

Life lessons from nexxworks & friends

Things we wished we knew when we were younger



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Dear reader,

This nexxworks e-book is somewhat different than our previous ones. This time, we are not writing about any type of trend in business or technology. We're not even going to talk about the future in the strictest sense. On the contrary, our authors are looking back to what they have learned along the way in their life's journey and what they would advise their younger selves, knowing what they know today. So, this is an e-book filled with life lessons which should be useful for anyone at any age. Though we do secretly hope that you might impart some of them onto your older children, who will be facing some very big challenges in the coming years.

I've curated quite some e-books over the years for nexxworks and – when working with multiple writers – I've always been able to perceive some patterns, some directions. But this collection proved especially challenging in that aspect.

There is often some higher form of consensus among professionals as to where we may be heading when it comes to technology, science, business, economy, etc. And even if there isn't, patterns still emerge through the opinions about certain themes. But when it comes to sharing life lessons and advice, it proved much harder to find these similarities. There were some, obviously: like advice about cognition, authority, relationships, dealing with differences (which are as beneficial as they can prove challenging), making choices or always remaining open and curious.

But what emerged above all from these stories was their diversity and the fact that no piece of advice ever is neutral. It made me think that life lessons are generally born from a negative space (not as value, but as a mathematical concept), from an absence. It is often about a way of thinking or feeling that does not come naturally (or nurturally (if it wasn't a word, it is now)) to us, but which we have learned to assimilate in a way that proved beneficial to us in one way or another. But that also means that what might be great advice for one person, might be less so for another to whom these things do feel natural. Just to give an example: some people might indeed fare better if they learn to say "no" more, while others probably need to embrace "yes" more often.

But it's not because life lessons are personal, that we can't learn from those of others who are very different from us. In fact, just realizing that others have been struggling with issues that are very different from yours, can be just as useful for opening up new

perspectives. So read on with an open mind, dear reader. Recognize those recommendations that seem familiar to you, remember those that give you new insights, and maybe even think a little bit longer about those that may seem completely obvious to you (and about what that means for your relationship to others for whom this is not the case).

Enjoy your summer read!

Warm regards,

Laurence Van Elegem,
Content Director at nexxworks

Start your journeys with a sense of direction, open to possibilities that are as yet unknowable and without being overconstrained by rigid goals

By Prof Dave Snowden, Director Cynefin Centre

It's not difficult to advise people of a different generation, but it is difficult to write that advice in the absence of a question. Indeed, for advice of that nature a question is permission giving. Unsolicited advice is rarely welcome and while it may be listened to with respect it is likely to have no effect.



**Dave
Snowden**

So in writing this short thought piece I have had to assume that in picking up this book you are asking for advice which is - at least in part - context free; and that is difficult. It is made worse by the fact that I am of that generation who left University debt free and confident of being able to find a job. We probably should have been, but in the main were not, aware of the existential threat of climate change that I used to worry about for my grandchildren, then as things got worse for my children and now for myself. The imminent threat of nuclear war had passed by the time I started my career; I was only eight at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis but I can still remember the palpable fear of my parents and their friends. Now that threat is back in part and we face the unthinkable in the growth of populism and war between nations in Europe. To those reading this article you are, in the words of the Chinese Curse, living in interesting times. You will face challenges my generation didn't even think were plausible.

So in writing this piece all I can really do is talk about what was valuable for me and hope it has use for you, the reader. So to my little list:

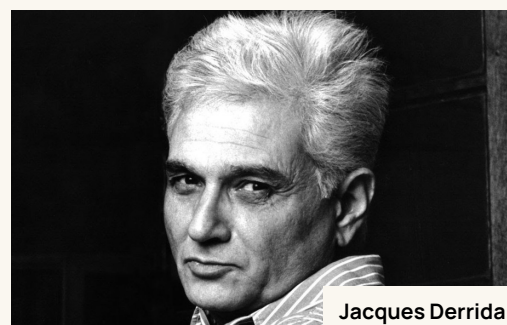
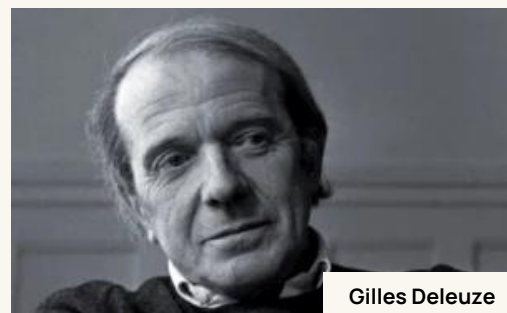
Read voraciously

I grew up in a household where you had no idea what might come up in conversation over the dinner table, and in school we did impromptu debating every week. That meant walking to the front of the class and being given a proposition and a position that you had to argue (regardless of your own views) for seven minutes to a hostile audience without preparation. That encouraged an eclectic reading of science, history, politics the arts and anything else I could get my hands on. I didn't always understand it, I had to follow references and use dictionaries and more recently the internet but it gave me a rich body of knowledge and learning to fall back on. To this date I am still normally to be found with a history text book, something in the cognitive sciences or similar, a novel and science fiction/fantasy all on the go at the same time.

Read deeply

With the odd exception, popular management books are simply collections of partly understood cases assembled to support a popular theme. Aside from the partial datasets, the failure to recognize that, as times undergo radical change, recipes based on what people think happened in the past may be not be applicable. Most of these books are superficial to the point of being dangerous. If you want to understand how decisions are made get into the cognitive sciences - there are many text books that can be read by the lay person. Read up on the idea of affordance from biology, it will tell you more about what is possible for your organization than a simplistic recipe.

Check into Philosophy, in particular the inheritors of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida where the ideas of assemblage and aporia will tell you how entrained patterns of thinking prevent innovation and how to ask questions that break those patterns. You don't have to fully understand something and you can always hike some of the authors or their followers in for conversations and to challenge your teams. You want to be a chef, not a recipe book user and that means a mixture of practice, learning your trade - and critically theory. The anti-intellectual tendencies of many an Anglo-Saxon manager are an inhibitor of learning and create a less resilient model of leadership.



Encourage mavericks

The ones who think differently, consider them like the jesters of the medieval kings who could speak truth unto power. Make sure some of the people around you are cynical, happy to call things as they are and not just get swept up in the next management fad. If you don't have the time to read voraciously and deeply then surround yourself with people who do, either within or outside the organization. I had one boss who targeted me on how many senior people in the organization demanded in writing I be fired. He said that if I was doing the change job properly - trying to create a service business out of the sow's ear of a manufacturing organization - I was going to upset people and I should get on and do it. He also wanted to know who got upset so he could see who was not buying into the change. He gave me top cover and in return he got honesty. Remember that an efficient system is rarely effective or resilient, you need requisite variety. I talk a lot about coherent heterogeneity - the ability to be very different but come together quickly in different contexts. Death for an organization lies in homogeneity. You really don't want a common culture and common values and common purpose, you need dissent and difference, not to the point of anarchy and to a degree contained, but without difference, what some scientists call a gradient, there is no learning.

Forgive but don't forget

This is one of the hard lessons to learn but people fail, you fail. Being open means that openness may be exploited. You can't succeed unless you trust people and with that trust comes the inevitability that you will be let down, discover the expectation match was poor or face deliberate dishonesty. If you want to lead there will be politics. My view, and I have the scars, is that it is better to pick yourself up, dust yourself down and start again but don't let one, or even more, bad experiences stop you from doing what is right. Overall trusting people pays off and creating too much security stifles innovation. There are of course limits to this! As a side bar on this, the more you speak in platitudes (and reading those airport bookstand 'recipe' books will encourage this) the more you can be exploited. Early feedback on understanding is key, communicating with stories as well as requests and instructions gives a richer mechanism for communication.

The better the communication, the less forgiveness is needed and the fewer regrets you will have.



Humility is key

By which I don't mean the platitudes of servant leadership and the like. You can do worse than heed the lessons of Luke 14:10 here. The higher you rise in an organization the more this verse comes into play:

"But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee."

In a sense this applies in reverse as well, those who work for you need to invite you in to their conversations and you have to live with that.

Don't be a door mat, but the aggressive pursuit of goals will prevent you discovering emergent opportunities.



In complex work we talk about starting a journey with a sense of direction, open to possibilities that are as yet unknowable and without being overconstrained by rigid goals or objectives.

I can leave you with no better advice than that, or maybe better with another bible quote that makes the point better than I on moving forwards despite uncertainty. This from 1 Corinthians 13:12-13. My mother, who was an atheist, insisted I read the Bible in full before I was 14 on the grounds that I would never understand European Literature if I didn't. I always loved this image of seeing through a glass darkly but verse 13 has a lot for a modern leader to reflect on. A favorite author of mine Terry Eagleton wrote a book *Hope without Optimism* and another on *Radical Sacrifice* both of which are easy but disturbing reads. If you do reflect on these then do some background reading on the meaning of 'charity'.

12: For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

13: And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Make time to disconnect

By Peter Hinssen, Partner at nexxworks, author and keynote speaker

In one of my all-time favorite movies, 'Back to the Future', the antagonist bully Biff Tannen smuggles a copy of 'Grays Sports Almanac' statistics to his younger self. I would not even need to give my younger version a whole book when it comes to financial advice, just two pivotal moments:



**Peter
Hinssen**

"Buy Apple Stock in 2000, buy Bitcoin in 2009." My future self would be set for life.

But honestly, if I would have the extreme luxury and opportunity to pass on any knowledge or wisdom, I probably wouldn't give financial advice. The older I become, the more I find that personal quality time might very well be the most important ingredient to remain mentally sane. It's an antidote for depression as well as the recipe to stay open for serendipitous encounters, ideas and friendships.

After launching and managing three different startups back-to-back - exploits which were extremely intoxicating in terms of business excitement, professional passion and experiences - I now realize I was quite close to a complete burn-out. But I did not recognize this at the time. In fact, I would have mindlessly jumped into a fourth startup, had my personal entourage not countered that move. In a military analogy, I was like the Vietnam veteran, with three tours of duty and only now do I understand that a fourth tour in 'Nam might have pushed me off the cliff.

I made a complete switch in life after that moment, and decided to spend more time with my family, certainly during the kids' holidays. I even indulged in two-month long vacations during summer. Had I chosen a career as a teacher, I would have had that luxury as well, so it seemed almost logical to me that I too could copy that approach. It was the best decision of my life. The summer months were wonderful, and spending time with my children had an amazing effect. Before that, I usually took about two weeks off: I needed a whole first week to 'detox' from the business stress and routine, and that by the second week I was already getting into the 'I have to get back to the office, my God how much e-mails will there be waiting for me' mode. But when you program longer periods of rest, that whole paradigm changes.


In the beginning I did it for the kids, and the older I get, the more I realize I was doing it for myself.

I use those periods to engage in completely different activities. I ride my bike or my tractor. I work on our farm. And I lose myself in woodworking. In fact, over the years I've gotten extremely passionate about working with timber as there will always be things on our farm that need mending. For me, few things can match the joy of turning a piece of raw wood into a functional item with my trusted tools.

Above all, when I'm on my tractor, or working with my miter saw, my mind will completely clear and empty itself from all day-to-day observations and worries. This really allows me to open up my mind and connect the dots that had previously been drifting in my mind.

So, if there is one thing I would urge my younger self, it is to start that routine earlier. There is often such a rush after finishing your studies, to start working immediately. And then you lose yourself in a rat-race, either in startups or traditional careers. But the truth is that you are often 'led' from one milestone to another, dragged from one engagement to another. And that's ok, because sometimes, there's no other way. But just realize that finding, crafting, making the time to 'detox' is just as essential.

Maybe I would even have been more passionately involved in my startups, had I had the opportunity to take extended periods of disconnectedness between them, instead of rushing straight into the next one.



So, for me, next to Apple and Bitcoin, I have just one piece of advice: "Take the time to completely disconnect, and that time will pay itself back a hundredfold."

Live your life with your eulogy in mind, not your resume

By Heather E. McGowan, future of work strategist, keynote speaker and author

A few years ago, I was inspired by a [TED Talk by David Brooks](#) that spoke about the difference between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. It may seem kind of odd to refer to a eulogy in an e-book about life lessons, but they are simply how you sum up what accomplishments or impacts or meaning you had on the world, especially to others.



**Heather E.
McGowan**

When you live with a resume mindset, you focus on how you make a living. You focus on how things work. You focus on external success. You focus on acquisition of money, attention, possessions, and stuff. When you focus on the eulogy perspective, you question: "Why are we even here to begin with? What internal intrinsic value do I have? Who do I love? Where do I give back? Where and how do I create community?"

And this is where I'm encouraged by this generation because prior ones looked at their graduation and they said, Okay. I got a job. And that job is in Lancaster, PA. If you have a loved one or a partner with whom you may start a life together, you likely need to look for that second job. And then you must figure out where you are going to live. Are we going to rent? Are we going to buy? Are we going to have children? Do we need to think about school systems? And then where are those places that we belong?" It could be houses of worship. It could be bars, restaurants, dog parks, gyms, country clubs, or whatever you're into. And then out of that, your community accidentally forms.

If we've learned anything from the global pandemic, it is that a significant part of the younger generations is putting community first. A lot of folks are resisting the status quo by declaring that they want their life to be as important as how they make their living. That's a reversal of prior generations and it may just work better for all of us.

And maybe their community will be in Lancaster. Maybe it will be in Pennsylvania. Maybe it will be in New England or maybe it will be further out in the world. But they turn the standard thinking upside down: they let life and community center their lives rather than 'the job'. They begin by contemplating where they want to live. What kind of climate they want to live in? Do they want to live in an urban or rural area? Where are those places that they want to belong? And then how does their job fit into that? I think that's the reordering that is starting to take place today. And that gives me great hope for the future.

In summary, the existential crisis brought on by the pandemic combined with the younger generations' passionate insistence to focus as much on life, and specific on community, as well as how we make our living, is best summed up by a quote from the closing line of poet laureate Mary Oliver's poem *The Summer Day*:

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"



Two types of people

By Carlota Perez, scholar specialized in technology and socio-economic development and author of 'Technological Revolutions & Financial Capital'

Even being aware of how preposterous it is to make such an extreme generalization; my experience tells me that, when approaching understanding, there are two types of people: the broad big-picture types and the one-by-one proven-fact types.



**Carlota
Perez**

The first are willing to make generalizations from a very wide range of information about a very broad spectrum; they are happy to combine different levels of certainty – from suspicion to hard facts – into a sort of movie of reality.

The second type approaches each fact on its own right and will go very deeply into a single question at a time. The first are interdisciplinary by nature and feel horribly constrained when required to stay within one discipline, one theory or one ideology. The second like to specialize and want to be sure of the tools they use, the theories they espouse and the ideologies they follow.

Since we all share the same world, we are often together and frequently uncomfortable. The problem is that we don't always realize that we need each other. It is thanks to the big picture people that broad theories are developed, within which many specializations thrive. It is thanks to the specialists, who are constantly searching and measuring the facts, that the big picture people can even consider doing their all-encompassing thinking. The hypotheses of the ones depend on the work of the others; but we seem predisposed to mutual rejection instead of appreciating the value we provide to each other.

Can you tell what type you are? Do you get excited by big theories, or do you find them fanciful and not serious enough? Do you think those people who spend their whole life studying one type of bacteria are obsessed? Do you always ask for the hard facts in order to accept a statement or an idea about why something happens? Are you annoyed by my holding that there are two types of people without ever conducting an experiment to prove it? Are you likely to dismiss the idea because it's too extreme or do you find it interesting and are willing to observe others and yourself to identify types? Well, I guess by now you know what type you are.

Do you think we can consciously learn to live with each other and to take advantage of our respective values? When we are in an academic or business environment we are bound to collide when having to take collective decisions. How much weight do we give to broad interpretations of the context we are facing and how much to the measurable facts? Surely, we need both. But it's true that certain decisions need more of the one and others more of the other.

Obviously, as the fact-by-fact people will hold, we are more likely to be located along a range that goes from one extreme to the other, and they are right. However, we, the big-picture people, will claim that it is more useful to stretch reality a bit so the differences can be dealt with consciously towards consensus.

If we know the origin of our differences, in this or any other area, it will be easier to deal with each conflict. Can you be comfortable with that statement? I do hope so.



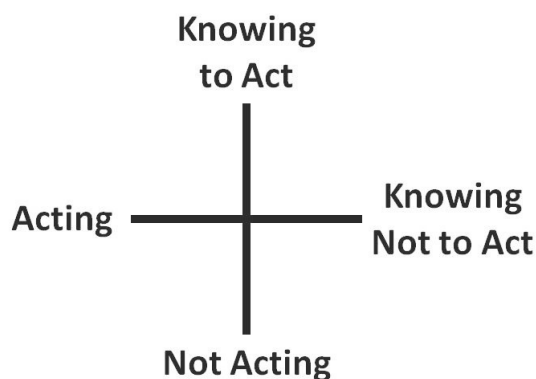
Build your dreams, don't chase them!

By Pascal Coppens, author and China keynote speaker

To my most impatient, overly ambitious and rebellious younger me, I would say that in order to make dreams happen, you need to build a path towards them, not just hit the road and frantically chase them. Life can be an adventure, as mine has been, but to enjoy that journey, don't focus on the destination, instead seek out the best trails and guides along the way.



**Pascal
Coppens**



Having lived in China for a long time, I learned about the valuable 'wuwei' (无为) concept from Daoism philosophy. The literal translation would be 'inaction' or 'no action'. More accurately it means acting, but without attaching any importance to the result. It teaches us to (temporarily) put off dreams that are too forceful to chase, and to focus instead on responding to inner needs and passions as well as external opportunities.

It's about letting go of our ego-driven plans. It's a subconscious mindset where change is not forced onto things but enabled with patience, persistence, skill and efficiency.

As such, I learned three Wuwei-practices from Chinese friends I wish I had known before:

- A successful Chinese entrepreneur once told me that creativity seldom makes you richer, but money gives you more time to be creative. Be like gentle water that can erode a hard stone over time. If I had known that 20 years ago, I would have exported Christmas decorations from China to make enough money to start my own internet company more comfortably in Shanghai.
- A top Chinese official once whispered in my ear that it's mostly people who can read the waves who make it to the very top. When the tide is high – and new markets and opportunities are visible – you need to grow as fast as bamboo and stand out. That is your moment to double down. When the tide is low – when laggards and regulations are coming in – be like bamboo that bends in the wind, and if needed, hide for a while. I won many bets in my life, but also forgot to stop fighting the losing battles.
- A good Chinese friend once explained to me that true friendship is the shortest path to achieve your dreams. Even if you are the smartest, the best, the most creative, most often your trusted network will give you a shorter path to success. Touch the stones in the water to cross the river. If you believe you can jump across without help from others, you will likely fall and maybe even drown. Invest more time in friends who believe in you. Make real friendships with people who are visible above the waterline. In my past, too often I thought that I was capable to leap into the future on my own.

If you rigidly chase your dreams, you will fall in the water many times. You will learn from getting back up, but the energy lost takes much time to recover.

Use your youthful energy to make money, use your creativity along the power of the waves, and rely on those friends who are the rock you can stand on. But don't forget to remain the rock for your friends too.



Never borrow unexamined ideas from others

By Carol Sanford, Executive Producer at The Regenerative Business Summit

Over the years, I have come to understand the dangers of following self-appointed and often best-selling experts, without further analyzing or second-guessing their best practices or 'visionary' ideas. It happens to the best of us: even top universities and platforms borrow and further share these ideas into the world, without much further investigation, and that is how they tend to spread like a wildfire.



**Carol
Sanford**

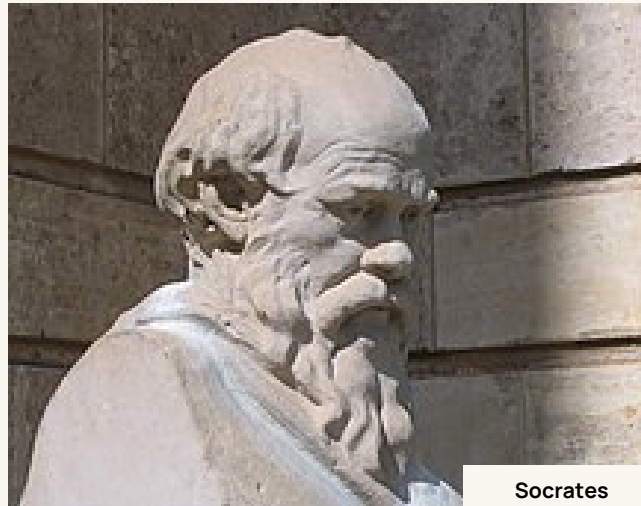
The real culprit here is that most of us have been trained to accept and internalize the ideas of experts, instead of thinking for ourselves. Worse even, we have been actively taught to distrust our own thinking and are often discouraged to share our own ideas. Even on a dissertation, we start with the literature review and must build only from there. And it's not just an education problem. It influences how we raise our children, how we manage and train employees and all the domains where we are learning the stuff of life.

After 30 years of experience, I finally understood the enormous shortcomings of this learning model. Even though I had worked so hard and so long to achieve my status as a specialist, I knew I had to let go of it when I realized how dangerous and degenerative this idea of 'the expert' was for our democracy. I no longer wanted the next generations to take my best practices for granted. Because if they did, it meant that they would also easily and uncritically adapt the visions of false prophets and scientists.

Most people are startled when I tell them this. They are assuming that they, and most people, really are thinking for themselves. But I would beg to differ.

Socrates understood this and he did everything in his power to disrupt the ideas offered to him by his students. He invited them to be more critical by asking developmental questions.

His students had to work hard to find meaning behind existing ideas and questions. They had to examine them before they were able to learn what Socrates thought, which in fact he rarely offered. This approach is pretty much the exact opposite of most current education processes, which encourage mimicking the ideas and ways of working of those experts who excel the most at pushing their vision and research.



Socrates

It will be very hard to unlearn this approach, though, because this 'modern' epistemology has been engrained in our learning systems for the past 100 years. The concept of professional expertise, coupled with an almost religious devotion to external advice and certification, was introduced in the early 20th century. We have the (back then) new profession of psychologists to 'thank' for that: they designated themselves as the experts on thinking, solutions and basically any type of knowledge about everything that happens between birth and death. And after that, every profession that was focused on teaching or managing people (and even parents), hired psychologists to tell them what to do, and what not.

Since then, all children have experienced some form of indoctrination and socialization from parents, teachers, churches and other institutions. This unfortunate practice leaves them in a very uncritical state of mind where they later easily succumb to peer pressure or influencers 'inspiring' them with enticing ideas. In fact, it should not come as a surprise that even democracy is under severe pressure, as citizens are basically trained to become pawns that need to be led by the vision of powerful others. This defines our economy, how we vote, who we trust and even our dinner table conversation.

So, if I could turn back time and give advice to my younger self:

I would tell myself that critical thinking and being able to self-manage my mind and behavior were basically all that matters for developing living systems. Everything else is essentially optional.



Everything else can be figured out if you cherish and nurture that ability.

There is no mathematical logic, only the logic of the people you work with

By Kosta Peric, Deputy Director, Financial Services for the Poor at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

When I studied computer science in the 1980s, a major chunk of the curriculum still consisted of pure mathematics, as this was such a nascent domain back then. In fact, there were less courses about computers and programming than about mathematics.



**Kosta
Peric**

And then, in my master's years, I had one – I repeat: one! – course about business life and working at a company. Back then the concept of a start-up didn't even exist.

So, when I proudly finished my master's degree in computer science, I was basically trained to consider my future business life as a mathematical equation and a computer algorithm. I believed the world to be a logical place, where all decisions and interactions would lead to coherent outcomes.

Things have changed a lot since, of course, and we live on a different planet now, but I suspect that a lot of young people still think the same way when they enter the job market today. They have been programmed to think that business is about making rational, logical decisions. I know this anecdotally from meeting many of them over the years.

Armed with this “knowledge” at a young age, I became rapidly frustrated in my first few jobs because, well, people do not behave logically all the time. In fact, they don't do that most of the time. Had I started my own business or start-up back then, I more than probably would have failed, driven by this very imperfect mindset.

What I wish that someone had told me at the time, was that there is no “business” in the sense of “business to business”, “business to consumer” etc.

These kinds of categories are not very helpful at the end of the day, because ultimately business is always about people. However large a corporation, ultimately you are always dealing with a human.

People aren't "if this...then that..." vehicles. Their lives and their emotions create interferences. They have a business to run but they also have good days, bad days and so-so days. They may act a bit selfishly or even nervously because they have quotas to fulfil. They may be distracted because they are in love or looking forward to their vacation. They do not shed their personal lives when they come in the office. It's not something they can turn on and off.

And so, it is absolutely crucial to connect. The pandemic taught us that most of us could work 100% online. But there was a lot less interaction and negotiation, and that had a great impact on human relations. But these live connections are essential because we are beings of emotion, not (just) logic. We're not robots or algorithms. And so, I would advise to always try to "put yourself in the shoes of the other" to properly understand what makes them tick. It will be extremely hard, because, as David Foster Wallace so elegantly put:



Thinking that we ourselves are the absolute center of the universe is “our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth”.

But if you want to make your work life bearable (and that of your colleagues), you must always bear in mind that other have a hidden emotional program, running on top of the rational one. One that is pretty much in charge of communicating and deciding.

And so, after working at the intersection of finance, technology, and innovation for almost 40 years, I think one of my main insights would be that there is no mathematical logic, only the logic of the people you work with. If you understand this and act accordingly, you will have achieved half of the path to success.

Don't be so hard on yourself —

By Laetitia Vitaud, Director at Cadre Noir Ltd, keynote speaker and author

To my terribly insecure younger self, I would like to teach a little something about self-confidence and relationships. This advice applies equally to work and life. The images of women you see in the media are incredibly limited and biased.



Laetitia Vitaud

It's just the tip of the female iceberg, and certainly not the most interesting part of the iceberg. There are many more possibilities, career paths and forms of success than you may think. You may rarely see any 40, 50 and 60-year-old women on TV or among the female professionals who get to be seen. So, you may think their life is of no interest. In truth, these women are much more powerful than you know. On average, they're more confident, more at peace with themselves than the young ones. You will grow more confident as you age. There's something to look forward to! Find older female role models now. Or learn to value the ones you already have. Know that as you age, you'll be a part of the most numerous and powerful demographic group of your time!

Start writing right now. You're afraid to put words on paper. You think it's for writers and journalists only, people who have the proper "legitimacy" to play with words and produce text. It's not! Everything good that will come to you will come through writing: increased confidence, recognition, creativity and surprisingly fulfilling career changes. Writing will clarify your thinking and help you grow. It will help you develop the ability to reach out to others. Writing is falsely presented as a solitary activity. It isn't! It's the activity that will most help you meet other people, learn from them and have an impact on them.

You're judging yourself constantly and you think others are doing the same. You are convinced that people are watching you and judging you. Well, they're not. They don't really care what you do and what you look like. They're far less judgmental than you are. They have other fish to fry. Some of them may be obsessed with what you think of them. Always presume other people mean no harm, because most of the time, they don't. That'll make it so much easier for you to be curious about them, rather than

obsessed with what they think of you. That'll help you develop more relationships and find pleasure in them.

The choices you make now aren't for life.



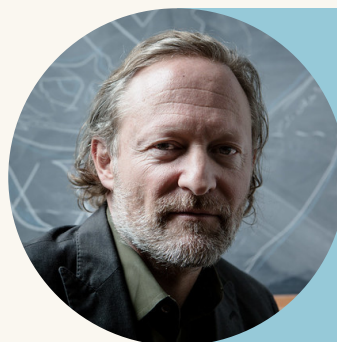
You were fed this view of a linear career that's the product of the choices you make at a young age. But in fact, your generation will experience a complete paradigm shift when it comes to careers. Nobody will have a linear career anymore! Most people will go through several cycles throughout their work lives. So don't take yourself so seriously. Nothing you decide now will bind you forever. Yes, these decisions will shape your identity, but you should welcome the one-in-a-gazillion combination of experiences and encounters that will make you you in the future, with your faults, your wounds and your failures.

The path and its patterns

By David C. Krakauer, President and William H. Miller Professor of Complex Systems at the Santa Fe Institute

"We have only to turn the initial move back upon itself to discover its symmetry; its parts can be superimposed one upon the other, and the stages through which we have already passed are not canceled, but rather confirmed, by those which succeed them."

- Claude Lévi-Strauss.



David C. Krakauer

We think of our lives as a tangled path from birth to death. Along this path every consequential moment that we sense either feels fated or imperfectly decided. In my case, I think of decisive moments as the discovery of new patterns, whose accumulation and subsequent use defines a lifeline. These patterns emerge from very common experiences but are not evident unless one works to discern their parts and form. These patterns are strewn about everywhere but are found more rarely on the career tracks commonly pursued. They are like the fruit of fruit trees that seem to retreat toward higher branches with time as all fruit within easy reach are consumed. As a scientist this implies that most of these patterns cannot be found within the

Orchards of science itself. This is because scientists have already devoured the germinating thoughts we might find most appealing.

Here are a four examples of source phenomena and artifacts whose patterns I have learned to live with, and I might indicate to my former selves to remain on the lookout for.

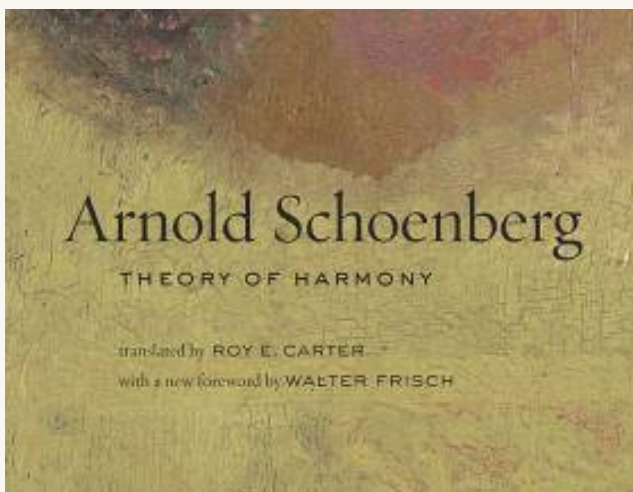
Pattern 1: The imperfect improvisation. Source: Keith Jarrett Köln Concert.

In 1975 Keith Jarrett recorded the best selling jazz album of all time on an out of tune Bösendorfer baby grand piano. Jarrett discovered that limiting personal freedom was the best way of making the world a true collaborator. The conjunction of improvisation and constraint is a "power pattern." Everything that I have agonized over tends to be met with indifference.

KEITH JARRETT
THE KÖLN CONCERT



Those things I have been forced to produce under constraint have generated my few ideas of value and of the greatest public interest.



Pattern 2: The Overtone Series. Source: Theory of Harmony. Arnold Schoenberg.

In 1922 Arnold Schoenberg distilled his thoughts on atonal composition into his *Harmonielehre*, which is German for the "study of harmony". Schoenberg observes that every sound is a complex layering of tones forming an overtone series.

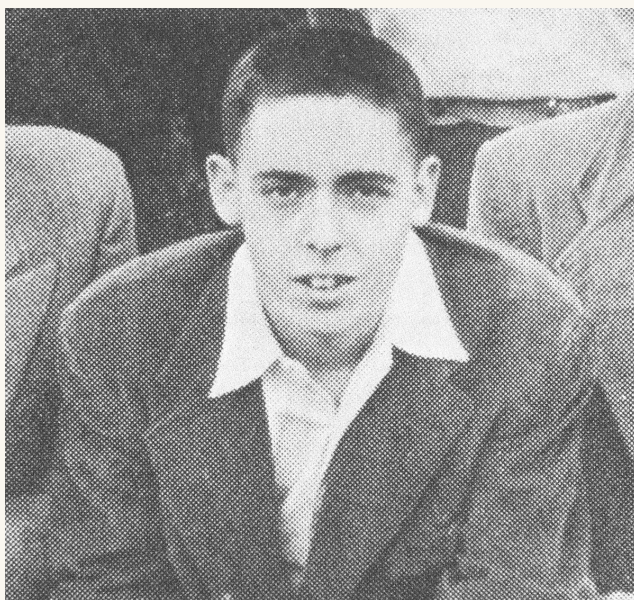
Melody, or a tune, is the exploration of this series in time. In this way a single instant of time contains just about everything one might need in order to explore seemingly complicated events occurring over the course of time. The implication is that insight can sometimes be achieved near instantaneously.

Pattern 3: Infinite Perspectives. Source: Synthetic Cubism

Synthetic cubism is an artistic style we associate with Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Juan Gris from 1912-14. The style moves beyond the perceptual reductionism of analytical cubism, which dissects scenes into fragments and planes, and seeks new ways to put "atomic" visual elements back together.



In this way the most ordinary objects and experiences contain a limitless alphabet for discovering radically new perspectives. Novelty is not elsewhere but in right front of our noses.



Pattern 4: Ontological map-making. Source: The novels of Thomas Pynchon and Robert Musil

Musil's *Man Without Qualities* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* look heavy enough to break a shelf and go on to do similar damage to a mind. In reality, these book-length possible worlds are rigorous explorations of existential possibilities unfettered by public opinion.

There are times when thought needs to be allowed to roam freely for several years and build out a fully realized alternative reality. Einstein did this for space and time, Durkheim for society, and Keynes for economy. Unlike scientists, who tend to dwell in the destination, Musil and Pynchon keep veering off track and thereby let us into the secrets of exploration in the service of conceptual topography.

Lead, be curious, have fun, keep questioning yourself but don't overthink it

By Julie Vens – De Vos, CEO, partner & keynote speaker at nexxworks

I may be one of the youngest contributors to this 'Life Lessons' e-book, but I firmly believe that learning and self-reflection should be of all ages. After having worked in multiple functions at a large corporate, starting a design company of my own, becoming the CEO of nexxworks,



**Julie Vens
- De Vos**

learning from friends and companies all over the world and having two children, I feel that there's a few things that I've learned along the way that my younger self and other young people might find useful. So here goes:

Advice #1. Always keep questioning yourself.

Keep learning about yourself. Keep experimenting. I say keep, though maybe for some the advice would be to start doing these things. The corporate world and its infamous people management routines really forced me to profoundly evaluate myself. So, the first thing I did when I became CEO of nexxworks, was to hire a personal coach. When she asked me why I needed her help I told her that I needed a mirror to accelerate my learning curve. The reason why was because, through the nexxworks programs, I've come to experience again and again how we are all such creatures of habit, sticking to our patterns, beliefs and safe zones. Our world is in dire need of more open minds, so try to be aware of that bias and work around that.

Advice #2. Perhaps the antidote to too much of advice #1 would be “don't overthink it either”

A former boss offered me the simple yet profound quote, which is often attributed to Albert Einstein: learn from yesterday, live today, hope for tomorrow. Ironically, he also added that “the important thing is not to stop questioning”. Questions are profoundly

valuable because they can trigger the new perspective needed for change. At nexxworks, we actually measure success by igniting more questions than answers. But as we live in an answer-type of society, many people still feel uncomfortable with that approach.

Advice #3. Have fun!

Another boss told me that I was doing all the good things on the job but that I was allowed to share my happiness and joy about it too. I was puzzled. Back then, I had trouble understanding how jumping on a table about what I did, could be relevant in any way. But he really lived by his own advice, by being an absolute party igniter. And he always managed to keep all his teams motivated to get the results he needed. I do like parties, yet I still find this one of the harder nuts to crack. But if you're a natural born partyer, embrace that talent with both hands.

Advice #4: "Be curious, don't be furious"

I loved this quote from speaker and author Marc Lesser at the Catalyst Empowerment Summit which I recently moderated. He's an absolute mindfulness authority with an impressive track record at Twitter and Google (he led the Search within Yourself school at Google). That quote resonated because I had learned the exact same thing at my former corporate company as well. As humans, we're always biased to search for external reasons about why things don't go the way we want them to. Instead, we'd be more impactful in conversations or our jobs if we let curiosity in, about what we ourselves can do better or different.

Advice #5. Do jump. Do lead.

That is what I always tell myself. And although sometimes I question why I always do jump, it has always proved to be worthwhile. Sometimes people ask me for career advice and I'm like "Huh? What do you need my advice for? Just do what you like! And do it with passion." Yes, I sometimes doubt my choices. Yes, I have made mistakes. But yes, I've also learned a lot. And every single time I see the joy on our customers' faces when they learn through experience, this simply confirms that we should give them the confidence to lead. Too many people are overthinking their capacities. We can all lead ourselves and we can all take leadership of something.

Last, but not least, things will often go slower than you think they will go. That does not mean you are wrong; it means you have to be more patient and more curious about how to take the next step.

In short: enjoy what you do and make sure that you jump at least 10% of your time.



Trust yourself, but learn to accept help

By Raya Bidshahri, Founder & CEO at School of Humanity

Trust your instincts

Often, your gut reaction is accurate and spot-on. We know from the latest advancements in neuroscience that our subconscious is processing information and making decisions without our conscious awareness all the time.



**Raya
Bidshahri**

Over the years, you'll find that your subconscious is often right, and knows what you truly feel or need to do. This is especially true if it is reacting to a context in which you're experienced. Don't ignore the voice of your subconscious and learn to trust your instincts.

Be your authentic self

Be who you want to be, not whom others want you to be - or even worse, who you think others want you to be. The looking-glass theory of self of Charles Cooley states that "I am who I think you think I am". This means that often our perceptions of what we believe other people think about us is what shapes who we are - even if our perception of their perception is inaccurate. We are constantly conforming to groupthink, as well as to others' expectations of our personality without realizing it. By extension, sometimes, you will need to go against the grain or group dynamic to stand up for what you believe in. But don't be afraid to do that... and be unapologetically your authentic self.

Persist

The journey is supposed to be difficult with ups and downs, meanderings, and all kinds of obstacles.



It may not seem like it, but everyone else's journey towards progress is the same - we just tend to share the positive news and barely broadcast setbacks on social platforms.

Creating something of value for yourself and for society takes tenacity, patience and a whole lot of groundwork through setbacks. Learn to expect the chaos and persist through it. Do not underestimate the power of time and consistent hard work.

Don't be afraid to say "no" or walk away

It's all about quality, not quantity. This applies to everything from your social group, as well as your professional projects and engagements. Don't be afraid to say "no" to opportunities and learn to prioritize the ones that are closest to your reason for being. Know when to leave or walk away from an initiative and project. It is focus and attention to a smaller number of social connections or professional pursuits that will give you what you seek.

Learn to accept help

In middle eastern culture, we are accustomed to take as little as possible out of respect to others and to give as much as we can. By extension of practices around hospitality, we learn not to overstay our welcome in all dimensions of life. You will need to rewire this state of mind (at least a little bit) and not feel guilty to accept help and support from others. You must recognize that when they help you, they too, receive fulfillment from the experience just as you would for them. Learn to accept help graciously and express your gratitude. After all, you can't do it alone.

One thing is always many things

By Laurence Van Elegem, Content Director at nexxworks

Weaknesses can be strengths

When I was young, people often told me that I was “too sensitive”. They meant well, merely wanting to protect me, but also simultaneously sent the message that sensitivity was a weakness, something to be avoided.



**Laurence
Van Elegem**

One of my favorite songs of the 90s was Lauryn Hill’s “Everything is everything” and I’ve learned since then that that is often the case. A weakness can be a strength and vice versa. Yes, it is true that I can be too delicate at times and that has indeed held me back on certain occasions. But sensitivity is also a form of perceptiveness. And the latter has greatly helped me “see” things that others don’t: patterns, evolutions, group dynamics, hidden feelings etc. It’s also probably the reason why I write better than most, and why I am a good fit for a company that focusses on trends, innovations and connections.

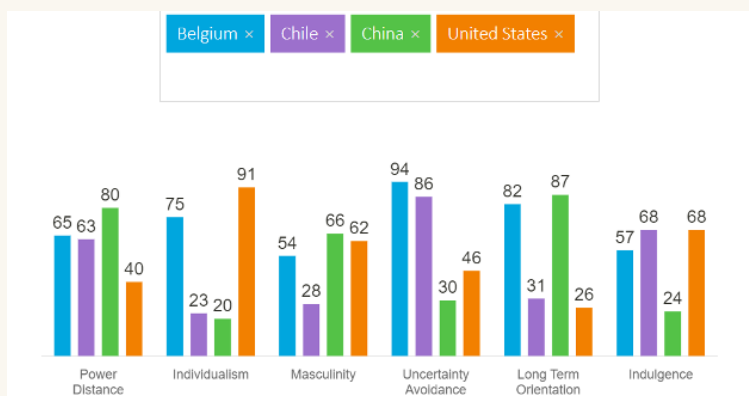


It is obviously necessary to keep investigating your weaknesses, and to question yourself. But even “bad” things tend to have multiple facets. And what others perceive as weak, could one day turn out to be really helpful.

But never become complacent

However, it is not because you should learn to embrace certain facets of your so-called weaknesses, that you should become complacent about your cognition. You are not just you. You are also your context, and this drives how and what you think a lot more than you know. Doing some research about Chinese culture, a few years back, made me realize how crucial this is. Just to illustrate how differently people think in other parts of the world, here's a comparison of 4 different countries - made via [Hofstede Insights](#) - along 6 different dimensions.

(I do realize this is a pretty reductionist approach, as cultural differences are a lot more complex than this, but I think it's also an interesting visualization to help you understand how biased you are, ... and this is only purely from a 'geographic' perspective):



But this also means that there's an incredible treasure of other philosophies, world views and perspectives out there that might actually fit your personality more than certain beliefs in your own culture. Study these cultures. Learn from them. Just to give an example: in the West, we tend to think in terms of opposites: something is X or Y but never both. Chinese people on the other hand believe things can be good and bad, a crisis and an opportunity or a weakness and a strength (see what I did there?) at the same time. Or look up the difference between monochronic cultures and polychronic ones, which perceive time (and thus many other concepts) very differently. This is the type of knowledge that holds the potential to change you as a person.

The best kept secret is that no one knows what they're doing

When I started working as a communications consultant, I was incredibly intimidated by more experienced people, who often tended to nourish this feeling to their own advantage. But it's not because someone has years of experience that A. they are always right and B. another method or answer is not just as valuable as theirs. So, if you want to learn from those who are maybe more experienced than you, don't seek out those who project an image of omniscience. Find those who are open-minded, second guess themselves, ask for your input and are never afraid to admit that they too, don't always have the answer. In more ways than one, no one really knows what they are doing and that's ok. But never let anyone intimidate you based on age. Be critical of yourself but be just as critical of others: experience and reputation do not equal holding the monopoly over truth.

Accept your insecurities, but stay critical

Putting yourself down, is not the same as being critical about yourself. Feeling like an imposter, does not help you grow. I also think our obsession with personal growth is getting out of hand (needing to become better, smarter, faster all the time is exhausting), but that's another story. Automatically telling yourself that what you do or think is bad, is 'just' a reflex. There is very little cognition involved, and it does not allow you to analyze what you did right, what you did wrong or what you could do better. Try to kick the habit of putting yourself down - I know this is very hard because I have been struggling with that my entire life - but do remain critical of how you act and think. These are two very different things.

Just be nice. It's not just right. It's smart.

Our Western culture is very individualistic, but many others (like Chile and China in the illustration above) are a lot more collectivist. They understand that relationships are essential for happiness, survival and success.

Research by Albert-László Barabási actually showed that performance is about "you" (the individual), but your success is really about "us" (the collective, the network). Simply put: you can be fantastic at what you do, but if no one acknowledges it because you're acting like a twat, you'll probably not (yes, there are exceptions, unfortunately) get very far.



Albert-László Barabási

You may come to realize that a lot of things are connected and that some people are bound to return in your life, even if they weren't in it for a long time. At one point, you may even need something from someone that you perhaps did not treat very well. To avoid these situations, just try to be nice and civil to everyone. Above all, because it's the right thing to do, but also because it's the smart thing.

Thank you, dear reader

We hope you enjoyed these pieces of advice, and that you may end up imparting some of them to your children, if you have any.

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About nexxworks

We believe each organization should invest at least 10% of its time and resources to prepare for the day after tomorrow. By bringing the right stories, inspiration and interactions we guide to find direction, to create enthusiasm and to kickstart the action and mindset for the day after tomorrow.

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