

Harvard lecturer: ‘No specific skill will get you ahead in the future’—but this ‘way of thinking’ will

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Many of us have been told that deep expertise will lead to enhanced credibility, rapid job advancement, and escalating incomes. The alternative of being broad-minded is usually dismissed as dabbling without really adding value.

But the future may be very different: Breadth of perspective and the ability to connect the proverbial dots (the domain of generalists) is likely to be as important as depth of expertise and the ability to generate dots (the domain of specialists).

The rapid advancement of technology, combined with increased uncertainty, is making the most important career logic of the past counterproductive going forward. The world, to put it bluntly, has changed, but our philosophy around skills development has not.

Today's dynamic complexity demands an ability to thrive in ambiguous and poorly defined situations, a context that generates anxiety for most, because it has always felt safer to generalize.

Just think about some of the buzzwords that characterized the business advice over the past 40 to 50 years: Core competence, unique skills, deep expertise. For as far back as many of us can remember, the key to success was developing a specialization that allowed us to climb the professional ladder.

It wasn't enough to be a doctor, one had to specialize further, perhaps in cardiology. But then it wasn't enough to be a cardiologist, one had to specialize further, perhaps as a cardiac surgeon. And it wasn't just medicine, it was in almost all professions.

The message was clear: Focus on developing an expertise and you'll rise through the ranks and earn more money. The approach worked. Many of today's leaders ascended by specializing.

The future belongs to generalists

But as the typical mutual fund disclaimer so famously states, past performance is no guarantee of future results. It's time to rethink our love affair with depth. The pendulum between depth and breadth has swung too far in favor of depth.

There's an oft-quoted saying that "to a man with a hammer, everything looks like nails." But what if that man had a hammer, a screwdriver, and a wrench? Might he or she look to see if the flat top had a narrow slit, suggesting the use of a screwdriver? Or perhaps consider the shape of the flat top. Circle? Hexagon? Could a wrench be a more effective tool? And finally, the mere addition of these tools can encourage a better understanding of a problem.

This is not to suggest that deep expertise is useless. *Au contraire*. Carrying a hammer is not a problem. It's just that our world is changing so rapidly that those with more tools in their possession will better navigate the uncertainty. To make it in today's world, it's important to be agile and flexible.

What it means to be a generalist

How does one do this? To begin, it's important to zoom out and pay more attention to the context in which you're making decisions.

Read the whole paper, not just the section about your industry. Is your primary focus oil and gas? Study the dynamics affecting the retail sector. Are you a finance professional? Why not read a book on marketing? Think bigger and wider than you've traditionally done.

Another strategy is to think about how seemingly unrelated developments may impact each other, something that systems thinkers do naturally. Study the interconnections across industries and imagine how changes in one domain can disrupt operations in another one.

Because generalists have a set of tools to draw from, they are able to dynamically adjust their course of action as a situation evolves. Just think of how rapidly the world changed with the development of the Internet and wireless data technologies. Jeff Bezos was not a retail specialist who took on his competitors and won. He was a relative newcomer to retail but was able to adapt rapidly to seize a gigantic opportunity.

Career success for generalists

Many forward-looking companies look for multi-functional experience when hiring. This is essential for large [organizations like Google](#), for example, where employees jump from team to team and from role to role.

In fact, Lisa Stern Hayes, one of Google's top recruiters, [said in a podcast](#) that the company [values problem-solvers](#) who have a "general cognitive ability" over role-related knowledge.

"Think about how quickly Google evolves," she said. "If you just hire someone to do one specific job, but then our company needs change, we need to be rest assured that the person is going to find something else to do at Google. That comes back to hiring smart generalists."

If you're relatively new to the workforce, my advice is to manage your career around obtaining a diversity of geographic and functional experiences. The analytical capabilities you develop (e.g. basic statistical skills and critical reasoning) in the process will fare well when competing against those who are more focused on domain-specific skill.

The one certainty about the future is that it will be uncertain. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and technological innovation have commoditized information. The skill of generating dots is losing value. The key skill of the future is, well, not quite a skill; it's an approach, a philosophy, and way of thinking — and it's critical you adopt it as soon as you're able.

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