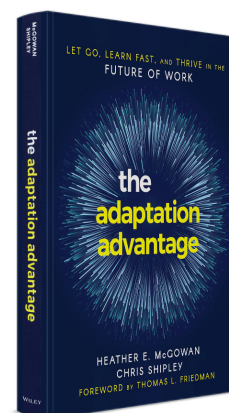


The Adaptation Advantage

Let Go, Learn Fast, and Thrive in the Future of Work

by **Heather E. McGowan and Chris Shipley**



Contents

Part I: Adapting at the Speed of Change

Page 2

Getting Comfortable with Adaptation: The Slowest Rate of Change Is Happening Now

Page 3

Part II: Letting Go and Learning Fast to Thrive

Page 4

Learning Fast: Why an Agile Learning Mindset Is Essential

Page 4

Part III: Leading People and Organizations in the Evolution of Work

Page 6

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Technology is changing work as we know it. Cultural norms are undergoing tectonic shifts. A global pandemic proves that we are inextricably connected whether we choose to be or not. So much change, so quickly, is undermining our sense of identity and challenging our ability to adapt.

The Adaptation Advantage explains the profound changes happening in the world of work and posits the solution: new ways to think about careers that detach our sense of pride and personal identity from our job title and connect it to our sense of purpose. Activating purpose, the authors suggest, will inherently motivate learning, engagement, empowerment, and lead to new forms of pride and identity throughout the workforce.

Of course, making this transition is hard. It requires leaders who can attract and motivate cognitively diverse teams fueled by a strong sense of purpose in an environment of psychological safety—despite fierce competition and external pressures. Adapting to the future of work has always called for strong leadership. *The Adaptation Advantage* is an essential guide to help leaders meet that challenge.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The meaning of adaptation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
- Why purpose and learning are more important than ever in the tech-driven economy.
- To seize the adaptation advantage for individuals and organizations.

PART I: ADAPTING AT THE SPEED OF CHANGE

The World Is Fast

Technology Is Changing Everything and Planting Opportunity Everywhere

We are entering the Fourth Industrial Revolution, marked by the merging of biological and cyber systems into a fully digitized economy. In this push to a digital world, any physical or mental task with a predictable, repeatable outcome will be handled by an algorithm. Objects will contain sensors connected to networks where data drives decisions in real time. Many aspects of the biological world will be augmented by robotic and cognitive technologies.

In this world, our relationship to work is no longer a monolithic career based on a single dose of early learning and compiled experiences. Instead, our careers will be defined by a state of constant learning and adaptation as new technologies, applications, and data alter the current state.

Three Interlocking “Climate Changes”

Celebrated *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman argues that we are being buffeted by three simultaneous and interlocking “climate changes”: technology, the environment, and the global economy. These changes, he suggests, are rapidly reshaping our world.

Technological climate change. Where technology-driven productivity shifts were once absorbed across a lifetime, allowing workers to adjust at pace, they are now on an exponential growth curve where change drives workers from job to job, employer to employer, and career to career.

Your work life will be one of constant adaptation. Every time you hand off a skill to technology, you must reach up to add capacity to your arsenal. Understanding the need for continuous adaptation is the first step in achieving the adaptation advantage.

Environmental climate change. Scientists aligned to academies, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world are clear on one point: Our natural environment is changing at a rate faster than at any time in the past 7,000 years. Eighteen of the 19 warmest years on record have occurred since 2001. Every company will soon be forced to adapt to avoid catastrophe or adapt to catastrophe itself. There is no denying that this will reshape how and where work is done.

Climate change of the market. In the analog economy,

global commerce moved only as fast as a ship could transport a container across the sea, and that container could easily be regulated, inspected, and taxed as it moved from port to port. Not so in the emerging digital economy. Bits flow across international boundaries at the speed of light. There are no ports of entry, customs inspections, or tariffs on digital goods. The adage “information wants to be free” may not always hold, but on the internet, it certainly flows freely.

We now live in a world in which any company can tap into the human talent cloud to identify the highest-quality, lowest-cost actor (human or technological) for any given task. In this reality, you must focus on how you uniquely add value, leveraging but not competing with rising technology and your own access to the talent cloud.

We must find a new path, one that loops through the traditional notions of work, learning, and retirement in a continuous and adaptive cycle. Where we once learned to work and then used that learning to build a career over decades, now we must work in order to continuously learn to recognize and embrace the challenges and opportunities that these climate changes present. Working to learn is the cornerstone of the adaptation advantage.

The Only Things Moving Faster Than Technology Are Cultural and Social Norms

The only thing moving faster than technology is culture. Rapid shifts in social norms are tearing at our individual and social identities, leaving many of us struggling to answer the three basic and oft-asked questions that establish our identity and orient us in the world: Who are you? What do you do for work? Where are you from?

Recent census data project that by 2045, white/Caucasian may no longer be the majority race in the United States. In the United States between 2009 and 2019, according to Pew Research, the share of adults who identify as Christian declined from 77 to 65 percent, while the share who claimed no religion at all rose from 17 to 26 percent.

According to the United States Department of Labor, 4.4 percent of those over 85 years old were engaged in the workforce in 2018, up from 2.6 percent in 2006.

The once “nuclear” family is giving way to extended families, as grandparents, aunts, and uncles engage in primary caregiving for children and aging adults.

Imagine what it might be like to tackle each workday as if it were the first day of school, but without the starchy new clothes.

Gender is now fluid. In various business, academic, government, and other forms, you may be asked to declare your personal pronoun preference.

Over the past decade, according to a survey conducted by Gallup, 69 percent of Americans say they have lost trust in the media. The proliferation of news sources and the inclination to cherry-pick facts and reject uncomfortable “truths” has eroded a once-common American experience: the day’s news delivered by a trusted news anchor.

Human populations have always aggregated in physical communities, city-states, and countries. Now, though, these geolocated populations are being eclipsed by a new form of association—online platforms.

Occupational Identity and Expertise

If so many facets of identity are being reshaped, the question “Who are you?” may be more rightly changed to “How do you define yourself?” Psychological security will be dependent on our abilities to define, own, and embrace the fundamental aspects and values of our complex selves, especially in a world where we are not likely surrounded by people who look, eat, pray, or speak like we do.

Likewise, that ice-breaker question “What do you do?” loses its relevance when our job is no longer our primary identity. “Where do you find purpose?” may be the better question in a world where your career identity is fluid at best and more likely becoming a portfolio of self-expression. Your adaptation advantage starts with a resilient and adaptive identity, even as the forces of globalization, diversity, and changing social and societal norms reshape your touchstones.

Getting Comfortable with Adaptation

The Slowest Rate of Change Is Happening Now

This exact moment in time, right now, is the slowest rate of change you will experience ever again. This speed of change makes it even more important to occasionally pause to reflect and focus on being human. Advances in technology allow machines to do many things, but they cannot dream, contemplate, or yet imagine our unseen future.

Imagine what it might be like to tackle each workday as if it were the first day of school, but without the starchy new clothes. That idea—that every day is a new learning day—is at the heart of the adaptation advantage.

From Scalable Efficiency to Scalable Learning

Throughout history, industrial companies grew and thrived by embracing scalable efficiency. Essentially, once a company figured out how to make something of value, it leveraged technology and process innovation to deliver the product more quickly and less expensively in order to make more profit.

That model breaks in the digital era, however. Digital production at scale is virtually infinite, and incremental costs are virtually zero. That’s the upside. The downside is that products—digital and digitally enabled—have shorter life cycles than they once did.

Consider the Sony Walkman, introduced to the market in 1979. For the next 30 years, Sony continuously innovated the product line, altering styles and media from cassettes to compact discs to keep pace with fashion and technology innovation, ultimately selling 385 million units before discontinuing the Walkman brand in 2010.

By contrast, Apple introduced the iPod in 2001 and sold virtually the same volume—390 million units—before ending most production in 2014. What killed the iPod? The iPhone. Apple killed its iPod cash cow in 2007 at the peak of iPod sales. The lesson here: If we disrupt ourselves at our peak, we’ll be well prepared to surf the next wave of innovation, and we’ll own the timing of our transformation. That is the adaptation advantage in action.

Scalable learning is what allows a company like Amazon to transform from online bookseller to global marketplace to web services provider to Academy Award-winning entertainment producer. Amazon seizes the opportunities that come like so much flotsam and jetsam of rapid market disruption.

From Stocks to Flows of Knowledge

But scalable learning is so much more than evaluating market turns and grasping at emerging fads. Principal to scalable learning is recognizing that information, which is

the atomic stuff of learning, is changing. In a slow-moving world, we had time to codify information into curriculum, establish a pedagogy, conduct training sessions, memorize, test, and apply “stocks” of knowledge, quite like inventory stored in a supply closet for future use.

In a fast-moving world, the information comes at us not in packaged and digestible chunks but in continuous flows. To become scalable learners, we need to become adept at drinking in new information as it flows by.

Now, rather than learning how to work, we ought to work in order to learn. That is, we take learning from our work as the primary benefit of work. People have always learned on the job, but what they learned was how to perform the explicit aspects of the job; they acquired the skills to do the work.

Now, we have to ask what the work has taught us. What did we learn from all the information that flows through the process of working? How were specific problems solved? Which approaches failed and why? How might those same approaches be effective in different circumstances?

In this increasingly fast-moving, change-dominated world, the speed you need comes from matching the “how,” rather than the “what,” of what you do. Make that shift in perspective and identity, and you are well on your way to adapting to the emerging market.

PART II: LETTING GO AND LEARNING FAST TO THRIVE

Finding the Courage to Let Go of Occupational Identity

In his seminal book *The Practice of Management*, Peter Drucker describes the parable of the three stonecutters: “An old story tells of three stonecutters who were asked what they were doing. The first replied, ‘I am making a living.’ The second kept on hammering while he said, ‘I am doing the best job of stonecutting in the entire country.’

The third one looked up with a visionary gleam in his eyes and said, ‘I am building a cathedral.’”

In one version of the story, the third stonecutter declares, “I am building a cathedral to bring people together.” In that version, the stonecutter reveals not just a vision—to build a cathedral—but also a purpose—to bring people together.

A purpose-driven identity—a sense of self that transcends job title and skill sets—is the best defense against work-re-

lated obsolescence. Yet, building that identity is not easy, because to have a sense of purpose, you must first discover your purpose.

You Are a Prototype; Start With Why

How do we avoid falling prey to occupational identity traps? We start with Why. In the age of accelerated change, every company needs to define themselves not just by their What or How but also by their Why. The Why is the principle that guides organizations through rapidly transforming market requirements, product and services opportunities, and business model adaptation. The Why is every company’s unique advantage.

As technological and social change unmoor us from our professional identities, we must connect to our Why as well. If research is correct, young people in the developed world graduating today will likely hold 17 jobs across five different industries in the course of their careers. To navigate that trajectory, you cannot define yourself by what you do. Instead, you must take your definition from how and why you do it.

By thinking of your career as a continual “beta,” you will develop your relationship to purpose, better understand and develop your superpowers, and come to recognize that your job is merely the application of your skills and a connection to your purpose at a moment in time. This is how you move from “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” (stonecutter 1) or a fixation on your current tasks (stonecutter 2) to a greater purpose-driven vision (stonecutter 3), “building a cathedral to bring people together.”

What kind of stonecutter are you? How do you define your Why and How? How does your What manifest your Why and How? What is your purpose?

Pay attention to what interests you; that is the fuel source for your lifelong learning and the basis for your adaptation advantage. In fact, the answers to these questions will give you the courage to let go and thrive.

Learning Fast

Why An Agile Learning Mindset Is Essential

We are in the greatest velocity of change in human history, and somehow we’ve got to keep up. The thing is, we will never keep pace by doing the same things faster. In fact, that will only get us farther behind. Why? Because it is the modality of the past. To keep up with this quickening pace, we need to focus not on speed and efficiency but on agility

and adaptability.

The ability to learn and adapt continuously requires both an agile learning mindset and a resilient and adaptive identity. It is nearly impossible to learn and adapt if your core identity is under threat. Learning, and more specifically unlearning, requires a comfort with vulnerability, an ease with ambiguity, an acceptance of not knowing, and, most importantly, an openness to failure.

The Agile Learning Mindset

In order to operate in an accelerating world that demands continual adaptation, we need a mindset outfitted to navigate change. We need an agile learning mindset. The agile learning mindset is separate and distinct from the agile methodologies of software and product development, although it shares similarities with those practices.

The agile learning mindset contains four components: agency, agility, adaptability, and awareness.

Agency. Agency, in social science parlance, is the capacity to act independently and to make choices for oneself. Some describe agency as the opposite of powerlessness. Navigating a rapidly shifting future of work will require the agency to learn and adapt quickly, understanding explicitly that learning is your responsibility. Connect that agency with purpose, curiosity, or motivational drive to fuel your learning and exploration.

Agility. Agility, and specifically learning agility, is the ability to both learn and unlearn. It is founded in your own learning style to optimize how you take in new information, form new knowledge, and let go of information that is no longer useful. It is flexibility, nimbleness, and responsiveness. Agility includes your ability to pivot not only to take in new information but also to deliver value when old processes and business models begin to fail and new ones are required.

Adaptability. Charles Darwin is thought to have said, “It is not the strongest of the species that survives but the most adaptable.” In work as in life, then, evolutionary success belongs to those who can most readily adapt. Adaptability enables us to navigate ambiguous situations and work through challenges even when not all the information is clear or even known.

Awareness. Awareness starts with an understanding of self. Self-awareness and your sense of personal identity are essential to engage meaningfully in work. One must also have a keen market awareness. Change is coming so quickly now

that organizations are in a constant dance, pivoting from one business model to the next. In fact, one might argue that the pivot *is* the business model. As a result, all workers—and most certainly every leader—need to understand how the organization creates value and how they contribute individually and collaboratively to that value creating.

Some of what separates us from other animals is also similar to what separates us from today’s artificial intelligence technologies.

Rise of the Humans

Developing Your Creativity, Empathy, and Other Uniquely Human Capabilities

It seems that it may be our ability and inclination to continuously learn and disrupt ourselves that makes us uniquely human. No other animal species disrupts themselves by creating new innovations and new, more complex tools, and certainly not ones that threaten their very survival as a species.

Interestingly, some of what separates us from other animals is also similar to what separates us from today’s artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. Silicon cognition has not been able to replicate or demonstrate innateness, that inherent sense of awareness, sentience, or wisdom found in humans. It struggles to apply learned skills and knowledge to new contexts. It simply lacks common sense.

The Predictive Markets Declare Future Skills That Favor Humans

Check any list of future skills, from the World Economic Forum to the Institute for the Future, and you will find one particularly intriguing similarity: None of them are specifically technical skills. The skills most needed in the future of work all center on uniquely human skills and our ability to think about our own thought processes and how we operate, and, more specifically, to collaborate with rising technology capabilities.

So why are so many people grasping at technology and sounding the alarm that schools need to teach more and better STEM skills, insisting that every kid must learn to code? Without a doubt, digital skills are important. But Dr. Randy Swearer, vice president of learning futures at Autodesk, says, “Humans need to understand what’s computable. They don’t need to understand a code, or to code, but they need to understand what’s computable.”

The real advantage to digital fluency is that it enables uniquely human skills to be seamlessly augmented with technological capabilities. That empowers individuals to see what can, and perhaps should, be automated. It empowers you to see that your real value comes from your uniquely human skills—your ability to leverage the technology tool and provide the wisdom, judgment, and common sense to maximize the value you create.

The Institute for the Future (ITF)’s Future Skills 2020 list is divided into two camps: individual performance skills and the aptitudes that enable better human-to-human and human-to-machine collaborations.

Individual skills:

- **Design mindset.** ITF defines design mindset as the “ability to represent and develop tasks and work processes for desired outcomes.”
- **Novel and adaptive thinking.** ITF defines this as “proficiency at thinking and coming up with solutions and responses beyond that which is rote or rule-based.”
- **Cognitive load management.** Defined as the “ability to discriminate and filter information for importance, and to understand how to maximize cognitive functioning using a variety of tools and techniques.”
- **Sensemaking.** ITF defines sensemaking as the “ability to determine the deeper meaning or significance of what is being expressed.”

Collaborative skills:

- **Social intelligence.** The “ability to connect to others in a deep and direct way, to sense and stimulate reactions and desired interactions.” “Emotional” intelligence” can be added to this definition.
- **Transdisciplinarity.** This is “literacy in and ability to understand concepts across multiple disciplines.”

- **Cross-cultural competency.** ITF defines cross-cultural competency as the “ability to operate in different cultural settings.”
- **Computational thinking.** The “ability to translate vast amounts of data into abstract concepts and to understand data-based reasoning.”
- **New media literacy.** The “ability to critically assess and develop content that uses new media forms, and to leverage these media for persuasive communication.”
- **Virtual collaboration.** The “ability to work productively, drive engagement, and demonstrate presence as a member of a virtual team.” As we increasingly work on global and often virtual teams, we must hone our ability to forge new relationships with, and perhaps even lead, people we may never meet in person.

PART III: LEADING PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE EVOLUTION OF WORK

Leading in Continuous Change

Modeling Vulnerability, Learning From Failure, and Providing the Psychological Safety That Builds Trusting Teams

As we wade into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we have to be more thoughtful about who we are leading and where we are taking them.

Leadership guru Jim Kouzes, co-author with Barry Posner of the seminal book *The Leadership Challenge*, says, “The most self-evident and stable truth is that, at its heart, leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. It is the quality of the relationship that makes the difference, not the rapidly advancing technology, or the fact that there are more human beings on the planet, or that organizations are more diverse, or that the economy is more global.”

“The more frequently leaders exhibit exemplary behaviors, the more likely it is people will feel engaged, be more productive, deliver higher-quality work, and all the other measurable outcomes you would expect from exemplary leadership.”

What, then, are those “exemplary behaviors” that deliver exemplary leadership in the context of accelerated change? How can we drive, eyes forward, to lead the future of work? Two ideas from Kouze’s and Posner’s work are to model

While you may assume your team knows who you are, you may be surprised to find they actually do not know what you value.

the way and enable others to act in order to lead adaptive teams. By embracing these two ideas, you will set the conditions for rapid learning, unlearning, and build the transformational teams at the heart of your adaptation advantage.

Model the Way

Introduce yourself and share your values. While you may assume your team knows who you are, you may be surprised to find they actually do not know what you value.

Be vulnerable. Too often, we think of vulnerability as a weakness, but University of Houston research professor and best-selling author Dr. Brené Brown has convinced millions over nearly 10 years that vulnerability can also be the basis of strength and connection. As machines do more and more routine and predictable work, humans need to be, well—more human.

Trust is essential at speed. In order to learn and adapt to new technologies, new roles, and new business models, we have to think like a trapeze artist and let go of one bar so we can grab the next. If you are asking your team members to leap, you have to assure them there is a net to catch them should they fall.

The best leaders are curious learners. To build a team that continuously learns and adapts, that learning has to start with you.

Enable Others to Act

You do not need to know everything. In the past, leadership often meant the person at the top of the organizational chart was the unquestionable expert. No longer. In a complicated world, you can predict outcomes. In a complex one, you need to constantly adapt in order to direct outcomes.

Establish psychological safety. Having the courage to show your weakness, embracing not knowing, and admitting mistakes is how you model vulnerability so that your people will be open with their own gaps and raise their hands when they need help.

Encourage respectful discourse and dissent. You

may avoid tough conversations to spare people's feelings. Maybe you are avoiding your own discomfort. Avoiding tough conversations, though, robs your team of the feedback that may help them grow or adapt.

Prioritize wellness. As our world has become increasingly complex, tenure in jobs has become shorter, and continuous learning has become a nonoptional requirement for staying relevant, it's no surprise that stress levels have skyrocketed. It is high time that corporations make mental health and stress reduction not just a human resource benefit but a core business strategy.

The Adaptive Organization

Creating the Capacity to Change at the Speed of Technology, Market, and Social Evolution

As we cross the bridge to a digital economy, we need to shift from measuring output to optimizing throughput. In other words, the conditions in which we create and produce will matter more than the product itself.

That may sound like a radical idea, but consider this: The things we produce—because they may be transient—are a product of our organization's capacity to identify and rapidly respond to new opportunity and capture new value.

Products and services will be short-lived. Rather than optimizing for specific production, our best work will be in establishing the conditions that enable continuous and continually shifting methods of value creation. These conditions result in an agile, learning, and adaptable company able to thrive in the new realities on the other side of the digital economy bridge. Those conditions are culture and capacity.

It's a radical but remarkably straightforward concept: Companies are nothing more than culture and capacity. Period.

Of course, neither culture nor capacity is a simple construct. Still, if you can break apart these two elements to understand them, you can rejoin the ideas to create a framework for highly effective organizational leadership.

Culture at the Core

Culture is either intentional or accidental. An intentional culture is a deliberate construction of organizational leaders, created in collaboration with all those who are led. An accidental culture is an environment that emerges without intention from a collection of experiences. Accidental cultures are almost always toxic.

Intentional culture begins with organization's leadership. Frankly, it *is* organizational leadership. So, where do you start to build a great culture?

Author and leadership guru Simon Sinek reminds us that transformational leaders of all kinds set clear targets. From Martin Luther King Jr.'s leading the civil rights movement to the Wright Brothers' chasing the dream of flight, great leaders craft a big vision and give their people a reason to follow them. We join our efforts with great leaders because we share a sense of purpose and live by common values.

Or, as Sinek would say, start with Why. The center of every great culture is a clear sense of purpose.

Capacity: Culture's Partner

Culture alone is not enough for effective adaptation. To get there, you must also nurture culture's partner, capacity. This is where you need to connect the two concepts for effective leadership.

If culture is the heart of a company, capacity is its brain. Simply put, capacity is an organization's ability to respond to opportunity. But it is much more than the available space, time, and talent needed to address a new opportunity. Capacity is how we think about new information and ideas in order to assess and respond to opportunity. In other

words, it's not enough to ask whether you have the people—or even the right people. You also need to ask whether your people have the mindset to think about this opportunity in the right way.

“Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished,” says psychologist Dan Gilbert. The world is changing, and fast. It is hard to imagine.

We will change, too. The work we do and the way we do it will differ almost from day to day. It will always be easier to look back and remember than it will be to look forward and imagine.

That practice of looking back and forward, and it is a practice, is incredibly intimidating when you are tightly bolted to a professional identity that measures how you walk in the world.

On the other hand, it's incredibly exciting to imagine a future of work that lets us explore *why* we walk in the world.

IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- ***Propeller: Accelerating Change by Getting Accountability Right*** by Jared Jones, Craig Hickman, Tom Smith, Tanner Corbridge
- ***The Reinventionist Mindset: Learning to Love Change and the Human How of Doing It Brilliantly*** by Joe Jackman



Future-of-work strategist Heather E. McGowan helps leaders prepare their people and organizations for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In 2017, LinkedIn ranked her as its number-one global voice for education. She gives nearly 50 keynote talks a year and is a regular *Forbes* contributor. Journalist, analyst, executive producer, and startup mentor Chris Shipley has documented, influenced, and predicted the impact of technology on business and society for more than 30 years. As executive producer of the DEMO Conference for more than a decade, she ushered groundbreaking products such as salesforce.com, TiVO, and VMWare to market.

From *The Adaptation Advantage: Let Go, Learn Fast, and Thrive in the Future of Work* by Heather E. McGowan and Chris Shipley, Copyright © 2020 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Summarized by permission of the Publisher, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 272 pages, ISBN 978-1-1196-5309-7. Summary copyright © 2021 by Soundview Book Summaries ® www.summary.com, 1-800-SUMMARY.