

Generation X: how to future-proof your working life

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If you're aged between 36 and 56, you're a member of Generation X. This means you have another 10-30 years of work ahead of you. They should be the best years of your career, right? You've gained wisdom, maturity and experience, and you can add real value to even the most future-focused of start-ups. Right?



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So why do you feel vulnerable when you watch a group of Millennials at work? There is a good reason. Millennials (also known as Generation Y) have no fear of technology, especially at the young end of the spectrum. This is why every 19-30 year-old seems a lot more relevant than you do. Certainly, they can be bolder, faster, more collaborative. What's more, they appear to be having more fun than you do!

It's time, Gen X, to get your stuff together!

Start with this premise: any wise, mature, experienced professional with an agile mind and an ability to solve problems, can master even the most out-there technology and harness it to catapult their career, comfortably riding the wave of the fourth industrial revolution.

Let's briefly clarify this revolution. According to the [World Economic Forum](#), "[It] will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before. [...] It is characterised by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres."

We know this to be true. Already we see the entire human knowledge base double approximately every 12 months and this is expected to keep accelerating. Traditionally manual jobs are fast being automated, the global economy is increasingly driven by data, the Internet of Things is a thing, and smart cities are being built as we speak. 80% of the jobs that our children will hold don't even exist yet!

In this world, Gen X, your job is to focus on welcoming change, embracing technology and upskilling. I hear you: how do you ensure you are best positioned to remain relevant and able to deliver quality work when you don't know what skills will be important and in demand five or 10 years from now, let alone 10 to 30 years from now?

My recommendation is that you stick to basics. After all, the more things change, the more they stay the same. The trick is to apply the basics with real confidence.

Train yourself to roll with the punches: In a world where the rate of change and the rate of knowledge creation exceed the rate of learning, one of your most valuable abilities is to become truly comfortable with change and to adapt quickly. There is so much information and knowledge at your fingertips today, it is easy to actively and constantly read and learn about developments in technology and the world of work.

Cultivate curiosity and creativity: Curiosity and creativity are critical in an ambiguous and ever-changing world. Be brave enough to ask questions – allow yourself to appear stupid – and then show that you have the will and ability to learn. You will earn so much respect among the Millennials if you're open to creative thinking, so be prepared to experiment and allow your mind to go places it's never been before. You can do this!

Get yourself a mentor: Remember when your mentor had grey hair and wrinkles? Think the opposite and get yourself a bright young thing – in fact, get several. Watch, listen and learn.

Prepare yourself for huge diversity among your colleagues: Diversity is no longer about age, gender, race... today it is about having team members in different countries. It is also about collaborating with professionals whose skills and world views vary completely for yours. As Henry Ford said: "In business, if two people think the same, one of them is redundant". Even if your Millennial colleagues have never heard of Henry Ford, the adage will make them stop and think.

Get the WoW factor: With upwards of 10 million disciples worldwide, World of Warcraft offers great insight into the future workplace. It's complicated, very fast, and played by teams, so it's highly collaborative. Because it's online, team members can be anywhere in the world. WoW is also very demanding.

As each team negotiates a series of quests, each player must contribute to resolving them or become irrelevant and lose their place. The player who makes the greatest contribution becomes the leader... until another player contributes more. It's classic survival of the fittest – what did I say about the more things change, the more they stay the same?

Millennials have been playing WoW since they were teens, so they already have the skills you need to hone to contribute and collaborate in the future workplace. Indeed, they think of these skills as fun, rather than work.

Learn to collaborate: I've used the word "collaborate" quite a lot and I'm emphasising it because it's such an essential future-proofing skill and it's one Millennials have in abundance, Gen X not so much. You're more of a delegator than a collaborator but delegation has become increasingly old-fashioned as people expect to contribute their skills in an open environment.

Stay close to your network: Gen X-ers are very good at networking. You grew up with real people and no doubt still have

friends from school and university. This gives you a distinct advantage over Millennials who grew up in a virtual world and have a lesser concept of friendship and loyalty. This is the time to draw your network close and extend it in every direction, making sure everyone in your orbit is up to date on your skills and experience and vice versa.

Re-think skills training and learning: Consider this: having grown up in a digital world, Millennials expect to receive the information they need quickly, interactively, and on the go. It's an ongoing process which suits the rate of new knowledge creation. Manuals are increasingly irrelevant in this world; mentors and quick, easily-accessible reminders are the norm. Learn to learn this way.

If you're worried about your current skills becoming obsolete, think about acquiring analytical, programming and development skills, as these types of tech skills will be needed in the future.

Enter the world of the permanent contract worker: If you read my previous post, ["Dear business analyst, are you ready for the enhanced requirements of the future?"](#), you'll know about the permanent contract worker. The future world of work will see companies "recognise that access to a large base of contractor skills is a prerequisite for innovation and growth". We've been supplying contractors long enough to know that there will be no shortage of work for them.

The bottom line for Gen X is that constant innovation and rapid change do threaten the status quo you've become comfortable with, but that needn't be a problem. Over the years of running Mindworx and learning from the best at large international events like Singularity, I know that the future workplace brings with it more opportunities everywhere, certainly for those prepared to grab them.

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