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This Is Generation Flux: Meet The Pioneers Of The New (And Chaotic) Frontier Of Business

BY: ROBERT SAFIAN January 9, 2012

The future of business is pure chaos. Here's how you can survive--and perhaps even thrive.



Members of Generation Flux can be any age and in any industry: From left, Raina Kumra, Bob Greenberg, danah boyd, DJ Patil, Pete Cashmore, Beth Comstock, and Baratunde Thurston. | Photo by Brooke Nipar, Styling: Krisana Palma; Grooming: Stephanie Peterson

DJ Patil pulls a 2-foot-long metal bar from his backpack. The contraption, which he calls a "double pendulum," is hinged in the middle, so it can fold in on itself. Another hinge on one end is attached to a clamp he secures to the edge of a table. "Now," he says, holding the bar vertically, at its top, "see if you can predict where this end will go." Then he releases it, and the bar begins to swing wildly, circling the spot where it is attached to the table, while also circling in on itself. There is no pattern, no way to predict where it will end up. While it spins and twists with surprising velocity, Patil talks to me about chaos theory. "The important insight," he notes, "is identifying when things are chaotic and when they're not."

In high school, Patil got kicked out of math class for being disruptive. He graduated only by persuading his school administrator to change his F grade in chemistry. He went to junior college because that's where his girlfriend was going, and signed up for calculus because she had too. He took so long to do his homework, his girlfriend would complain. "It's not like I'm going to become a mathematician," he would tell her.

Chaotic disruption is rampant, not simply from the likes of Apple, Facebook, and Google.

Patil, 37, is now an expert in chaos theory, among other mathematical disciplines. He has applied computational science to help the Defense Department with threat assessment and bioweapons containment; he worked for eBay on web security and payment fraud; he was chief scientist at LinkedIn, before joining venture-capital firm Greylock Partners. But Patil first made a name for himself as a researcher on weather patterns at the University of Maryland: "There are some times," Patil explains, "when you can predict weather well for the next 15 days. Other times, you can only really forecast a couple of days. Sometimes you can't predict the next two hours."

The business climate, it turns out, is a lot like the weather. And we've entered a next-two-hours era. The pace of change in our economy and our culture is accelerating--fueled by global adoption of social, mobile, and other new technologies--and our visibility about the future is declining. From the rise of Facebook to the fall of Blockbuster, from the downgrading of U.S. government debt to the resurgence of Brazil, predicting what will happen next has gotten exponentially harder. Uncertainty has taken hold in boardrooms and cubicles, as executives and workers (employed and unemployed) struggle with core questions: Which competitive advantages have staying power? What skills matter most? How can you weigh risk and opportunity when the fundamentals of your business may change overnight?



When conditions are chaotic, Patil explains, you must apply different techniques. "Command-and-control hierarchical structures are being disintegrated," says Boyd. | Photo by Brooke Nipar

DANAH BOYD, 34

Senior Researcher,
Microsoft Research
Studied at Brown, MIT Media
Lab, and UC Berkeley;
named "High Priestess of
the Internet" by the *Financial
Times*; has advised Intel,
Google, Yahoo, and more;
worked on V-Day, a not-for-
profit focused on ending
violence against women and
girls.

"People ask me, 'Are you
afraid you're going to get
fired?' That's the whole point:
not to be afraid."

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DJ PATIL, 37

Data Scientist, Greylock
Partners
Researcher at Los Alamos;
Defense Department fellow;
virtual librarian for Iraq; web-
security architect for eBay;
head of data team at
LinkedIn, where his team
created People You May
Know.

"I don't have a plan. If you look
too far out in the future, you
waste your time."

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Look at the global cell-phone business. Just five years ago, three companies controlled 64% of the smartphone market: Nokia, Research in Motion, and Motorola. Today, two different companies are at the top of the industry: Samsung and Apple. This sudden complete swap in the pecking order of a global multibillion-dollar industry is unprecedented. Consider the meteoric rise of Groupon and Zynga, the disruption in advertising and publishing, the advent of mobile ultrasound and other "mHealth" breakthroughs (see "[Open Your Mouth And Say 'Aah!'](#)"). Online-education efforts are eroding our assumptions about what schooling looks like. Cars are becoming rolling, talking, cloud-connected media hubs. In an age where Twitter and other social-media tools play key roles in recasting the political map in the Mideast; where impoverished residents of refugee camps would rather go without food than without their cell phones; where all types of media, from music to TV to movies, are being remade, redefined, defended, and attacked every day in novel ways--there is no question that we are in a new world.

Any business that ignores these transformations does so at its own peril. Despite recession, currency crises, and tremors of financial instability, the pace of disruption is roaring ahead. The frictionless spread of information and the expansion of personal, corporate, and global networks have plenty of room to run. And here's the conundrum: When businesspeople search for the right forecast--the road map and model that will define the next era--no credible long-term picture emerges. There is one certainty, however. The next decade or two will be defined more by fluidity than by any new, settled paradigm; if there is a pattern to all this, it is that there is no pattern. The most valuable insight is that we are, in a critical sense, in a time of chaos.

To thrive in this climate requires a whole new approach, which we'll outline in the pages that follow. Because some people will thrive. They are the members of Generation Flux. This is less a demographic designation than a psychographic one: What defines

GenFlux is a mind-set that embraces instability, that tolerates--and even enjoys--recalibrating careers, business models, and assumptions. Not everyone will join Generation Flux, but to be successful, businesses and individuals will have to work at it. This is no simple task. The vast bulk of our institutions--educational, corporate, political--are not built for flux. Few traditional career tactics train us for an era where the most important skill is the ability to acquire new skills.

DJ Patil is a GenFluxer. He has worked in academia, in government, in big public companies, and in startups; he is a technologist and a businessman; a teacher and a diplomat. He is none of those things and all of them, and who knows what he will be or do next? Certainly not him. "That doesn't bother me," he says. "I'll find something."

The New Economy Is For Real

More than 15 years ago, this magazine was launched with a cover that declared: "Work Is Personal. Computing Is Social. Knowledge Is Power." Those words resonate today, but with a new, deeper meaning. *Fast Company's* covers during the dotcom boom of the 1990s described "Free Agent Nation" and "The Brand Called You." We became associated with the "new economy," with the belief that the world had changed irreparably, and that yesterday's rules no longer applied. But then the dotcom bubble burst in 2000, and the idea of a new economy was discredited.



"In a big company, you never feel fast enough," says Comstock. Notes Thurston, "To see what you can't see coming, you've got to embrace larger principles." | Photo by Brooke Nipar

BARATUNDE THURSTON, 34
Director of Digital, *The Onion*

Harvard philosophy major turned consultant turned stand-up comedian. Mayor of the Year on Foursquare. The promo letter for his new book, *How to Be Black*, begins, "If you don't buy this book, you're racist."

"I can't wait for the middle-management level to die off and the next generation gets in there. Then we'll have a revolution."

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BETH COMSTOCK, 51
Chief Marketing Officer, GE

TV news reporter turned PR pro turned marketing powerhouse. She's responsible for Ecomagination and Healthymagination, GE efforts that account for billions of dollars in sales.

"Today everyone feels out of control. Some people say, 'I declare bankruptcy.' But they're not embracing change. They're giving up."

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Now we know that what we saw in the 1990s was not a mirage. It was instead a shadow, a premonition of a new business reality that is emerging every day--and this time, perhaps chastened by that first go-round, we're prepared to admit that we don't fully understand it. This new economy currently revolves around social and mobile, but those may be only the latest manifestations of a global, connected world careening ahead at great velocity.

Some pundits deride the current era as just another bubble. They point out that new, heady tech companies are garnering massive valuations: Facebook, Groupon, LinkedIn. And beyond the alpha dogs, the list of startups with valuations above \$200 million is long indeed: Airbnb, Dropbox, Flipboard, Foursquare, Gilt Groupe, Living Social, Rovio, Spotify--the roster goes on and on.

We are under constant pressure to

Setting aside the fact that the majority of these enterprises, unlike the darlings of the late-1990s, have significant revenue, so what if some companies are

learn new things. It can be daunting. It can be exhilarating.

overvalued? That still doesn't discount the way mobile, social, and other breakthroughs are changing our way of life, not just in America but around the globe. And in the process, these changes are remaking geopolitical and business

assumptions that have been in place for decades. This was not true in 2000. But it is now. Chaotic disruption is rampant, not simply from the likes of Apple, Facebook, and Google. No one predicted that General Motors would go bankrupt--and come back from the abyss with greater momentum than Toyota. No one in the car-rental industry foresaw the popularity of auto-sharing Zipcar--and Zipcar didn't foresee the rise of outfits like Uber and RelayRides, which are already trying to steal its market. Digital competition destroyed bookseller Borders, and yet the big, stodgy music labels--seemingly the ground zero for digital disruption--defy predictions of their demise. Walmart has given up trying to turn itself into a bank, but before retail bankers breathe a sigh of relief, they ought to look over their shoulders at Square and other mobile-wallet initiatives. Amid a reeling real-estate market, new players like Trulia and Zillow are gobbling up customers. Even the law business is under siege from companies like LegalZoom, an online DIY document service. "All these industries are being revolutionized," observes Pete Cashmore, the 26-year-old founder of social-news site Mashable, which has exploded overnight to reach more than 20 million users a month. "It's come to technology first, but it will reach every industry. You're going to have businesses rise and fall faster than ever."

You Don't Know What You Don't Know

"In a big company, you never feel you're fast enough." Beth Comstock, the chief marketing officer of GE, is talking to me by phone from the Rosewood Hotel in Menlo Park, California, where she's visiting entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. She gets a charge out of the Valley, but her trips also remind her how perilous the business climate is right now. "Business-model innovation is constant in this economy," she says. "You start with a vision of a platform. For a while, you think there's a line of sight, and then it's gone. There's suddenly a new angle."

Within GE, she says, "our traditional teams are too slow. We're not innovating fast enough. We need to systematize change." Comstock connected me with Susan Peters, who oversees GE's executive-development effort. "The pace of change is pretty amazing," Peters says. "There's a need to be less hierarchical and to rely more on teams. This has all increased dramatically in the last couple of years."

Executives at GE are bracing for a new future. The challenge they face is the same one staring down wide swaths of corporate America, not to mention government, schools, and other institutions that have defined how we've lived: These organizations have structures and processes built for an industrial age, where efficiency is paramount but adaptability is terribly difficult. We are finely tuned at taking a successful idea or product and replicating it on a large scale. But inside these legacy institutions, changing direction is rough. From classrooms arranged in rows of seats to tenured professors, from the assembly line to the way we promote executives, we have been trained to expect an orderly life. Yet the expectation that these systems provide safety and stability is a trap. This is what Comstock and Peters are battling.

"The business community focuses on managing uncertainty," says Dev Patnaik, cofounder and CEO of strategy firm Jump Associates, which has advised GE, Target, and PepsiCo, among others. "That's actually a bit of a canard." The true challenge lies elsewhere, he explains: "In an increasingly turbulent and interconnected world, ambiguity is rising to unprecedented levels. That's something our current systems can't handle."

"The main difference between the kind of problems that companies, institutions, and governments are able to solve and the ones that they need to solve," Patnaik continues. "Most big organizations are good at solving clear but complicated problems. They're absolutely horrible at solving ambiguous problems--when you don't know what you don't know. Faced with ambiguity, their gears grind to a halt."

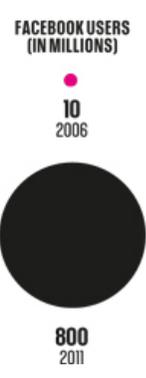
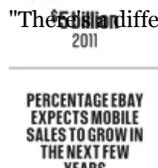
You don't need to be a jack-of-all-trades to flourish now. But you do need to be open-minded.

"Uncertainty is when you've defined the variable but don't know its value. Like when you roll a die and you don't know if it will be a 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. But ambiguity is when you're not even sure what the variables are. You don't know how many dice are even being rolled or how many sides they have or which dice actually count for anything."

Businesses that focus on uncertainty, says Patnaik, "actually delude themselves into thinking that they have a handle on things. Ah, ambiguity; it can be such a bitch."

Be Not Afraid

What's "a bitch" for companies can be terror for individuals. The idea of taking risks, of branching out into this ambiguous future, is scary at a moment when the economy is in no hurry to emerge from the doldrums and when unemployment is a national crisis. The security of the 40-year career of the man in the gray-flannel suit may have been overstated, but at least he had a path, a ladder. The new reality is multiple gigs, some of them supershort (see "[The Four-Year Career](#)"), with constant pressure to learn



new things and adapt to new work situations, and no guarantee that you'll stay in a single industry. It can be daunting. It can be exhausting. It can also be exhilarating. "Fear holds a lot of people back," says Raina Kumra, 34. "I'm skill hoarding. Every time I update my resume, I see the path that I didn't know would be. You keep throwing things into your backpack, and eventually you'll have everything in your tool kit."

Kumra is sitting in a Dublin hotel, where earlier she spoke on a panel about the future of mobile before a group of top chief information officers. She is not technically in the mobile business; nor is she a software engineer or an academic. She actually works for a federal agency, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, as codirector of innovation for the group that oversees Voice of America and other government-run international media. How she got there is a classic journey of flux.

Kumra started out in film school. She made two documentaries, including one in South America and India, and then took a job as a video editor for *Scientific American Frontiers*. "After each trip to shoot footage," she says, "I'd come back and find that the editing tools had all changed." So she decided to learn computer programming. "I figured I had to get my tech on," says Kumra, who signed up for New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program. She then moved into the ad world, doing digital campaigns at BBH, R/GA, and Wieden+Kennedy before launching her own agency. Along the way she picked up a degree from Harvard's design school, taught at the University of Amsterdam, and started a not-for-profit called Light Up Malawi.

"So many people tell me, 'I don't know what you do,'" Kumra says. It's an admission echoed by many in Generation Flux, but it doesn't bother her at all. "I'm a collection of many things. I'm not one thing."

The point here is not that Kumra's tool kit of skills allows her to cut through the ambiguity of this era. Rather, it is that the variety of her experiences--and her passion for new ones--leaves her well prepared for whatever the future brings. "I had to try something entrepreneurial. I had to try social enterprise. I needed to understand government," she says of her various career moves. "I just needed to know all this."

You do not have to be a jack-of-all-trades to flourish in the age of flux, but you do need to be open-minded. GE's Comstock doesn't have as eclectic a career path as Kumra--she has spent two decades within GE's various divisions. But just because she can dress and act the part of a loyal corporate soldier doesn't mean Comstock is not a GenFluxer. She's got a sweet spot for creative types, especially those whose fresh thinking can spur the buttoned-up GE culture forward. She's brought in folks like Benjamin Palmer, the groovy CEO of edgy ad firm Barbarian Group, to help inject new ideas and processes into GE's marketing apparatus. "We're creating digital challenge teams," she explains. "We're doing a lot more work with entrepreneurs. It's part of our internal growth strategy. It creates tension. It makes people's jobs frustrating. But it's also energizing."

**PETE CASHMORE, 26****CEO, Mashable**

At 19, he founded a tech blog in Scotland, which has grown into a monster site for social news. Mashable has more than 2 million Twitter followers.

"I don't have any personal challenges about throwing away the past. If you're not changing, you're giving others a chance to catch up."

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Cashmore's Mashable is part of a class of new, fast-rising firms, from Airbnb to Dropbox. Living Social to Spotify, Flipboard to Foursquare. | Photo by Brooke Nipar

Comstock, once president of digital media at NBC, is now one of CEO Jeff Immelt's key confidants. "I've always gravitated to the new," Comstock says, in trying to explain her comfort with change. "Part of it is who you are. I grew up in media, in news, and developed almost an addiction to go from deadline to deadline. It's intoxicating." And profitable. Comstock is the architect of Ecomagination and Healthymagination, GE initiatives that have helped reconfigure the company during this financial crisis. While it's too early to tell what Healthymagination could produce, the Ecomagination group has to date accounted for \$85 billion in revenue.

Nuke Nostalgia

If ambiguity is high and adaptability is required, then you simply can't afford to be sentimental about the past. Future-focus is a signature trait of Generation Flux. It is also an imperative for businesses: Trying to replicate what worked yesterday only leaves you vulnerable.

Baratunde Thurston is a quintessential GenFluxer. When I met up with him recently, he had just pulled an all-nighter. At 1 a.m. that morning, the New York City police had descended on Zuccotti Park to roust the Occupy Wall Street crowd, and Thurston--who is digital director for satirical news outlet *The Onion*--was called on to help cover the event. He was at home, in Brooklyn, but he didn't jump on the subway or into a taxi to hustle his way to lower Manhattan like a traditional journalist. Instead he fired up his computer. "I found the live streams of video from the site, so I could see what was going on. Then I monitored police scanners, to hear what they were saying. I looked at news feeds and Mayor Bloomberg's statements, and then I accessed all my social-media feeds, screening by zip code what people down there were saying. Some people in the neighborhood were freaked out by helicopters overhead, shining floodlights into their windows. They had no idea what was going on, said it felt like a police action. Which it was, you know."

Industries are being revolutionized," says Cashmore. "Businesses will rise and fall faster than ever."

For three hours, Thurston pieced together what he was seeing and hearing, and rebroadcasted it via digital channels. "I had a better sense of what was happening and where the crowds were moving than the people on the ground," he says. By eschewing well-trod practices and creatively adjusting to a fluid situation, he built an authentic narrative in real time, one that reflected the true

story far better than the nightly TV news.

Thurston calls himself "a politically active, technology-loving comedian from the future." He works for *The Onion*, does stand-up comedy, and has a terrific book coming out this month called *How to Be Black*. "I was a computer programmer in high school, but I discovered I wasn't very good at it--it was too tedious," he says. "I was a philosophy major. I did management consulting right out of college. But then I started doing comedy, and I love it. People say to me all the time, 'What are you? You need to focus.' Maybe so. But for now, this smorgasbord of activities is working."

Thurston is telling me all this over lunch at Delicatessen, a restaurant in SoHo on the corner of Prince and Lafayette. "I'm the mayor of this corner on Foursquare. Last night, the Occupy crowd walked right by here, and I tweeted them: 'That's my corner. Sorry I'm not there, I promise I'd be a better mayor for you than Bloomberg.'"

Thurston is not bashful. At 34, he's not a kid (though he says, "I have the technological age of a 26-year-old"). And he's cheering on the pace of change. "You can knock on the doors of power and make your case for access. That's the way it's usually done. Or you can be like Mark Zuckerberg and build your own system around it." Thurston is utterly lacking in nostalgia. "I was talking to some documentary filmmakers at a conference, and they all just talk about loss, the loss of a model. I can empathize. But I'm not upset that the model is dying. The milkman is dead, but we drink more milk than ever. Do we really want to return to a world of just three broadcast channels?"

Nostalgia is a natural human emotion, a survival mechanism that pushes people to avoid risk by applying what we've learned and relying on what's worked before. It's also about as useful as an appendix right now. When times seem uncertain, we instinctively become more conservative; we look to the past, to times that seem simpler, and we have the urge to re-create them. This impulse is as true for businesses as for people. But when the past has been blown away by new technology, by the ubiquitous and always-on global hypernetwork, beloved past practices may well be useless.

Nostalgia is of particular concern to GE's Peters, keeper of the company's vaunted leadership training. Since 2009, she has been aggressively rethinking the program; last January, she rolled out "a new contemporized view of expectations" for GE's top 650 managers. That's a mouthful, but basically it's a revolution to the way execs are evaluated at the company known as America's leadership factory. "We now recognize that external focus is more multifaceted than simply serving 'the customer,'" says Peters, "that other stakeholders have to be considered. We talk about how to get and apply external knowledge, how to lead in ambiguous situations, how to listen actively, and the whole idea of collaboration."

Not everyone at GE is excited about the shift. "Some people question changing our definitions," Peters says. "When they do, I ask: How many of you use the same cell phone from five years ago? The world isn't the same, so we need new parameters." At GE's Crotonville leadership center, in New York, "we are physically changing the buildings, to make it better for teams," she says. A large kitchen has been installed, so teams can cook together "with all the messiness and egalitarian spirit involved." Managers who are uncomfortable playing second fiddle to more culinary-inclined staffers "can sit on the side and have a glass of wine," says Peters. "But usually, after a while, they realize they're on the sidelines, and they get in the game." And then there's the building known around campus as the "White House," which dates back to the 1950s. "It's where executives would go after dinner to have a drink," Peters explains. "We're gutting it, replacing it with a university-like all-day coffeehouse. Some colleagues who've been here for 20, 30 years, they tell me, 'This is terrible.' I tell them, 'You are not our target demographic.'"





Kumra, who has had her DNA sequence read, actually has a risk taker's gene; Greenberg may not have that gene, but he's taken decades' worth of risks. | Photo by Brooke Nipar

RAINA KUMRA, 34
Codirector of Innovation,
Broadcasting Board of
Governors

The documentary filmmaker, digital strategy guru at Wieden+Kennedy, and founder of Light Up Malawi is now the Codirector of Innovation at a federal agency, The Broadcasting Board of Governors.

"I work on a mission: to use mass platforms to change the world. It's a mission, not a job title, not a career."

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BOB GREENBERG, 63
CEO and founder, R/GA
 After founding his firm to create visual effects for movies like *Alien* and *Zelig*, he now delivers cutting-edge digital programs for Nike, Nokia, HP, and more.

"People talk about change and adaptation, but they have more competition than they think."

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So much for nostalgia. At this year's meeting of GE's top executives, presentation materials will be available only via iPads. "Some are scrambling to learn how to turn one on," Peters says. "They just have to do it. There's a natural tendency for some people to pull back when change comes. We're not going to wave a magic wand and make everyone different. But with the right team, the right coaching, we can get them to see things differently."

Thurston is less forgiving of the iPad-challenged. "It's irresponsible not to use the tools of the day," he charges. "People say, 'Oh, if I master Twitter, I've got it figured out.' That's right, but it's also so wrong. If you master those things and stop, you're just going to get killed by the next thing. Flexibility of skills leads to flexibility of options. To see what you can't see coming, you've got to embrace larger principles."

There Are No Perfect Role Models

Bob Greenberg, chief executive of digital advertising agency R/GA, doesn't do the comb-over. Nor does he crop his hair short or shave his scalp, in the way of so many modern admen. Instead, beyond the patch of baldness on top of his head, his hair is long and flowing and bushy. It's as if he's saying, *Look, I am who I am. So deal with it.*

I met with Greenberg several times this past fall to talk about how he's managing a growing business in an industry experiencing total upheaval. The first time we sat down, in September, he dropped that his company had dozens of job openings. The agency, Greenberg explained, had grown 20% since the start of the year, from 1,000 staffers to 1,200. And to net those 200 additions, Greenberg had hired 500 new people. That math doesn't exactly add up, I pointed out.

Here's the rub: R/GA's young GenFlux staffers are leaving at such a steady pace, sticking around for such short runs that Greenberg finds himself constantly replacing them, endlessly slotting one talented young person into another's place. Many CEOs would react to this news with alarm: What are we doing wrong? Why can't we keep our young talent? Greenberg talks about this intense transition with nonchalance. He's not upset by it; he's not fighting it; and he assumes this is the way life will be for the foreseeable future.

But that doesn't mean he's standing still. Despite strong business momentum, he's pushing R/GA into a radical reorganization--

the fifth time he's hauled the firm into a new business model. "If we don't change our structure, we'll get less relevant," Greenberg tells me. "We won't be able to grow." This time, he's integrating 12 new capabilities, from live events to data visualization to product development, into R/GA's platforms. "People talk about change and adaptation, but they don't see how fast the competition is coming," he says. "We have to move. We have no choice."

R/GA's flexibility is instructive for large firms and small. Many businesses are struggling to recast their strategies, with top execs hunting desperately for successful models that they can replicate. (Which might explain why you've probably heard the phrase, "We're the Apple of . . ." once too often.) But there is no new model; you may well need to build one from scratch. "Command-and-control hierarchical structures are being disintegrated," says danah boyd, a social-science researcher for Microsoft Research who also teaches at New York University. "There's a difference between the old broadcast world and the networked world."

In a world of flux, what succeeds for one industry or company doesn't necessarily work for another; and even if it does, it may not work for long. One reason Facebook has thrived is that it is continually changing. Users and pundits routinely carp about new features or designs. But this is the way Facebook has been from its inception--including the critical decision in 2006 to open its doors to those not in college. Mark Zuckerberg knows that if he doesn't keep Facebook moving, others will come after him. Steve Jobs applied a similar approach at Apple: He disrupted his own business in dozens of ways, from refusing to make new products compatible with old operating systems to dumping the iPod's successful track wheel to embrace touch screens--ahead of everyone else.

Just because a specific tactic worked for Apple doesn't mean it is right for your business. Maybe the world's best marshmallow maker just needs to keep churning out the best marshmallow (even if it should have its own Facebook page and a Twitter feed). Every enterprise needs to find--and evolve--the structure, system, and culture that best allows it to stay competitive as its specific market shifts. Business leaders need to be creative, adaptive, and focused in their techniques, staffing, and philosophy.

Given the need for more iteration, missteps like Netflix's may become more prevalent.

An instructive analogy comes from the world of software. In a recent book called *Building Data Science Teams*, chaos expert Patil explained how software used to be developed: "One group defines the product, another builds visual mock-ups . . . and finally a set of engineers builds it to some specification document."

This is known as a "waterfall" process, which was practiced by large, successful enterprises like Microsoft that, on a designated schedule, issued large, finished releases of their products (Windows 95, Windows 2000, and so on). Today that process is giving way to "agile" development, to what Patil calls "the ability to adapt and iterate quickly throughout the product life cycle." In software, such work follows the precepts of "The Agile Manifesto," a 2001 document written by a group of developers who stated a preference for "individuals and interactions over processes and tools; working software over comprehensive documentation; [and] responding to change over following a plan."

It's not just the apps on your iPad: The entire world of business is now in a constant state of agile development. New releases are constant; tweaks, upgrades, and course corrections take place on the fly. There is no status quo; there is only a process of change.

But if your business is primed to be adaptable, flexible, and prepared for any shift in the economy, isn't it also primed to be whipsawed by constant change?

I visited Nike CEO Mark Parker on the company's campus outside of Portland, Oregon, and I asked if he had ever considered having Nike-branded hospitals, or Nike-branded doctors, or Nike-branded health food. After all, Nike is dedicated to improving its customers' health. The health-care business is in tumult, and presumably an innovative new entrant could make a lot of money. Parker replied that, however tempting those business opportunities might be, they didn't intersect with Nike's core focus on sport.

That doesn't mean Nike is avoiding new areas--including ones that touch on health. Spread across a couple of buildings on the west side of its campus are the employees of Nike's digital sports operation. This burgeoning startup is focused on remaking how casual athletes train, stay motivated, and connect with one another. More than 5 million people interact on the Nike+ website, which connects to sensors in your shoes, phone, or watch to provide GPS-linked data about your exercise, as well as health facts such as heart rate and calories burned. By deploying new technologies and tools in the service of its long-term mission, Nike has deepened its customers' brand experience--and reinforced, rather than fractured, its sense of identity.

The key is to be clear about your business mission. In a world of flux, this becomes more important than ever. Netflix's recent troubles with its ill-fated Qwikster product is a telling example. Netflix's core proposition has always been delivering a better, simpler, cheaper consumer experience. CEO Reed Hastings rattled video stores like Blockbuster with his no-late-fee DVD-by-mail model; he then obliterated them with his embrace of online streaming. But along the way, Netflix began to see itself as a first-mover technology leader more than a leader in consumer-focused experiences. That's when the company stumbled, by forcing its customers to go somewhere they didn't want, more because it made sense for Netflix's business model than it did for them.

MARKET VALUE OF NETFLIX (IN BILLIONS)



\$16.4
At July 13, 2011, peak
(one year after
Blockbuster was
delisted)



\$3.8
Five months later

THOUSANDS OF SUBSCRIBERS NETFLIX LOST AFTER LAUNCHING DVD-ONLY SPIN-OFF QWIKSTER



The twist to all this: Given the need for more frequent iteration in our age of flux, missteps like Netflix's may become more prevalent. And over time, we'll become more forgiving as a result. That will encourage even greater embrace of innovation by businesses, as the costs of failure decline. And in the process, flux will destabilize--and energize--our economy even more.

Lessons Of Flux

Our institutions are out of date; the long career is dead; any quest for solid rules is pointless, since we will be constantly rethinking them; you can't rely on an established business model or a corporate ladder to point your way; silos between industries are breaking down; anything settled is vulnerable.

Put this way, the chaos ahead sounds pretty grim. But its corollary is profound: This is the moment for an explosion of opportunity, there for the taking by those prepared to embrace the change. We have been through a version of this before. At the turn of the 20th century, as cities grew to be the center of American culture, those accustomed to the agrarian clock of sunrise-sunset and the pace of the growing season were forced to learn the faster ways of the urban-manufacturing world. There was widespread uneasiness about the future, about what a job would be, about what a community would be. Fringe political groups and popular movements gave expression to that anxiety. Yet from those days of ambiguity emerged a century of tremendous progress.

Today we face a similar transition, this time born of technology and globalization--an unhinging of the expected, from employment to markets to corporate leadership. "There are all kinds of reasons to be afraid of this economy," says Microsoft Research's boyd. "Technology forces disruption, and not all of the change will be good. Optimists look to all the excitement. Pessimists look to all that gets lost. They're both right. How you react depends on what you have to gain versus what you have to lose."

Yet while pessimists may be emotionally calmed by their fretting, it will not aid them practically. The pragmatic course is not to hide from the change, but to approach it head-on. Thurston offers this vision: "Imagine a future where people are resistant to stasis, where they're used to speed. A world that slows down if there are fewer options--that's old thinking and frustrating. Stimulus becomes the new normal."

To flourish requires a new kind of openness. More than 150 years ago, Charles Darwin foreshadowed this era in his description of natural selection: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives; nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." As we traverse this treacherous, exciting bridge to tomorrow, there is no clearer message than that.

Meet Generation Flux

Read the full profiles.



[danah boyd](#)



[DJ Patil](#)



[Baratunde Thurston](#)



[Beth Comstock](#)



[Pete Cashmore](#)



[Raina Kumra](#)



[Bob Greenberg](#)

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Showing 1-20 of 47 comments

Sort by **Newest first** **Lynn Underwood** 01/20/2012 12:47 AM

"By the mid 1970s, the movement toward chaos as a science was well underway, and in 1977, the first conference on chaos theory was held in Italy. Perhaps the most startling finding to come out of this new scientific theory is that order exists within chaos. In fact, order comes from chaotic conditions. "

Goodness, being a "grey hair" - I am over 50.... gives one perspective if not the rights to call BS what it is BS...and this article is just that. I had thought to write a long definitive on Chaos Theory and the impact it had on most of us during the 80s...am I stooped? Wasnt the Chaos theory a reaction to the last recession...somebody anybody...point out to these Flux folks...this state of affairs happens after every recession..and I have lived through 2...well, now its three...but darn....who is going to get a clue on all this stuff...? Doesnt anybody track stuff and make connections anymore..or is everyone lost the ability to learn and grow... isnt that one of the requirements for wisdom..I know I dont have a lot..but certainly if you are going to write a long article like this one..you owe the readers a long view perspective.....maybe that is wanting too much.....umm....

**INTELPRO** 01/17/2012 04:01 PM

This article sadly illustrates in large part what is ultimately wrong with business today, which leads into whats fundamentally wrong with the economy and society at large. This is nothing more than self serving corporatist propaganda while in the back rooms of the Fortune 500 they are all doing scenario planning regarding the demise of the euro, the impending failure of the European Union, the impact on America as our fates are tied, the fact that the younger generation is already saddled with more debt than they can service and have no ability to consume on an ongoing basis the output from all these multinational companies, nor does India/China with the failure of the America consumer on which they were dependent. There's an underlying denial in this piece that civil society as well can hold together with this magnanimous degree of self centered narcissism and fundamental lack of concern for the larger social good. Now lets talk about the chaos ! Why is their so much chaos at present? It certainly isn't because of increases in innovation (more on that below), that's a huge red herring! Its because the world is awash with more debt than can ever be serviced, thanks in large part to copious amounts of esoteric "financial engineering" by freshly minted Harvard MBAs and outright criminal fraud. Nobody knows what anything is worth! The policy response has been abandonment of the letter of the law, the suspension of sound accounting rules (see FASB 157) bailouts, coverups, stock market manipulation and staunch denial. There's your chaos! The only thing that matters right now is what the IMF, Central Banks, Fed, etc are doing to keep the ponzi from imploding on itself, and setting off the inevitable deleveraging, necessary correction they so desperately want to avoid. Calling these supplicants "pioneers"? Hahaha try the new serfs when these folks lose their corporate gigs! These narcissistic automatons are clearly clueless to the larger game at hand, advocating for their own misery and subjugation in the longer run without being cognizant of the ramifications. Shifting business trends? Bullshit. Innovation you've got to be kidding me! What innovation overall? Go look at the R / D budgets of the largest firms in this country as a percentage of revenue and you will quickly see the majority have declined precipitously in the last few years while the corporate focus has been almost exclusively on selling more of what they already have, being entirely tactical/reactive....then look into the fact that 50% plus percent of PhDs in this country cant find a job. There's innovation for you! Puhleeze....Flux? Study behavioral psychology the human composition is absolutely not suited to constant change and long term lack of stability. Look what happens when people are subjected to constant stress and uncertainty-health care issues and mental health issues proliferate, then social degeneration, etc. Looked at in another vein, who exactly is going to suck up 10M + foreclosed houses in this country when stable employment is a thing of the past? I think we still have a HUGE problem Mission Control. Saying that

predicting the future cant been done today? Horseshit! Wanna a glimpse? Study the failure of previous empiresthat's precisely where we are headed.Groupon? Oh my God....epic fail. Social media? Well, a lot of firms are questioning their investment, ROI because at the end of the day who the hell goes to Facebook to be marketed to eh? And they aren't prime time listening platforms YET. All these firms are radically overvalued and even one of the big mucky mucks from Living Social or one of the other SM firms said "Hell in 18 months 53 out of 54 SM firms in the NY area will be bust." I agree.GM stronger than Toyota? Only if you dont realize their balance sheet is about as reliable as Goldman's.Jack of all trades is what these folks say they have to be, I say yes and master of NOTHING.Globalization as a continuing trend? Nope. We're going to see a return to more localized structures out of necessity. We've already seen what happens in centralized structures when one component fails. It takes down everything. And trying to pull Darwinism into this? Obviously the author has never read Darwin and misunderstands his work. Natural selection has to do with the passing on of biological traits as a function of differential reproduction! Darwin wasn't referring to newly disenfranchised people trying to change their mindsets to cope with the fact that a bunch of plutocrats got greedy and destroyed the middle class and their future- so to cope the workers now have to constantly change their expectations to having ever less and accepting this is now their lot....BRILLIANT and this my friends is called SOCIAL CONTROL.



david perl 01/17/2012 03:32 PM

Great article...Good reality check..I am ADD/ENFP and a veteran of Silicon Valley so I am totally in line with the spirit of this article...I work at a traditional firm, still do acting in Hollywood, and look for work in tech..And keep myself open to many other fields (and other countries--states--cities)..And yes, I am single..and 49 years old...I embrace chaos..Life is short..my parents have been dead for years so I embrace the brevity of life...Just do it !



Liz Levenson 01/17/2012 01:04 PM

I just graduated last May and, for lack of a better plan, moved to Russia for a year to teach. Although I'm helping 8-year-olds learn to multiply, my education was actually in marketing. Because of this, I feel like I am more or less in the "Generation Flux."

The idea of an ever-changing world isn't new to me, but this article has gotten me thinking even more, "What does this mean for my education? Was it even worth my money and time? Would I have been better off just jumping into the job market if I'm going to have to learn new skills even x number of years anyway?"

One thing that doesn't seem to be talked about much is the impact that this change should be having on education, but isn't. We're told it's even more important now to get a bachelor's degree, but even that is almost expected of any newcomers to the job market. Why? In my classes we studied and discussed large, Fortune 500 companies, but I expect most of us will work in small business out entire lives. We talk about working our way up the ladder, but the ladder doesn't just go up anymore: it goes sideways, backwards, upside down. So why do businesses think it's important for us to get these more or less obsolete educations?

So what's the point? Why did I spend 4 years specializing in a subject that I may or may not ever use? Would something less traditional have been more beneficial to me, to perhaps help me to learn to cope and thrive in this "chaotic" world? Just like any other skill, flexibility and adaptability (especially in mindset) has to be learned. Many people are not born with these talents. So how can the rest of us learn these skills to keep up and not just get any old job and cling to it?



Judith Linn 01/17/2012 12:15 PM

I have two problems with this article. The first is that the career advice is nothing new. The idea that the work world is constantly changing and that we need to keep our skill set five steps ahead is at least a decade old. So is the message that we should no longer expect the gold watch retirement party from the company we're working at right now. I think the people profiled here have obviously excelled within the current rules, but I don't see most of them either as rule breakers or work/life innovators. It's clear from the styling of the group photo that this article mirrors any of the many 30 under 30, 40 to watch, 50 to emulate, etc. etc. articles of this type.

The second problem is that we've been living through the fallout of this lack of long-term responsibility in the corporate and financial worlds for years now. Having a creative type gleefully point out that she can't explain what she does for a living leaves me no more impressed than the guy who can't explain the derivative he's been selling all over town. This article seems to be encouraging the creative classes to get theirs while there's still a bit to get, that we all approach our careers as looting expeditions. What we need from this group is not more of the same attitude that's bringing down the corporate world. Not more throwaway products, new only because they're digital. Not more empty experiences, new only because we can like them on Facebook.

I don't think anyone could argue that we can learn one small set of skills and expect to be employed for the rest of our lives. I think we can ask though that the people promoted as the future leaders of the economy be adding long-term value and thoughtful innovations to the world rather than gimmicks that they won't stick around long enough to be held accountable for. I'm sure many of those profiled have and will do just that, but it's hard to get any sense of that through this article's breathless presentation of chaos for chaos' sake.



DAVID NGUGI GITAU 01/17/2012 07:58 AM

the articles are amazing



Larry Levenson 01/16/2012 10:39 AM

Your "Generation Flux" article puts into perspective so many disparate parts of my life, from business to politics, from social change to my twenty-something kids and their aspirations. It somehow creates an kind of "order" out of the chaos -- yet immediately disabuses me of that. Chaos is the constant here... there is no "order" in the traditional sense.

People (not just business people) can be very slow to adapt to the flux that is our lives right now. Many yearn for "simpler times", and careers, or just to get a job. But even a "job" is different... I'm not hiring people who are looking for jobs. I'm hiring people who are looking for an opportunity to stand in the middle of the flux of our business (and our clients' businesses) and be energized and excited about the chaos floating around them.

I'm passing your article along to my internal team, as well as to all my external teams, friends, nonprofits..... this is an extraordinary example of Fast Company's ability to stay on the leading edge of chaos (of course, having an "edge" pre-supposes that there is "not chaos" out there... funny how our language is based on certainty and is not a language of chaos).

Thanks for an exhilarating read, Robert!



David Coffman 01/16/2012 09:05 AM

I just finished reading the article and my first thought is how such a forward thinking publication can be so ten+ years ago. My second thought is "no kidding" or "duh". I am not sure where someone who found this topic new or enlightening has been living for the past decade. Maybe in one of the companies you profiled. Chaos, ambiguity, uncertainty or whatever you want to call it has been the rule in business for such a lone time. I gave a presentation titled "Take Your Business Plan and Shred It" at a management conference back in 2004. Now I'm feeling nostalgic.



MaRiEagar 01/14/2012 12:03 PM

There is a renewed interest in how chaos and complexity sciences can be used as lenses to inform leadership, strategy and culture. For example, the AsOne initiative spearheaded by Deloitte. When I studied these theories in the context of business about six years ago, the feedback from MBA schools was that it was irrelevant to business. Maybe now the time is more appropriate to re-introduce these back into the business curriculum.



karen mccullough 01/14/2012 09:40 AM

Though it was a great article- Lots of great gen X examples and ideas - I wanted to hear from some of the 40-somethings...today having an open mind is key no matter what your age. Technology, speed, innovation are the game changers- and yet relationships matter. Life is interesting and exciting and I am so happy to be in the game



madhukar tanna 01/14/2012 04:58 AM

Article makes an excellent observation of changing paradigm of new business and how people will have to adept to rapidly changing environment. It does not matter if companies quoted have any significant profit or not. It shows the challenges ahead for all class of executives not necessarily born in 70's. I like the term Generation Flux - It correctly describes the current business environment, the chaos and how people adept. In general I love the direction FC is taking, always in forefront of leadership, business, creativity and technology. FC truly identifies with Generation Flux



Jamie LeRoy 01/12/2012 01:48 PM

I think this article could be good for those struggling to see what their path is and who need some reassurance that some people in this world can turn that into a full time career.

For the most part, though, I agree with Burton that the majority of this is hogwash for a large part of our society. And I've seen first hand that having a skill set where you know a little bit of everything can be terribly detrimental to your chances of securing a "specialized" job. And if you're not trying to secure a specialized job, then you won't stand out among your competition...unless you're a CEO like the folks above. What's wrong with pursuing one passion? I realize this might be the old way of thinking, but I wonder how much fulfillment can be achieved when your passion is to constantly be the next big question mark. And this whole "four year career" thing, I think that rings true for many, but trust me, when that stability falls out from underneath you you'll be longing to work somewhere or create something with some longevity.

In the grand scheme of things are we going to remember any of the folks listed above? Probably not. Because in a couple months they'll be replaced by the next batch of power-hunger flux-ified youngsters. Maybe I'm alone when I say I have no dreams of pursuing that go-go-go, live on the edge of unemployment and sheer genius lifestyle. I'm very much content to perfect my craft and keep my head above the murky waters of this society...and hopefully make a difference in my tiny part of the world before I pass on.



Maxim 01/12/2012 12:40 PM

The article is well written but ultimately lack substance. Of course, you can always cherry-pick a few successful individuals and point out that a particular trait was conducive to their success. But that's just that, a biased sample. If you look at somebody who is a father of three, and must provide medical insurance and decent education for their kids, "flux" just doesn't seem as a good option, because it amounts to playing roulette with their kids' lives. Besides, rumors of "long careers being dead" are vastly exaggerated -- I personally know a few individuals with rather long careers in a few companies, who are gainfully employed and have fulfilling lives. So, the take home from this piece is "All these industries are being revolutionized" -- which is simply a truism.



paul healy 01/12/2012 07:26 AM

A fabulous reply from Bruton that slams dunks this article. It's doing the social media rounds so I was looking forward to reading something enlightening. Instead we get a yawn-fest on the self regarding...."meet Benjamin Palmer, the groovy CEO of edgy ad firm". Come on... this is vacuous stuff! Less about vanity and more about values please.



Maxim 01/12/2012 12:41 PM in reply to paul healy

Agree 100%



Burton 01/11/2012 01:44 PM

I'm sorry, but this article is just filled with narcissistic, me-me-me, feel-good pandering to an age group of people that were born in the 70's and earlier, who are scared of losing their jobs. And the point it makes, about job skill adaptability, was much more eloquently made in an NPR segment 2 years ago. The damaging part about this article is that it ousts social responsibility or even societal utility of one's job and promotes trend-surfing as a way to make money, and essentially charlatanism. It's basically a mean-spirited, "every man for themselves" call-in-disguise, amidst a totally uncertain economy and marketplace.

Right off the bat, this article attempts to make an adaptable workforce seem like a special club using a made-up term "Generation Flux". I'll bet the writer can't wait for that to catch on so he can take credit for it. And he was probably born in the 70's or earlier as well. Then it tells "success" stories to make the reader WANT to be in that club. Then it uses ONE example of failure by Netflix, which doesn't even really follow the point of the article, to make the reader FEEL threatened, and that they should want to join this exclusive club. But it's all so narcissistic from the branded image photos of the interviewees to the description of Bob Greenberg's hair, "flowing and bushy... as if he's saying, look, I am who I am. So deal with it." Yeah, like with that leather jacket, hat and scarf he's really giving off the I-don't-care-about-my-image vibe... sure... It's pure charlatanism; you'll get a job based on an "I-don't-give-a-f***" attitude and making yourself seem more important than you are. Okay. Ultimately, this 1970's-born-and-earlier pandering is totally apparent in the age group of the interviewees. They all (with Pete Cashmore as the rare exception) earned their degrees and entered the workforce well before the economic crash in 2008, and based on their ages, were part of the group of young professionals who bounced around without any direction in their 90's and early 2000's lives, wasting the wealth and goodness that was accumulated during that time, which was the same poorly thought-out attitude that led people to buy a bunch of houses they couldn't afford and wreck the economy and lives of millions. But what of the generation that graduated in 2008 and later? It is totally true that job skill adaptability and ability to learn new things is much more valued in an employee now than it was years ago when "specialization" ruled. But the unemployed 20-somethings are not achieving life and career success by bouncing around from job to job. They don't have that self-indulgent luxury. My generation, the 2008 graduates, have to focus AND be skilled at EVERYTHING. And if they're lucky enough to even get a job now, they hang on to it. But what's more important is that the lucky few of the generation of 2008-and-later graduates that actually do get a job discover that it's all about societal usefulness. And that's what's lacking in this article. This article brings up the tired, business-minded belief in social darwinism. Which basically means that everyone is your enemy, and the goal is to make a quick buck on whatever trend, wherever you can. Beth Comstock succeeded in an Ecomagination and Healthymagination campaign for GE? That's just nonsense catering to the health-conscious and eco-conscious trend that has emerged now because our health care system is a mess as is our planet. Raina Kumra's "Light-Up-Malawi"? Again, another serial entrepreneur trend to create some non-profit for the developing world. Non-profit work is a long-term process for devoted people that actually care about helping developing countries, and the fact that Kumra left it just goes to show the lack of commitment to it and the clear signs of trend-surfing instead. But let's give them the benefit of the doubt and assume their intentions were good. Either way, this article is so confused about whether it endorses longevity or not. These darwinistic attitudes don't promote longevity nor does its promotion of the "four-year career". Yet its "positive" examples of Apple and Facebook are much longer than four years. Steve Jobs didn't quit Apple after 4 years the last I checked. Mark Zuckerberg didn't quit Facebook after 4 years either. So what gives?

It's simple: Yes, be adaptable. Update your skills. But don't be some a**hole charlatan. Have value. Stop thinking about yourselves and commit to something greater than yourself. Wake up and face reality: millions are unemployed, health care is in shambles, education is in shambles, government is out of control and impotent and our economy is crumbled. So stop thinking about yourself, your "personal brand image" and think about society. Don't abandon longevity. How are you contributing to rebuilding our society? How are you contributing to solving our problems? OUR. It's not about YOU, it's about US. Wake up and make yourself valuable not by trend-surfing or serial entrepreneurship, but by building a future. Actually believe in it. Technology may change daily or by the second, but technology is not our world, technology is the tools to build a world. A better world. That should be your motivator, not social darwinism.



Shinett Boggan 01/12/2012 12:08 PM in reply to Burton

I disagree, I thought this article gave a brief snapshot of how leaders in business and society succeed...by continually being aware of the changing forces and being highly adaptable. These are the individuals who give us products and technologies that make our lives easier and better more often than not. For this reason, I find these people valuable and contributors to a better world...which is what I strive for. I graduated from college in 2005 and I find that I had choice but to leave jobs when the company wasn't interested in being forward-thinking or encouraging that trait in its employees.



michael 01/12/2012 10:59 AM in reply to Burton

See my post from yesterday: With the exception of GE, I do not see any reporting on actual revenue. This seems like a bit of fluffy self promotion. Would be interesting to see these names and the P and L that they have developed successfully. Michael



sampa 01/12/2012 09:08 AM in reply to Burton

100% agree. I think many people got lost in this crazy "innovation" circus. As a consequence they buy stuff they don't need with money they don't have and think this stuff will bring them happiness or a better social status. People lose faith in realtionships (professional and personal) and their instincts, because they have become passive, bored, manipulable and scared information consumers. I think stop watching TV, cutting random internet zapping and taking a moment to think about the value of what they actually watch, read, listen helps a lot to find new goals, self-esteem and to find out what is really important in personal life and what are ideas/concepts/business plans/career plans that last longer than the next quarterly figures. Sorry for my English. It's not my mother tongue.



sampa 01/12/2012 09:22 AM in reply to sampa

"...
of what you actually watch, ..."

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