelligence as possible, then act. And, after assessing the results of their choices, they should adjust their approaches to be more successful based on the insights gained from these efforts.
- **Embrace failure.** Modern successes consistently experiment with new business strategies and solutions, and aren’t afraid to fail. Think of failure as the price of getting an education—a price that you can control. It’s alright to fail as long as you’re failing quickly and cost-effectively, and learning from mistakes and using the insights gained to improve future tries.
- **Future-proof.** To keep themselves, and your business, ahead of the curve, teach employees to prioritize ongoing education and professional development. Train them to regularly stop and ask themselves: What types of talents, training, and educational experiences will be in demand tomorrow? Then have them purposefully seek out the opportunities they’ll need to get these assets right here, right now today. That way, both your organization and its workforce will be ready to greet the future long before it comes knocking.
- **Fix problems.** If your organization finds itself dealing with the same issues over and over, there’s probably a larger underlying issue that keeps causing them. Encourage workers to purposefully seek these challenges out, and to stop curing symptoms and start solving problems. Instead of struggling with side effects, you will all find that it’s better to fix what ails you once and be done with it.

The biggest challenges we face when it comes to getting ahead faster in business are, ironically, the same ones we often face in everyday life: Teaching ourselves and our colleagues to be more open to change, and more flexible and diligent about responding to it. So instead of fighting change, teach employees to prepare themselves to greet it more effectively, and be more amenable to rolling with the punches.

Be bold. Be creative. Be open to new perspectives. And be willing to take some smart risks. The more you can teach this formula, the more you’ll give employees all the tools they need to stay in tune with changing times and trends, stay on top of their field, and stay ahead of the curve as well.

Characteristics of Future-Proof Leaders

Today’s business leaders must remain focused on what’s next. Here is a list of attributes those best equipped to succeed in tomorrow’s working world should embody.

- **Crave curiosity.** If we want to think like futurists, it’s more important to ask “why?” than “what?” so that we can dive into the root cause of an issue and understand the value shifts driving today’s trends.
- **Act courageously.** Human beings are wired to reject change, and the future is synonymous with change. A good futurist must recognize that the insights we share will make others feel uncomfortable, but it is in that discomfort that growth occurs.
- **Think outrageously.** The ability to think provocatively is paramount to being able to see ahead of the curve, and react faster. To expand our thinking (and that of our leadership and stakeholders), we must stretch our minds beyond our comfort zone.
- **Connect the dots.** It is not enough to collect the dots (or trends). A forward-looking executive also must connect them to uncover patterns. To understand what’s next, we must analyze the intersection of trends and make sense of the patterns they form.
- **Think in multiples.** As future-focused leaders, we must be able to think in simultaneous, multiple futures rather than the traditional, single, linear forecast. Being able to consider myriad paths beyond the official future allows us to create robust and resilient strategies that will be successful no matter which future emerges.



7 Habits of Hugely Successful Organizations

According to top researchers, continuous change is the new norm in business. To stay relevant in a fast-changing world, leaders must continually change and innovate as well. As research with scores of leading innovators for our new book *Make Change Work for You* reveals though, this process doesn't need to be difficult.

Studies of the world's most-innovative firms show that their key source of competitive advantage is merely providing workers with better platforms for speaking up, sharing insights, and taking action. These businesses' leading source of new ideas is simply listening to customers as well—another area where frontline employees are best poised to spot rising opportunities.

Clearly, corporate culture plays a pivotal role in driving innovation. Following are seven new habits that can help you adapt yours to be more competitive – and stay ahead of highly-disruptive business environments:

1. Create a culture of trust and encourage employees to speak up.

Leading organizations empower workers and reward them for bringing potential opportunities and challenges to their attention. Frontline employees are often an enterprise's most informed audience—to create and sustain competitive advantage, provide them the tools they need to translate ideas into action.

3. Freely collaborate across the organization.

Flatten lines of communication, and allow information, insights and support to flow throughout your enterprise. The more readily you can align tools, talent and resources towards common goals, the more readily you can foster innovation.

5. Be open to change.

Leaders expect employees to stay abreast of changing business environments—and intelligently and flexibly respond to them. To this extent, workers are given the freedom to take small, smart risks that have the potential to help the organization better serve its customers... so long as these risks are intelligent, productive, and cost-affordable.

2. Constantly rethink business practices.

Is the way it's always been done" still the best way to do it? Like competitors, market leaders are always asking themselves this question.

4. See the future today.

Rather than simply keep pace with rivals, top innovators always consider where the future is heading and strive to put the solutions tomorrow's audiences will demand in place today.

6. Spread your risk.

Leading organizations don't try to be risk free, but rather actively pursue a more calculated range of business bets. As with financial portfolios, these enterprises constantly manage and adjust a portfolio of strategic ventures. Not all wagers will pan out. But all are designed to collectively help the organization grow its capabilities, spread risk, and learn through real-time monitoring and course-correction.

7. Never stop learning.

Rather than just rely solely on contingency plans, market leaders consistently experiment with new innovations and solutions—especially when things are going well, and they can most afford to gamble. By consistently pioneering new ideas and approaches, and extending their experience, capabilities and comfort zones, they create added flexibility and room to maneuver in the face of changes or unforeseen events.

SUMMARY

Leading organizations turn employees into emergency responders. They transform infrastructures from barriers into enablers. They see business strategy as being flexible, not fixed. And they continually provide workers with the tools and runway they need to reimagine, reinvent, and innovate their way to success as scenarios change.

You too can consistently innovate, succeed, and go from strength to strength by doing the same.

What's Holding You Back From Success?

Research shows the #1 barrier to ongoing business success isn't time, money, or resources: It's resistance to change, and lack of risk tolerance.

As fast-moving and unpredictable as today's world is though, we're all forced to adapt on a daily basis. Haven't taken a good look at your shifting schedule or priorities lately? Surprise - chances are, you're successfully changing and innovating every day already.



If everyone is capable of innovating, the only thing stopping your from getting ahead consistently is your own sense of perspective. As we discovered, fear comes in seven flavors. Learn to conquer them, and you'll soon find out - the possibilities are endless.

FEAR OF CHANGE & UNCERTAINTY

The process of acting or reacting differently—and the discomfort that accompanies these shifts and/or surrounding uncertainties or risks.

Solution: Don't try to predict the future. Instead, study events as they take shape, and adapt. Design a portfolio of small, smart professional bets to take - bets in the form of changing decisions and actions. Constantly revised these bets as you gain new information, and adapt your strategies accordingly.

FEAR OF ISOLATION

The feeling of being alone or left to operate on your own without others' support.

Solution: Build your own strategies while also building trust and strong relationships with colleagues. Be part of a team, but be yourself as well.

FEAR OF CONFRONTATION

Experiencing a negative event or having a hostile personal or professional interaction with others.

Solution: Stop avoiding confrontation and face problems—take a step back, think about the best way to tackle them, then begin addressing them one step at a time, updating your strategy based on the results your actions produce.

FEAR OF REJECTION

When you, your organization, or your products or services are refused, turned away, or avoided by others.

Solution: Maintain confidence and keep forging ahead. You're going to hear "no" more often than "yes" in life. The more you hear it, the closer you're statistically getting to yes, and things have in business, no often simply means "no for now"—don't hesitate to try later, as circumstances change.

FEAR OF LOSING CONTROL

Believing that situations and events have spiraled beyond our ability to command or adapt to them.

Solution: Accept that certain variables are beyond your control. Instead, focus on controlling those you have the power to manage.

FEAR OF EMBARRASSMENT

The same and self-consciousness felt when one feels humiliated, unable to live up to expectations, or socially conform.

Solution: Start trying and doing new things, expanding you and your organization's comfort zone, making small steps until you feel comfortable pursuing larger ones.

FEAR OF FAILURE

The possibility of being unable to successfully complete a goal or task set by yourself or others.

Solution: Experiment frequently. Fail fast and often, but fail smartly—use failure as a way to cost-affordably experiment with strategies and solutions to course-correct as you go, until you find success. Just don't make the same mistake twice.

The New Rules of Career Success

Ever feel like the corporate ladder is broken? That's because you're making the mistake of trying to climb it. As we discovered through our research, an increasingly uncertain business world requires all-new methods of thinking and strategies to navigate. Following are eight new rules needed for professional success in increasingly unpredictable career environments – and how to use them to vault yourself straight into the executive suite.

VICTORY!

8

TAKE SMART RISKS

Take Smart Risks – The more you do the same things over time, the less value they hold in a rapidly-changing world. Faced with change, you've got to take risks that can help propel you further towards achieving your goals. But being risky doesn't necessarily mean being reckless: Rather, smarter about where you place your bets. Pick a portfolio of promising growth activities – start a part-time business, launch a new product, volunteer to lead an innovative new venture, etc. – then pursue them, readjusting your strategies as you go based on the results achieved. Keep taking promising risks that put you in chance's sights, and put you in a position to succeed.

7

GO ABOVE AND BEYOND

Go Above and Beyond – What personal activities are you pursuing that can teach you marketable skills, or push you closer towards achieving your career goals? Going forward, your work, your reputation, and your contributions will be your résumé—use off-hours opportunities as a chance to grow and enhance them, and set yourselves apart while others shy away from opportunity.

6

EMBRACE DIFFICULT CHALLENGES

Embrace Difficult Challenges – Seek out hard tasks that others avoid: It means you've got less competition, and the benefits of accomplishing these tasks will be more singular and value. Look to apply a variety of skills and insights while doing so too: The more you exercise different talents while others exercise the same ones over and over, the more versatile you'll be. Applying focused effort towards accomplishing larger goals can help you achieve more. And the more you push your comfort zone, the more you'll increase your courage and capabilities.

5

NEVER STOP LEARNING

Never Stop Learning – Constantly look for ways to expand your education and insights – the most resilient leaders are eternal students, and possess talent and training that's applicable to a wide range of professional contexts. Think of it this way: The more resources you've got in your professional toolkit, and ways you can use them, the more future-proof you'll be.

4

CREATE YOUR OWN OPPORTUNITIES

Create Your Own Opportunities – Go, see, try and do. Put yourself into situations that place you outside your comfort zone, like taking on unfamiliar tasks that require you to do new things with new people. Be open-minded, and soak up as much knowledge and learning as you can – then apply it vigorously. The more you do so, the more you'll consistently put yourself in opportunity's path and the greater your chances of finding it will be.

3

CHANGE AND EVOLVE

Change and Evolve – Get the capabilities, skills and insights today that will be in-demand tomorrow. Take steps to acquire the talents, contacts and resources you'll need to succeed in the future, so you can be in a more advantageous position to greet it when it arrives. Know where you want to go in your career, have a plan for getting there, and voluntarily push yourself to learn, grow and take on more leadership and responsibility – even if this means taking small steps in different directions until bigger ones become more comfortable.

2

RETHINK YOUR VALUE

Rethink Your Value – Never stop learning, improving, and investing in yourself – then consistently apply these talents in ways that go far beyond your job description. For example: If you're a programmer, take design and marketing classes so you can create more user-friendly and engaging products. If you're a marketer, spend more time with your programmers so you can find new ways to leverage your creative ideas through technology. The more versatile you make yourself, the more adaptable, resourceful and uniquely value-adding you can be.

1

BECOME ESSENTIAL

Become Essential – You've got to be crucial to your organization – not someone that's easily replaced. For example: You might be the company's go-to IT expert, a crucial member of its engineering team, or a highly sought-after internal thought leader. If others can do what you do, you're already on the road to irrelevance. Instead, be a lynchpin, or crucial piece in any system – one that's fundamentally difficult and expensive to replace.

Seeing Tomorrow Today

As you can see, training yourself to get better about learning to spot the future taking shape is far simpler and far less time-consuming than it seems at first blush. More than anything else, it's simply a question of putting yourself in a forward-thinking mindset, and actively getting in the habit of asking yourself more pointed questions. The more you actively work to exercise the skills and strategies outlined here, and build a robust network of collaborators, the more successful you'll ultimately be.

I'd love to hear more about how you are implementing these strategies in your workplace and career. Please feel free to reach out at www.FuturistsSpeakers.com with your thoughts anytime, or follow us on Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter (@akeynotespeaker) to pick up even more insights on how to steer your business towards a brighter future. I look forward to learning more about the methodologies and solutions you're using to stay ahead of the curve – and how you're leveraging them to create positive results in life and business at every turn.

-Scott Steinberg



THINK LIKE A FUTURIST™

LEARNING TO APPLY THE ART
OF POP FUTURE™

WHAT IS POP FUTURE!?

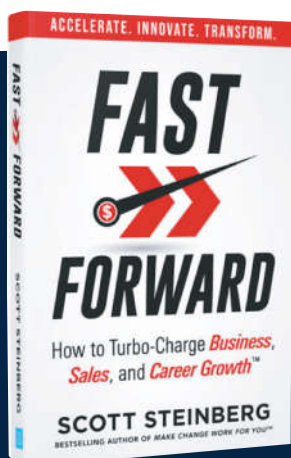
A BETTER WAY
TO MONITOR
AND ADAPT TO
NEW TRENDS IN
LIFE + BUSINESS



From 5G high-speed wireless networks, self-driving cars, and artificially-intelligent telehealth platforms to NFTs, cryptocurrency-based trading crazes, and cutting-edge metaverse playgrounds, make no mistake: Growing public fascination with both new and emerging technology trends and the art and science of innovation has now made a passion for all things forward-looking an intrinsic part of life and work.

As much an exercise in sociocultural learning as management strategy, **POP FUTURE** challenges us to put the impact and import of breaking developments and emerging trends in an everyday context that audiences of all backgrounds and skill levels can understand. In effect, by framing these subjects in a clearer, more familiar manner and describing their pending influence in terms that anyone can comprehend, not only can we make complex concepts more approachable and simpler to grasp. We can also help the future more clearly come into focus – and help determine what, if any, impact that it will have on the way we work, live, and play going forward in the years ahead.

Enter the concept of **POP FUTURE™**, which describes the theory of applying the lenses of pop culture, anthropology, and organizational psychology to the practice of futurism (actively contemplating the impact and import of future events and trends).



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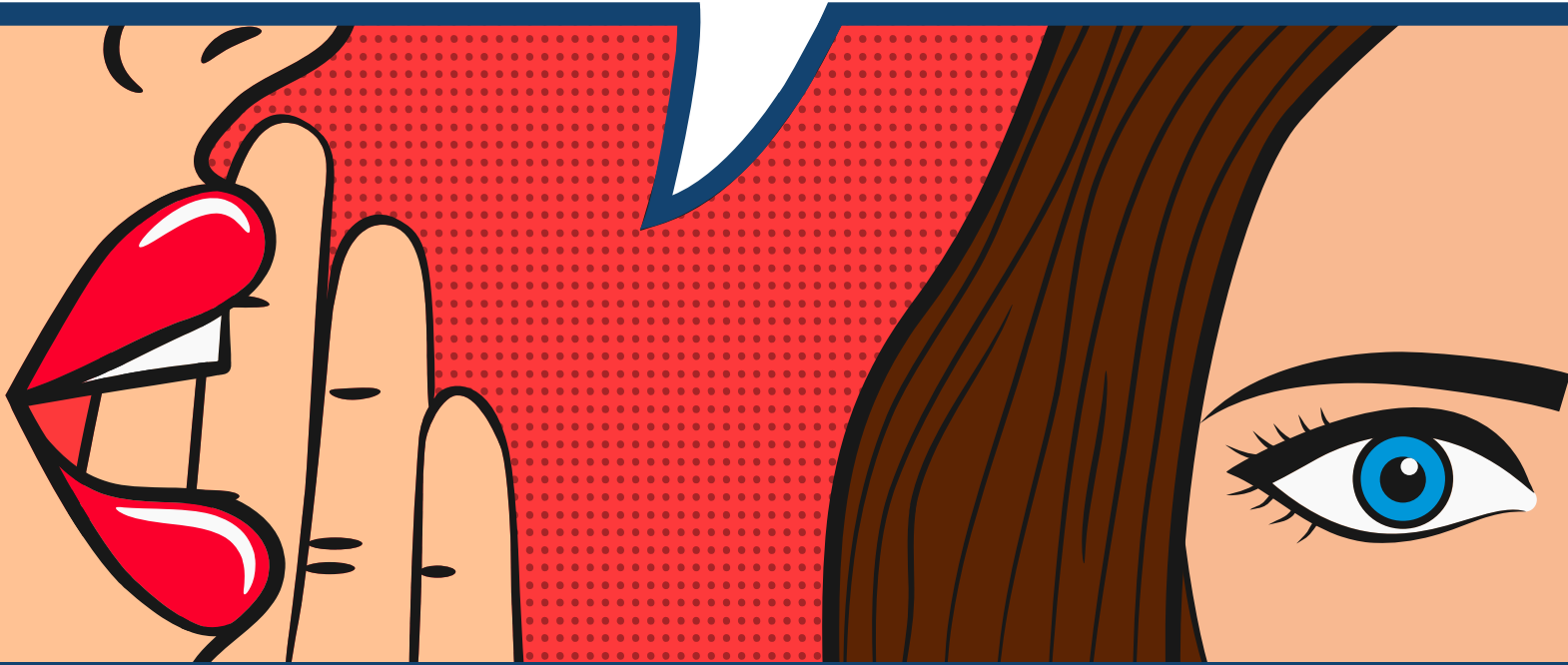
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World's Leading Business Strategist

Scott Steinberg

HOW POP FUTURE INFORMS THE FUTURE OF WORK



Who says that you need to have a PhD to make sense of market research reports, that workforce development needs to be dry and off-putting, or that business presentations must always prove formulaic and dull?

The art of **POP FUTURE** challenges us to consider: In the same way that songwriters and musicians use fun and catchy references or unique callouts and audiovisual gags as a way to make concepts seem engaging and familiar, how can we use creativity, wit, and insight as a similar way to grab audiences' attention – and quickly convey complex concepts by using these interest- and attention-grabbing hooks as a form of mental shorthand?


To put things in perspective: Given the meteoric growth of the Internet, mobile devices, and online media, the average human being's attention span has now shrunk to just 8 seconds. To put things in perspective, a goldfish's attention span is 9 seconds by comparison – 1/2 to 1/3rd of the time traditionally allotted to an "elevator pitch," and a far cry from the time many organizations traditionally allot for conference events, workshops, and professional development sessions. In other words, in less time than it's taken you to read these three sentences, you'll either have captured audiences' attention and piqued their excitement or not – making it growingly essential for those hoping to raise awareness for future-focused topics to find clever and creative ways to rapidly communicate their message and stand out at a glance.



POW!

POP FUTURE provides a vehicle for doing so by inviting us to use techniques including, but not limited to, the below strategies to get one's message heard:

- **Creativity** – Repackaging or representing familiar concepts in new forms (i.e. via eye-catching animations or snappy infographics) or adding a clever twist to a familiar formula.
- **Urgency** – Speaking to a pressing need or problem, such as how to effectively respond to shifts in customer purchasing habits and organizational behavior due to COVID-19.
- **Humor** – Using offbeat approaches or silly takes on common topics to approach otherwise dry subjects from original angles.
- **Timeliness** – Attaching your insights to a topical news hook that is currently trending, allowing you to piggyback on heightened public attention.
- **Teamwork** – Combining forces with like-minded businesses, brands, and influencers to team up on crossover efforts, or partner in clever ways.
- **Functionality** – Introducing unique hooks (whether practical or for purposes of generating publicity), innovative capabilities, or a fresh spin on ways to interact with your offerings.



Noting this, it's important to apply the lessons of **POP FUTURE** – taking your subjects and work seriously, but not getting hung up on the formality of process over the ability to achieve an end-result – at every turn. If it helps to explain why this shift in thinking is no laughing matter perhaps consider: As it stands, the next 10 years will bring more technological change than the prior 10,000. Learning to use POP FUTURE can not only help you put all of these changes in a more engaging and user-friendly context that audiences of all skill levels can appreciate and understand. It can also help you boost learning and retention – and more rapidly equip audiences with the tools and insights that they need to succeed in the years ahead. After all, the pace of change and disruption is only going to continue accelerating, and futurism will only continue to become an increasingly critical skill for working professionals to master.



APPLY POP FUTURE TO YOUR EFFORTS



Therein lies the challenge: How will you practice the art of POP FUTURE to more effectively get your message across – and get others talking?

As a general rule for those looking to find winning solutions here, the process starts by asking yourself a simple question: What makes your subject so fascinating and different – and why is it crucial to be aware of? And, of course, following it up by considering:

- What 1-3 key insights are you hoping to convey?
- Which fun or familiar references can you use to quickly grab others' attention and put any given topic in context?
- What audiovisual, interactive, or other original elements can help you stand out and get your message across at a glance?
- And how can you share key insights or actionable information in a more engaging and bite-sized form?

Case in point: Here at management consulting firm FutureProof Strategies, we're often asked to look 5-25 years into the future of different industries – but we routinely make a point to practice the skill of **POP FUTURE** to offer more practical and approachable takes on emerging trends. This often manifests through our use of unique elements – e.g. humorous videos, offbeat infographics, and keynote speeches that challenge commonly-held beliefs – to reveal tomorrow's trends today... and how to stay one step ahead of the curve in practical terms that anyone can understand.



Consider: Does your organizational leadership team really need another 100-page research report explaining how complex academic models and methodologies can be applied to de-risk a business – or would a two-page summary detailing upcoming shifts in customer habits your business should be aware of; what products/services audiences will be looking for going forward; and where gaps in the marketplace exist that you can quickly capitalize upon be more helpful? Likewise, are exhaustive looks at emerging technologies, shifts in generational trends, or changes to market landscapes (many of which are based on historical data, which is notoriously bad at predicting the future in times of radical change) truly needed, or would quick-hit overviews of what's come before and what's coming next paired with actionable business strategies and forward-thinking solutions for navigating through these advancements be more useful to you?



Again – if you can get the message across in minutes, why waste hours, and if what you're really looking for is small data (a handful of actionable insights to capitalize on), what's the point of being obsessed with big data instead?

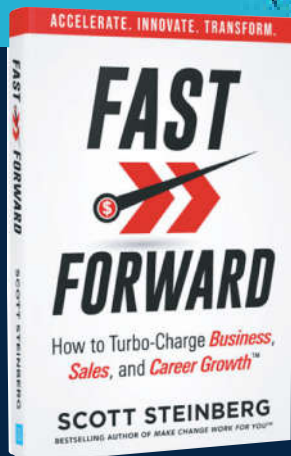
Noting our focus on quickly raising awareness for trending topics and finding more productive ways to drive practical outcomes, don't be surprised if you find us or our clients, for example:

- **Starring in quirky cartoons, episodic graphic novels, or offbeat videos encouraging working professionals to take more (not fewer) risks, albeit those of the calculated and well thought-out variety.**
- **Designing catchy learning exercises, interactive games, and workplace challenges that teach anyone how to get better at learning to spot new trends.**
- **Creating training guides, workbooks, and corporate training manuals that are otherwise disguised as tongue-in-cheek illustrated works, coloring books, or even the type of picture books that you enjoyed as a child.**

POP FUTURE

In other words, there is no one right way to practice the art of POP FUTURE – and the more creative and original the strategy that you adopt to applying it, the more successful you stand to be.

So what are you waiting for: Tomorrow is today, and the future is already taking shape before our eyes. Noting this, there is no better time to start applying POP FUTURE's core principles like the present – what future will you create?



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World's Leading Business Strategist

Scott Steinberg



THINK LIKE A FUTURIST™

PART II

NEW TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR
A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

MANAGING CHANGE: ADAPTING TO UNCERTAINTY

I. HOW TO FUTUREPROOF YOUR BUSINESS

II. HOW TO FUTUREPROOF YOUR CAREER

**III. HOW TO GET HIRED USING TECHNOLOGY
AND ONLINE SOLUTIONS**

**IV. RENEGOTIATING WITH PARTNERS AND
SUPPLIERS**

**V. BUSINESS NEEDS YOU CAN OUTSOURCE
ON-DEMAND**

**VI. WHY CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY IS
THE WAY FORWARD**

**VII. START AND GROW YOUR BUSINESS FOR
LESS**

**VIII. HOW TO DETERMINE WHAT BUSINESS
ACTIVITIES ARE WORTH YOUR TIME**

**IX. HOW TO FIND SUCCESS WHATEVER THE
FUTURE BRINGS**

HOW TO FUTURE PROOF YOUR BUSINESS

Flexibility is the essence of futureproofing, with uncertainty now the only certainty in business. As a result, the ability to remain agile and adaptable is suddenly the ultimate source of competitive advantage for companies of all sizes. Thankfully for firms in every space seeking to innovate and reinvent themselves, technology provides an essential tool for staying one step ahead of the curve, and unexpected developments.

“In the digital age, the ability to constantly evolve your business as customer tastes change is critical to survival,” explains Simon Mulcahy, chief innovation officer for CRM software industry leader Salesforce. “Most companies aren’t changing how they think though but are simply improving what they already do. Future-fit companies are [instead] redesigning their businesses to compete on their ability to understand, engage, and earn the trust of their customers.”

For firms all around the world that are hoping to stay competitive, this means not only learning to use technology to become more anticipatory and well-attuned to shifting audience needs and trends. It also means having to leverage these high-tech advancements to be nimbler and more agile at responding to COVID-19-related challenges and other unforeseen events. That’s because organizations are now faced with greeting unprecedented change and satisfying a growing array of new audience demands with each passing day, according to the most recent Enterprise Technology Trends report. Per its findings, 93% of IT leaders report that instituting improved customer-facing technology is critical to remaining competitive, while 99% say that businesses must also be mobile-enabled to survive.

As numerous firms in every space continue to fast-track digital transformation, they are discovering that forward-thinking high-tech tools that incorporate cutting-edge advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), business process automation, and workflow optimization can provide them with a winning edge. These tools – which are increasingly allowing businesses of all sizes to track fast-changing markets and customer habits, and reinvent everything from fashion and footwear promotions to retail experiences to match – don’t just provide unparalleled insight into rapidly-shifting industry trends. They also provide firms of all sizes with the actionable intelligence they need to craft winning business strategies while also adapting to quickly-changing conditions all around the world.

Of course, doing so isn’t just about using technology to power more flexible and resilient business solutions that can shift in turn with rapidly-evolving market realities. It’s also about finding clever and

innovative ways to leverage these new advancements to offer practical innovations that put the emphasis squarely on enhanced user experiences and smarter, more personalized shopper interactions. Above all else, that means using technology to get one step closer to, and better understand, your customers. But simultaneously, as numerous firms in every space continue to discover, forward-thinking high-tech tools can provide businesses with a winning edge as they undergo this process of digital transformation. These solutions allow you to quickly tap into cutting-edge advancements that can help you get a leg up in several areas of operations including, but not limited to artificial intelligence, business process automation, and workflow optimization.

Using these solutions, Bitty & Beau's Coffee, which up until recently operated five stores across Wilmington, NC, was able to successfully migrate its entire business online within one week. By leveraging cloud-based software and community-building solutions to quickly build a branded website, online storefront, and virtualized customer service operation, for example, the small business rapidly established a digital presence and lines of communication via social networks. Thanks to the speedy and cost-affordable pivot these tools made possible, Bitty & Beau's continues to stay top of mind with clients, and stay in contact with valued employees, while continuing to provide shoppers with a personalized touch.

San Francisco-based Hornblower Cruises and Events likewise faced unexpected hiccups to its travel and hospitality operations in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The company used rapid response tools to swiftly roll out a preconfigured employee help desk complete with automated and AI-powered assistants. This virtual help desk (and an artificially intelligent chatbot named Admiral Hornblower, both of which were implemented in just 3 days) provided its staff with answers to common questions and information relating to and assistance with unemployment, health care, insurance, and debt relief. These tools now handle 83% of chat engagement, allowing HR to prioritize fielding issues that require human touch and direct engagement, leading to improved employee satisfaction and enhanced online functionality for them. Loyal workers afterwards returned the favor by working hand in hand with company leaders to stage successful reopenings, provide enhanced safety and service, and effectuate new rollouts in select areas of the country as lockdown restrictions lifted.

By helping to minimize upkeep, maximize user experience, and offload time-consuming tasks, these new advancements in technology are not only streamlining workflows and automating business processes, but

also making it possible for enterprises to quickly and cost-affordably introduce or expand their services at scale. As a result, firms of every size are increasingly adopting these online and cloud-enabled tools to provide creative solutions designed to support customers and communities impacted by the global pandemic and its aftershocks.

For example, financial leader Pentagon Federal Credit Union (PenFed), the nation's second-largest federal credit union, recently reinvented its member platform and provided enhanced online financial services amid the pandemic. Among the new solutions it introduced were PenFed Member360 (a financial management tool and connected experience platform for members) and a loan deferment portal for families facing financial hardship. Similarly, the credit union was also able to improve business processes and enhance customer service by using artificially intelligent bots to field common questions and requests. These advancements have led to greatly shortened wait and response times for credit union members, providing faster support and more timely help for callers when it matters most.

But technology tools don't just provide solutions for organizations facing rapid shifts in the marketplace. They can also serve as basic building blocks upon which forward-thinking new strategies can be quickly and cost-efficiently implemented, setting up companies for long-term success. It's an important point for companies hoping to stay one step ahead of the marketplace and changes in customer habits (which technology allows you to effectively monitor and predict) to note, as staying well-attuned to your target audience is vital to remaining relevant, and remaining nimble, say industry insiders.

"Most companies must realize that they are no longer competing against the guy down the street or the brand that sells similar products," says Dan Gingiss, author and customer experience expert. "Instead, they're competing with every other experience a customer has."

"Convenience and ease are the pillars for great customer engagement, and [technology tools like] AI can supercharge them all," seconds David Clarke, Global Chief Experience Officer for PwC. "If all of a customer's information just pops up and a smart, adapted script is there for an associate, how much better do you think that employee will serve that customer by spending less time hunting for data and more time building relationships? That's all possible in large part because of adoption of [emerging] technologies and connected devices."

Noting this, those companies best poised to succeed going forward will be those who remain adaptable and agile, and use technology

to stay ahead of shifting trends while also using it as an ongoing springboard to opportunity. Granted, the future remains uncertain. But by giving you all the tools you need to stay one step ahead of constant change in the marketplace, and changes in customer habits? High-tech advancements such as those discussed here also provide all the resources you need to invent equally creative new business solutions in turn.

“[Tomorrow’s leaders understand that] future success and growth depends as much on the customer experience they deliver as it does their products and services,” explains Salesforce’s Mulcahy. “To create change, you need to change how people see the world.”

HOW TO FUTURE PROOF YOUR CAREER

I've spent 25 years teaching Fortune 500 firms and four-star generals how to boost creativity and innovation, design winning business strategies, and stay one step ahead of the curve. Across hundreds of keynote speeches and books like *Think Like a Futurist* and *Make Change Work for You*, I've also explored how to future-proof your career and business. During this period of unprecedented change, I've often reminded the professionals who I work with that even though negative events will happen outside of our control, we have the ability to choose how we handle the challenges that come our way.

As it turns out, a few simple shifts in strategy and thinking are all it takes to safeguard yourself against the unexpected, and rebound stronger from setbacks. Here are several strategies that you can use to future-proof your career and finances, no matter what tomorrow brings – and go from strength to strength in the months to come.

Stack the odds in your favor

Luck is hard work, the place where opportunity meets preparation, and a resilient career is one in which you keep making practical decisions that persistently put you in opportunity's way. How do you do this? Create an action plan, then ask yourself: What do you need to do right now, to get where you want to be later?

Being brave in business simply means taking that step – then taking more steps, one after another, until you've arrived at that destination. Constantly strive to gain new talents, training and experience that will be in-demand tomorrow today.

Make a point to expand your comfort zone by pushing your creative thinking and problem-solving abilities in fresh directions as well. Right now, there are a lot of new problems that are in need of solutions, and the fastest, most reliable way to put yourself in fortune's sights is to be brave. Instead of waiting for career opportunities, seek them out.

Remember you're more resourceful than you think

The only constant is change. But anyone can adapt to new and novel problems the same way that leading innovators do: By studying problems, brainstorming original solutions, then steadily testing them out and improving as they go. Success isn't about how many resources you have, but how resourceful you are.

Periods of uncertainty can be paralyzing. But if you want to start a new business, or pursue a new investment, the truth is that there isn't ever going to be a risk-free option. But by being aware of the risks, and

using that information to make smart, calculated bets, you can come out ahead. Right now, if you have an idea for a side hustle but are wary about what the future holds, I encourage you to get started.

Think about your next steps in terms of growth activities that can help you achieve your stated goal. Don't sit still while times, trends and competitors are also evolving. Keep moving forward.

Watch for emerging patterns

Right now, many people are dealing with job losses. If your industry is one that has been hit hard by COVID-19, now is an opportunity to think about where your skills could be an asset, perhaps in a way you've never explored before.

The world's business leaders pay attention to signals, emerging innovations and disruptions, that indicate where the marketplace is headed. And you can do the same.

A number of high-level socioeconomic forces called megatrends – e.g. the rise of contactless and touchless technology solutions – promise to impact the future at all times. As noted earlier, a few simple ways to stay on top of them include reading up on the latest news, staying attuned to academic research, listening to industry thought leaders, and keeping on top of startup and investment activity. If you see keywords and terms repeating frequently, or note that an industry is hiring more often, it's a clue that you may be on the right track.

For example: The rise of new innovations like robotics and automation tools haven't completely revolutionized the business world just yet, but – as indicated by companies' growing push towards digital transformation and increasing demand for technically-skilled professionals – these will inevitably be growth areas in coming years.

Your goal is to collect signals and use them to spot bigger-picture trends – then adapt or expand your skill set to plug into them. Ex: If you're a newspaper reporter who suddenly finds themselves operating in the age of TikTok and Twitter, you'd be well-advised to add additional communications skills – e.g. public speaking, video hosting, and film or audio production – to your resume.

Seek out community support

The most successful people understand that if they want to solve big challenges and spot potential areas for business or career growth, they need to surround themselves with a network of diverse individuals with different backgrounds, skills and experiences. And they are constantly building those relationships.

If you are one of the many people who is searching for a new work opportunity in the wake of COVID-19, don't be afraid to ask for help. The more that you make others aware that you're looking for work, the better off you'll be. If you're shy about connecting with peers, find an excuse to be in others' inbox. You can also proactively volunteer to help others, which helps you meet more people and do a little good at the same time.

Chart your own path

Most careers aren't straight lines. And that's okay. But what you learn from setbacks can help vault you to unexpected heights.

One young technology executive I interviewed graduated during the Great Recession with minimal business experience and qualifications. She was skeptical about the value of a graduate degree or working for someone else, so she created her own shortcut to career success by turning her life into a self-guided MBA program full of self-imposed challenges (e.g. launching new conferences and entrepreneurial ventures) that filled in gaps in her experience and skill set. She since went on to become one of the tech industry's most noted thought leaders and a successful entrepreneur who sold her first startup. Finding career success is about constantly building bridges to future opportunities.

Invest your resources wisely

Money isn't your most valuable asset: Time is, and it's far harder to replace.

Rather than spend it helping someone else build their dream, figure out what yours is worth (hint: you can calculate your hourly rate by dividing your weekly income by 40 hours). Then work to take on projects that double it, at minimum, and buy back precious hours that could be spent investing in yourself.

Remember: If you're simply earning enough to scrape by, you're not setting aside enough money to reclaim valuable time that could be used to pick up forward-thinking job skills, education, or experience, or exploring a potentially lucrative sideline business. (AKA pursuing the activities needed to future-proof yourself.) After all, in business, there's a difference between maintenance activities (things which keep the lights on) and growth activities (things which pave the way to future expansion) – and no matter who you work for, you're always the CEO of You, Inc.

But don't let dollar signs blind you to the big picture either: Sometimes, you've got to take a sidestep – moving sideways into a position of equal rank and pay – or backstep (moving back down the career ladder) to acquire essential skills and experience, or pave new pathways to opportunity. If a volunteer position or chance to help a colleague at no charge helps you expand your work portfolio, demonstrate your talents to important audience, or make crucial contacts, don't be afraid to contribute.

Your number one goal should be to acquire elastic skills, which translate to many industries and contexts, and build out your professional network and toolkit: Valuable resources which can help serve as ongoing springboards to opportunity, whatever the future brings.

Make a point to refocus and reinvest

Money should also work hard for you, not vice-versa.

It's important to save, because every dollar that you sock away into a savings account, stock, or new business venture has the potential to help you build equity – and quietly do the work of compounding upon itself, even while you sleep. Wherever you can, get in the habit of putting it away: Ideally, 30% or more of whatever comes in the door.

Most people increase their spending when times are good, and cut back when bad. That's the opposite of how innovators operate. You should be putting more away when things are going well, as a hedge against uncertainty, and spending more during downswings, when your money goes much further and competitors are pulling back.

Market downturns can be scary times, leading many to curtail spending habits. But if you've been planning for downswings in advance, and putting away cash for a rainy day? They're a great time to focus on growing your resources and capabilities, since your buying power has increased. Likewise, they're fine times to explore new opportunities, or ramp up marketing efforts, while rivals pull back and offer room for you to advance.

Downswings also present an opportune time to connect with service providers and road test any business activity or venture you've been holding back on. Dozens of online marketplaces from Fiverr to Upwork can help connect you with affordable business services of all kinds (web development, graphic design, app coding, etc.) that can help you start your venture.

Noting that you can always learn and grow your experience by engaging in any of these activities, and that your work portfolio will be your resume going forward? It's high time that you started writing that book, or building that sideline business you keep putting off.

Understand risk and use it to your advantage

Every dollar that you sock away into a savings account, investment portfolio, or new business venture has the potential to help you build equity, and quietly do the work of compounding upon itself, even while you sleep. Even if you're working with a tighter budget right now, get in the habit of saving a small percentage of what comes in the door, especially for those potential growth activities.

If you have an idea for a side hustle but are wary about what the future holds, I encourage you to get started anyway. Periods of uncertainty can be paralyzing. But if you want to start a new business, or pursue a new investment, the truth is that there isn't ever going to be a risk-free option.

By being aware of the risks and using that information to make smart, calculated bets, though, you can come out ahead. Anyone can adapt to new and novel problems the same way that the most successful innovators do: Study them, brainstorm original solutions, and then test them out and improve as you go. And find collaborators who can help you make your idea the best it can be.

HOW TO GET HIRED USING TECHNOLOGY AND ONLINE SOLUTIONS

With tens of millions of Americans having recently gone unemployed, and double-digit amounts of the country's workforce having been sidelined in the wake of coronavirus-related concerns, finding full-time work still remains elusive for many. But even as financial markets remain volatile, and growth opportunities hard to find, companies in many fields such as technology, telecom, and healthcare continue to engage in mass hiring. To meet explosive growth in demand across these sectors, corporate recruiters are increasingly turning to new technologies to court and engage prospective hires in an age of remote work and social distancing. Modern-day job seekers looking to find open positions, ace interviews, and stand out to potential employers would do well to adapt their strategies to match these new high-tech paradigms.

"Today's recruiting environment has never been more challenging," notes Aman Brar, CEO of talent recruitment platform Jobvite. "As a result, recruiters are leveraging a variety of methods and tactics to connect with prospective candidates. The current climate has forced many companies to step up their use of new technologies. While many of the platforms being used to facilitate [hiring] have been available for years, use of them has increased tremendously in recent weeks."

According to research by Jobvite, 84% of recruiters are currently in the process of adapting their hiring processes to facilitate remote exchanges. Of them, 58% are now using social media networks like LinkedIn, Facebook, and even Instagram to connect with potential hires, while nearly half are increasing the number of postings that they make on these services to advertise open positions.

A growing army of recruiters are likewise turning to videoconferencing solutions to screen and interview candidates as well, with as many as eight in ten now making it a key part of the hiring process. Digital communications tools such as artificially-intelligent job outreach programs and text messaging are also growingly being implemented as a means of connecting with candidates, even as 55% of recruiters are also falling back on phone calls to source potential hires. In addition, more and more firms are looking to leverage analytics tools (which can scan resumes and data that you've input to automatically surface key insights and information at a glance) with each passing day as well.

"This crisis has led us to reimagine recruiting," admits Michael Wright, Global Head of Talent Acquisition for media investment

company GroupM, who says the firm has been moving towards digital recruitment processes for years. “We immediately adapted our [artificial intelligence]-driven video interview tools to be more empathetic and more contextually aware than they were pre-COVID. We’ve also set up what we’re calling ‘video handshakes,’ which are more focused on discovering what people can be and become, rather than what they do and have done [previously in their career.]”

As a result of these shifts, job seekers shouldn’t just expect video interviews to be a de facto standard, and the hiring process to take much longer lately, says Abby Kohut, President of recruitment firm AbsolutelyAbby.com. They should also expect to interact with AI-driven tools (i.e. chatbots, or software programs smart enough to pass for human) which can screen candidates, ask interview questions, and answer questions that they may have on the fly more frequently. Talent acquisition platforms, which automate the applications process by scanning applicants’ resumes for specific skills and experience, and smart texting tools (capable of conducting recruitment outreach and facilitating communications throughout the hiring process) are also on the rise.

These shifts in hiring practices may continue to resonate with recruiters long after COVID-19’s impact begins to trail off as well. As is, new data from Aptitude Research Partners shows that the amount of companies who have invested or plan to invest in chatbot solutions has jumped by over 500% in the last year alone, and 80% of users are happy with the technology. Likewise, more than nine in ten organizations who’ve turned to text-based recruiting methods have chosen to stick with them, with nearly two-thirds of workers preferring this type of communication to an email or phone call, according to a recent Job Seeker Nation Report.

“Many companies with partial or no remote work policies are now having to grapple with the shift to working from home, which means that the way companies recruit and hire has been forced to evolve,” suggests Darren Murph, Head of Remote for software development platform GitLab. “Companies that are still able to hire in the current economic climate are looking to virtual tactics to grow their teams.”

Utilizing traditional job-seeking strategies – i.e. creating simply-formatted resumes so a computer can easily read them and peppering popular search term keywords throughout these documents – when applying for positions can still serve prospective hires well, says Marc Mencher, founder of GameRecruiter.com. Likewise, numerous firms still continue to conduct personalized interviews and screenings, at which it pays to exercise traditional communications and leadership

skills. (“Although there are benefits to using AI, there are so many attributes such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving that are also super important to us that we’d rather take our time getting to know candidates,” admits Rebecca Bowsher, Head of People at health food provider Huel.) But ultimately, as Mencher reminds, numerous changes continue to impact the hiring process as a result of growing high-tech adoption, necessitating that job seekers make some fundamental changes to their tactical approach. “Nowadays, it’s more important than ever to stand out on video, and communicate your value proposition at a glance.”

According to recruiters, potential hires looking to land a position would do well to keep the following hints and tips in mind:

Stand out at a glance. “Be memorable,” advises Huel’s Bowsher. “In addition to ensuring that your application is relevant and writing a cover letter explaining why you’d be a good fit for a role, make sure your application is creative.” For instance, you might use colorful visuals and charts to present your career experience in the form of an infographic; ask a graphic designer to make your resume look like a potential employer’s product packaging; or submit a catchy audio recording or video snippet.

“I recently received an email message with the subject line “quarantine and chill” including book and movie recommendations as well as a call-to-action to help the application find a job – it was very clever,” chuckles Group M’s Wright.

“We look for people who are comfortable with taking initiative [and who display] great self-awareness and expert communication skills,” agrees GitLab’s Murph. “I recently uploaded a video outlining the scope and expectations for a recent role I hired for. Many candidates recorded videos of their own to respond and reply, linking to their YouTube page in a cover letter.”

Embrace the art of video interviews. In addition to dressing and comporting yourself professionally when conducting interviews, as well as utilizing a clean, simple background with minimal distractions, take time to prepare and practice fielding sample questions you expect to be queried about. What’s more, you’ll also want to ensure that popular videoconferencing software programs are preinstalled and working on your devices properly prior to interview sessions, and test that your video camera and microphone are functioning as anticipated.

Similarly, if you have a fear of public speaking, ask friends and family to put you through test runs, and ask sample questions so that you can get comfortable with being put on the spot. “Being afraid of being on camera is old news,” cautions AbsolutelyAbby.com’s Kohut. “You have to get over your fears and do it.”

Communication skills are more important than ever, she and others note, as is learning to quickly and succinctly summarize your thoughts. To maximize your talents here, practice answering questions with 20- to 30-second quick-hit responses, using three or four sentences maximum to get your thoughts across. When speaking, be sure to look at the camera, and maintain (virtual) eye contact with your interviewer as well. Similarly, you can’t let the occasional photobomb freak you out.

“Employers understand that many workers are getting used to operating from home,” laughs Jobvite’s Brar. “Candidates should be up-front about if kids or barking dogs may cause temporary interruptions.” You can even turn these disruptions into positives, he says, as unexpected happenings offer a chance for prospective job candidates to explain how they’re able to work effectively around distractions.

Become a wizard at text messaging. “Candidates need to be ready for interviews to occur via this medium,” notes Brar. “When this happens, you’ll want to focus on providing well thought-out and succinct responses, and be clear and direct about what really drives you, rather than just reiterate what’s on your resume.

Likewise, he says, it’s also important to keep additional files – i.e. certifications, writing samples, and reference letters – ready to share via text if a recruiter requests them. In addition, you’ll also want to take time to check and recheck spelling, grammar, and punctuation (keeping an especial eye out for auto-correct-generated errors) before sending messages. Furthermore, as much conversational nuance and emotion can be lost in the translation to digital, be sure to read over and double-check responses to ensure they sound upbeat and energetic.

Most of all, don’t be afraid to be yourself. “The use of text-based recruiting also offers the opportunity to showcase your personality by using emojis, Bitmojis, pictures, and GIFs where relevant,” says Brar. But before doing so, he cautions, also take time to think about how doing so may be perceived, and be certain that playful approaches such as this align with the company’s brand and culture.

Do your homework. In addition to researching positions that would be a good fit for you on company websites and career portals such as Monster, Indeed, and Glassdoor, it pays to familiarize yourself with the philosophies that prospective employers' embrace and champion. "Remote work forces companies to hire for values fit, not culture fit [since you're working largely independently and not in-office amongst colleagues]," explains Murph. Accordingly, he says, you should research firms to ensure that the attributes you prize – e.g. self-reliance, empathy, a focus on customer service over cost-efficiency, etc. – align with potential employers' values.

Similarly, when you do find a prospective employer and position that you'd like to apply for, it's important to position yourself to quickly relay how specific skills and experience you possess best align with companies' specific needs. The more concrete information and real-world examples you provide, the more successful you'll be.

In addition, when you submit a resume, it should include targeted keywords – specific phrases denoting in-demand job titles and descriptions, professional experience, and technical terms – that artificially-intelligent analytics programs are seeking. Many times, you can find clues as to which keywords to insert (e.g. "network administrator" vs. "IT expert") contained in the job description itself. Note that many computer programs also start at the top of documents and read left to right – ergo, the sooner you include these keywords up-front, the more successful you'll be.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. A robust network of contacts can help you more readily find open positions, including those that haven't yet been posted, experts say. The more you make others aware you're on the hunt, and more you make a point to stay on recruiters' radars, the more you'll stand to put yourself in opportunity's path, and more successful you'll ultimately be.

"Utilize your LinkedIn profile," suggests Murph. "Take time to update job descriptions, reach out to coworkers for recommendations, and enable your profile to let recruiters know that you are open to job opportunities."

"You have to be willing to ask your network for help more than ever, even if it's uncomfortable at first," agrees Kohut. "You can ask strangers to do virtual informational interviews [about what their

job entails]. You can volunteer to help others, which helps you meet more people and pay things forward. You can even go on YouTube and post a video resume.”

Likewise, she says, it doesn't hurt to be deliberate about who you reach out to. “One tip I'm giving job seekers is to look out for companies that are hiring recruiters right now, which means they are growing and probably have jobs available.”

In the end though, the specific high-tech tools and tactics that you turn to matter less than simply making a point to constantly put yourself out there, and be more persistent and proactive when it comes to professional outreach, experts say.

“Ask yourself: How do you bring your very best self into your digital profile, and how do you leverage your network in the current context?,” says GroupM's Wright. “Abandon any anxiety you have about reaching out to people... you might be surprised at how much empathy [you'll find.]

“Job skills will always be table stakes,” he reminds. “The difference between awesome and average is character – integrity, authenticity, and leadership.” Finding ways to consistently exhibit these talents will be crucial to your job search.

After all, while the technical mechanics associated with communicating these attributes digitally vs. physically may differ, it bears reminding. With a little ingenuity and elbow grease, it's not hard to vault yourself to the top of recruiters' inboxes, and give them ample reasons to keep your number (and email address) on speed dial.

RENEGOTIATING WITH PARTNERS AND SUPPLIERS

Whether it's been weeks or years since you last renegotiated prices with partners and suppliers, it pays to reconsider every dollar that's being spent in challenging times. Luckily, even for those who don't like confrontation or having to drive a hard bargain, securing better deals and discounts from vendors doesn't have to be as challenging or time-consuming as it seems. As countless business owners having to adapt to COVID-19 and current market realities continue to remind us, the secret to successfully negotiating better agreements is simply to be more strategic, and forward-thinking. Following, you'll find several hints, tips, and techniques that can help you secure better prices, lock down more favorable deal terms, and otherwise optimize the essential business relationships that you need to get ahead in tomorrow's marketplace.

Create Win-Win Business Scenarios. Like any organization, suppliers and partners ultimately want to see two things as a result of your professional relationship: Paid invoices and business growth. They also don't want to lose your support and patronage. Noting this, if you're looking to have contractual agreements adjusted, it's crucial to establish that any proposed term changes aren't simply cost-cutting tactics and find ways to create win-win scenarios for all parties involved. In effect, your best approach is to show why any adjustments to deals make good financial sense and will lead to more successfully completed orders overall. If you're coming from a position of strength (financial growth), this may mean committing to more orders or more consistent restocking in exchange for more favorable rates, credit terms, or billing periods. If you're negotiating from a position of weakness (financial atrophy), though? This may mean having to use market research or analysis to rightsize expectations, secure better bargains, or demonstrate how temporary deferrals can improve your firm's financial health, thereby leading to larger orders at a later date. (Hint: Historical sales data and forward-looking projections can help.) One simple hack you can use if you're in a current cash crunch? Call up your vendors and explain that you need 3-6 months of free services while you figure out your next move, or, failing this, remain open to any suggestions that they might have. Then dial up their competitors and ask for the same amount of freebies if you're willing to switch suppliers. Given how competitive the market has become, you may be surprised to find how much wiggle room you'll get.

Consider the Many Ways You Can Negotiate. Partners and suppliers won't always be willing to move on price. (Although getting quotes from at least three competitors and approaching your vendors while letting them know the most competitive offer wins is often a quick way to help reluctant vendors budge here.) But that doesn't mean you can't negotiate other ways to save that can help your business score big in the end. For example, you might also bargain with partners to reduce the amount of any down payment that you're required to make, gain more favorable credit terms, or increase the amount of unsold inventory that you can return. Similarly, many organizations will provide a special discount if you're willing to pay outstanding invoices quicker or invest in bulk or overstock buys. Don't forget that many areas of a contract from shipping speed to customer support or length and scope of warranty are often open to discussion. Trade secret: If you've got cash in-hand, one of the strongest moves you can make is to make a larger up-front deposit (e.g. 50-60%), which will afford you significant bargaining power in any area you desire. Given how concerned that suppliers are with getting paid, it's a quick way to build leverage, and bring virtually any other term of a deal more in-line with your expectations.

Stay Informed and Up to Date. Understanding suppliers' and vendors' industries and business models can provide you with a deeper understanding of what motivates them. Likewise, knowing how much it costs to provide any given solution affords you crucial insight into how tight margins are, and where there's room to potentially save. But the goal here isn't to tighten the screws on your associates. Rather, it's to figure out how to make their lives easier and save them money, so you can establish yourself as a trusted partner and make things more cost-effective for everyone. Along these lines, it also pays to maintain regular communication with your contractors, and a friendly rapport. That's because doing so can help you better understand suppliers' current goals and pain points, and go a long way towards helping you know what makes them sit up and pay attention, and where you have room to maneuver.

Be Polite, But Persistent. Don't accept the standard-issue "policies" and "procedures" that suppliers' sales reps may quote you as the gospel. Instead, politely and firmly challenge your vendors by asking if they've got any wiggle room or authority to go off-script and fulfill your requests (even if this means speaking to a supervisor). The more you adopt a curious and earnest tone, and the more you ask pointed questions while also maintaining a polite and professional manner, the more successful you'll be. If it helps, you can "accidentally" let it slip that you're also talking to and/or working with other vendors. While you may receive some pushback, persistence pays here, as virtually any

aspect of a partner deal leaves room for negotiation. Often, securing more favorable terms is just a function of catching the ear of someone with the authority to make the necessary changes, and sufficiently motivating them to come around to your way of thinking.

Commit or Shop Around. Last, but not least, you might also consider switching all your business to a single vendor or supplier in exchange for deeper discounts, enhanced purchasing terms, and other exclusive perks. Alternately, if you're not a fan of commitment, you can go the opposite route and look to spread your purchases out across a range of younger, hungrier, less well-established suppliers who may be more eager to compete for your business. Still a third technique you might use is not to worry about placing any original orders at all, and instead wait to buy up surplus goods that vendors may be looking to offload at a discount. Whichever route you choose to go though, remember: A host of local and international vendors are now competing for your business. A single supplier's unwillingness to change or bend is hardly a show-stopper anymore and, when it comes to negotiations, you don't have to be an expert to get ahead these days. Instead, simply being a little bit more persistent and proactive is often all it takes to secure the best discounts and deals.

BUSINESS NEEDS YOU CAN OUTSOURCE ON-DEMAND

Stop: Don't pay another invoice until you've read this chapter. Thanks to the rise of the gig economy, high-tech automation apps, and online marketplaces that can connect you with thousands of eager freelancers, virtually any business need can quickly and cost-effectively be outsourced today. Offering cash-conscious business owners a way to secure nearly any service on-demand with minimal commitment, and at a fraction of typical expenses, these solutions provide a readymade means to help offset coronavirus-related concerns. As you work to craft new business services and strategies, all can help you execute these initiatives or pivot more efficiently. Following, you'll find a number of common business needs that you can offload ASAP, allowing you to deploy reopening strategies in record time while still remaining flexible and nimble in case things change.

Photography And Illustration

Shh, don't tell: Massive libraries full of royalty-free photos and stock art can help you spruce up or add a touch of color to any marketing materials or website in minutes. Look closely, and you'll even find that several also contain cartoons, drawings, and illustrations if you'd prefer to take a more artistic tack to designing your supporting assets as well. All offer images in high-resolution, and at various sizes, so they're suitable for use in both print or online formats too. While each website providing these shots offers its own image license (be sure to check terms before using) you'll find several that allow you to use pictures for virtually any purpose, sans attribution, and modify these photos as needed. In short, the next time you're on the hunt for an eye-catching photo? All you have to do is punch in a topic (say, "accountant," "law firm," or "innovation") to pull up dozens of professionally-made shots that are ready to republish.

Website Development

Need a professional website built on a tight deadline and budget? Dozens of web hosting services now let you customize predesigned templates and drag-and-drop features to add functionality with the click of a mouse, with no programming experience required. No matter if you're a restaurant, retailer, or professional services firm (or any business in-between), for under \$15/month, you can build an attractive Web- and mobile-optimized home on the Internet. Note that many services even allow you to quickly implement photo galleries and product demos, setup blogs and online shopping carts, and provide

access to royalty-free stock photos and art. Your creations, which can be further personalized to add menus, members-only areas, and search engine optimization, will look every bit as sharp as if you'd commissioned them from a creative agency. Better yet, depending on how quickly you work, and how extensive a resource you need, you can have one up and running in a handful of hours, tops.

Graphic Design

Whether you're looking to style product packaging or promotional materials, dress up a book cover or design a new sign for your storefront, freelance marketplaces can connect you with hundreds of affordable graphic designers. Flyer graphics, logos, t-shirt art and more start as little as \$5, though more complex tasks (ad design, custom artwork, infographics, etc.) may run \$50-\$100. Alternately, if you'd like to crowdsource designs rather than commission a single contributor, numerous services let you post a cash bounty (avg. \$100-\$300) and invite the general public to contribute. From business cards to stationary, album covers to slide presentations, there's a huge community of online freelancers waiting to assist. To ensure best results, you'll want to build at least a couple rounds of design feedback and revisions into your bid. Likewise, you'll also wish to work with a service that holds funds in escrow, only paying them on final receipt and approval of contributions.

Foreign Language Translations

How do you say "This is awesome?!" in French, Italian, or Spanish? No matter what foreign language you're looking to get your creations translated into, it's easy to find out with the help of independent translators. Several global freelance marketplaces exist that cater to these needs, letting you pay by the word (roughly 4 to 10 cents) or by the hour (starting at \$15 and up) to have your work ported to dozens of dialects. Regardless of the level of task complexity, and how uncommon the language may be, each can quickly connect you with native speakers ready to meet the challenge. To ensure best results here, be sure to post jobs and source bids from multiple contractors, and vet contributors' profiles to see how many tasks they've successfully completed on time, and average review scores.

Video Production

Many of the same online archives that provide access to stock photos also offer access to free stock videos (businesswomen on their smartphone, coffee shops brewing fresh cups, etc.) on-demand. However, numerous other providers also offer access to premade

motion graphics templates, special effects, and even entire 3D animated intros that you can edit and drop into your own video projects in minutes. In similar fashion, if you need supporting imagery on a specific topic – banking, dog walking, children playing at the park – you can also find short clips available as well. The bottom line being that whether you're looking for a supporting video for a presentation or website, or special effects or high-impact shots to add to a clip you're filming, it's easy to find. So many mix-and-match pieces and parts are now available that you could literally assemble all the assets you needed to create a new business reel or training video in minutes for under \$200.

Bookkeeping And Accounting

Small business accounting can be complex or straightforward. But either way, it's an essential and often time-consuming task – and that's before you factor in other associated concerns such as payroll management and invoice collection. Happily, myriad online accounting tools and services (many of which come with corresponding mobile apps) make it easy to offload these functions. Sign up for one, and not only can you automate many routine and repetitive tasks, including invoicing, processing expense claims, and bill payment. You can also gain more in-depth views into cash flow and operating needs, and sign up to receive real-time updates as financial concerns arise. The best solutions make it possible to collaborate with colleagues in real-time, and manage tasks from anywhere you've got an Internet connection and mobile device.

Marketing And Social Media

Looking to create an amazing advertising campaign, design a must-see email newsletter, or craft all sorts of fun and funky images for your next social media promotion? Not only can you hire the graphic wizards that you need to design these ventures online via freelance marketplaces. You can also find the creative and promotional talent – marketers, public relations pros, search engine gurus, etc. – that you need to successfully pull these ventures off there as well. Literally thousands of experienced professionals with backgrounds in numerous spaces (healthcare, automotive, spa and wellness, etc.) stand ready to help you promote your next big launch. Likewise, you can also source the help of data entry and market research pros to assist in these initiatives here, and help you build out your contact and email lists as well. So the next time you're thinking about how to make a splash in the marketplace? Focus on assembling a winning team instead of trying to do everything yourself. After all, countless forward-thinking professionals stand ready and waiting to help shine the promotional spotlight on you.

WHY CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY IS THE WAY FORWARD

Corporate sustainability and sustainable energy (like recycling and eco-friendly green solutions) are now major trends amongst both business leaders and everyday individuals like. A slew of polls and surveys demonstrate that awareness for these topics is likewise growing around the globe.

With over half of folks now noting that they're concerned they're about their personal impact on the environment, and more than 70% of businesses stating that responsibility for driving green solutions (i.e. corporate sustainability and eco-friendly alternatives) lies with their organization, it's clear that interest in the space only continues to skyrocket in corporate circles. Considering that more than 80% of businesses remind that employees increasingly make it a priority to work for sustainable businesses, this movement is only expected to grow in coming years.

Noting this, it's not surprising to see interest in the space booming. Case in point: A centuries-old alcohol brand is already preparing to repackage itself using paper bottles in coming months. Packaging will be made leveraging fully recyclable wood pulp to increase its biodegradability and eco-friendliness – a point worth toasting. Around the world, a variety of international mail carriers and shipping services are also testing out the use of hybrid and electric vehicles as they service delivery routes, including the use of rechargeable batteries to power these automobiles. Moreover, all sorts of organizations – especially farmers, co-ops, and livestock producers – are leveraging solar panels to help minimize their impact on the planet and energy consumption to boot.

The net effect being that initiatives that promote corporate sustainability and eco-friendliness only continue to pop up more frequently. If you'd believe, several leading beauty brands have even gotten behind the movement, and made commitments to move towards utilizing more cardboard-based packaging. A number of transportation and travel providers are also rolling out efforts designed to help these organizations achieve carbon neutrality in coming decades as well.

Best of all, more than half of business leaders are looking to put growing emphasis on corporate sustainability over the coming decade. Even more say that it's the right thing to do as good corporate citizens, and have bumped related programs to the top of their priority lists, along with driving economic recovery. So when it comes to environmentally friendly solutions? We're pleased to report that they're clearly the future of business.

START AND GROW YOUR BUSINESS FOR LESS

Graphic design services starting at five bucks. Email marketing for a handful of cents. Sprawling libraries full of stock photos, free for commercial use. Professionally-crafted websites that anyone can quickly get up and running beginning at two dollars a pop. Thanks to the rise of online marketplaces, affordably-priced cloud apps, and freelance gig sites, virtually anything you need from a kick-ass video to SEO or marketing help can now be had for free or at a fraction of typical costs. Moreover, in the wake of the pandemic, the range of on-demand solutions and options available to budget-minded business owners only continues to grow.

Over 57 million Americans (representing 35% of the U.S. workforce) freelanced last year, per non-profit advocacy organization Freelancers Union. Likewise, over six million skilled gig workers are now operating just in America's top 30 cities alone, according to online freelance marketplace Fiverr.com's annual Freelance Economic Impact Report. Coupled with the continuing rise in remote work prompted by COVID-19 and industry growth that's compounding by double or even triple digits in select global territories, it's not only clear that gig work now enjoys greater prominence than ever. It's also becoming increasingly apparent that "outsourcing" is quickly becoming the new "in-house." Bearing in mind that six in ten freelancers expect to earn as much or more than they did in the year prior (amounting to a collective \$150 billion), it's obvious that the gig economy's moment has arrived. What's more, all those pennies now flowing to non-traditional sources are quickly adding up to create massive opportunities for businesses and everyday working professionals (especially those seeking a new side hustle) alike.

"I don't know why anyone would build most business platforms or websites [from scratch] anymore," chuckles Joseph Olin, executive director for the Video Game Bar Association, which represents legal practitioners in the interactive entertainment space. "The biggest challenge for most businesses is simply deciding which solutions provider to choose from."

As a result, both working professionals and organizations seeking on-demand alternatives to traditional business arrangements and solutions are finding it increasingly simple to collaborate and connect. "With the expansion of and globalization of gig platforms, talented professionals from around the world can offer their services to a much wider audience of potential clients," seconds Brie Weiler Reynolds, career development manager for FlexJobs, which has created a guide

to popular freelance and gig economy job platforms. “These platforms can allow for much quicker transactions and collaborations, and have a streamlining effect on the whole [project development and innovation] process.”

However, it's not just budding entrepreneurs who are finding creative ways to assemble ragtag teams of freelance superstars, and stretch every dollar further. Perhaps the most telling signs of sea change lie in corporate America's growing embrace of on-demand and outsourcing practices, with the share of gig workers at US businesses having ballooned 15% since 2010, according to the ADP Research Institute. Moreover, over 30% of 1099-MISC contractors doing gig-based now are now over age 55, pointing to growing opportunities for working professionals in every category and age group. But nowhere is the growth potential in the space greater than for small businesses, who are increasingly turning to freelance marketplaces and online sites to outsource (or crowdsource) common day-to-day tasks for pennies on the dollar. And whether they need help with social media management or professional voice-overs, drop shipping or app development, countless entrepreneurs across the globe are quickly adding these solutions to their list of go-to resources.

“Although we're a 22-year-old business, we consistently use stock image, music, and video providers,” notes Andrew Krause, founder of marketing communications firm AKA, by way of example. “During the pandemic, it's provided an easy way for many clients, including Fortune 500 firms, to fill in creative gaps and source specific film footage that would otherwise be tough to produce while under stay-at-home orders, let alone quickly.”

Moreover, as he reminds, use of freelance creatives to provide solutions (e.g. editing all these template assets together), can also provide a great way to outsource time-sensitive work, or fill in any specific skills gaps that your company may have – and on a more flexible basis. The key to being successful when using them, he says, is simply to be clear with freelance providers about what your project needs are. Likewise, it's important to vet freelancers' capabilities and work portfolio, up-front, establish clear deadlines and milestones, and keep a close eye on project management. As ever, he reminds, it pays to have a skilled hand managing the troops, and making sure everything's coming together. “There's plenty of talented work to be done here, and at affordable prices, but as with anything, results can vary... even when you outsource project pieces and parts [in this fashion], it still takes a skilled hand to assemble and watch over people.”

Similar sentiments are echoed by Andrew Vine, head of professional speaking agency The Insight Bureau, who notes that the company uses freelance marketplaces, off-the-shelf templates, and online tools to outsource and streamline many aspects of its operations. For instance, “we use Upwork.com [freelance] staff to take on ad hoc projects in a way that temporary agencies could never accommodate, sites like SurveyMonkey to source customer feedback, and Zoho CRM [sales software] to handle customer relationship management,” he notes. “Similarly, we use solutions such as Calendly to [manage our schedule] and avoid the ping-pong match involved in setting up appointments. There are plenty of affordable, web-based solutions that help us remain agile.”

“As we’ve grown and scaled our business, we’ve relied on several free resources to support ongoing initiatives,” seconds Michael Morgenstern, SVP of Marketing for expert witness provider The Expert Institute. “We use Trello to manage our projects... Brainlabs’ open source scripts to automate certain high-tech actions... and Unsplash.com is our go-to resource for free, high-quality stock imagery.”

In effect, agile and affordable solutions such as these can often be a vital go-to resource for startups and other bootstrapped ventures, helping lower barriers to market entry and offer the tools needed to compete with larger firms. Ironically though, with so many outsourced and on-demand options now available, and just a click away, the biggest challenge for many businesses is simply picking the right choice of marketplace, and right freelance provider. Happily, say many executives, it’s a good problem to have, even if the options can sometimes prove overwhelming.

“When we first started, we were in total bootstrap mode, and every dollar counted,” says Andrew Tropeano, executive producer at popular broadcast television series NewsWatch TV. “From our website to logo to marketing materials, we needed quality offerings, but we didn’t have the funds to hire a marketing agency. Online marketplaces and off-the-shelf services like [crowdsourced logo provider] 99Designs and [freelance marketplace] Fiverr helped us get the business rolling at an affordable price. We wouldn’t be where we are without these solutions.”

Anticipated to be a \$5 billion market by 2025, freelance platforms are expected to grow at a 15.9% compound annual growth rate according to research by ReportsWeb.com. They’re also well-positioned to experience a huge uptick in light of the recent coronavirus pandemic. On the bright side, say insider insiders, this growing activity will only translate into more potential partners, more opportunity, and more selection for enterprising working professionals with each passing year.

“You really can find everything online now that you need to launch a business or brand just a few clicks away,” says David Brice, general manager of online creative marketplace Envato. “The quality and variety of stock assets has never been better. The industry has also evolved rapidly over the past decade, which has resulted in a higher degree of professionalism and quality across the board. Whether it’s logo and branding assistance, marketing copy, WordPress website customization and installation, video and audio editing... you name it, it’s out there [waiting to be had].”

Given that this type of outsourcing has quietly been growing in popularity for over 10 years, it’s hard to call the sudden upsurge in interest an overnight success. But with research by 99Designs demonstrating that 54% of people are currently planning to launch a new business or side hustle during the coronavirus outbreak, its timing couldn’t be more impeccable. “Online platforms have created a completely new level of accessibility when it comes to professional services,” notes CEO Patrick Llewellyn. “It’s never been easier to access all the services you need to start a business. We give business owners access to a huge creative workforce... as well as the opportunity to collaborate with individuals who understand and connect with their brand, regardless of whether they’re located on the other side of the country or down the street.”

“Even before COVID-19, there was never a better time to start a business, or launch new projects,” agrees Matt Barrie, CEO of Freelancer.com. “Every business today is an Internet business in some way or another... and now every business is forced to work online. Luckily, the products and tools needed to build and operate businesses are widely available, and are cost-effective and (in some cases) even free.”

According to Barrie, Freelancer.com alone has already played home to 18 million jobs and contests from 44 million users in over 1600 areas from engineering and app development to astrophysics and market research. Keeping this kind of growth in mind, with new business up 50% year on year, he says, now’s the right time to start a firm, start a side hustle, and start making things happen, whatever your passion or industry.

“It’s never been easier or more affordable to establish an online presence,” concurs Heidi Gibson, senior director of product management for web hosting firm GoDaddy, which provides user-friendly apps that let those without technical know-how quickly and cost-affordably build a website and digital footprint. “The barriers to entry have never been lower thanks to the rise of intuitive website, marketing, and e-commerce solutions. You can launch a business

online in a matter of days, sometimes hours, and often for less than a \$100 using easy do-it-yourself tools.”

If you’re looking to get started yourself, sample online marketplaces where you can find freelancers or on-demand services include:

- Fiverr
- FlexJobs
- Freelancer.com
- Guru
- Toptal
- Upwork

Likewise, according to Brent Messenger, VP of Public Policy and Community Engagement at Fiverr, a few tips to keep in mind when using these marketplaces are as follows:

- When hiring from a global marketplace, be aware of different time zones and where freelancers are based, so you can ensure that you communicate effectively on the timeline of the project and expected deadline.
- Do your homework and thoroughly review each freelancer’s portfolio, and be sure to read comments and reviews. Likewise, research how the freelancer has been rated by previous clients. This will help you build a better understanding of what they offer, how they work, and their past results.
- Be clear on your expectations: Freelancers are required to be clear on what they deliver, but it’s the responsibility of the buyer to be clear in terms of defining what they need up-front.
- Hold regular check-ins to ensure that each project is progressing as anticipated, and address any questions either of you may have.
- Work with freelancers as if you were working in an office, where you’d expect to keep an open and professional line of communication about how things are going.

In addition, if you’re looking for help with online automation, or stock assets such as photos, images, and plug-and-play solutions (e.g. premade video animations or website templates that you can easily customize), the following sites can also be of service. Some may offer assets and solutions for free, others for a nominal fee or on a subscription basis:

Email and Newsletter Marketing – AWeber, Constant Contact, Drip, GetResponse, HubSpot, iContact, MailChimp, SendInBlue

Photos and Videos – Unsplash, Shutterstock, StockSnap.io, DepositPhotos, Videezy, VideoHive

Logos, Graphics, and Branding – Crowdspring, 99Designs, Behance, Canva, Easil, Adobe Spark

Web Design and Development – Shopify, Squarespace, Wix, WordPress, GoDaddy, TemplateMonster, ThemeForest

“When you’re starting out, you can’t always afford to hire a design team or marketing agency, but you still need solutions that can help you move forward,” says Thiago Desouza, head of boutique video production firm TDIMAGE. “Having access to the correct tool for the correct job at the correct time can help you create success.”

“We’re a relatively small company (22 people), and leaning on readymade solutions can really help us expand our capabilities without needing to increase staffing,” agrees Tom Ohle, founder of Evolve PR. “Rather than have to create everything from scratch, we can get ‘good enough’ results in a minimum of time.”

Even project management professionals to whom tasks are being outsourced by clients are growingly swearing by these services and solutions as well. “We’ve used so many of these tools to not only build our own company, but provide great service to our clients,” says Carolyn Crummey, founder of small business support services firm VirTasktic. “From Squarespace for affordable, professional looking websites to tools like MailChimp for email marketing, Canva for graphics creation, and Invideo.io for professional video quality shorts, there’s an abundance of tools that can help any entrepreneur or small business start with very little investment or technical knowledge.”

Noting this, it won’t be long before freelance marketplaces and the gig economy become the new normal say industry insiders, who argue that their continuing rise is all but inevitable. “In the future, we’ll think in terms of ‘platform economies’ [vs. marketplaces],” says Hugh Durkin, director of product development for marketing, sales, and customer service software provider HubSpot. “Because of the much lower costs [associated with using these solutions] it’s not uncommon for bootstrapped, self-funded businesses to become more meaningful in terms of revenue.”

Ultimately, it all potentially adds up to big wins both for gig economy workers, and businesses looking to start virtually any project that they can envision. Just remember, say frequent buyers, that no matter how many new options present themselves, or low prices go, there's always value to be had in also working with a skilled hand to oversee and help bring projects together as well.

"The rise of these off-the-shelf services and solutions has been a boon to entrepreneurs and small businesses, as we can be much more agile," suggests Evolve's Ohle. "I can't stress enough, though, that off-the-shelf solutions aren't always a replacement for expertise. In general, yes, I think that you can probably outsource or offload just about any facet of your business nowadays. The difficult decision to make as a business owner is which ones you want to hand off in that way."

HOW TO DETERMINE WHAT BUSINESS ACTIVITIES ARE WORTH YOUR TIME

Feeling pressed for time lately? Join the club: At the best of times, business leaders and owners often work twice as much as employees, and put in more than 50 hours of work per week. But as much as it's in an entrepreneur or senior leader's nature to want to do everything themselves, learning to let go of certain time-consuming activities is even more critical to taking back control of your schedule, and staying ahead of the curve today. After all, with the rise of COVID-19 and coronavirus-related concerns, it's more important than ever to stay laser-focused on the bottom line, even as more concerns threaten to pull you in more directions. On the bright side, in the era of big data and online analytics, everything is measurable – including productivity. If you're feeling strapped for resources as of late, fear not: Here's how to figure out where to focus your energy and effort to make the greatest impact, and make the most of any situation when it counts.

Time Management Essentials

With only 24 hours in any given day, and countless tasks to tackle, volumes have been written about how to regain command of your schedule. As a business owner or operator, it's important to know where your time is spent, how much of an impact your actions are having on your organization, and whether there's room for streamlining and optimization. A brief look at important points to remember here that can help you determine where to focus include:

- The need to set fixed office hours during which others can contact you, block off times during which you can't be disturbed, and educate colleagues on which contact methods you prefer them to utilize when reaching out.
- Leaving room for “white space” (empty) hours in your schedule for deep thought and focused effort.
- Waking up early, before most of the world, and using these wee hours (5AM – 8AM daily) to devote time to important initiatives, or personal needs such as meditation and exercise.
- Focusing on completing hard tasks before ticking smaller items off your to-do list, in order to ensure that you're getting the most of out each day, and staying on-time and on-budget.

- Regularly stopping to chart business goals and milestones, and keeping and reviewing a workplace diary that can help you determine where you spend your time, and if it's really going towards achieving meaningful objectives.

As a general rule, if a task does not directly impact the bottom line, or help you in your efforts to achieve long-term goals, remove it from your schedule. If a job can be done a minimum of 70% as effectively as you'd do it yourself, and it's a non-essential effort (or a need that involves little interaction with customers), outsource it. Likewise, with the rise of technology and online automation, more repetitive and time-consuming tools and tasks (data entry, research analysis, content management, payroll, etc.) can now be offloaded to artificially intelligent apps and tools. Keep in mind that millions of executives face similar challenges as you do. Rather than assume it's necessary for you to perform a task personally, always look and see if you can quickly delegate it to a digital stand-in. For more information, see below.

Activities to Focus On

As a business owner or operator, remember that your role isn't to micromanage. It's to be an effective team captain, and empower employees to do their jobs while leaving them ample room to run with productive new ideas and concepts. That said, there are several activities that executives and entrepreneurs should always stay on top of. These duties include:

- Brainstorming Business Opportunities
- Planning New Products, Services, and Concepts
- Mentoring and Managing Employees
- Driving Financial Results
- Keeping Cash Flow Solvent
- Bringing Business in the Door
- Plotting Organizational Strategy
- Staying Attuned to Customer Needs
- Building Strategic Partnerships
- Reviewing and Refining Tactical Approaches

The key to knowing where to focus your efforts is to determine which activities create the highest value (both in terms of actual dollar value and springboards to opportunity) for your business. You can do this by asking yourself three simple questions:

- Is engaging in this activity bringing me one or more steps closer to completing a major task or goal?
- How does performing this activity help me boost the bottom line, and/or create additional opportunities for my organization?
- What resources, insights, and capabilities does my business gain from pursuing this effort, and how adaptable are they to helping our organization meet other needs or demands?

Once you've identified high-value activities, pick one to three that you'd like to accomplish each day. You can then strive to schedule your working hours in such a way so as to emphasize getting related tasks done first. While it's not always possible for a busy executive to accomplish these tasks in the wake of everyday happenings and unexpected events, it's important to keep them in focus. Doing so can help you stay more on-target and motivated as you work to achieve big-picture objectives.

Business Needs to Outsource Immediately

Ultimately, when determining where to spend your time, and whether or not an activity demands your attention, it's important to consider: Are there faster or more cost-efficient ways of getting the job done? As alluded above, thanks to the rise of digital and online tools, in the case of many common day-to-day business needs, the answer is yes. Following, you'll find a list of common organizational needs that you can outsource to freelance providers, or automated or artificially-intelligent tools to that can help you free up time today:

- Accounting, Bookkeeping, and Payroll Processing
- Administrative, Clerical, and Scheduling Tasks
- Data Entry and Upkeep
- Market Research and Analytics
- Order Processing and Fulfillment
- Payment Processing
- Inventory Management
- Search Engine Optimization
- Community and Social Media Management
- IT and Network Operations
- Creative Works: Art, Copy, Video, Photo, Graphic Design
- Online Advertising, Public Relations, and Social Media Marketing
- Content Design and Management
- Website and Application Development
- Foreign Translations

As you can see, there's no shortage of needs competing for a business leader's attention at any given time. Learning which to pursue, and which to abandon, is key to being more effective on the job. Apply the simple rules and strategies outlined above though, and you'll have less trouble finding time for what matters: Making sure you're always on the ball, and always ready to deal with whatever challenges that any given workday brings your way.

HOW TO FIND SUCCESS WHATEVER THE FUTURE BRINGS

Having made the leap from freelance writer to business consultant, keynote speaker, and strategic adviser to 1000 brands, people often ask me: What's the secret to adapting to fast-changing times – and finding ongoing success, no matter what the future brings?

Happily, as I note in recent book *FAST >> FORWARD*, it's easy to stay one step ahead of the curve when you make a point to purposefully plan ahead and acquire forward-focused talents and pursue new opportunities that can help you stay both top of mind and relevant.

In effect, the answer to this question is simple and fourfold:

1. Consistently strive to gain elastic skills that translate to multiple areas of business or industries. For example, talents honed as a writer or reporter (i.e. researching, communications, and networking) can serve you just as well as a market researcher, public relations pro, or business analyst in any field.

2. Constantly take on stretchwork that expands your skill set and familiarizes you with new experiences, talents, and trends. In effect, the more skills that you can add to your professional toolkit, the more opportunities you'll create for yourself, and flexibility you'll have to mix-and-match your talents in novel ways. Case in point: While hosting hundreds of videos, I volunteered to stay late and help videographers edit and package film footage. They taught me how to translate my penchant for storytelling to the screen and visual mediums. Now, we're producing our own broadcast videos and documentaries.

3. Routinely build new bridges to opportunity. In addition to persistently networking and knocking on many doors to find work, consider ways to quickly grow your business by expanding it to other audiences or markets. For instance: After helping technology providers adapt to constant change, our market research practice quickly transitioned to serving banking, insurance, and retail providers – other areas where companies needed help innovating around constant disruption.

4. Regularly reinvent yourself. Just as musicians often refresh their image and businesses repackage product offerings to seem timelier and more topical, you need to do so as well. Trade secret: In recent years, I've made the jump from being an "analyst," "market researcher," and "trends expert" to "futurist." But behind the scenes, my day-to-day workload is no different: The only thing that's changed is my marketability and search engine visibility.

Wondering how you can put yourself on the fast-track to success, and avoid falling by the wayside as times and trends evolve as well? The answers are simpler than you think.

Here's a simple five-step formula that you can also follow to find constant success as an individual or business, no matter your chosen field:

1. Differentiate at a Glance – Business and job markets are more crowded than ever. Moreover, most folks' capabilities look similar on paper, and many marketing opportunities are now reduced to snapshot-sized posts on websites – even as competition is skyrocketing. Between increasingly cluttered fields and clients' shrinking attention spans, it's essential to grab prospective clients' attention and stand out at glance to be more memorable. For instance, in addition to debuting guides to successfully navigating business chaos right as COVID-19 hit, we also rolled out training programs that actively encourage audiences to take more risks, not fewer – even in the middle of a recession.

2. DIY: Do It Yourself – The fastest way to find new opportunities in unpredictable times is to quickly and cost-effectively experiment with self-published solutions, learning from audience reactions and iterating as you go. Doing so not only allows you to more rapidly prototype new ideas and concepts while retaining creative control and ownership if a project successfully lands. It also allows you to prove out concepts, build a profitable following, and amass leverage that can help you negotiate better deals with potential partners that can help you amplify your reach down the road. Ex: We parlayed thousands of self-published book sales into hundreds of media mentions and a book publisher bidding war, culminating in signing bestselling manuscript *Make Change Work for You* with Penguin Random House. We then piggybacked on growing audience attention from all this activity to launch global speaking tours, video hosting appearances, and a variety of independently-published training guides and workbooks.

3. Start Small, Then Go Big – A niche can make you rich. Rather than be everything to everyone (e.g. positioning yourself “an online marketing guru”), pick a unique space where you can stand out (i.e. becoming the top “TikTok video ad producer for restaurant or retail businesses”). Your audience may be smaller, but you'll stand out more and be paid more of a premium for it. Once you've built traction and begun to generate income, you can then move on to scale your business or make the leap to new markets. By way of illustration, after starting in the video game space, our strategic consulting firm became well-known as innovation insiders, and notched up myriad radio and TV appearances. Having

gained a reputation for helping companies stay ahead of the curve, we leveraged our momentum and contacts to quickly break into dozens of other industries seeking to successfully navigate disruption as well.

4. Diversify Your Income – After 20 years of freelancing for over 600 outlets, if there's one thing I've learned, it's that a steady paycheck isn't guaranteed. Diversifying into different business areas can help you offset these risks. In effect, the more diverse your revenue sources and income streams, the more resilient your business will be to economic downswings (like a market recession) and more you can capitalize on economic upswings (like a market comeback). For instance, we recently added corporate event hosting, online training, and professional development classes to our repertoire. These opportunities have allowed us to extend our reach beyond market research, public speaking, and consulting – all additional areas we'd already make the leap to on top of writing and editing prior.

5. Reinvest in Personal Growth – Rather than pump money into advertising, promotions, or other business activities where it may quickly depreciate? Make a point to spend it on professional development, education, new business opportunities, and other growth-focused activities that have the potential to appreciate as investments and grow your resources and capabilities first instead. Even if you don't make money from them initially, remember: They can still ultimately pay off by helping you acquire new skills and insights, or expose your talents to valuable new contacts and audiences. Best of all, countless off-the-shelf technology tools and pay-as-you-go services can serve as overnight growth accelerants and help you test new ideas in minutes for pennies on the dollar. For example: We recently debuted a new website focused on our futurist services that took 48 hours to launch using preexisting technology solutions. Days later, brand-new clients had already hired us to do several presentations and talks.

To summarize: Always have next steps in mind for your career or business, and actively position yourself to acquire tomorrow's most in-demand insights, resources, and capabilities today as you go. The more flexible and widely-applicable to different scenarios and contexts that these acquisitions are, the better positioned you'll be to steer yourself back on track if the road ahead takes a sudden, unexpected turn.

Afterwards:

- Constantly prototype and test new, well-differentiated and self-funded solutions, learning about shifts in market or audience needs through the process so that you can adapt and refine your strategies to be more successful (and improve your odds of finding success) as you go
- Look for simple ways to reposition or repackage yourself at routine intervals (say, every 2-3 years) to grow your audience and reputation, or expand into new areas
- Find additional ways to apply your services and solutions or adapt them to changing trends that allow you to expand your business by making a series of quick, simple leaps into adjacent markets
- Stay on the lookout for new services that you could add, industries you might explore, or trends and gaps in the marketplace that can serve as springboards to opportunity
- Rinse and repeat as needed

So even though future pathways to career victory may be uncertain? Never forget. The more you actively keep your eyes peeled, stay flexible and open-minded, and strive to gather capabilities and resources that you can leverage in many ways, the better equipped to successfully and consistently forge ahead that you'll always be.

BUILDING AND GROWING YOUR BUSINESS

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- I. HOW TO STAND OUT FROM COMPETITORS
AT A GLANCE
- II. 7 WAYS TO GENERATE PUBLICITY FOR LESS
- III. DESIGNING BETTER CUSTOMER
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TO ADDRESS COVID-19
- VI. HOW TO INCREASE SALES
- VII. HOW TO MANAGE CHANGE
- VIII. HOW TO NAVIGATE THROUGH DISRUPTION

HOW TO STAND OUT FROM COMPETITORS AT A GLANCE

Think you have a unique product, service, or solution to share? Bzzt! Sorry, but you're just not that interesting. Of course, we're only kidding. But in a world where customers are increasingly engaging with brands online, exposed to literally thousands of marketing messages every day, it's harder for businesses to stand out than ever, unless they apply clever tricks to promotions and advertising. As a result, it's becoming increasingly crucial for companies to differentiate themselves and engage audiences at a glance, even as attention spans continue to shrink. Luckily, with a few simple shifts in approach and strategy, you can greatly improve your odds of making an impression via digital channels. Leverage the below tactics, and like many of today's most well-known and successful products (which aren't often particularly new or original, just more cleverly-presented) you can quickly capture audiences' attention, and potentially even go viral overnight:

Speak from the Heart – From independent movie chains that proudly champion underground films to clothing labels that invite audiences to take a stand against social injustice, brands in every field are benefitting by speaking their mind and showing their personality. That's because people like to buy from other people, not faceless companies, and in the age of social media, championing a shared mission and values helps create a sense of connection and loyalty. Ask yourself: What does my company stand for, and what unique perspective does it have to add to any given conversation? The more that you work to add a human touch to your online outreach efforts, and find ways to craft promotional materials that tap into your audiences' top passions, the more successful you'll be.

Get Colorful and Creative – Data visualization (using colorful, eye-catching graphics and images to quickly convey important information) is one of the fastest ways to grab others' attention and communicate complex ideas in simple fashion. The more that you can turn your ideas into infographics – visual images like charts and diagrams that summarize key insights – to share concepts online, the faster and more effective at communicating them you'll be. For instance, our consulting and market research firm FutureProof Strategies recently put together reports on how customer shopping habits were changing following COVID-19, and the future of meetings and events. After turning key findings into candy-colored images, graphs, and illustrations, the infographics we built not only enjoyed widespread uptake on social networks, but also generated coverage in media outlets, which shared them with their own audiences in turn.

Capitalize on Trending Topics – Tying promotions to trending topics in the news, and subjects of rising customer sentiment, can also help you quickly ratchet up awareness. For example: During the pandemic, one leading ice cream brand rolled out a slate grey-colored ice cream that tastes like a ray of sunshine (i.e. bouquet of colorful flavors) when it hits your tongue to show that every cloud has a silver lining. Likewise, a number of leading fitness and exercise brands quickly pivoted away from dedicated machines and studio-based classes to offer free online training courses and mood-boosting downloadable exercise routines featuring their all-star trainers. By scanning media headlines for subjects of rising frequency, you can quickly determine which topics are becoming top of mind with your customers – and craft winning promotional programs around them.

Make Your Customers the Stars – The driving force behind your business' success, it's also important to build bridges to your community and find ways to shine the spotlight on your customers at every turn. You can do this by creating online forums and fan communities where you can swap ideas and insights or building promotions where you ask enthusiasts to submit videos, photos, designs, and other user-generated content contributions. Many businesses are likewise finding ways to stand out at a glance by creating unique deals and offers as part of their loyalty programs or offering chances for diehard fans to go hands-on and test products/solutions before these offerings release. The key is to make customers feel like they're appreciated, that their voice is being heard, and that their support is making a visible impact. Noting this, while tools like polls, surveys, and questionnaires are well and good for measuring consumer sentiment, take note. Offering solutions such as new user group communities, online events, and exclusive Q&As with your team are even more effective tools for quickly raising interest and awareness.

Work with New Mediums – Anytime you have news to share, consider: What's a unique or original way to communicate these ideas? Then look to translate these concepts into short vignettes designed for sharing on social networks. Case in point: With so many articles written on online safety and raising healthy children, we recently promoted the book *Parenting High-Tech Kids* by creating animated cartoon shorts instead. We then teamed up with corporate/non-profit partners to promote these short, punchy clips – devoted to topics like building healthier family relationships and Internet safety – as an original video series called “How to Speak Kid.” However, this is just one of many cost-affordable concepts you might pursue. Using online freelance marketplaces and gig economy sites, it's easy to hire creative talent to help you craft everything from virtual art galleries and custom publications to original podcasts and illustrated eBooks.

Have Fun with It – In a world of cookie-cutter solutions, zany and offbeat promotional items which tap into humorous themes can also help you quickly punch through the noise and find an audience. From short video mockumentaries lampooning common office hang-ups to cartoons poking fun at common business tropes, options are only limited by your creativity. A brief scan online, where the gig economy is booming, reveals that you can hire musicians, artists, graphic designers and more for pennies on the dollar today. The more you make a point to leverage these resources in new and novel ways – say, composing a ballad to workplace safety, or video skit about adapting to the new normal – the better your business stands to jump out at a glance.

7 WAYS TO GENERATE PUBLICITY FOR LESS

Who says that marketing your business and generating publicity online has to be a time-consuming and expensive process? We've personally published multiple bestselling books such as *Make Change Work for You* and *The Modern Parent's Guide* series while scoring major media appearances and chart-topping success, all on shoestring budgets. With a little ingenuity, a creative angle, and the power of free or low-cost online and high-tech tools behind you, the sky's the limit when it comes to cost-effective advertising today. Following, you'll find seven simple and affordable promotions strategies that you can use to quickly boost your business' profile online and raise awareness for any initiative.

1. Staging Online and Virtual Events – Numerous free and low-cost online videoconferencing and broadcasting tools now make it possible to create virtual gatherings (complete with optional breakout chat rooms) and entire conferences (which you can host alone or in partnership with larger, preexisting events) on the fly. Craft them around timely and topical subjects, e.g. "Adapting to the New Normal in Business" or "Making the Shift to Digital and Online Platforms," and you can create newsworthy programming and commentary that can help you quickly raise your profile. Many speakers are often happy to present talks or participate in digital panels free in exchange for the exposure, just as many firms seeking to connect with clients are frequently happy to present their latest research findings at no charge. Moreover, the more creative you get with presentation formats, and original with concepts, the more attention-getting your sessions will be. For example: You might consider packaging programs as VIP experiences in the form of invitation-only online roundtables with industry thought leaders, or virtual fireside chats and intimate Q&As with well-known personalities. Alternately, you might present them as live-streamed educational sessions or masterclasses hosted by prominent executives. Whatever your preferred approach, whether livestreaming debates or hosting training workshops, just remember to capture and record these sessions. Chopping them up into smaller videos or converting their highlights into additional creative assets such as articles, eBooks, and whitepapers can help you create a library of content designed for sharing that can boost awareness for your business year-round.

2. Conducting Online Polls and Surveys – Media outlets are always hungry for new research on trending topics and looking for catchy soundbites that summarize interesting findings. This means that you can effectively create your own news announcements with the help of free or online tools for conducting polls and surveys, which let you track customer sentiment on timely issues. If you've yet to

build a large enough audience to draw upon (ex: 300-500 potential respondents or more), you can either (a) use pay-as-you-go online services to cost-affordably find contributors or (b) team up with other businesses seeking publicity who already have a large following to access respondents. Note that online thought leaders and influencers (who are frequently seeking ways to boost their profile) can often prove helpful partners here, especially if you're already working with them as part of online webinar or conference programming. In any event, once complete, you'll want to publish your findings in the form of a downloadable report or infographic, and couple it with a blog post and press release announcement to major media outlets. As an added bonus, remember that research can always be offered as a free value-add ("Sign up for our newsletter to get your Business Trend Report!") or implemented into other promotional assets (i.e. client-facing brochures or websites) to maximize your ongoing return on investment as well.

3. Empowering Fans to Become Evangelists – It's no secret that word of mouth is today's most powerful form of advertising, and that audiences are growingly starting to trust friends' and family's recommendations more than critical reviews. Noting this, it pays to partner with online thought leaders and influencers who can help share your message and build awareness on digital and social media channels. Among today's most influential voices, you can make the connection with them by reaching out and providing unique information, exclusive content (i.e. one-off interviews or behind-the-scenes access), or complementary product/service samples to share and discuss. Need help locating potential collaborators? Remember that entire online tools exist that let you upload email lists to quickly determine who wields the most clout. To incentivize participation, don't forget to offer collaborators something of value in exchange for their time, be it a complementary guest pass, free book, or chance to spend the afternoon hanging out and swapping ideas with your staff.

4. Crowdsourcing User Input and Contributions – One of the best ways to capture an audience's attention is to meaningfully interact with your fans, regularly source feedback, and create opportunities to spotlight their contributions at every turn. Crowdsourcing user-generated content (aka inviting your customers or the general public to submit ideas, designs, and input) represents one of the simplest and most powerful tools for doing so. Sample ways to facilitate the process involve soliciting comments, feedback, and submissions via your website or social media channels, hosting contests open to all, or creating online portals where concepts and ideas can be submitted. Alternately, you might run early user access tests or trials with new offerings to encourage audience input. Whatever your preferred

method and tool for gathering information, remember. Submissions can actively be used to shape business strategy (helping you decide which emerging trends or topics to pursue), incorporated into promotional campaigns (e.g. as testimonials or product highlights), or used to generate new logos and other creative assets. Doing so not only helps boost awareness for your brand and generate ongoing promotional opportunities. It also helps create a deeper sense of connection with your brand, and increases the odds that others will like, share, and talk about your business for months to come.

5. Establishing Thought Leadership – Your business is staffed by a host of subject matter experts on various topics in which your firm specializes. One easy way to get the word out, and boost search engine visibility, is to empower all to share the word via online article posts and videos. Not only can doing so help grow your Internet presence, but also establish trust and thought leadership with customers thanks to your willingness to share your knowledge and offer time- and money-saving tips. Happily, a host of free blogging tools, services, and platforms (including free plug-and-play software that you can use to build or add new sections to websites) can help you publish this information. Of course, many trade publications and media outlets with large audiences are also growingly understaffed and hungry for content too. Noting this, another effective way to get the word out is to author free, bylined articles on trending topics for them. To locate possible opportunities, have a scan through popular trade- and consumer-facing publications for your industry and look for those that host guest contributions or opinion columns. You can often locate assigning editors with a quick search on social media platforms and reach out directly with an offer to submit contributions.

6. Providing Free Offers and Giveaways – It may seem counterintuitive, but free trials, samples, and giveaways can prove a powerful driver for generating audience interest. For example: We've given away over 100,000 copies of our books such as *Leading with Innovation* and *Building a Better Workplace* at zero cost to readers online. But while this strategy may have limited product sales in the short-term, it also helped greatly boost audience appreciation and awareness, leading to growth in other areas of business such as keynote speaking, consulting, and training. Likewise, doing so also provided a vehicle to stay top of mind with the media and customers, and an excuse to stay in their inboxes. The key to generating interest and goodwill here is to identify a specific target audience, intimately get to know its needs and pain points, and offer singularly differentiated items of value that help members solve pressing problems. Case in point: As the pandemic spread, we quickly brought business future-proofing guide *Think Like a*

Futurist to market and offered it free with membership to BIZDEV: The Intl. Association for Business Development and Strategic Partnerships. Doing so helped increase member signups, generate interest in speaking engagements, and lead to several new business partnerships. You can do the same by crafting similarly well-timed and cost-effective promotions (hint: digital assets cost little to give away).

7. Becoming a Media Commentator – Trade secret: You could pay for an advertisement in your favorite publication, but it's often better to flip the script and let them actively promote you for free instead. After all, journalists are always looking for industry commentators to offer expertise and insight – and it costs nothing to become an expert source quoted in the world's top publications. One way you can connect with writers and producers can be to follow and interact with them on social media, where they often put out queries for comments. But if you'd like to sit back and let opportunities come to you? Try signing up for popular newsletters such as HARO (Help a Reporter Out) where journalists seeking expertise in different fields put out open calls for sources to interview instead.

As you can see, generating publicity online is easier than it seems at first blush. Happily, the more you routinely work to brainstorm clever ideas and unique angles designed to capture audiences' interest at a glance? The sooner you'll capture the spotlight, and more successful you'll be.

DESIGNING BETTER CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

COVID-19 swept through the world of business and finance like a tsunami, bringing with it a tidal wave of change and innovation in virtually every professional field. But as countless scrappy organizations who have found ways to thrive despite disruption continue to demonstrate, there are many ways to successfully reengineer the concept of customer experience – and stay one step ahead of the curve. That’s good news, because experience is everything to tomorrow’s shoppers; a superior customer experience minimizes friction, maximizes efficiency, and makes every exchange feel more human. “Give customers a great experience and they’ll be buy more, be more loyal, and share their experience with friends,” reminds management consulting firm PwC. Bearing this in mind, it’s imperative to keep a laser focus on what drives results: finding ways to create customer experiences that audiences will adore, inspire shopper loyalty, and keep audiences coming back for more. Here’s how technology is helping businesses in several different markets transform their operations and business models to evolve and prosper in coming years.

Travel And Hospitality – Imagine dropping your bags off at an artificially-intelligent airport kiosk, winking at a screen as you stroll right through security, and checking in for a flight just by walking on a plane. Afterwards, upon arrival at your destination, picture unlocking your hotel room just by tapping an app and grabbing a snack from the gift shop with a wave of your hand. Thanks to new face- and voice-recognition technologies, which eliminate the need for physical documents, manual identification checks, and human interaction, it’s now possible to securely verify your ID and process transactions in literally seconds.

Already, artificially-intelligent and biometric (body-powered or spoken-word) solutions are transforming the future of travel, to the point that entire airport terminals are now instituting self-service check-in, drop-and-go baggage, and automated checkpoint screening systems. Capable of providing organizations with detailed insights and analytics into business processes and customer behaviors as well, these tools don’t just enable passengers to enjoy shorter wait times, greater convenience, and safer, more intuitive interactions at every turn. These high-tech tools also provide organizations with critical business intelligence and predictive capabilities that they can use to optimize workflows, cut costs, and minimize overflow and congestion. Myriad companies have leveraged technologies like big data, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things to create smart airport solutions that improve transportation efficiency and the overall passenger experience.

Additionally, in the future, check-ins that occur via text message or with the scan of a QR code will be the norm. Customer service calls handled by computerized chatbots will be smart and well-spoken enough to pass for human counterparts. Digital signage will lead you to your guestroom or dining area and virtual reality headsets will let you attend conferences and events with hundreds of colleagues in 3D computer-generated worlds. Going forward, high-tech solutions will lead the way for the future of travel, meaning that if you're a company looking to play in the space, there's never been a better time to consider upgrading your business plan.

Banking and Finance – From ATMs that let you withdraw cash at a glance to voice-recognition calling systems smart enough to recognize your individual vocabulary and speech patterns and prevent ID theft, the future of finance has arrived. Forget having to wait in line at a retail or grocery store. In an age of cryptocurrencies, digital wallets, and mobile finance apps, you'll soon be able to pay for anything (even monthly bills like rent or student loans) wirelessly and right from your pocket. Credit cards will become event tickets, and you'll be able to wave your card in front of a band poster to digitally buy music on-demand or double-tap it at a bar to split the cost of drinks with friends. It's only a matter of time before these and other digital payment options completely upend the way in which consumers and companies alike do business. In short, from smartphones to credit cards and a raft of new wearable devices, a growing host of on-the-go accessories will soon make cashless, peer-to-peer transactions the new normal. Using these high-tech tagalongs, you'll soon be able to easily transfer money amongst businesses and friends and make purchases of virtually any kind. Likewise, credit and debit cards will only become capable of storing more and more information in the years ahead – e.g. store coupons and specials, which you'll be able to download and preload right to them. Normally, you might think you'd need to keep a close eye on your budget as a result, but a host of intelligent and predictive apps – which can keep a close watch on your accounts and spending behavior to help you avoid any hiccups – will soon be doing that too.

Retail – As rapidly and pronouncedly as shopping environments can now evolve, brands have to be far more agile and adaptable about shifting strategies in time with customers' fast-changing needs as well. Noting this, flexibility will be the name of the game going forward. Extensive use of easily-reengineered and -redesigned technologies that can be applied to multiple needs and contexts, and detailed data insights solutions that can anticipate inventory and distribution requirements in real-time, will only become more critical. To stay a step ahead of shoppers, whose habits and consumption patterns are becoming more split across an ever-expanding range of online, mobile, and physical touchpoints, tomorrow's retailers won't just come to view

data as the lifeblood of their business. They'll also learn to thrive by using these solutions to get a better sense of which products to stock, to what extent, and how to more effectively meet fulfillment needs on-demand. Moreover, high-tech tools will also give companies the ability to predict which items are trending around the world and where – even before customers themselves realize it. Similarly, on the customer-facing side, relevant data and insights will growingly be presented to shoppers through 3D and augmented reality solutions, such as smart mirror technology, which provides information such as the weather forecast, traffic routes, product discounts and coupons, etc.

However, as much as it pays to give back-end operations an overhaul in terms of optimizing customer service, from the standpoint of delivering a winning customer experience, significant front-end changes will need to be made as well. For example, we're already seeing a growing rise in cashierless check-out options, service appointments and product preorders that you can reserve by smartphone app, along with frictionless experiences that minimize human contact, e.g. online order pickup from computerized storage lockers. Time-limited pop-up and boutique retail experiences will also become more popular going forward as a way to minimize operating costs and maximize shoppers' convenience by targeting them at highly-trafficked areas they already frequent. You can also expect to see more stores looking to play to hyperlocal audiences, offering food, home accessories, and novelties targeted at their community. But perhaps the most intriguing thing is the growing use of technology to transform retailers into virtual showrooms that reflect emerging entertainment, fashion, and wellness trends.

In fact, thanks to technology's growing presence in the retail chain, it bears noting that in coming months, you won't just be able to personalize and order everything from purses, blue jeans, and athletic shoes on-demand. You'll also increasingly be able to use augmented reality apps and devices to see which stores are offering the best deals nearby and have drones and self-driving cars deliver purchase straight to your doorstep. Long story short: as much as we like online ordering and curbside pickup, there's ample room for groundbreaking innovation here – and the industry is just getting started.

Healthcare – Telehealth tools and virtual doctor visits (as well as digital veterinary appointments) are skyrocketing in popularity as of late. But they're just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the breakthrough innovations in medicine that you can expect to see within the next two to three years. For example, just a few new concepts being rolled out as we speak are: decision-making tools powered by machine learning and data analysis that are helping municipal leaders determine how and when to safely reopen schools, parks, and community centers under changing health constraints; artificially intelligent software

networks that can monitor, predict, and prevent the spread of COVID-19 symptoms and cases amongst seniors at long-term care homes; and mobile apps with augmented reality capabilities that offer computerized personalities who can talk to you and help ease stress during difficult times. And that's before you also consider the myriad of advances in robotics happening now, e.g. tools that are now allowing surgeons to operate in real-time using robot arms on patients that are physically located thousands of miles away.

Throw in a boom in artificial intelligence platforms – capable of scanning millions of records faster than a human brain could ever process to look for and detect signs of illness – and it becomes increasingly apparent. While there's still ample need for healthcare professionals' creativity and human touch going forward, much of the routine grunt work associated with helping keep medical systems and hospitals running, and helping patients navigate care pathways, will increasingly be shouldered by computers. Mind you, the science and technical capabilities are already in place for rapid advancements here, if legislation can keep up. We might see pharmacies that can dispense prescriptions and medicine without ever demanding that you interact with a human technician. Or, for that matter, entire healthcare systems that never require the use of printed documents or written records to verify patients or know what medicines and care to deliver.

Insurance – Welcome to a world of customized and pay-as-you-go home, auto, and health insurance solutions, which will increasingly become the norm going forward. You can also hope for some welcome discounts, as providers are growingly turning to data-driven insights, analytics, and other high-tech tools to personalize and rightsize offerings to every customer and make better decisions. After all, insurance companies are the original big data leaders, having always been great at collecting information. Using this info, coupled with the power of predictive technologies, they'll increasingly begin to analyze billions of insights from on-road driving behaviors to healthcare claim filings to offer ultra-customized insurance options and plans.

Likewise, say you're out and about traveling: should an accident happen, self-aware autos will soon be able to automatically assess the damage, and you'll be able to submit claims and start inspection processes just by sending pictures from your smartphone. Similar solutions also stand poised to revolutionize the process of obtaining and utilizing insurance policies across the board: when researching possible health or life insurance providers, artificially-intelligent systems will soon recognize your personal history, behaviors, and potential risk profile, and quickly customize and price offers for you in minutes. Self-aware computers that will be so smart that they can pass for humans will also help you submit and process claims in coming years, and connected devices with built-in sensors will assess the extent of damage or loss associated with them.

In short, from machine learning to robotics, a host of high-tech enhancements are currently working to make every aspect of the insurance business – from picking a policy to processing submissions – simpler, faster, and more cost-efficient.

HOW TO REBOOT OR EXPAND YOUR BUSINESS DURING A PANDEMIC

Happily, 86% of businesses have either fully (52%) or partially (34%) reopened after COVID-19-induced shutdowns, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Coronavirus Impact Poll. But with the pandemic and recession's lasting influences continuing to loom large over coming years, it's also important to note that many firms (especially in the hospitality, service, and retail sectors) continue to struggle, and a whopping 65% of businesses fear lasting repercussions. Luckily for those who've experienced what it's like to deal with disruption firsthand, keeping one's doors temporarily shuttered or having to suddenly pivot online doesn't necessarily mean having to put productivity and profits on pause, or sit around in limbo waiting for good fortune to strike. Simply by applying a little insight and ingenuity, you can use time spent working remotely to rethink your operating strategy, reinvent your services and solutions, and reposition yourself to swiftly bounce back when situations evolve. Here's how to get started..

Rethink and Reimagine the Value You Provide – Adversity can often make a business stronger, if it uses times of hardship as motivation to rethink the value that it offers its customers, and as a catalyst to reimagine the services, solutions, and benefits that it provides. For example, if you run an eatery, you might expand your offerings to provide premade meals for delivery, or at-home cooking or decorating kits that provide customers with a tasty nosh and fun family activity to enjoy. Likewise, if you own a gym or personal fitness firm, you might introduce online classes, or partner with local wellness and nutrition companies to remotely offer clients individually-tailored workout routines, supplement schedules, and diet plans. From coffee shops pivoting from slinging fresh lattes on-site to pitching bagged beans via social media sites to home A/V installers expanding from serving individual homeowners to commercial building construction firms to local acting/singing troupes switching to hosting virtually-produced corporate meetings and retreats, options are infinite. Start by asking yourself: How can you repackage, reuse, or reimagine existing resources, services and solutions in new and novel ways? You may be surprised at how quickly new opportunities and business options spring to mind.

Stay in Time with Changing Customer Demand – Clients' needs are constantly changing. Noting this, access to timely data can prove an essential lifeline in fast-moving times like these, helping you more effectively deliver what customers crave, rightsize ventures, and pivot if situations change. The sooner you start surveying and polling, and tapping into existing off-the-shelf services and pay-as-you-go tools

to implement AI and analytics solutions across your operations, the closer every customer touchpoint and online interaction will bring your business to bouncing back. Don't know where to begin? Keep in mind that even simply scanning popular social networks, news outlets, and video sites can help provide inspiration – and, when coupled with a growing rise in on-demand production and delivery methods, help provide a winning one-two punch for your business. Case in point: Noting the recent skyrocketing shift to remote work, several fashion brands have quickly pivoted away from high-end fashion concepts to working with suppliers to provide comfier and more casual outfits designed for at-home wear. Likewise, many consumer electronics providers have shifted away from providing premium broadcast-quality camera and sound equipment to offering more affordable everyday online gear designed for professionals look to stream live from their bedroom or home office. In essence, the fastest way to find out what shoppers are hunting for is to engage with them, and the fastest way to get back on their radar is to be swift about responding to these needs.

Participate and Volunteer – One of the fastest ways to sniff out new opportunities, stay top of mind, and expand your network today is to get involved in helping out among your local community. Case in point: Graphic and web designers in several cities are teaming up to offer free services to hundreds of restaurants in their local area, quickly raising their profile. Likewise, many photographers and writers are donating their time and efforts to help raise awareness for healthcare, hunger, poverty, and other causes during this time of crisis, and building positive relationships in the process. Still other professionals in fields as varied as advertising, engineering, and construction are teaming up to provide families with financial aid and relief, or raise awareness for nationwide humanitarian efforts. One of the fastest ways to find out where you can plug in and help out is to reach out to your local Chamber of Commerce, or state economic development agency.

Streamline and Optimize – At the same time as you focus on expanding your business, it also pays to use slower moments like these to minimize expenses, optimize processes, and otherwise streamline your firm to become more cost-efficient. Consider: What is your firm currently taking multiple steps to do that could be more easily accomplished in fewer steps, and with less time and effort? Where can you outsource common needs or look to artificially-intelligent tools to help automate frequent or repetitive tasks? Are there free or value-priced substitutes for the resources or capabilities you use that would be just as effective? Which tasks can you delegate or hand off to free up your schedule to focus on more high-impact efforts and enhance your productivity? For instance, we recently discovered that we could save thousands of dollars annually

by creating online and software products by mixing and matching premade, licensed parts at a fraction of the cost of building everything from scratch. You may be surprised at just how much time and money you can save with a little research, helping boost this year's numbers, and improving your odds of profitably in the (sure to be eventful) years ahead to come.

HOW TO ADAPT EVENT VENUES TO ADDRESS COVID-19

COVID-19 has fundamentally altered the dynamics of the meetings and events industry for the foreseeable future, putting a squeeze on travel and group gatherings. But as ever, innovative event planners, destination management companies, and hospitality providers are finding clever ways to work around current challenges and successfully adapt in turn. Following, you'll find ten ways in which meeting and event venues are innovating and implementing inventive ways to draw audiences back while also staying one step ahead of the curve.

HEIGHTENED SAFETY MEASURES – Venues are increasingly putting a premium on individual safety, and putting attendees' minds at ease. Steps being taken include extensive cleaning measures, social distancing solutions, temperature checks, health assessments and scans, and the on-site presence of medical professionals. Likewise, event planners are increasingly working with destination management companies and hospitality providers to ensure that compliance is maintained, and that emergency response solutions are on-hand.

CERTIFICATION AND REVIEW – Several destinations are working in tandem with city officials to introduce certification programs (complete with public-facing awards and stickers) and highlight venues that adhere to heightened healthcare and safety standards. Likewise, they're also teaming up with industry leaders to craft risk mitigation tools and educational materials that can help you assess potential areas of concern.

DIGITAL AND HYBRID PROGRAMMING – More event hosts are switching to hybrid online/real-world content and programs, and tapping into technology and streaming digital platforms to deliver content in contactless format. As a result, you can expect more spaced out seating at events, lower-capacity crowds, and more audience networking and interaction using apps, software programs, and online services. Rooms will hold fewer participants at any given time, with growing numbers of attendees encouraged to tune in online or live-stream keynote and breakout presentations.

AUGMENTED AND VIRTUAL REALITY SOLUTIONS – Augmented reality (AR, which superimposes digital content over real-world scenes) and virtual reality (VR, which immerses users in 3D computer-simulated environments) tools are growing in prominence as well. Going forward, expect more destinations and venues to introduce high-tech headsets, digitally-enhanced apps, and wearable devices as a means of facilitating audience interaction, conducting site tours, and enabling shared entertainment or event experiences.

MORE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES – From al fresco dining to beach and waterfront activities, more properties are pushing for events that take place outside in nature, as opposed to indoor within enclosed environments. Similarly, more event planners are considering resort buy-outs, experiential destinations, and outdoor venues as destinations for their get-togethers.

SMARTER DINING – Providers which offer catering are growingly looking to space out dining areas, stagger dining groups, deliver individualized plates to each guest, and regroup around themed experiences (“A Taste of Napa”) designed to pique audiences’ interests. In addition, they’re also looking to house food service solutions in larger open-air areas, such as open fields, parking lots, parks, and festival grounds, and offer guests greater mobility by offering to-go drinking and dining options. Sustainability is also continuing to take top billing, as – even in an age of single-use, disposable items – more venues are looking for ways to go green as well.

RETHINKING REGISTRATION – Some properties are placing colored tape six feet apart on the floor so attendees don’t overcrowd registration lines. But many forward-thinking destinations are also introducing online and digital alternatives (e.g. operating via text message or allowing guests to scan QR codes) to avoid direct one-to-one contact.

PROMOTING EMPLOYEE HEALTH – Both event venues and organizers are growingly adopting flexible attendance and sick leave policies, and cross-training staff to cover for colleagues, who are encouraged to stay home if ill or high-risk. Similarly, they’re also working to create quarantine areas and action plans with local health departments and hospitals in the event individuals come down ill. Many are turning to automated platforms to quickly share information and news updates with staffers as well.

FLEXIBLE STAFFING AND SHIFTS - To limit staff interaction and contact, myriad event venues are also bringing fewer workers on-site at any given time, and introducing staggered shift schedules to minimize exposure. Workers who aren't needed at the property are also increasingly being encouraged to telecommute and work virtually.

LOCAL FOCUS - Smaller, more intimate experiences and mid-size events structured around the best that local regions have to offer look to grow in prominence going forward at the expense of far-flung excursions to exotic destinations and grand-scale gatherings. Noting this, venues are increasingly adapting to provide all sorts of bite-sized, turnkey group programs and experiences that promote the features that make their properties and surrounding locales unique.

HOW TO INCREASE SALES

With shoppers' attention spans becoming shorter and increasingly divided between devices, media channels, activities, and brands, it's more important than ever for companies to deliver high-quality customer experiences that stand out at glance. But to do so, it's also crucial to minimize customer friction, defined as any source of hesitation that may cause your customer to take pause during (or abandon) the process of engaging with your firm. When market leaders talk about friction, they're not just referring to it from the standpoint of sales leads and conversions either. They're also discussing it in the context of overall usability, and the ease with which someone can interact with your products, services, solution, or even company itself. The more that you can provide a frictionless experience for clients, the more successful you'll be at building a customer base and inspiring target audiences to take positive action.

Friction can take many forms in business, although all lead to the same result: Dampened enthusiasm in, and completion rates for, individuals accomplishing your desired results. Commonplace sources of friction that are frequently encountered in the context of product, service, and organizational design include, but are not limited to:

- Counterintuitive controls and commands
- Confusing or convoluted instructions
- Long wait or hold times when accessing apps, websites, or services
- Limited hours of business or service availability
- Uninformed or low-quality customer service
- Costly fees or slow delivery times
- Concealed features or capabilities that users have to hunt for
- Complex policies, rules, and procedures

The idea of friction can even extend to entire operating models and make or break small businesses as a result. In fact, if you think about it, many startups' entire existence comes down to whether they can overcome friction. For example: Cutting-edge software firms, whose success in the field, regardless of product quality, comes down to whether they can convince anyone to click a button to download or install these products. Noting this, the importance of applying design thinking – human-centered design processes that attempt to minimize the challenge of learning and engaging in any activity – cannot be underscored enough. Lower the amount of customer friction that is associated with any given business offering, and you will be able to:

- Increase leads
- Boost conversion rates
- Enhance productivity
- Improve learning and recall
- Grow retention and renewal rates

Happily, finding simple and cost-effective ways to redesign your offerings to minimize friction doesn't have to be difficult. Likewise, asking yourself a few simple questions as you go about crafting any given process or solution can also help you improve the shape and design of these efforts. For example:

- Is there a way to do in one step what is currently taking several?
- How can information be better presented – and is it possible to convey it more concisely using a chart, graph, or illustration?
- What shortcuts and solutions can be utilized to help speed up processes and minimize time spent engaging in them?
- Where could simple shifts in layout, design, controls, or presentation provide large usability enhancements?
- How might products, services, or solutions be made more accessible to end-users of every background and skill level?
- Are commonly-used services and features, or answers to frequent questions, just a click or call away?
- In what manner can policies or procedures be redesigned to be more transparent and productive?

In effect, when talking about reducing friction, what you're really discussing are how to implement your business ideas in more user-friendly and understandable fashion. That's why minimizing friction can take the form of reducing action steps, costs, and prerequisites or requirements, or simply finding ways to represent and repackage solutions to be more engaging and approachable. Accordingly, ways that you can apply design thinking to help minimize friction in your own business are plentiful. Just a few ideas that can help you get started include:

- **Customer Onboarding and Retention** – Implementing electronic signatures, pop-ups, assistants, and step-by-step wizards to help speed clients through registration, sign-up, and purchase processes. Also, supplementing these solutions by applying customer relationship management (CRM) tools to track customer preferences and behaviors, and deliver personalized and contextualized suggestions.

- **Marketing and Sales** – Making websites, apps, and marketing material easy to navigate, parse, and gather key insights from at a glance, keeping an especial eye towards putting important action items and important details front-and-center right at users’ fingertips. Additionally, offering one-touch access to popular features, and answers to common questions at a glance.

- **Customer Service and Experience (CX)** – Providing multiple ways for customers to get in contact from phone to email to chat and social media, being highly responsive to queries, and instituting artificially-intelligent chatbot helpers to answer questions during off-hours. Empowering audiences to quickly get answers from a live human contact, and empowering workers reasonable room where needed to deviate from standard policies and procedures to process returns, field concerns, and otherwise ensure shopper satisfaction.

- **Public Relations (PR) and Communications Outreach** – Keeping marketing messages clear, simple, well-differentiated, and laser-focused on the benefits and core value proposition that your business provides. Concentrating on playing up no more than 1-3 unique sales points (USPs) in your communications materials that help tell your story at a glance and explaining why shoppers won’t want to look elsewhere for solutions.

- **Employee Engagement** – Having a well-defined playbook and plan of action steps that employees can follow as needed, and making it clear whom to call upon if questions arise and what communications channels to utilize. Likewise, making staffers aware of where decision-making authority for different types of queries rests, and where to turn if they need answers or support in a pinch.

Apply these customer experience and design essentials to help reimagine internal processes and procedures, and rethink the shape of the customer journey, and you can give your sales numbers a much-needed shot of adrenaline. By being clearer about instructions, more intuitive when it comes to the capabilities that you offer, removing unnecessary challenges and action steps from interactions, and using technology to offer a helping hand, you can greatly improve customer uptake and conversion. The more you can reduce friction as an executive leader, the more you’ll vastly improve every user exchange and interaction – and the greater you’ll increase the takeaway and returns on every business effort.

HOW TO MANAGE CHANGE

Change management refers to the art and science of systematically applying resources, tools, and knowledge to manage and drive positive change within an organization. As you might imagine, it's something of a popular topic lately, as small businesses continue to race to stay one step ahead of rapid-fire shifts in the marketplace, customer demand, and industry best practices. But change management only promises to become even more of a top priority for working professionals going forward, with the next 10 years expected to bring more change than previous centuries of recorded human history put together, as we point out in recent book *Make Change Work for You*. Luckily though, the process of managing change doesn't have to be anywhere as difficult, costly, or time-consuming as you might think either when you embrace a few simple strategic principles, as we often remind business executives as well.

1. Always Be Learning – Staying up to date with changing times and trends becomes far simpler when you make a point to change your business and operating strategies in time with them too. The world's most successful companies regularly refresh their product and service lines, internal processes, and communications and sales programs as needed, testing and refining new ideas based on feedback they get from the marketplace. By cost-effectively experimenting with new concepts and solutions, tracking customer insights, and iterating as they go, leading firms not only make the change management process simpler and less risky. They also steadily, but surely improve their odds of finding success as they go.

2. Promote Leadership at Every Level – Great ideas can come from anywhere, but most often come from customers themselves, and the frontline workers closest to these clients on a day-to-day basis. That's why more small businesses are making a point to offer online brainstorming forums, internal competitions or contests, and innovation programs as a way to get staffers to speak up and share more forward-thinking suggestions. Likewise, with everyday employees the likeliest to routinely encounter new and novel problems, and be most familiar with these issues, these firms are also looking to promote a widespread sense of accountability and ownership. In effect, to successfully manage change, and create cultures of greatness, they're working to empower these employees and encouraging them to exercise leadership and decision-making skills, even if they haven't technically been afforded a leadership role by job title.

3. Embrace the Art of Innovation – Change management becomes far less daunting to handle when you realize that innovation is simply defined as “the introduction of something new.” Yes, that something new could be a game-changing new technology or engineering breakthrough. But more often than not, it tends to come in the form of slight reinventions and repositioning, or the repackaging of existing offerings and solutions. Ask yourself: Are there ways you could use or reuse existing capabilities and resources, other ways you could be marketing them, or additional audiences you could be promoting to? You may be surprised at just how effortless it becomes to reinvigorate your business when you simply apply a little reimagining and reinvention. Remember: Evolutionary changes can be every bit as powerful at driving wins in business as breakthrough advancements, and far more effortless to produce on a consistent and running basis.

4. Iterate, Don't Reinvent – Wherever possible, the golden rule of change management is to not reinvent the wheel. Need to give your IT systems or sales management tools an upgrade? Try pay-as-you-go online services, or turn to a free or low-cost app. Looking to outsource or cut expenses? Hit up a gig economy site or freelance marketplace for help. Many common business tasks and needs can now be automated or handled more efficiently and at lower cost using preexisting and template technology tools. Likewise, remember: While it's true that not every need can be adequately addressed using plug-and-play solutions, you always have the option to overhaul or retrofit them as needed as well. In effect, when it comes to managing change, there's usually a shortcut or ten to be found, and you seldom have to start from scratch when building a new solution or strategy

5. Take More Risks, Not Fewer – Ironically, as alluded above, businesses need to take more risks to get ahead in fast-changing and unpredictable times, not fewer. Risky is the new safe, so to speak. However, as change management pros know, these risks have to come in the form of small, smart, cost-effective bets that are designed as learning experiments that can help your firm get smarter over time. Put simply, if you don't know the optimal strategic direction in which to orient your company going forward? It's best to test the proverbial waters slowly by rolling out new prototype strategies and solutions. You can use these pilot ventures as a radar of sorts to see what kind of success you meet with, only committing to a certain course of action once you've located a firm pathway forward.

6. Plan for Tomorrow Today – Another touchstone of change management is the need for forward thinking. That means constantly having to work to get out in front of the future and plan for tomorrow today. Your goal as a small business owner isn't just to maximize profits now. It's to secure the resources and capabilities that will be in-demand at a later date and have them in place ready to go before the market trends that way as well. This often means having to keep your people upskilled and trained on emerging topics and trends, routinely invest in new tools and technologies, and keep an eye out for breaking news items and industry developments. To effectively manage change, it's not enough to focus on maintenance activities (i.e. those that keep the lights on and pay the bills). You've also got to concentrate on growth-focused activities (e.g. those that position you for future success) as you go about building your budget and schedule as well.

7. Empower Your Workforce – In addition to planning for the future, it's also imperative to encourage and empower staff to speak up and take action in the face of rising opportunities and challenges. Teaching staff to be more proactive, and to embrace a mindset of ongoing organizational growth and improvement, should be made an essential mandate from the highest executive levels on down. That's because businesses don't just successfully adapt to change by putting the tools and technologies in place that they need to stay better attuned to changing marketplaces and customer habits. (Ex: High-tech analytics and customer relationship management apps.) They also do so by giving themselves the latitude to be more flexible, agile, and adaptable when it comes to making or implementing decisions and providing their workforces with constant opportunities to move the needle.

In the end, as complicated as the concept of change management may initially seem, it bears reminding. Driving positive growth across a business becomes far easier when you provide your team with the essential tools that they need to stay more informed and responsive – and give them more opportunities to take control of the wheel. Noting this, finding successful ways to manage change becomes less challenging when you're simply willing to keep an open mind and aren't afraid to regularly adjust your strategy and tactics as well. Ultimately, it bears reminding that simple shifts in approach can produce big impacts on the bottom line. Likewise, your ability to manage change as a business is often simply defined by your own attitudes and outlook – all of which, like business strategy itself, you have ample potential to shift for the better.

HOW TO NAVIGATE THROUGH DISRUPTION

Seemingly out of nowhere, COVID-19 arrived and hit the world of business with the impact of a gale force hurricane in Spring 2020, wiping \$22 trillion off company valuations in Q1 of the same year alone. Nearly one in five firms have ceased transacting since, even as the seismic waves of change and disruption that the pandemic's arrival have brought on continue to rock organizations in every field.

But while 43% of small-/mid-size businesses have reported negative impacts to their operations, and 70% of S&P firms have been forced to revise or withdraw earnings guidance, savvy firms in every field nonetheless continue to find ways to thrive and adapt. By learning to apply leaner and meaner operating strategies, embrace scrappier business models, and leverage technology innovations more capably, many are demonstrating how to successfully stay one step ahead of the curve. "Disruption and change may be uncomfortable, but they are also powerful catalysts for innovation," reminds Sumit Singh, CEO of popular online pet food and supplies retailer Chewy. "While we must anticipate continuing external disruptions, we can also excel as business leaders by introducing innovations of our own, in service of customers and our employees alike."

At the same time, notes Singh, it's also vital for forward-thinking executives hoping to successfully navigate uncertainty going forward to make a point to adapt their fundamental way of thinking and embrace new industry advancements as well. After all, the surest way to keep up with fast-changing times and trends isn't to continue repeatedly applying the same historical business strategies and solutions while markets are rapidly evolving. Rather, it's to proactively disrupt yourself and evolve your own strategies in time with shifting customer needs and competitive landscapes as well.

LEADING WITH INNOVATION

More than 90% of executives surveyed expect the impact of coronavirus to fundamentally change the way in which they do business within the next five years. Nearly nine in ten agree that the pandemic will produce a lasting change in customers' habits and behaviors as well. At the same time though, roughly three quarters of business leaders note that the shifts brought about by COVID-19's arrival also present a huge growth opportunity for forward-thinking providers. However, as experts remind, learning to capitalize more effectively upon these disruptions going forward will require us all to exercise a little bit more creativity and forethought.

“The pandemic has shown the fragility of optimized systems such as grocery supply chains,” notes Oleg Urminsky, professor of marketing at The University of Chicago Booth School of Business. “When shutdowns started in early to mid-March, customers drastically changed their shopping behavior... then, after a few weeks, their behavior shifted again. In the future, businesses will need to have more flexibility in their systems to be able to respond to sudden changes like this in the marketplace.”

Luckily for those looking to keep their organizations nimble and relevant, innovation doesn't have to be as difficult, costly, or time-consuming as you might suspect. In fact, if you were to look up the definition of innovation in the dictionary, you'd find that Merriam-Webster simply defines it as “the introduction of something new.” True: Game-changing new technologies and breakthrough innovations certainly fall under this banner. But by the same definition, so too do simple changes in business strategy such as minor tweaks to packaging or presentation, or slight adjustments to marketing campaigns and customer outreach strategies. Likewise, new and novel ways to reuse or repackage preexisting capabilities and resources can also prove a powerful force for driving continuing organizational growth as well. For example, when pet owners suddenly found themselves stuck home on lockdown, Chewy introduced the “Connect with a Vet” telehealth service to provide medical advice – it's since become the #1 e-commerce pet pharmacy provider.

In addition, it also bears noting that disruption is simply defined as a disturbance that interrupts current routines and events to boot. Ironically, if you were to take a second look at your shifting work schedule and priorities lately, you may be surprised to discover that we're all innovating and navigating our way through disruption on a constant (sometimes hourly) basis. In effect, we are all capable of innovating as business leaders, and this means that the only thing preventing most of us from adapting and getting ahead in the face of unforeseen events are typically just our own attitudes and outlooks. As it happens, finding ways to survive and thrive, even in uncertain times, is largely a function of our own willingness to try new things and attempt new risks.

To this point, world-famed researcher Malcolm Gladwell, bestselling author of *Outliers* and *The Tipping Point*, studied iconic leaders like Ted Turner and Steve Jobs. In doing so, he discovered that these celebrated industry figures aren't quite the mavericks that they might seem at first blush. Rather, it turns out that several of history's smartest business minds instead continue to get ahead in the fields over time simply by making a habit of learning to take highly-calculated risks.

Granted, all are known to wager more heavily than the average working professional on new business spaces or initiatives. But rather than place these bets indiscriminately? These iconic leaders instead only do so after conducting small, smart, cost-effective business experiments with new pilot programs and prototypes, learning as they go from the marketplace and leveraging customer feedback to improve their odds of finding success. As it turns out, you can use a similar system to help your own company stay competitive. Regularly making a point to test new shifts in thinking both small (e.g. changes to marketing campaigns or customer loyalty programs) and large (i.e. new product or service rollouts) can help you find new opportunities, and learn to successfully navigate disruption as well. In effect, the key to getting ahead in uncertain times is to take more risks, not fewer – albeit by quickly and affordably testing new strategies and solutions, staying well-attuned to customer feedback, and steadily iterating your way to success.

As Chewy's Singh notes, given that great ideas can come from anywhere at anytime, it also pays to listen to your customers (often the best source of innovative new suggestions) as well. That means not only having to encourage frontline employees (those closest to customers on a day-to-day basis) to speak up and share their feedback and insights regularly. It also means learning to embrace the use of "inside-out" approaches to innovation – e.g. websites featuring open calls for ideas to industry partners or even the general public – to help make innovation and leadership concepts that scale.

APPLYING NEW TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

Also vital for modern executives to note: Flexibility is now the essence of future-proofing, given that uncertainty is the only certainty in business. As a result, the ability to remain agile and adaptable isn't just crucial for any company to embrace in coming years too – as more and more organizations are noting, it's quickly becoming a leading source of competitive advantage as well.

"[As a business owner,] you need to find ways to be both hyper-dialed into your customer's needs and ways to move more quickly on these insights," explains Mike LaVitola, founder of popular upscale food market chain Foxtrot Market. "Curiosity is essential: I'm constantly thinking about how emerging technologies and trends and new industry developments are going to impact our business model. Booth really drilled into me the importance of connecting objectives and key results – that type of discipline keeps us focused, even during a pandemic."

But while technology promises to provide organizations with the

flexibility needed to adapt to unexpected developments, and reshape every facet of the workplace, many businesses continue to struggle to keep up with the pace of technological change happening today. However, given that disruption is the new norm for modern organizations, it bears noting. Learning how to effectively adopt and implement future-focused high-tech innovations will only become even more critical to maintaining long-term business success in coming years, long after the pandemic recedes. That's because staying attuned to changes in the marketplace and customer habits (which technology allows you to monitor and predict) is vital to remaining agile and competitive. Small wonder then that 93 percent of IT leaders suggest that instituting improved technology solutions, like keeping up with customers' rapidly-shifting tastes, is crucial to organizations' survival. Thankfully for firms of every size in every field looking to reinvent or reposition themselves to thrive in coming years, a host of new technologies offer solutions for staying ahead of unexpected developments.

For example, artificial intelligence (AI) and data analysis tools can help you quickly surface key insights and make smarter decisions on the fly without the need for human input. Business process automation solutions can likewise perform tasks more cost-efficiently and rapidly without manual direction, enabling you to streamline operations and offload tedious tasks from your staff's schedule. Workflow optimization services further allow for the simplification of routine processes and procedures to provide time- and money-saving optimizations. Online and pay-as-you-go apps or freelance and gig economy marketplaces can likewise help you cost-affordably outsource services from bookkeeping and graphic design to search engine optimization or website development. What's more, data visualization tools (which translate complex information into graphical and easily-understood representations) can help you go from analytic capabilities to actionable business strategy at a glance to boot.

Between open source (freely modifiable and distributable) software solutions backed by an army of developers and template technology tools that you can quickly retrofit to meet custom needs, executives have never had more high-tech power at their fingertips. Moreover, thanks to a growing range of cloud applications and services which you can easily integrate with current IT solutions and deploy as needed, they've never had a more flexible range of solutions available to them as well. Using these value-priced and widely-configurable solutions, it's not only possible to roll out new online services and digital platforms in days without any design knowledge or leverage plug-and-play software tools to create new apps, even if you lack coding skills. You can also tap

into these tools' capabilities to expand your business' online shopping options or services at scale, or even roll out preconfigured employee help desks staffed by automated assistants with the push of a button. Applying forward-thinking high-tech solutions such as these in tandem can not only help you spot rising challenges or opportunities in the marketplace and rapidly adapt your business or operating in turn. Doing so can also help you rapidly adjust strategies in time with changing customer tastes and demands, and quickly pivot in the wake of COVID-19-related disruptions and other unforeseen developments.

"Being a CEO, I'm constantly focused on new and emerging trends, and how to get my teams thinking about how high-tech innovations like cashierless checkouts and social shopping are going to impact our business model," notes LaVitola. "As a modern executive, you need to read voraciously, spend time speaking to innovators in complementary fields, and really do your homework here."

DESIGNING BETTER CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

Of course, all the new technologies and groundbreaking apps in the world ultimately mean little if you can't translate their upsides into actionable business strategies, or leverage them to products, services, and solutions that are in-demand. That's because customer experience is everything in tomorrow's commercial world, according to industry insiders. But while 82% of marketers feel that their brands are living up to customers' expectations, amusingly, just 1 in 10 clients actually agrees. Noting this, it's imperative to also keep a laser focus on what counts most as an organization: Finding ways to create customer experiences that audiences will adore, that will inspire shopper loyalty, and that continue to keep audiences coming back for more.

"There are two specific qualities that leaders must display now to stay one step ahead of the curve," notes Chewy's Singh. "The first is the ability to anticipate what's coming next, and the second is the ability to think big and invent. At our company, we encourage leaders to stay close to their customers using metrics and insights, and to think bigger and rapidly innovate on behalf of their clients. Customer-centricity must be infused into your corporate culture, along with a shared sense of mission to deliver an exceptional experience every time - and your entire organization should practice these principles every day."

For instance, Chewy recently implemented its first fully robotic and automated order fulfillment center not only as a way to enjoy enhanced productivity and significant cost savings, but also speed up order processing, cut customer wait times, and improve overall

shopper satisfaction. Similarly, Foxtrot Market didn't just introduce new innovations this year in the form of contactless delivery and a wider selection of wines that have helped boost the company's bottom-line figures by double digits. It also rolled out a customer loyalty program backed by unique, time-limited offers to help encourage uptake in purchases among frequent buyers, which has provided a 30% boost in featured category sales.

But it's important to note that customer experience isn't just about delivering well-packaged and user-friendly products, services, or solutions: It's about making your customers' lives easier, and saving them time, money, and effort. After all, today's shopper's attention is more fractured than ever, even as they are being marketed to more frequently by a growing number of brands at every turn. Buyers are also becoming smarter and choosier about where they spend their dollars, even as competition is now just a click or call away. Meaning that unless the product or service that you offer is so specialized and unique that it is literally irreplaceable, it's vital to remember that clients have more buying options available than ever before. That makes it growingly important for companies hoping to stay competitive to set themselves apart from rivals and instantly provide customer experiences that stand out at a glance.

If you're looking to design customer experiences that connect, experts such as Singh and LaVitola advise applying a mix of low- and high-tech strategies. For example: Using analytics and customer data to glean crucial insights and know where to focus your company's efforts; creating internal opportunities for frontline workers close to customers to share their insights and feedback (e.g. internal message boards or innovation contests); and creating vehicles through which clients can actively get involved and provide insight and feedback as you go about crafting new programs and solutions. Likewise, they also recommend hiring employees who are curious and capable problem-solvers, promoting a corporate culture of accountability and service, and actively rewarding employees for their commitment to customer success to reinforce the practicing of positive habits at every turn. Finding ways to shout out and recognize staffers who go the extra mile, they say, can provide a simple, yet powerful incentive for workers to maintain a consistent customer focus. In effect, it's crucial for companies hoping to thrive despite ongoing disruption to make a commitment to customer experience that needs to come from the executive suite on down, and for leaders to model the behaviors they'd like to see reflected in their staff at all times.

“Attentiveness and intentionality in building the right culture

is paramount to any business,” notes Chewy’s Singh. “Ingenuity, resourcefulness, and empathy should remain at the forefront of your approach, and leaders should focus on delivering new solutions for customers, partners, and team members. Empowering other leaders to help elevate their performance is a critical factor in achieving future success.”

FUTURE-PROOFING YOUR BUSINESS: PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

In effect, when it comes to continuing market volatility and ongoing disruptions brought on by COVID-19 and growing economic upheaval, it’s anyone’s guess what the future will bring. “My sense is that many questions here are unanswerable – that’s the thing about uncertainty,” chuckles Booth’s Urminsky. But simply by keeping an open mind and remaining flexible as a business leader, while also implementing the high-tech tools and innovations that can keep your company well-informed and nimble, it bears reminding: Navigating an unpredictable business environment can become far less challenging that you’d anticipate.

Granted, like operating conditions, customer habits and preferences will only continue to evolve throughout 2021 and the foreseeable future. That means that your organization’s strategies and approaches should routinely be shifting in time with breaking developments as well. Keeping this in mind, it’s important to instill a love of learning in your business, commit to ongoing organizational improvement, and instill a passion for customer service amongst your workforce from the top of the enterprise on down. Doing so can not only help equip you with the insights, resources, and capabilities that your firm needs to grow and evolve, whatever tomorrow brings. It can also help you learn to predictably coming shifts in the marketplace more reliably, successfully disrupt yourself before outside forces do it for you, and come to see the world through your customers’ eyes a little more clearly.

“COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the way in which we work, but despite the challenges that 2020 brought, it’s also helped drive innovation across the board,” explain LaVitola. “We’ve chosen to respond to the pressures that the pandemic has presented with a strategy of inspired creativity, deep collaboration, and organizational alignment. It’s more important than ever to stay dialed into clients’ needs. [No matter how uncertain times like these are,] your customers will tell you what they want – it’s up to you as a business leader to really listen.”

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT: GIVING TEAMS THE TOOLS TO SUCCEED

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT: GIVING TEAMS THE TOOLS TO SUCCEED

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UPSKILLING YOUR EMPLOYEES WITH ONLINE AND VIRTUAL TRAINING SOLUTIONS

Upskilling employees and bringing their education and skills up to speed on new technologies and best business practices are becoming increasingly important topics for businesses transitioning to the cloud and a remote working world. But it's not always readily apparent what the most efficient way to provide the training and insight that staffers need to succeed in a rapidly-changing marketplace is, especially when teams are growingly working virtually and under rising constraints. Luckily, a range of clever and cutting-edge new approaches to employee upskilling and professional development can help you give your workforce the tools that they need to stay one step ahead of the curve. Here, we take a closer look at five innovative new approaches that you can use to upskill your workforce, and better prepare them to greet the challenges that tomorrow's working world will bring.

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) Training – Cutting-edge VR and AR solutions now provide a handy distance learning alternative to classroom training, allowing staffers to simulate trying their hand at new roles or responsibilities from afar. These tools, which enable you to inhabit 3D computer-generated worlds or overlay digital pop-ups atop real-world camera views, respectively, can empower your workforce to go hands-on in lifelike problem-solving scenarios using high-tech hardware. Armed with these advanced solutions, employees now enjoy the option to role-play the process of tackling any task or assignment to see how they fare, while also accessing real-time feedback and enjoying options to adjust their strategies and approaches in real-time. Allowing everyone from trainees to managers to learn by doing, these technologies offer a more engaging and interactive approach to education while also helping boost participant recall rates by boosting engagement. Customer service reps in every field are already using these tools to simulate working through demanding challenges (e.g. dealing with high-volume call days or feisty shoppers), while manufacturers and distributors, as well as travel or hospitality providers, are using them to offer workers virtual facility tours. From testing IT staffers' knowledge to training field service technicians, potential applications are endless.

Game-Based Learning and Gamification – Life is like a game for many organizations in that they're constantly trying to level up their employees' skills, grow their company resources, and solve challenging problems. Noting this, more businesses are turning to actual games based on everyday real-world working scenarios to boost workers' capabilities and insights – and heighten their familiarity with commonly

encountered obstacles. For example: Simple quizzes and puzzles are growingly being utilized by organizations to help employees gain deeper insight into emerging topics and improve test results in online training or certification programs. Likewise, physical gesture-tracking apps and detailed strategic simulations are also making it possible to experiment with crafting better automobile or building models or noodling your way through complex supply chain or crisis communications scenarios. Cybersecurity professionals in particular are growingly leveraging game-based learning solutions to improve their skills as a rapidly-changing threat landscape (which also demands coordination amongst multiple teams) requires workforce upskilling as often as every 90 days. Given that workers naturally prefer two-way feedback and communication to passive lectures, and interacting with virtual worlds (free of repercussion, unlike the real world) to more traditional training programs though, game-based learning solutions continue to grow in popularity in every field.

Scenario Planning and Strategic Exercises – As explained in recent book *Think Like a Futurist*, identifying the emerging industry trends and developments likeliest to impact your business, and making a point to plan in advance to greet them, can help your company greet tomorrow's challenges more effectively. Happily, boosting employees' resilience and responsiveness can often as simple as asking them a series of pointed "what if?" questions, and offering your workers opportunities to try their hand at navigating through potential future-focused business scenarios. For example, using online videoconferencing tools, you might pair colleagues into teams of 4-8 individuals, then ask what they'd do if ongoing economic uncertainty continued to disrupt your company's shipping and logistics model, delay project development, or increase overhead costs? Or, for that matter, if new competitors were suddenly to pop up, or customers to begin favoring lower-priced or more feature-laden alternatives to your products, services, or solutions? Not only does engaging in such simple forward-thinking exercises offer a chance to upskill your employees' talents, and improve their ability to spot and adapt to new disruptions. It also provides a chance for them to identify emerging opportunities and challenges before they arise, and added incentive to gain the capabilities, insights, and resources needed to succeed tomorrow today.

360-Degree Video and Distance Previews – Immersing the viewer in 3D panoramic views of any environment, even from thousands of miles away, 360-degree video effectively puts you right on-site at any location without having to set foot outside your home. Using this technology, you can model entire offices, factories, and training centers, and facilitate online town halls and get-togethers, while in the company of

computerized representations of colleagues. Effectively dropping you right into the heart of any professional environment, the technology not only allows workers to get a good preview of any jobsite or challenge faced by workers at the facility. It also helps empower more rapid employee upskilling by slashing the time required to onboard new hires and accelerating the speed at which you can facilitate learning and development. Picture giving medical workers a chance to get a firsthand look at how hospitals and emergency rooms operate or factory workers the opportunity to see how every facet of an assembly line comes together. You'll have a good idea of 360-degree video's potential to provide more realistic previews of and deeper looks at the challenges global workers that may face at every turn.

Virtual Presentations and Online Workshops – As keynote speakers and corporate trainers, we've hosted dozens of team workshops and seminars on topics such as leadership, change management, and innovation over the past decade. But today, thanks to a host of new streaming videoconferencing tools and online networking platforms that let you beam out instructional segments live from your living room, these classes and courses are growingly being delivered online. With even free and low-cost communications tools allowing your company to create training events on the fly with virtual breakout rooms and roundtables, it bears remembering. Nearly any employee education or professional development program can be delivered live on-demand or prerecorded for delivery in the form of online videos coupled with downloadable coursework. Don't forget that a growing number of providers are also offering online-based certifications in every topic from marketing and online sales to public relations and social media as well. As a result, upskilling your employees can now be as easy as registering to purchase individual courses, participating in weekly training, or subscribing to receive regular course module updates. Each of these tools allows workers to learn at home remotely, and at their own pace, as well.

Noting that experience is often the best teacher, and technology continues to improve with each passing year, upskilling your workforce becomes much simpler when you free yourself from the constraints of on-site lectures and classroom learning. Thanks to recent advances in cloud computing and communications, and a growing push towards more interactivity, it's not only possible these days to empower staffers to boost their knowledge and capabilities on-demand. It's also increasingly simple and cost-affordable to allow them to do so virtually anytime, anywhere.

7 MOST VALUABLE WORK SKILLS

Upskilling employees and bringing their education and skills up to speed on new technologies and best business practices are becoming increasingly important topics for businesses transitioning to the cloud and a remote working world. But it's not always readily apparent what the most efficient way to provide the training and insight that staffers need to succeed in a rapidly-changing marketplace is, especially when teams are growingly working virtually and under rising constraints. Luckily, a range of clever and cutting-edge new approaches to employee upskilling and professional development can help you give your workforce the tools that they need to stay one step ahead of the curve. Here, we take a closer look at five innovative new approaches that you can use to upskill your workforce, and better prepare them to greet the challenges that tomorrow's working world will bring.

1. Futurism – Futurism describes your capacity to evaluate the likelihood and nature of future events and trends, and your ability to accurately assess how they'll impact your business in turn. Mastering it will be crucial in the years ahead, with global consulting firm McKinsey noting that geopolitical uncertainty, cyberattacks, and market upheaval are just a few among many impending market disruptions anticipated in coming months. Learning to adapt to the unknown will only become growingly critical for corporate leaders going forward, with the company's research noting that over the next 10 years, these disturbances will erase half a year's worth of profits. That means having to get more accurate about learning to predict and plan around tomorrow's disruptions today.

2. Courage – In uncertain times like these, good luck can be hard work to find. But it's most often situated in the spot where opportunity crosses paths with preparation. Noting this, you can improve yours at work by routinely pushing your comfort zone and seeking out new roles/responsibilities or chances to volunteer that otherwise expand your experience, skillset, and capabilities. After all, in a world of constant change, embracing continuous learning is becoming increasingly essential for organizations and individuals, as researchers at Deloitte remind. On the bright side, like we explain in *Make Change Work for You*, bravery (taking action in the face of your fears) doesn't have to be difficult to practice either. An easy way to start is simply to begin taking small steps in new directions, and steadily making practical decisions – i.e. signing up for online courses or volunteering to head up a new effort on the job – that put you in chance's sights. Better still, you'll find that it's a mental muscle that you can strengthen through repeat exercise over time.

3. Resilience – Defined as your ability to recover from setbacks, resilience (also known as grit) speaks to one's potential to bounce back from adversity. Unsurprisingly, studies of individuals in challenging circumstances – i.e. students, spelling bee contestants, and West Point cadets – by psychologist Angela Duckworth remind us that it's a better determinant than talent or IQ of success. Today, following historic declines in GDP, changes in customer behavior continue to accelerate and businesses are engaging in unprecedented shifts towards digital transformation, even as S&P 500 firms' average lifespan has shrunk by 33%. Mistakes will doubtlessly be made, and organizations will inevitably be upended. If you plan on being able to roll with these errors, it's important to remember that your capacity to change and adapt (not to mention get back up if knocked down) will define your ability to succeed in turn.

4. Ingenuity – Contrary to popular belief, innovation isn't about having more resources, but rather being more resourceful. Similarly, you don't have to be a genius to get ahead on the job anymore – just a little bit more ingenious instead. The more that you can apply clever solutions or utilize existing resources in original ways, and mix-and-match professional talents in new and novel combinations, the more successful you'll be. From firms who've reengineered artificial intelligence-powered retail solutions to provide autonomous contact-tracing services to software companies who've pivoted online communications platforms to support students and teachers, creative examples of businesses who've found successful ways to rework ideas on the fly are plentiful. After all, while COVID-19 may have hit a big reset button on many fields, don't forget that it's also opened many doors for forward-thinkers – and helped fast-track many pioneering ideas to market as well.

5. Agility – Speed to market, and the pace at which you can evolve your business strategies in response to fast-changing customer needs and shifting trends in the broader marketplace, is now a crucial determinant of success. Moreover, many businesses (especially startups) can now go to market with new concepts or ideas in 90 days or less. Given that even Fortune 500 leaders are constantly rolling out new ideas quickly and pumping out cost-affordable prototypes simply for the insights that these efforts provide, it goes without saying. Looking ahead, not only must you make a point to be more proactive on the job about speaking up and taking action if you spot new opportunities or challenges rising. You've also got to respond more rapidly in turn if you want to keep pace. For organizations, this means the need to rework internal systems to make company processes springboards, not barriers, to change and innovation. For individuals, this means having

to put a laser-focus on action over debate and maintaining an ongoing emphasis on productivity over procedure.

6. Communications – Tomorrow's business problems are becoming exponentially more challenging and complex to solve, necessitating that modern executives put a growing emphasis on teamwork, as Michigan State University reminds. Likewise, solving them often requires us to call upon the perspective and capabilities of experts from multiple backgrounds and professional domains. This requires us to increasingly focus less on cultivating individual talents, and more on mastering the art of communication and collaboration at scale. Bearing this in mind, succeed more frequently going forward, you won't just want to build a diverse network of contacts and colleagues, consistently work to empower your peers, and continuously strive to create leaders at every level. You'll also want to cultivate talents like emotional intelligence (EQ) and empathy, noting that future leaders will function less like MVP athletes, and more like conductors in an orchestra working to bring many all-star players and talents together.

7. Flexibility – As researchers at IBM have noted, continuous change is the new normal. Just one catch: It's been over a decade since they first pointed this out, suggesting that this environment of constant change is far more normal than new. To keep up with ongoing changes in the business environment (especially those brought on by COVID-19) the company recently updated its guidance to reinforce the importance of not only making ongoing changes to your approach and strategy, but consistently rethinking your approaches as well. This means having to embrace constant learning and not be afraid to experiment with new solutions, steadily course-correcting and iterating as you go. Moreover, it also speaks to the rising need for tomorrow's leaders to maintain strong, but weakly-held opinions in the face of uncertainty. In effect, the best way to succeed when the way forward is unclear isn't just to do your homework up-front, and take decisive action once armed with this intelligence. It's also to keep an open mind and keep pushing forward, and not be afraid to revise or even rip-up and rewrite strategic playbooks as new information is gained along the way.

MANAGING LONG-DISTANCE LEADERSHIP

The mass onset of COVID-19 hasn't just impacted the way in which countless firms now market to customers, manage supply chains, and mitigate risks. It's also paved the way for the rise of mass teleworking and remote collaboration, and changed the very way in which modern teams connect and communicate in the workplace. With 75% of employees now interested in working from home, and over three-quarters of HR executives expecting the trend to continue in coming years, it's suddenly vital for executives to master the art of remote leadership. Luckily, as business leaders worldwide are quickly learning, inspiring and motivating your workforce via videoconferencing or online solutions doesn't have to be difficult. Nor does maintaining peak productivity or performance have to be a challenge when you utilize the following strategies to make the most of virtual get-togethers and check-ins.

Formalize Remote Working Processes and Procedures

Lack of face-to-face supervision, support, and oversight often have the potential to detract from productivity. You can offset these challenges by setting aside regular, structured daily check-ins with remote workers and, from business communications platforms to online chat services, providing your team with multiple high-tech ways of staying in touch. Similarly, to be more effective when working remotely, it's also important to predesignate different communication methods for different types of exchanges (e.g. sensitive or subtle interactions are often best handled via videoconference versus email or instant messages, where personal nuance is often lost). Likewise, as you transition to a work-from-home setup, teams should also know what the best ways to reach you and times to get ahold of you during the workday are, and how you'd like emergency and high-priority queries to be tackled. (Say, by calling your home phone or texting if an urgent matter pops up.) In addition, to minimize team disruption, it's also advised that any preexisting meetings you had in place prior to the operating shift remain on the calendar, and that teams maintain the same meeting schedule that they did while working in the office.

Maintain a Sense of Order and Professionalism

Although it may be tempting to adopt a more leisurely attitude when working and communicating with employees from home, note that it's also important to maintain a sense of professionalism in all exchanges. The same rules of conduct and dress codes that you adopt when working at the office should also be applied when working remotely. Likewise, be mindful of what's visible in the background of any given

scene when you're presenting via video or web camera (several providers offer free virtual backdrops that can dress up any garage or spare bedroom). In addition, when presenting, make a point to look into the camera directly, and avoid typing or checking emails and instant messages while others are talking. As you switch to a remote setup, be sure to let workers know that you're available if they have questions or concerns, and set predetermined points to check in and follow-up with them, as well. Also be sure to take the lead on setting remote meetings yourself too, especially one-on-one exchanges – doing so helps let others know that these gatherings are a priority to you.

Encourage Employees to Stay in Touch – and Stay Connected

Many remote leaders make a point to set 50% of the topics to be discussed during remote meetings and let direct reports determine the other 50% of topics that will be explored. That's because in addition to making sure that everyone's concerns are addressed, schedules are being maintained, and projects are staying on task, adopting this approach also allows you to create healthy forums for dialogue and social interaction. Consider that remote work can often be isolating and create a sense of removal from one's team, vision, and purpose. Noting this, even taking a few minutes at the start of a conversation just to get colleagues' feedback and input, or simply catch up and see how others are doing, can go a long way towards helping rekindle empathy and a sense of connection. Similarly, from a team-building standpoint, be sure to set aside times for workday gatherings such as virtual happy hours and office catch-ups (participants can bring their own beverages and food) that your colleagues can engage in. Doing so helps keep familiar faces front and center and can help increase employees' sense of belonging while offsetting the isolating effects of social distancing.

Keep Your Staff Informed and Up-to-Date

During times of uncertainty, it's especially important to keep peers abreast of current events, maintain a firm sense of direction, and help minimize colleagues' sense of disruption. You can put anxious workers at ease by starting by keeping them informed and up-to-date on the latest happenings that impact your employer and workplace. During remote get-togethers, make a point to regularly check in with direct reports and explicitly state what your company action plan is for dealing with current events, and how the actions that you're taking are helping create positive outcomes. Similarly, if you have to convey bad news, be short, be straightforward, and be empathetic. While furloughs, project delays, and other changes in plan aren't always easy to break the news about, being honest and respectful with coworkers is the best policy. Whatever the nature of your remote one-on-ones (or group

events), prepare for possible questions that employees may ask, have any supporting information ready to go in advance, and take time to walk through how any impending changes impact your team (and next steps to take) with colleagues as well. Whatever the future brings – and it's worth remembering that many companies are well-poised to ride out temporary disruptions – it pays to be on the level with your peers. In uncertain times, people want to know what's happening – so be sure to take the lead and let them know where things stand, and what's coming next.

Offer Ongoing Encouragement and Support

Like senior managers, employees are often left stressed and anxious in the wake of unexpected events, such as those that may continue to wax and wane (and impact your business) for the foreseeable future. During tough times, leaders are encouraged to acknowledge these concerns, set aside time to listen to others' worries, and actively seek ways to empathize. Especially when working remotely, it's important to regularly drop-in and ask others how they're doing. Similarly, you might also pose other questions to them ("Interesting times we live in... how are you guys adjusting to the work from home routine?") that may help provide insight into the state of their thoughts, and ways you can lend a hand. Remember: Exercising emotional intelligence, and providing others with comfortable contexts in which to air their feelings and opinions is a crucial part of modern leadership. In addition, making others' concerns an area of focus (as opposed to your own) during times of disruption is also crucial, as is projecting a sense of reassurance at every turn. The more you acknowledge colleagues' feelings and make serving others a top priority, while simultaneously projecting an air of calm and control, the more successful you'll be. Top leaders not only inspire confidence in their peers, they also provide a running sense of encouragement at every turn.

A BETTER WAY TO BREAK BAD NEWS AT WORK

No one ever wants to be the bearer of bad news at work, least of all during challenging economic times. At the same time, business leaders faced with increasing uncertainty may also find themselves growingly having to make some tough calls. Given that layoffs, furloughs, and scheduling reductions are likely to be par for the course for many firms for the foreseeable future, it's all but inevitable you'll have to drop the occasional bomb going forward. Thankfully, as challenging as the process of breaking bad news can seem, it becomes far easier to manage when you take a more empathetic and practical approach to spreading the word. While no one can predict all the unexpected twists and turns that the future might take or wants to deliver news to colleagues when it's not the news that they're hoping to hear? Remember: The more honest, up-front, and respectful that you are with your coworkers, and more you work hand-in-hand with them to offer pragmatic responses to problematic scenarios, the more successful that you'll inevitably be.

Practice and Prepare Before You Present – Prior to breaking the news to subordinates, sit down with department heads and managers to make sure you're all up to date on the latest information and on the same page in terms of messaging. Take time to brainstorm and review the questions that employees are likeliest to have with your leadership team, and practice crafting meaningful and substantive responses that you can provide. As a management team, determine the best time and setting to break the news to your employees, and the most comfortable context within which to do so. (Say, during a weekly all-hands-on-deck meeting where workers can speak up and ask questions vs. conducting a series of individual face-to-face interviews while squirreled away behind a desk.) Have any important documents and materials – information sheets, workbooks, reference guides, etc. – in-hand and ready to offer before breaking bad news. Likewise, make sure that any supplements that you provide to workers present information in clear and simple fashion, and set aside time to walk through these materials with your employees as well. Be sure to practice sharing information before delivering it (preferably in front of peers, or a video camera) to get comfortable with your presentation to boot. That's because in addition to projecting an air of calm and confidence, you'll also want to make sure you're not sending the wrong signal via errant body language or non-verbal cues. When breaking bad news, it's important to make a point to be approachable and empathetic. Staffers may be rattled: Your job is to stick to the facts, allay their concerns, and address any questions they might have, while also acknowledging any

unknowns. Remember: If you don't have an answer yet, it's OK to say "I don't know" as well. Most important is to remind others that you'll continue to work together to find out and keep them up to date as more information is gained..

Put on a Positive Face Despite Negative Events – Of course, if you should find yourself being the one forced to hand down a decision from above that you don't agree with, it's important to stay cool and collected too. Don't publicly contradict others' opinions or organizational choices that you don't agree with. Similarly, don't downplay their importance, or the need to move forward with these marching orders either. Instead, remind peers how much care and consideration went into making these executive decisions, and that other choices were considered before leaders settled on an optimal course of action for the company. What's more, you'll also want to avoid advertising to your coworkers that you may personally disagree with any choices that were made. However, if they're already aware that you may have reservations about these decisions, be genteel about it. Remind associates that while choices made here may not be the exact choices that you yourself might have settled on, they're what leadership has decided is best for the company. Likewise, it's important to reassure associates that you'll continue to work with them hand-to-hand to implement these changes and updates.

Stick to the Facts – The more elusive and/or vague that you are with your coworkers, the more demoralized and unnerved that they stand to be. To alleviate as many concerns as possible here, focus on providing as much hard information on any given situation as possible. Likewise, be sure to provide colleagues with as many details as you can that explain the reasoning behind any shift in company policy or plan, and the impact that it will have on how you do business. If you don't have these details in-hand yet, be up-front and honest about it with your peers, and let coworkers know that you'll continue to seek out answers and provide updates as scenarios evolve. In addition, be sure to keep an open door and make yourself available to your team as you work through these shifts and offer running briefs as new insights emerge. The more open and genuine you are with others, and harder you work to keep them informed, the more you'll be able to assuage their concerns, and more of an ally they'll perceive you to be.

Offer Constructive Ways to Move Forward – Be straightforward and firm about the fact that a company decision has been made, and that you won't allow teams to deviate from it. At the same time, also let peers know that constructive feedback and actionable insight, with an eye towards continuous improvement, is always welcome. (And remind

colleagues that your door always remains open.) Be clear about next steps that you expect employees to take (reaching out with further questions, implementing changes by a certain time, etc.) and have a step-by-step, deadline-driven plan in place for making changes happen. In addition, if you're worried about worker morale, or employees firing up the rumor mill, you can also provide neutral forums (e.g. internal town halls, which offer opportunities for you to respond to pressing concerns) at which it's OK to vent. Whatever the case, as an executive leader, it's important to remain cognizant that your words and actions can be extremely powerful (and memorable) at trying times like these. Don't allow yourself to be boxed into giving assurances or making promises in the heat of the moment if you can't guarantee that you'll deliver on them. If you don't have necessary answers in-hand yet, or the authority to make any given call, it's alright to let others know you'll research their concerns and follow-up later..

In the end, being the bearer of bad news isn't a job responsibility that any business leader ever relishes having to take on. But sometimes, it can't be avoided. However, it's well within all of our abilities to handle these scenarios with poise and confidence if they should arise. The more reasonable and respectful of employees you are when unfortunate circumstances rear their head? The easier it will be to have these difficult conversations, and the better the odds are that you'll be able to work through tough scenarios together.

HOW TO COMPLETE BIGGER PROJECTS WITH A SMALLER TEAM

Businesses often operate with grand ambitions and tight budgets. That means frequently having to tackle big projects with smaller teams and compete for work with larger industry players using more resourceful and innovative tactics. Luckily, as a legion of scrappy entrepreneurs that are successfully going toe-to-toe with bigger rivals nationwide continue to prove with each passing day, a little ingenuity can help you run rings around rivals. Learn to master the art of project management as they have, and you too can punch above your weight in the marketplace. Simply read on to find out how, with a little planning and forethought, small teams – more agile and adaptable by nature – can successfully tackle big projects and rise to challenges they never thought possible.

How to Improve Project Management: Begin with the End in Mind

Successful project management starts with careful planning. That means beginning by defining a clear end-goal, budget, and deadline, then working backwards to break the workload up into a series of smaller, more easily-managed milestones. Each of these goalposts, which should be laid out in an initial step-by-step project roadmap document, won't just help you chart ongoing progress as you reach them. They'll also help provide a sense of ongoing momentum, and motivation, for team members as you set about ticking them off your to-do list. However, when plotting these milestones, be sure to factor an extra 20-30% time buffer into your plans, and any task deadlines assigned to in-house/freelance staff, to account for possible unforeseen delays or unexpected hiccups.

Note that when dealing with larger projects, in which work builds and compounds on prior efforts, these milestones should also be used as helpful checkpoints at which to stop and reflect on current progress. After all, as you go about performing tasks, it's important to stay laser-focused on objectives, so as not to let "feature creep" (the temptation to add features or expand your focus) derail your advancement. However, at the same time, you'll also want to be aware of any new developments that might impact your project that spring to mind along the way. To this extent, you'll additionally want to make a point to capture any fresh ideas or insights that surface as a result of your work as it progresses.

This feedback, which should be actively solicited from staff at all turns, should be shared in a central repository (e.g. an online forum or project tracking tool) with every team member. Before moving to the next milestone, make a point to hold an all-hands-on-deck meeting for

purposes of reflection and review, and to discuss any updates or pivots that may be needed in light of these insights. If changes are needed, be sure to separate out and prioritize mission-critical revisions to your project, such as modifications that fix major software bugs or add customer-favorite features, from those that simply stand to enhance it. Optional improvements can be moved to a separate list for tackling later towards the end of the project, during polishing and refinement stages, if time permits.

To maximize productivity here, it often helps to start by distilling projects down to their bare essence, and a single design document that quickly and concisely summarizes the task at hand. By concentrating on building a minimum viable product, and getting the essentials done first before adding further enhancements, you can better ensure that you remain on schedule and on budget. In short, the more well-defined and narrow your project focus, the more effective you'll be.

Getting Tactical: How to Map Out a Winning Strategy

Once you have a series of objectives in place, you can work backwards to define specific tactics and strategies for accomplishing your goals, including implementing tools that can help you be more efficient. When weighing your options though, remember that opportunity costs are associated with every decision you make, not just financial expenses. That means that it often pays to say no to choices that may seem compelling in the immediate, but don't necessarily best support your end goals. (Say, skipping trendy, but unproven new technologies and selecting more traditional solutions that enjoy greater customizability, technical support, and options to expand upon if you need to respond to sudden changes in the market.) Likewise, it's often crucial to plan for growth long before it occurs, and invest in more flexible and scalable solutions up-front, so you don't have to return to the project and rework it later.

As a team leader, this means not only having to forecast the time and expenses associated with working on larger projects, and draft a detailed accounting of labor, equipment, and materials needed at every turn. It also means having to take time to consider which services that you'll be performing that are essential to getting the job done, and which can be easily automated or outsourced to others. To determine where it makes sense to bring in outside help, calculate what each team member's time is worth, and what the highest-value activities are to the business that they perform. Doing so lets you know where their attention should be focused, and after comparing these costs to outsourced solutions, where it makes sense to offload less-important work to alternate resources to free up critical contributors' schedules.

Likewise, you'll also want to research and review if any preexisting tools, services, or solutions can help give your team a head start on accomplishing its goals. It may seem costly to invest in these resources (which can include everything from high-speed manufacturing equipment to high-tech virtual reality or 3D graphics engineering solutions) initially. But when you factor in the benefits of being able to get running start by implementing them, and the opportunity cost of time sinks and distractions that they prevent, savings can be substantial. Remember: If an external service, online tool, or freelance hire can help you greatly accelerate progress, or free up crucial contributors from wasting time on busywork, it's often money well spent.

Happily, a wide variety of cost-affordable online and off-the-shelf tools can help you enjoy significant time/money savings by accessing premade solutions for everything from designing professional-looking websites to creating engaging and user-friendly software programs. Using these plug-and-play high-tech solutions, which include premade videos that you can customize, drag-and-drop cloud application development platforms, and even artificially-intelligent research tools, you can quickly 10X your progress by tapping into preexisting resources, or mix-and-match capabilities that others have invented to create novel solutions. All of these tools can act as project accelerants, helping you more quickly get up to speed, or rapidly iterate your way from start to finish by adding a few unique flourishes to a stock solution, in no time flat.

Communicate and Stay in Contact to Make Projects Manageable

Once you've charted a course for your project, and assigned team members to each task, make a point to keep team members up-to-date on project assignments, status updates, scheduling, and background information. Likewise, staffers should be informed where specific roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authorities lie, and each worker should know whom to call on and how to reach contacts when questions arise. Using free or cost-affordable online apps and software tools for real-time collaboration, such as instant messaging apps, project tracking solutions, and cloud productivity suites (which can provide shared documents, files, and workspaces for all), can assist with project coordination. The more that you keep team members up-to-speed and on the same page when working on larger, more complex projects, the more you'll minimize bottlenecks, confusion, and task duplication. Bearing this in mind, weekly check-ins with staffers are advised, each of whom should be invited to share suggestions or concerns.

Likewise, it's also important to work with project contributors to engage in strategic planning and risk management. Asking staffers a simple series of what if questions – e.g. what if the market quickly migrates from physical to digital solutions in light of COVID-19, or what if customers suddenly pull back spending – can help you anticipate and offset many challenges before they arise. In addition, as larger projects are often spread out over extended lengths of time, you'll also want to make succession planning and knowledge transfer a priority in case key team members depart. You can retain team knowledge by arranging for team members to provide regular training to their peers, assigning workers to tasks that require joint collaboration, or building skill redundancy into your staffing model. As your project proceeds, you'll also want to keep a watchful eye on how much each employee has on their plate at any given time, and delegate or shift responsibilities to maximize efficiency as needed.

In addition, don't forget how important it is to listen to your workers as you go about pursuing any given task as well. Those individuals closest to frontline operations, and customers, they're often the most informed audience inside your business. Regularly polling, surveying, and soliciting team feedback can quickly help you surface opportunities and concerns, and know where to best focus your efforts. Large projects seldom go as planned, often changing and evolving over time. Successful project managers learn to change their strategies as needed in turn as well.

Once Done, Perform a Final Project Review

Finally, upon finishing up any given assignment, don't forget to perform a post-mortem, or post-review assessment, of your completed project as well. Reviewing end-results with colleagues offers an opportunity to consider how successful you were in your efforts, how well things went according to plan, and where room for improvement exists. Look for where processes and procedures can be streamlined, costs can be cut, and scheduling solutions can be enhanced. Performing an end-of-project review will help you get a better sense of the factors that contributed to your performance, or worked to hinder it, and how you can improve your approach to project management going forward.

HOW TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL CORPORATE CULTURE

Like people, companies also have personalities, often described as their “organizational culture,” a shared set of values and beliefs that define their social and psychological norms. It’s the reason why one business may prize creativity and clever design above other attributes, and another may place greater emphasis on customer service or concise engineering. In effect, at the core of any business’ workforce, and how it operates, lies a universal sense of mission (which defines a firm’s purpose) and values (which defines its core traits and characteristics), which serve as a professional compass of sorts. These key attributes essentially summarize the goals that you hope to achieve, the qualities and characteristics that you most prize, and – in short – the guiding principles that you prefer to follow as you set about performing your work.

However, in today’s more informed and socially-conscious marketplace, it’s also important to remember. Your company’s mission and values won’t just serve as a north star that helps define how you choose to orient your commercial operations more frequently going forward. A core element of your business around which talent (including both new and existing hires) will be both increasingly attracted to and gravitate, these variables will also growingly serve as a key differentiator and cornerstone of business strategy. Building a winning company culture – and, by proxy, a successful business – ultimately starts by defining your mission and values... and, for that matter, creating a sound foundation upon which to establish future operations.

Why Mission and Values Matter

Top-performing talent only continues to show a growing affinity for businesses that reflect their personal values, whether in the form of a commitment to doing good in their community or helping save the planet. That goes double for members of younger generations such as Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z (born in 1995 or later), who are now the largest group of working professional in the global workforce. Noting this, from the standpoint of HR and hiring, crafting a company mission, vision, and values that resonate with a passionate and driven audience is only becoming more important with each passing day. For example, tomorrow’s leaders are increasingly placing less emphasis on salary and 401k matching plans, and more on opportunities to create positive change, such as:

- Performing meaningful work that leaves the world and their local community better off than how they initially found them
 - Contributing to worthy causes such as charity, education, and the advancement of diversity or underrepresented peoples
 - Helping the world become more eco-friendly, and offset its carbon footprint by switching to more green or sustainable solutions
 - Working to end global problems like hunger and homelessness, and ensure access to clean and safe housing
 - Providing equal rights and representation for all peoples worldwide, and making sure that these rights are protected
- Likewise, workers of all ages are increasingly shifting their focus away from scoring bonuses and promotions to ensuring that they enjoy a better life-work balance and access to benefits like:
- Flexible and customized schedules that support their family and individual needs
 - Greater opportunities for virtual and remote work
 - Individualized training and development, including eLearning and online mentorship, that prepare them to greet rising opportunities and challenges
 - Access to new roles, responsibilities, and work-related challenges that help them expand their comfort zones and become more capable
 - Solutions that help them improve their physical health, mental health, and overall well-being

It's easy to see why mission and values make such a difference to a company today. At their core, they'll define your ability to attract and retain talent, and directly impact your ability to remain competitive.

Product and Marketing: Mapping to Mission Critical

What's more, your company mission and values will also inform core decisions surrounding your product or service development efforts and marketing initiatives, as well as fundamentally define the shape of the solutions that you choose to offer. These choices in turn will influence your ability to differentiate, connect with potential customers, and appeal to myriad audiences. For example, socks and shoes are among the most commoditized products on the market today, and many manufacturers' and distributors' offerings are largely indistinguishable. But many scrappy businesses continue to upend these industries, and find ways to stand out, by using methods such as:

- Leveraging greener or more recyclable or sustainable materials
- Sourcing goods and items from local or regional artisans and vendors
- Giving a portion of the proceeds from every sale to those in need
- Donating free items with every purchase you make to charitable causes
- Creating products or solutions specifically designed to appeal to smaller and more niche audiences
- Capitalizing on brand awareness to promote education, healthcare, political awareness, and other topics
- Offering spunkier alternatives to offerings from larger competitors

As they remind, your company's mission and values won't just define what products or services you choose to offer, and how they're ultimately delivered. These attributes will also define how these items are packaged and presented, and how unique you appear to the marketplace and appealing you seem to different groups of customers around the world. Likewise, it bears remembering that people most prefer doing business with others that they perceive to have shared interests and values. The fastest way to assemble a passionate audience, and inspire that audience to take positive action, is to galvanize around shared ideals or interests.

Leading with Teamwork and Partnership

Finally, as BIZDEV: The International Association for Business Development and Strategic Partnerships reminds, the best business collaborations occur when you focus on building win-win scenarios for all parties involved. Companies who share mission-alignment will find it easier to locate and attract partners who can help them achieve their goals.

As a general rule, remember that the more resources and capabilities that you can bring to bear when tackling a challenge, the faster and more successful at solving it you will ultimately be. This principle underscores the importance of teamwork in helping accelerate growth and innovation. Likewise, one single company cannot expect to excel in every single area of business, or appeal to every audience. Cultivating partnerships with other firms to help supplement your resources in areas where your capabilities may be lacking can also help you become stronger as a business in the end.

Companies with a strong, shared sense of mission and purpose will be able to rally more collaborators to their cause, and more effectively train their sights on a shared purpose. As a result, they'll also create multiplicative and network effects that can radically boost their capabilities while lowering costs and shortening time to market.

It pays to create a strong sense of mission and values in your business. As a core building block around which other professional efforts are often designed, their ability to impact the bottom line of your organization simply cannot be understated.

MANAGING SALARIES DESPITE UNCERTAINTY

Managing salaries and making payroll can often be a balancing act for business leaders, even in the best of times. In the age of COVID-19, which has prompted significant changes in customer behavior, and put a squeeze on many firms' sales prospects, it's become a virtual tightrope walk. As a result, it's now growingly important for company leaders in every field to discuss hard topics such as furloughs, salary cuts, and layoffs sooner rather than later, in case the need should ever arise. In addition, it's also become vital to consider how to handle related business disruptions long before they ever hit, in the unfortunate event that you find yourself in a cash crunch.

On the bright side though, if there's anything that the pandemic has taught us, it's just how resilient today's teams are, and how effectively that people can pull together to turn the proverbial ship around when situations dictate. So if ever liquidity or cash flow should become a concern? Consider working together with your team to come up with a creative solution, and using the below money-saving strategies to take a more balanced approach to salary planning and payroll management. Using them, you and your staff can not only identify ways to help your company buy back time, but also opportunities, as you work hand-in-hand to put your balance sheet back in the black.

Start by Focusing on Business Essentials

The leaner that you can operate as a business, the more money that you'll have to put towards payroll. This means that the first step towards avoiding salary or headcount reductions that you should take should be eliminating unnecessary expenses. Begin by reviewing your balance sheet and asking yourself: Is this expense crucial to keeping the lights on, and bringing customers in the door? If not, from equipment upgrades to travel expenses, immediately eliminate it or hit the pause button.

Likewise, consider: Is there a faster, cheaper, or more cost-effective way of performing any given task? Whether you're looking at bookkeeping, web design, or email marketing, many pay-as-you-go, on-demand services and online freelance marketplaces can help you outsource for pennies on the dollar. Sample expenses you can often slash include equipment leases (which you can cancel or renegotiate), office space (which you can downsize or eliminate), and software (which can be retired or replaced with free or cost-affordable alternatives). Similarly, now's the time to forego business expansions and capital improvement projects, reduce energy and waste expenditures, and look for virtual and remote alternatives to in-person gatherings.

In addition to being relentlessly practical when it comes to eliminating expenses, if you're having trouble making ends meet, you'll also want to explore the possibility of bill deferment and alternative payment plans. Many banks, lenders, and utility providers offer programs designed to assist small businesses that have been impacted by the pandemic. Likewise, suppliers and vendors may also be open to renegotiating payment or financing terms. Exploring all possibilities here can help you increase cash flow, keep more money in the bank, and better meet your salary and payroll obligations. Whatever you do, don't let bills go unpaid or unaddressed, though. Like you, creditors expect to be paid in timely fashion. However, they also understand the extent of the challenges brought on by COVID-19's arrival. Many will be willing to work with you to come up with practical solutions that can help everyone make ends meet.

Next, Employ Flexible Work Solutions

If revenue is still a concern, take a moment to pause, step back, and remember: People are a small business' most important asset. So before you consider cutting staff, it pays to contemplate ways that you can avoid doing so by getting creative with salary planning and scheduling.

For example, you might reduce employees' hours, or limit work periods to three or four days per week to save money. Alternatively, you could allow certain staffers to work remotely, saving your business on utilities, energy, cleaning, insurance, equipment, and other common costs. Other money-saving solutions you might employ to bridge the gap might include temporarily reducing or suspending perks and benefits, limiting or eliminating overtime, and/or staggering employees' workplace shifts. Likewise, if you further need to shrink your payroll, you might also temporarily freeze executive pay, institute company-wide salary reductions (either equally or proportionately to individual earnings), or cap commissions and bonuses.

To quickly reduce costs, some firms are asking their entire workforce to accept temporary wage cuts, while other companies are asking only top-level management and executives to do so. Others are looking to furloughs (temporary leaves of absence wherein employees may go unpaid, but still retain benefits, and are expected to return to work after some time) as a stopgap solution. Still more are seeking to find ways to avoid salary reductions entirely by assigning employees more responsibilities and tasks in order to increase each individual's contribution to the bottom line. While the right solutions for your business may differ, all of these strategies can help make up for

temporary revenue shortfalls, and present positive alternatives to layoffs or terminations.

If Needed, Take a Measured Approach to Pullbacks

Cutting salaries isn't a task you'll relish, but if it becomes a necessity, you can minimize its impact on morale by taking a more practical and considerate approach to making these cuts.

Case in point: Executive pay is often highest in an organization, and reductions made here (while they may disappoint a single individual) may save several colleagues' jobs. Cuts to leadership teams' salaries may be necessary. If so, while such pullbacks won't be greeted with smiles, you can minimize gripes by meeting with key executive team members up-front and being open and honest about your operating situation. Likewise, it's important to be candid with peers about the likely timeframe during these reductions will apply (even if that timeframe is indefinite) and to explain that such changes are necessary because you want them to be able to keep their job. While doing so, also make a point to be a good partner, and both show peers' how they're contributing to the betterment of all, and make a promise to reinstate their salaries ASAP when things get back to good. Then proactively check in at regular intervals, keeping team members up-to-date on company progress so that they can see how they're helping move the needle. Applying a similar approach to reductions in frontline workers' pay, if needed, can also help ease concerns.

Under any circumstance, it's important to underscore that you're applying a team mentality, and remind others that all staffers are in this together, and have what it takes to work through current challenges in tandem. Likewise, any cuts that you need to make should come together in one fell swoop (as opposed to many smaller reductions spread out over time), and clearly explained so that employees understand the reasoning behind them. Doing so not only helps maintain a sense of stability for remaining employees – underscoring that you're, say, simply downsizing an underperforming business venture vs. looking to apply ongoing and seemingly arbitrary downsizings. It also helps remind others that you're laser-focused on the bottom line, and that with their support, you can find ways to work through any hiccups and be on the upswing again in no time. The more everyone works together to shoulder the challenge, the more successful you'll be.

WHAT MEETINGS YOU SHOULD SKIP

Trade secret: Time, not money, is often a working professional's most valuable and important asset, as the only resource that you cannot ever replace. Unfortunately, productivity software maker Atlassian reports that most businesspeople attend 62 meetings a month on average, half of which are considered a waste, amounting to roughly an hour every day that's spent in fruitless conversation.

What's more, following the switch to remote work, surveys by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) find that these distractions have only increased. According to the NBER, not only have meeting requests grown by 12.9% per person, but the average number of attendees per meeting has also jumped by 13.5%. Put simply, that's a lot of time that you and your colleagues could otherwise have spent helping current clients, attracting new customers, and growing your business.

Luckily for the terminally overwhelmed and/or sidetracked, applying a few simple time-saving strategies and tips to focus your efforts can not only help you regain control of your calendar. Doing so can also help you and your peers to free up headspace and focus where it counts – on productivity, not process, and making things happen by prioritizing action over debate at every turn.

Managing Your Time: Do You Really Need to Attend Business Meetings?

Up-front, it pays to realize that in many cases, you'll find that the answer is no. For example: A recent review of tens of thousands of workers' calendars by smart calendar app Clockwise finds that many working professionals are spending 24% more time in one-on-one meetings and 29% more in team meetings. But ironically, every moment that we spend engaged in them tends to disrupt our creativity and workflow, as well as detract from our ability to focus and perform the deep thinking required to complete complex tasks. Moreover, as two-thirds of respondents to a survey by global consulting firm Korn Ferry remind, spending too much time in meetings hampers one's ability to do productive work.

Bearing this in mind, it's essential to take a pass on unnecessary meetings – i.e. those that don't help you perform your job or become more effective at completing work-related tasks. Ten simple questions that you can ask yourself to determine whether your attendance is necessary at these professional get-togethers include:

- Will my presence or perspective add any value to colleagues' efforts or the current conversation?
- How will attending this session help me be more effective in my role, and fielding my current workload?
- Is there a specific, work-related purpose and outcome that the meeting will help directly drive?
- Do all attending parties have all the information and materials that they need in advance to have a substantive discussion?
- Have I already recently reviewed featured topics with peers, and brought them up to speed on our organization or initiative's current status?
- Are there any meaningful new developments or insights that have occurred since prior discussions that require sharing?
- Is the subject of conversation simple enough to field with an instant message, online post, brief phone call, or email instead?
- Will all necessary decision makers be in attendance, or would information potentially need to be shared again and additional approvals sought at a later date?
- Are more than 15-20 people planning to be in attendance, potentially leaving me with little time or opportunity to get a word in?
- Can I grab notes or summaries of the discussion later – and would doing so be just as effective at bringing me up to speed in person?

Avoiding Unproductive Meetings: Hints and Tips

While it's important to be respectful of your peers and consider not skipping meetings until you've spent at least six months getting to know a new role or organization, you can still find ways to keep your schedule slim. A few simple hints, tips, and tricks that you can use to avoid wasting time are as follows:

Fill Your Calendar Up-Front – Block out space on your calendar for pressing projects, important get-togethers, and deep, focused work in advance before the workweek starts and colleagues attempt to commandeer your schedule with lower-priority items.

Ask in Advance – If you don't know how useful or productive a meeting stands to be, ask the organizer for an agenda and background materials in advance. You can also inquire if there are specific parts of the meeting that they have in mind, or topics, where your contributions might be most valuable.

Avoid Recurring Commitments – As meaningful updates aren't always forthcoming on a regular basis, recurring meetings are often unnecessary, let alone at a high frequency rate. Before starting your workweek, review the current progress of your program or project's efforts, and the subject of proposed discussions, to determine if it makes sense to delay or postpone check-ins to a later date.

Prioritize Participation First – Unless they help make complex topics simple, one-way conversations (i.e. tuning in online just to hear others speak) are frequently ineffective at helping individuals absorb information. Unless you have specific questions that you'd like to ask the speaker, or are seeking clarity from peers, consider whether you'd be better served parsing information offline and at your own pace.

Look for Quick Resolutions – Sometimes, a brief phone call or online sidebar with a colleague is enough to resolve an outstanding issue or item. Before committing to a formal meeting, consider if there is a faster, more efficient way to nip any questions concerns in the bud.

So while meeting requests may only continue pop up in your inbox with growing frequency going forward? Remember that it's OK to say no (as long as you do so politely) sometimes, and that you don't have to attend every proposed get-together. After all, every minute that you can reclaim from these distractions is another that you can spend investing in meaningful work, and getting your job done.

EMBRACING THE NEW NORMAL

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As you can see, the future of business is rapidly changing – and looks radically different from the past. Moreover, the frequency with which emerging developments in the commercial world tend to take unexpected twists and turns only continues to increase with each passing day, necessitating that we business leaders prepare to make just as many rapid shifts in strategy and planning in turn. The good news being that a little more planning and forethought, and a little bit more flexibility in how we approach any given scenario, are all it often takes to stay one step ahead of the curve. By making a point to disrupt ourselves before competitors do and reinvent our operating strategies before outside forces demand we do so, we discover the surest way to successfully adapt to changing times and trends: To change and adapt our own perspectives and approaches in turn.

Again - we always enjoy learning more about how you are finding ways to address ongoing change and disruption and implementing these strategies in your workplace and career. Be sure to swing by www.FuturistsSpeakers.com to share your insights and inspiration anytime, or reach out with questions and comments.

-Scott Steinberg

Acknowledgments

Bob, Tim, Neil, Paul, Josh, Pete, Mike, Richard,
Stephane, Sue, Sandeep, Tamara, Lisa, Jamie, Karen,
and Jean – for more late nights and LCD lights than
I can remember.



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