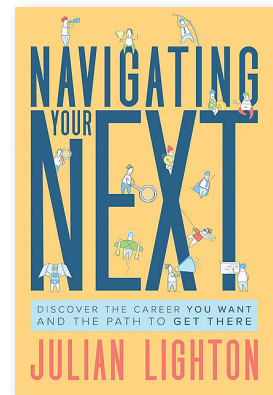


# Executive Book Summaries®

## Navigating Your Next

Discover the Career You Want and the Path to Get There

by **Julian Lighton**



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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

*Navigating Your Next* presents a structured approach to career decision-making and professional development, starting from the core premise that career progress begins with clarity about what a person actually wants and how their skills, motivations, and values align with possible opportunities. Rather than prescribing specific career paths, the book focuses on helping readers analyze their current situation and develop a deliberate plan for future roles and responsibilities.

The book introduces several practical frameworks to guide this process. Central among them is the Four Axis Framework, which examines competence, context, fit, and motivation to help readers understand where they are most likely to succeed. The text is organized around a seven-step process that moves from self-assessment and career clarity to planning, networking, execution, and reflection. Across three sections: Finding Your Next, Getting Your Next, and Living Your Next, the book outlines how individuals can define their value proposition, build supportive professional relationships, and execute a structured development roadmap toward their goals.

The author, Julian Lighton, draws on more than three decades of experience in business leadership and management consulting. His approach reflects lessons from corporate leadership roles as well as insights gained from hundreds of career coaching engagements with professionals navigating career transitions and advancement.

### IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Clarify career goals through structured self-assessment frameworks and reflection
- Evaluate strengths, competencies, and organizational fit across varied contexts
- Develop a clear professional value proposition for employers or collaborators
- Build and execute a structured development plan for long-term career direction

### Introduction

Most of us will spend approximately ninety thousand hours of our lives working. That equates to a third of the average lifespan. Your time spent working is likely to contribute heavily to your sense of identity, well-being, social circles, and legacy, and to create most, if not all, of your wealth.

What do you want to do? Who do you want to be?

How you want to spend your ninety thousand working hours is one of the most relevant questions you can ask yourself.

### Ikigai and Finding Your Next

Your destination might be a career move to a new industry, occupation, or sector of the work world, such as a pivot from corporate to nonprofit. Your goal might be to advance and grow in your professional life, or perhaps you're looking for the opposite, such as retiring or scaling back your focus on work.

Understanding and being able to pursue what you really want is liberating and empowering. The Japanese have a concept for this called *ikigai*, which is the place where what you are good at, what you love, what the world needs, and what you can get paid for converge. When you identify a path that fulfills all four elements, you've found your *ikigai*, a career or lifestyle that provides personal satisfaction, financial stability, and a sense of making a difference.

The journey to finding your *ikigai* is deeply personal and rarely linear. It requires balancing self-discovery with practical action, remaining open to possibilities, and aligning your career with your values and purpose.

While it may take time to pinpoint this alignment, the effort is worthwhile: A life guided by it can be both fulfilling and impactful, helping you wake up each day with a sense of meaning and excitement for what lies ahead.

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## PART I: FINDING YOUR NEXT

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### STEP 1

### Initiate: You're About to Embark on a Journey

People who are successful and know what they want have clarity. Clarity is a state of focused understanding in which information is easily processed, while confusion is a state of

uncertainty that makes it difficult to think, concentrate, or make decisions. Confusion also often leads to prevarication or procrastination. We might not be able to prioritize and sequence when confused, so we struggle to focus our efforts and are likely to find our energy scattered or dissipated.

One of the most frequent sources of confusion is the gap between our expectations and reality. Human beings are decision-making machines. We wander through space and time, encountering various stimuli, and we make decisions, mostly unconsciously, through pattern recognition based on our previous experiences.

When we experience a new situation that we have not encountered before, we try to extrapolate from existing learned patterns. When these fail to explain or rationalize what is going on, we get confused. The gap between what we expect and what is reality causes our conscious mental processes to be hijacked by underlying anxiety, fear, frustration, or anger.

To address this, we will follow a simple methodology consisting of seven Steps to Success. This will guide you from assessing where you are now to determining where you want to be, understanding your value proposition, creating and implementing an action plan, and finally celebrating and building on your success.

### Six Superpower Character Traits

There are six common traits among people who have successfully navigated career transitions:

- positivity
- curiosity
- adaptability
- consistency
- persistence
- kindness

These are not necessarily innate personality traits but rather behaviors that can be cultivated and strengthened. Adopting a mindset built around these six behaviors provides you with the inner drive and resilience you'll need to push forward and stay focused even when faced with obstacles or setbacks. It provides the psychological foundation necessary for the demanding task of rigorous implementation. Think of these as muscles to be exercised regularly.

The more you use them, the higher return you will get, and the more they will stand out to others. As you go on your journey to your Next and become the identity you want, remember to always include these six characteristics.

Live a life of desire backed by competence, and you will become an indomitable force of nature.

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## STEP 2

### Insight: Know Yourself

The best way to start figuring out what you want is to take stock of your current reality. Who are you today? What are your strengths? What are your preferred contexts in which to use those strengths?

In Step 2, you will use the Four Axis Framework to hold up a mirror of reality to yourself. The framework asks a series of questions that will help you form an accurate picture of who you are as a person and where you are in your career. The axes are:

1. Competency
  - What skills and capabilities do you have?
  - How good are you at them?
  - What do you enjoy?
  - What have other people noticed you are good at?
2. Context
  - What organizations, teams, departments, and companies have you worked in?
  - Which environments did you like?
3. Culture
  - What are your values?
  - What cultures have you worked in?
  - What makes you feel supported?
4. Mindset
  - What are your motivations?
  - What are your aspirations and goals?
  - What are your limiting beliefs?
  - What is your decision-making process?

#### Head North for Insight into Your Competency

The first place your hitchhiker's guide is sending you is to assess your competency. Competency is a measure of how well you do things. It describes your ability to get things done, which is made up of your skills, capabilities, experience, and expertise with them. It is a measure of your level of mastery of acquired skills and your actualization of innate abilities.

We care about competency because employers look for evidence that you've applied your skills and capabilities. In terms of ikigai, it is what you are good at and what you can get paid for.

#### Competency in Three Parts

1. **Intrinsic competencies** – an essential part of you, often from birth or a very young age. Examples include intelligence, charisma, a heightened sense of smell, perfect pitch, physical skills, artistic talent, and logical thinking.
2. **Generalist competencies** – versatile skills that can be deployed across multiple functional roles, industries, or work settings. These are sometimes referred to as transferable skills. Examples include project management, organization, problem-solving, active listening, persuading or motivating, spoken communications, writing, coordinating, and collaborating.
3. **Specialist competencies** – skills that are specific to an industry, a functional area, or a technology or process. Examples would be expertise in insurance, sales, negotiation, and client development.

#### Head East for Insight into Context

Now we move to the east quadrant of the Four Axis Framework, to context. For our purposes, context refers to the situations and environments in which you have demonstrated and built your competencies.

An affinity for smaller environments, whether a team or an overall organization, is generally predicated on a focus on relationships. This often involves high-touch interactions with people to build engagement and trust.

By contrast, an affinity for larger environments is generally predicated on a focus on tasks. This emphasizes outcomes based on shared processes and content.

#### Head South for Insight into Your Culture

We experience each other through our interactions as a series of values. We observe and form impressions of one another, both consciously and unconsciously. Are we kind? Are we curious?

Ultimately, what we want to understand is who you are from a values standpoint. How do you show up, and what matters to you in how others show up?

Make a list of your personal values—what you stand for and consider important. Then make a separate list of the cultures you have worked in and consider these questions:

- Do you see an overlap with your own values or hardly any?
- Which cultures have felt most positive and comfortable for you?

Write down as many details as you can when reflecting on the issue of culture because this area is likely to be the canary in the coal mine as you determine which types of cultures you want to or do not want to work in. Culture is critical for describing what you may be most interested in regarding future options.

### Head West for Insight into Your Mindset

The final element of the Four Axis Framework is mindset. Mindset refers to your established set of attitudes concerning motivation, goals, beliefs or biases, and decision-making. Your mindset is essentially how you play both the inner and outer game of life; your inner attitudes drive your outwardly visible and measurable behaviors.

This includes four key elements:

- motivation
- aspirations and goals
- beliefs or biases
- decision-making

Taking stock of your current reality by working through the Four Axis Framework is a key foundation for deciding on and moving toward your desired future reality—your Next.

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#### STEP 3

### Imagine: Know Your Options

Most people struggle with deciding what they want, typically in one of two ways:

1. They get stuck in confusion caused by too many possibilities, unsure how to determine what they really want.
2. They get overwhelmed by the gap between their desired future and current reality.

This sense of overwhelm usually stems from not knowing what is probable and how to take small, purposeful actions that build confidence and lead to longer-term achievement.

Taking purposeful action is a skill you can learn. Deliberate and sustained practice of an action that leads to your goal is purposeful and helps you transform yourself through changing habits and behaviors for the better.

In addition to action, mindset is key. Feeling sad or overwhelmed when you compare the life you have today with what you desire is normal but not useful. This is not manifestation or motivation. It's destructive. Get excited about how you could become better today and succeed tomorrow. Live a life of desire backed by competence, and you will become an indomitable force of nature.

### The Essence of Step 3

Use the Four Axis Framework to articulate your desires regarding competency, context, and culture and turn them into a list of possibilities. What do you want to be different, better, or more meaningful? Where does this lead you in terms of desired and potential possibilities? Filter your possibilities to get to probable options.

Break down the gap between your current reality and desired state by understanding the actions you need to take to reach the level of mastery you want over time. Prioritize the actions that feel worth taking and connect to your motivation, and sequence them based on relevant factors such as difficulty, availability, and cost.

### Don't Aim for Mediocre

There is someone out there with half your talent but ten times your self-belief making five times the money. 99% of people in the world are convinced that they're incapable of achieving great things, so they aim for mediocrity. Feeling insecure? The rest of the world is too. Do not overestimate the competition and underestimate yourself. You are better than you think.

### The Power of Regret: Future-Proofing Your Decisions

You don't want to build your life only to look back and wish you had made different decisions. That's the power of regret: it helps you clarify what matters most before it's too late, and you have an opportunity to harness that power here.

There are four major types of regret:

# Embracing responsibility unlocks the momentum to do what needs to be done.



- **Foundational regrets:** “If only I had done the work.” These tend to be small decisions that compound over time and have a significant impact on achieving your goals and creating your identity.
- **Boldness regrets:** “If only I had taken the chance.” These decisions are about *not* making decisions. Today’s procrastination and prevarication, fear and doubt, breed regrets tomorrow.
- **Moral regrets:** “If only I had done the right thing.” These decisions are about being out of alignment or integrity with yourself, such as lying, cheating, or hurting someone.
- **Connection regrets:** “If only I had spent time with so and so ...” Not allocating time to those who matter most in your life—parents, siblings, friends—hurts us over time. This absence can leave a sense of loss, as relationships are a primary source of meaning and context.

As you make decisions about your Next, use these regret categories as lenses to future-proof your decision.

If you’re not sure what you want, ask, “Which choice will I regret not taking?” Then imagine that regret: not “What would I get?” but “What would I feel?” That emotion brings the decision into the present, making it no longer abstract but real and personal. Use this approach to stem the tide of regret before it shapes your future.

## Deciding from the Outside In

Another way you might find your Next is to reverse the process. Instead of being driven inductively by your desires and aspirations or designing your Next as a hypothesis, consider letting availability make the decision for you. Be deductive. Put the decision in the hands of the market.

## What Are You Not Going to Be Anymore?

A final way you might find your Next is to be reductive. Instead of being driven by your desires and aspirations, you can decide by eliminating what you are no longer willing to do or who you are no longer willing to be. What repels or angers you about your current life? What are you no longer willing to tolerate in yourself or others?

Sometimes, it is easier to see in the negative. Many people use this method to eliminate actions, habits, current competencies, people, and influences from their lives. By doing so, they free themselves to become what they really want.

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## PART II: GETTING YOUR NEXT

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### STEP 4

## Investigate: Why You?

Good stories don’t just have beginnings, middles, and ends. They are connected by a “why.” They have an arc that brings the listener along, riding the ups and downs of the message. They show a transformation in the protagonist.

Your story is your ticket. Construct it and learn to tell it well. Share it with the right people so they know you and can help. Then focus on building a plan of purposeful actions to make progress, and live your story every day.

Remember that employers and investors are interested in your credibility, relevance, fit, and motivation—all of which make up your value proposition.

Being able to articulate your value proposition is not only for job interviews or investor pitches; it is critical for enlisting the help of others along your journey, whether in a networking, advisory, or other supportive capacity.

## Story Development Simplified

To ensure you don’t get lost along the way, here’s the story development process in a nutshell:

1. Clarify your value proposition
2. Frame your story
3. Practice and refine it
4. Expand your channels
5. Seek next-level feedback and conduct A/B testing
6. Field-test your story
7. Iterate until polished
8. Maintain a closed-loop mindset

## Connecting Your Value Proposition, Story, and Brand

Your value proposition is the “bones” of your story, why you are distinctive in some way. As you tell your story, the story expresses your brand.

I believe that we have lost sight of what a personal brand means, especially as social media has muddled the notion of brand. A brand is not a few viral pieces of content. It is not a slogan, logo, or color. A personal brand is built on trust. You build that trust with consistent messaging, presentation, and execution. Inconsistency in how you tell your story and how you live it is death by a thousand cuts when it comes to brand.

Your personal value proposition is a brand promise, a promise of trustworthiness made up primarily of your credibility (competency, quality, consistency, and persistence), relevance, values, and motivation.

Your brand expresses your value proposition and tells others:

- This is what I am
- This is what I want
- This is why I am uniquely suited to do this
- This is why I’m interested in this opportunity

You will tell these things in a way that people actually want to hear. You will tell a story they connect with; they want to find out what happens next.

They want to be involved in getting you to your Next. And that’s where the magic happens: getting people to help and support you, to open doors for you.

## A Multichannel Approach to Telling Your Story

The “who I am,” “what I want,” and “why me” elements of your story can be plugged and played in various formats for various purposes. These include:

- spoken elevator pitches (short and long versions)
- cover letters and emails
- resumes or CVs
- social media profiles

You do not have to start from scratch with each of these channels. Think of this as a scaffolding process: you have crafted your basic value proposition story and can now build or “remodel” it for different channels and audiences.

Throughout it all, you are keeping in mind that the core of your story is “This is who I am, this is what I want, and this is why me.”

## STEP 5

## Implement: Activate the Plan

Think of this step as consisting of two big buckets of things to know and do. The first is the how—the guiding “meta” core principles that will set you up for success and help you sustain momentum as you develop and activate your plan. The second bucket is the what—actions to take to devise and implement your plan in a logical and manageable order.

### Four Core Principles for Career Success

Let’s take a deeper dive into the key guiding principles that define the *how* and are vital for successfully activating a plan.

#### Responsible Mindset

You are entirely responsible and accountable for your success and your actions. You have agency and full ownership of what you do. Embracing this mindset unlocks the forward momentum to do what needs to be done.

#### Doing Is Becoming

Much of your identity is shaped by what you do for work. In turn, this is influenced by your day-to-day actions and the people you spend time with, your tribe.

Neuroscience shows that identity is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Your brain works constantly to keep you aligned with your current identity. If you are trying to build new habits and achieve new goals but keep falling off, this is why. You have not yet shifted your identity. You will achieve your goals when your identity matches the outcome.

#### Radical Focus

You can’t do multiple things with excellence. You will get confused and fail. Radical focus means deliberately concentrating your energy and resources on the actions that most directly move you toward your Next and saying no to distractions.

Strategy is as much about saying no to things as it is about making the right decisions. In a world filled with competing demands and shiny objects, staying focused on your plan requires discipline. You can build the skill of saying no with these tactics:

- make it short and sweet
- state your values
- know that assertiveness can coexist with respectfulness

#### Ruthless Execution

This is a concept and methodology developed at and made famous by Cisco. It is focused on rapid, iterative, collaborative,

If you don't stop to measure success,  
you won't know when you've won.

”

and closed-loop planning and execution. As a methodology, ruthless execution has four phases:

1. commitment
2. planning
3. delivery
4. measurement

In practicing this competency, you will break your objective into incremental steps and persist through uncertainty, discomfort, learning curves, boredom, and anything thrown your way. You might need an accountability partner or coach, and that's fine, but you'll keep at it. Like an athlete honing a tennis serve day after day, you will steadily transform.

### Mapping the Actions to Activate Your Plan

1. Map your destination—what you want, including short- and long-term goals.
2. Map your destination to channels, or ways to reach them, such as people, groups, forums, and companies.
3. Map those channels to specific individuals and the “doors” they are behind.
4. Map those people and places to messaging that will help you build the right relationships and communicate your story effectively.

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## PART III: LIVING YOUR NEXT

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### STEP 6

### Increase: Know Your Success

The experience of success without realization, satisfaction, or fulfillment requires diagnosis—an honest reckoning with why many outwardly accomplished people still feel unfulfilled. You may feel successful based on your bank account, your title, or the recognition you receive, yet still feel empty, sad, or full of regret. This paradox of success ultimately depends on perspective.

I've diagnosed six traps or “symptoms” commonly associated with the downside of this success paradox:

- **Deferring happiness:** putting off being happy until some future milestone is reached.
- **Not knowing what you want:** lacking clarity about your life and career, often leading to fixation on one area and a lack of balance.
- **Living someone else's dream:** chasing what others want for you, not what you want.
- **Losing sight of “enough”:** tying identity to achievements and never achieving the mirage of “enough.”
- **Achieving loneliness:** reaching the top only to find you're alone there.
- **Not experiencing gratitude:** failing to pause and feel grateful for what you have and what you've been able to do.

These are the common signs of *what* to avoid when pursuing success. The *how* of success is twofold: the active practice of measuring your success with meaningful metrics that matter from your own perspective and of celebrating it in ways that reinforce connection, purpose, and joy. Together, in practice, these will help you not only get what you want but also know it when you do.

### Framing Your Success: The Success Thermostat

We all have an inner thermostat for different aspects of our lives, such as career success, personal health, and our relationships with partners and friends.

This concept compares the human tendency to return to a baseline level of success to a home thermostat regulating temperature. This thermostat shapes our view of life experience. It is adjustable, but only with awareness and internal work to shift that perspective.

Success does not erase or solve insecurities; it amplifies them. When we gain success, recognition, fame, or money beyond our conception of self (thermostat), inner conflict emerges, such as imposter syndrome and shame.

### Framing Your Success: It's About the Journey

The first step is to know what success is and how you are measuring it. You have to frame it up, which means thinking in terms of progress rather than progression. Progress is

about the small, consistent steps that move you forward. It's the "1% better" mindset: a stoic, patient commitment to the craft, not just the goal.

Progress says, "I am doing. I am learning. I am becoming." Progress, the journey, also becomes your identity (doing is becoming) and so allows you to accept success.

If you don't stop to measure success, you won't know when you've won. You'll keep reaching, striving, and chasing. But if you shift from asking "What did I achieve?" to "What did it mean?" and "What did I learn?" you'll be closer to enjoying true success and feeling fulfilled.

### STEP 7

## Inspire: Move from I to We

Unless your goal is to be an individual contributor or solo professional practitioner, you'll have to work through and with others to get what you want.

Whether you're trying to launch a new initiative, grow a business, or simply solve a problem, your success will depend on your ability to work in teams. That means leadership of people, and that means moving your skill set and mindset from "I" to "we." This step will help you shift from how you get what you want to how you and others achieve it together.

### The Big Idea: Leadership as Relationships

How do you get teams to succeed? How do you lead people? As a leader, you need to provide your teams with both a *know why* and a *care why*.

A leader defines the problem itself, the logical issue or opportunity to be solved, the so-called *know why* that a team needs to understand and apply through individual and collective action. However, the leader also defines and explains the way the team relates to the problem and the solution, the so-called *care why*.

These concepts are critical foundations of leadership and execution and show the shift from I to we and from merely building a plan to leading other humans in successful action and adaptation.

Collaboratively articulating and discussing *know why* and *care why* with your team creates clarity rather than confusion and fosters a shared vision and a sense of shared purpose. Together, these are the foundations of scalable engagement in the shared purpose and trust in you as a leader.

### Six Steps for Team Navigation

Understanding what you want as a leader and translating that to your team takes a structured cycle of attention and action.

Here is a six-step framework that will guide you in moving from I to we. This framework will be critical to your success as you go through your first one hundred days in joining a company at a new job or your transition to a new leadership role within a company.

1. **Discover responsibilities and accountabilities:** Clarify exactly what you are responsible and accountable for as a leader. You can do this by understanding how your role links to the company's value creation, operating procedures, and leadership metrics.
2. **Diagnose the external situation:** Take stock of the external environment to understand the current "lay of the land." Every leader operates within a marketplace, and you need a clear-eyed view of where you stand in it. Are you winning or losing against competitors?
3. **Diagnose the internal situation:** Look inward at the reality inside your organization. This is where you check whether your assumptions and plans match what's actually possible.
4. **Design an aspirational situation:** Once you know where you are, the next move is to define what you want, but unlike defining your *own* Next, you are now making decisions together, as a team.
5. **Develop a team interventions plan:** With clarity on the current state and shared aspiration, it's time to build the path. Planning doesn't mean you have all the answers but that you know how to sequence action. Create a plan to close the gap between the current and aspirational states.
6. **Deliver through a team calendar:** Once you've designed the interventions and your use of team modes based on your team's needs, the next step is to anchor all of this to the company calendar. This is about making sure great intentions and well-designed interventions don't get lost in the chaos of day-to-day demands.

### The Leadership Choice

You either want to be a leader, or you don't. You have a choice. Leaders are not just custodians of operations; they are catalysts for transformation. Your role goes beyond managing tasks; you are being compensated to empower your team members and elevate their potential. By investing in

their development, you not only enhance individual skills but also foster a culture of continuous growth and innovation.

This is where you find true significance as a leader: creating meaningful change that resonates throughout your organization. Embrace your responsibility to uplift others and watch as your team flourishes.

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## Conclusion

Those who succeed are not the ones with the most credentials or the best resumes, but those who take purposeful action. They own their calendar, work their relationships, stay focused, and know when to say no. They understand that career success isn't a one-time leap but a series of deliberate moves. Most of all, they take responsibility.

Whether you're still working on Step 2 or have already popped the champagne to celebrate in Step 6, the answer is still the same:

- **Keep being the defining force of your life.** The only thing worse than failing is succeeding at the wrong thing. Continually define what you want, not what others think you should want.
- **Keep practicing purposeful action.** Work the plan; do the reps.
- **Remember that success isn't linear.**
- **Continue building strong relationships.** Nothing worth doing is done alone. Cultivate trust, in others and in yourself.
- **Measure success now, not later.** Understand both what good looks like and how you are getting better every day, week, month, etc.

- **Enjoy the journey.** It may zig and zag, but no matter what, it is doing it every day and enjoying it that will turn it from stress and strain to freedom and expression.

And one more thing: celebrate. Don't wait for permission or aim for perfection. If you've reached a waypoint, mark it. Acknowledge your effort and share it with others. Meaning is not found in achievement alone; it's found in how we make sense of the path.

Whether your Next is around the corner or years away, you have the tools and the insight. You know what you want. You know what to do. You've got this. Just do it.



**Julian Lighton** is a business strategist, executive coach, and advisor specializing in decision-making, team performance, and scaling organizations. With more than thirty years of experience, he has served as a consultant, C-suite leader, board director, and coach across global companies. His career includes roles at McKinsey & Company, Cisco, Hitachi, and four publicly listed technology firms where he was chief strategy officer. He has led more than thirty mergers and acquisitions and taken companies public and private. Founder of Moo Pie Advisors, he works with leaders and teams worldwide. Lighton holds degrees from Oxford University and Harvard and lives in Silicon Valley.

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