

FRAME WE R

How Generalists
Thrive in a
Changing World

SIOBHÁN A. O'RIORDAN

Praise for *Reframe*

“*Reframe* is both a practical guide and a salve for the soul. It gives language to the unspoken truths many of us live with, explaining why we think and act as we do. For those of us who are Generalists, it shines a light on the often-invisible value we bring to the world and reminds us that we’re not alone. Reading it gave me clarity about my own winding path and affirmed that the perspective we carry, while sometimes isolating, is exactly what’s needed in times of change.”

MIDY APONTE-VARGAS, President and Founder, Civil Strategies

“In a world of narrow career paths and siloed experience, Siobhán O’Riordan offers up a practical guide for the entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, operational wizards, project leads, people managers, and leaders who bring expansive thinking, considered actions, and a desire to work across systems to solve entrenched problems.”

GERALD CHERTAVIAN, Founder and Advisor, YearUp United and Senior Lecturer, Harvard Business School

“As a philanthropic futurist, I spend my days helping visionary leaders prepare for what’s next. The pace of change isn’t slowing down. The leaders who thrive will be the ones who can navigate volatility with creativity and range. *Reframe* is a practical and affirming blueprint for how to do just that.”

TRISTA HARRIS, President of FutureGood and author of *Future Good*

“Being a Generalist in a Specialist’s world is stressful. Most of us need to work to live, and that means we usually don’t have the luxury of experimenting with our livelihood. There’s an enormous amount of pressure—some self-imposed, but much of it very real—to “figure it out.” I entered my career with few connections and minimal skills to self-advocate, so it took years of mentorship and trial and error to receive the kind of validation a book like this could have given me. It’s comforting to know that you’re not alone, and invaluable to hear that you have unique strengths that others don’t.”

CASSY KRUEGER, Organizational Effectiveness & Culture Designer

“Siobhán O’Riordan has written the book so many of us have been waiting for—especially those who’ve never quite fit neatly into one box. *Reframe* is like a permission slip for anyone who’s ever felt like a ‘jack-of-all-trades’ but secretly wondered if that was a weakness. Siobhán flips that thinking on its head. She shows us that being a Generalist isn’t just valid—it’s powerful, necessary, and perfectly suited to the complex world we’re navigating right now. If you’ve ever felt unseen or unsure how to articulate the value you bring, this book will feel like someone finally turned the light on.”

JANINE GARNER, coach, speaker, podcast host, and author of *Be Brilliant* and *It’s Who You Know*

“While the world celebrates specialists, Siobhán O’Riordan champions the questioners, connectors, and pattern-seekers who thrive in uncertainty and drive innovation. If you’re tired of apologizing for your wide-ranging interests and ready to claim your role as an essential catalyst for change, this book will show you how.”

OSCAR TRIMBOLI, award-winning podcast host and author of *How to Listen*

“At last, a guidebook to navigate a world that increasingly rewards specialization, but desperately needs the multi-faceted and multi-sectoral experience and wisdom of the generalist. Siobhán O’Riordan is the perfect guide for those of us who seek a broader path of contribution and change-making.”

MICHELLE NUNN, President and CEO, CARE

“The world is changing dramatically—and so is the kind of leadership we need. In *Reframe*, Siobhán O’Riordan shows how Generalists—adaptive, curious, and action-oriented—can thrive in this new era. As a former CEO for thirty years and now a coach to dozens of CEOs, I’ve seen the power of both Specialists and Generalists. *Reframe* is an essential guide for leaders and employers alike, offering practical strategies and inspiring insights to unlock the full potential of Generalists.”

VANESSA KIRSCH, Founder-in-Residence & Senior Partner at New Profit

“As an investor, advisor, and educator, I have spent my career cultivating future leaders in both the private and social sectors. I know first-hand that the pace of change isn’t slowing down, and the ones who will thrive are those who can navigate volatility with creativity and range. *Reframe* equips the next generation of leaders with the mindset and tools to turn uncertainty into opportunity.”

ARCHIE L. JONES, JR., Senior Lecturer, Harvard Business School and CEO of NxGen COACH Network™

“The rapid change in technology demands leaders who are adaptable and discerning, open to learning and growth. Siobhán’s book *Reframe: How Generalists Thrive in a Changing World* gives systems builders, dot connectors, and those who fill in the gaps a guide to visioning and valuation to collaborate with leaders and specialists in new ways, and transform challenges into opportunities.”

TINA HALFPENNY, CEO Efficiency Forward/Executive Director DLC

REFRAME

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How Generalists Thrive
in a Changing World

SIOBHÁN A. O'RIORDAN



Reframe

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INTRODUCTION

UNSEEN AND UNSUNG

CHARISSE SAT WITH a former colleague over a Saturday coffee, regretting her career of false starts. Over the past fifteen years, her friends had built successful careers as lawyers and executives, with titles like “Director” and “Vice President.” Charisse had just left her job after a year, again disappointed by working at another start-up where she failed to translate her early success into a permanent position. This happened a lot. She would join a company at the beginning and have immediate success in finding problems to solve. She had a knack for getting to know clients quickly and felt her “fresh eyes” gave her an advantage in finding ways to meet their changing needs. Yet, as each company soon grew, her once-exciting role of identifying and innovating solutions to meet client needs increasingly narrowed and focused on standardizing service. She soon became bored and frustrated as her job lost the creativity she had initially experienced and enjoyed. She knew being hired successively by so many companies was evidence of her intelligence and capability, and yet the many examples of her success were almost equal in number to the disappointments. Discouraged, she confided in her friend her doubts and the uncertainty of what to do next.

Or consider Nasir, whose personal story differed in several ways from the childhood experiences of his colleagues. His upbringing as a young immigrant navigating new environments provided him with a unique perspective as a consultant discerning client needs.

Nasir was valued by clients and colleagues alike for his ability to assess industries, quickly identify key opportunities to research, and make insightful and strategic recommendations. Quickly promoted to senior consultant, he was now pressured to focus on one industry. Nasir loved his job because he had constant exposure to new ideas and opportunities, including clients, industries, and challenges. The need to specialize in this new role robbed him of what he felt made him successful: the freedom to follow his curiosity, see patterns, and think broadly about solutions. Disappointed and discouraged, Nasir became convinced that consulting wasn't for him and soon left the company, landing a management role at a nonprofit organization.

And then there is Michelle, who, after university, followed in the footsteps of her trailblazer sister to work on cruise lines. With a new contract every four to six months, Michelle enjoyed her work, the places she traveled to, and the freedom to explore the world in between contracts. She loved everything about the life she had created, yet on curated social media posts and periodic trips home, she observed friends living a very different, even conventional, life. While they climbed the corporate ladder, got married, bought homes, and had families, she accumulated a list of countries visited and created unique memories through many once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Michelle questioned her unconventional choices after moving back to “land” permanently. The life led by so many people she knew and loved somehow did not work for her, and she was unsure what would.

ALL GENERALISTS,¹ INCLUDING Charisse, Nasir, and Michelle, experience what David Epstein describes in his book *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, as the “Generalist zigzag.” When intentional, the “zigzag” is rewarding. Yet, for Charisse, Nasir, and Michelle, and many other Generalists, it is a byproduct of second-guessing choices and capabilities, wondering why they cannot do what others seem to do with ease: pick a lane, hone a skill, develop a career, climb the ladder. Instead, our need as Generalists for variability takes precedence. We thrive in roles that allow for our

“ranging curiosity” and “creative approach” to problem-solving. When we default to what we think we should be, an expert, the attributes that make us successful in the right roles for Generalists fail us as Specialists. Our “ranging” curiosity lacks focus, our creative problem-solving is illogical, and our adaptability and experimentation are interpreted as lacking intention. This is what drives the cycles of confidence, curiosity, and success, followed by frustration, discouragement, and doubt for Charisse, Nasir, and Michelle, and so many other Generalists.

Even when we, as Generalists, find confidence, as Charisse, Nasir, and Michelle eventually do, we still struggle to communicate our value, understand our impact, or build a career because our work is largely unseen and unsung. Our “invisibility” begs the question: Why should we care about Generalists? And why now? This is one of the key questions I will answer in the pages that follow. But before I outline exactly what this book entails and how it can help you, I would like to introduce myself.

From one Generalist to another

My name is Siobhán O’Riordan. I am a certified Gallup Global CliftonStrengths Coach with a BA in History and an MA in Teaching from Tufts University.

Before becoming a coach, I was a consultant and senior leader, working with and in organizations with revenues ranging from \$500,000 to \$30 million. I helped social entrepreneurs build their teams and create inclusive learning cultures. I scoped and implemented strategies to increase revenue, expand collaboration, and improve communication. I advised extensively on direction, programs, funding models, and messaging across all types of philanthropic organizations, including foundations and intermediaries.

At least that’s what my bio says. But I also worked in public relations, taught high school history, catered, and sold antiques in addition to a slew of summer jobs. If you chart my career (and I do in Chapter 6), it is marked by highs that were both satisfying

and award-recognized, followed by deeply discouraging lows. And yet I never understood this rollercoaster (zigzag!) of success and failure until seven years ago, when a colleague, Andrea McGrath, introduced me to the idea of a Generalist. Andrea described a Generalist as someone who is widely curious, often a quick study, ranges across careers, and finds success in any number of roles. I recognized myself immediately in her description, and, later, in David Epstein's book, *Range*. I welcomed having a word, even if undefined, that captured how I operate in the world.

Not unlike landing in a new environment without knowledge of the language, customs, or climate, until recently, being a Generalist lacked direction and was mostly "learn as you go." While I appreciated knowing there were others like me, that fact didn't answer the questions I had about how to *be* a Generalist in the world in which I live and work. And more specifically, how to understand and adequately explain my value, my strengths, and the kinds of conditions and challenges in which I thrive.

The book I needed, but didn't have

So, I set out to answer the question: What is a Generalist? In this book, I explore what we share and how we individualize; how we navigate our unique paths; and how we differ from, and yet very much need, Specialists. It was not just a definition or a description of what a Generalist is that mattered to me and the other Generalists I interviewed for this book. It was understanding why we struggle, where we excel, and how we can better deliver on our individual and collective value in a world that needs us to solve increasingly complex problems.

Five years ago, prompted again by a conversation with Andrea about the invisibility of being a Generalist, I wrote a popular post on LinkedIn.² Since then, I have coached and created a course for Generalists to help them handle role changes, handle new responsibilities as managers and leaders, and find new jobs. In every scenario, I helped each Generalist distill and define their narrative.

Who are they as Generalists? What is their unique value proposition and power? When and where do they find excellence? The answers are not obvious, and yet, like peeling an onion, we examine the layers of excellence and potential that have, for so many Generalists, been overlooked, ignored, and underutilized.

Witnessing my clients understand and embrace their version of a Generalist further inspired me to go deeper into the subject. I researched over 150 sources (including books, articles, videos, podcasts, and posts about Generalists), surveyed over 100 Generalists, and conducted twenty interviews. I had many more conversations with clients, other coaches, colleagues, and peers to inform the content of these pages. The research, my learning, and the challenges of our current moment all contributed to the content and influenced the layout, which is designed to encourage notes of your own.

This is the book I wish I had twenty-five years ago: a practical how-to guide for Generalists and professionals with multi-faceted careers, who are often lost in a world that rewards specialization. This is the book that could have helped me find clarity and confidence in my abilities as a Generalist, rather than failing to meet and being disappointed by imposed definitions of success.

The questions I ask and give guidance on in this book are the same questions my clients and other Generalists struggle with:

- What would happen if you, as a Generalist, could confidently communicate your value so others easily understand what you do?
- What would happen if every Generalist had the same kind of opportunities for growth, success, and development that Specialists have?
- What could collaboration with Specialists look like to help further shared success while building your own?
- What would it feel like if you could name your superpowers, carve a career you love, and have a vibrant network of other Generalists, all similarly unique?
- What could be possible if you and every Generalist could meet the unknown demands of the future?

If I have learned anything in my zigzag, roller coaster career, it is this: *the thinking that created the problem will not be the thinking that solves the problem*. Stubborn challenges and unpredictable change still require expert insights. Yet, increasingly, it will be new ideas and new approaches that meet the increasingly complex demands of our time. Demands that Generalists are uniquely positioned to address. This book provides Generalists with what they have long needed: a definition and framework within which to understand and communicate their unique value and create an aligned career. When Generalists can be and bring their best, Specialists can more easily do the same. It is only together that we can meet the demands of our rapidly changing world.

A practical guide for every Generalist at every stage

This book serves as a comprehensive and pragmatic guide for anyone who identifies as a Generalist at any stage in their career: an overview of the Generalist landscape, precise definitions, detailed descriptions, and relevant frameworks to support individual career development and direction. It is also a guide to navigating changing times and how to use our strengths, people skills, and values to make decisions with limited and imperfect information.

This book is intended to be a resource that Generalists can return to repeatedly as they seek first to discern their value and then develop their careers. (Managers, HR professionals, and others will also find the book relevant.) The layout of this book facilitates active reflection on the content with prompts, wider margins for note-taking, selected quotes for inspiration, and questions for further exploration. The workbook, accessed via the QR code, has additional exercises. The information shared invites individual consideration; not everything will apply to everyone. While a book for all Generalists, it is for you to make it your own. The case studies are anonymized and, in some instances, combined. However, all

are drawn from real conversations with interviewees and coaching clients about Generalist challenges and successes.

The book is split into two parts. Part 1 consists of three chapters and provides definitions that Part 2 builds upon. Chapter 1 identifies the dilemma facing Generalists in being both unseen and increasingly in demand. In Chapter 2, we examine the broader context, types, and needs of Generalists to understand the challenges ahead better. Chapter 3 provides a framework and explanation of core Generalist attributes—curiosity, creative connections, and context—that Generalists can use to identify their areas of potential growth.

Part 2 has four chapters, exploring how we can understand, individualize, apply, and develop our value proposition as Generalists. Chapter 4 focuses on the power of understanding and discerning our strengths (not skills) in preparation for Chapter 5, which explores how to communicate and collaborate as a Generalist. Chapter 6 delves into key considerations when creating a career as a Generalist. Chapter 7 covers self-development and growth as a Generalist. The conclusion focuses on how Generalists can meet the needs of the future starting today.

We can no longer afford to leave Generalist talent on the table. To meet the unique demands of our time, Generalists need to receive the kind of support, visibility, and understanding that Specialists have long had. This book does precisely that by providing pragmatic and career-changing tools and tactics that elevate all Generalists, enabling us to see every single one of them.



1

THE GENERALIST'S DILEMMA

“In a wicked world, the only
guarantee is uncertainty. The only
way to meet it is by being curious.”

DAVID EPSTEIN

WHEN THERE IS no definition, it is hard to determine direction. Where exactly do we start if we don't know what we are or are trying to be? As Generalists, we must begin with the existential yet pedestrian problem of invisibility before we can embrace a definition and direction. Understanding what's missing shapes our case for recognition and, more importantly, the types of support we need to meet the pressures of the time in which we live.

The specialization myth

In 2020, the author Malcolm Gladwell conducted a live audience interview with respected journalist and author David Epstein to discuss Epstein's recently published book, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. The duo immediately hooked a curious audience with this question: Is excellence a product of relentless and focused effort or wide-ranging curiosity and experimentation?

This was not the first meeting of Gladwell and Epstein. Indeed, this conversation and the idea for David Epstein's book were both seeded in 2013 when Epstein and Gladwell first met as panelists at MIT's Sloan Sports Analytics Conference. Both avid runners, researchers, and sports fans, Epstein and Gladwell were well-positioned for a conversation on athletic excellence. Epstein had

just published his first book, *The Sports Gene*, which examined the controversial question of genetics and training in athletic performance. Gladwell's 2008 bestseller, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, explored the making of "high achievers." And while part of their conversation focused on the expected debate between the "nature" of genetics and the "nurture" of practice, the 10,000-hour rule, popularized by Gladwell's book, was also discussed.

While Gladwell's definition was more nuanced in his book, many started to use a more popularized version of "10,000 hours" as an easy measure of excellence, a fail-safe way to claim expertise. If you did anything for the equivalent of 10,000 hours, you were "automatically" an expert. Yet Epstein wondered whether this was indeed true. Based on his work as a journalist for *Sports Illustrated* and other publications, he probed whether specialization guaranteed success. And if specialization did not result in success, what did? He explored the answer to this question in his second book, *Range: How Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. Published in 2019, the book was shortlisted for the *Financial Times* and McKinsey Business Book of the Year Award, named as one of five titles on Bill Gates' "Holiday Books 2020" list, and appeared on the bestseller lists of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*.

Like Gladwell's *Outliers*, Epstein's meticulously researched book included hundreds of data points and nearly as many stories of exceptional success, including the early specialization of children in chess, sports, and music. He starts his book with the origin stories of Tiger Woods and Roger Federer. Woods famously held a golf club in his hands before he was a year old and began playing golf at the age of three. Woods' early and singular focus on golf is a popular example of early specialization as essential to later success.

Federer's path to success tells a different story. Even though his mother was a tennis coach, Federer played a variety of sports as a child. He did not focus exclusively on tennis until he gave up soccer at the age of twelve. While both Federer and Woods have achieved the pinnacle of their respective sports, it is Woods' storied start, not Federer's "delay," that is known and adopted by parents and coaches worldwide.

In investigating this story and hundreds of others, Epstein argues that it is *not* specialization—the much-popularized 10,000 hours of focused practice—that is the frequent pathway to success. Instead, Epstein argues that success, as exemplified by Federer, is more often the result of a range of zigzag experiences in which one learns and adapts, becoming increasingly innovative in delivering improved solutions.

Epstein points to Generalists' deep curiosity and willingness to learn as reasons they excel in addressing the problems of a rapidly changing world. Complex issues that lack permanent solutions—such as climate change, viral epidemics, and international drug trafficking—cannot be solved by expertise alone. They demand the approach to solving problems that Generalists bring: curiosity, creativity, and adaptability to changing circumstances. Epstein forcefully concluded, “In a wicked world, relying upon experience from a single domain is not only limiting, it can be disastrous.”³

In making the case for Generalists, Epstein succeeded in describing the Generalist experience so robustly that we, as Generalists, did not even need a definition to feel validated. At the same time it's essential to be “seen;” early acknowledgment's outsized importance does not replace what is still missing. Though visible, as Generalists we still lack a functional definition, adequate support, professional development opportunities, and a well-defined career path.

Indeed, everything in the work world—from job descriptions, to sourcing, vetting, and hiring candidates, to degrees, certifications, performance reviews, and promotions—is geared to Specialists and their areas of expertise. By contrast, Generalists operate in a world where titles do not align with abilities, certificates fail to capture knowledge, performance measures ignore our value, and, finally, practice is not an accepted area of expertise. While we have, as Generalists, lived with ambiguity for decades, the times we live in demand transparency on our core abilities: adaptability, curiosity, and creative solutions. As Epstein's book points out on every page, the time for Generalists is now.

Our interconnected world is characterized by constant change, infinite possibilities, and equally numerous distractions. Since the

late 1800s, the work world has successfully responded to change through increased specialization characterized by focused expertise that has resulted in enhanced efficiency and growth. However, with the advent of knowledge work, globalization, technological innovations, AI, and many other factors, a rapidly changing, ambiguous, and complex world has quickly emerged. This new world necessitates a different response—one that is “ranging,” adaptive, collaborative, and discerning. A Generalist response.

The heart of the dilemma

In O.C. Tanner’s 2023 *Global Culture Report*, fifty percent of Americans identified as Generalists.⁴ According to *Harvard Business Review*, ninety percent of 17,000 CEOs studied had general management experience.⁵ The data points to a critical irony; while everywhere, Generalists are without a definition or direction and lack awareness and support. Yet our disappointments stem not from what we lack, but from the rollercoaster of success followed by letdown (Epstein’s “zigzag”). Successes are easy to enjoy; it is the letdowns of role misalignment, poor cultural fit, boredom, creeping doubt, or unfavorable comparisons to Specialists that have significant consequences and negatively impact our confidence, earnings, and career trajectory.

The rollercoaster is not our only predicament; indeed, our wide-ranging dilemma as Generalists is neatly captured in the word itself: “Generalist” simultaneously means anything, possibly everything, and yet exactly nothing. The word purports a broad range of abilities and a can-do attitude as easily as it does a lack of focus and inability to make decisions.

Solid yet inexperienced. Useful but undeveloped. Good. Never great. The ubiquitous “jack-of-all-trades, master of none.” (A flawed interpretation, as we discover in Chapter 2.)

Why do you think you are a Generalist?

This lack of definition is further complicated by the fact that, as Generalists, we are each distinctive; shaped by our particular talents, interests, and life experiences. No two Generalists share the same path. We might take a deep dive into one career, learn everything about it, and emerge before diving into a new area of interest and career. Or we may have multiple roles within a single company. Perhaps, like Michelle, we pursue numerous and concurrent roles that align with our values and interests, or, like Charisse, we flourish in a start-up environment. As Generalists, we may thrive as leaders, entrepreneurs, CEOs, managers, or, like Nasir, as consultants. Indeed, our careers are as diverse as Generalists are unique.

“The voyage of the best ship is
a zigzag line of a hundred tacks.”

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Although needed, Generalists lack a definition, direction, and development to support individual growth and collective effectiveness. This is the heart of the Generalist dilemma. Ubiquitous and yet unseen. Needed but unnamed. In demand but underdeveloped. The reason for the dilemma? As stated earlier, *everything* about the work world—sourcing talent, job descriptions, roles, hiring, performance assessment, certifications, career ladders, professional development, promotion, and more—is geared to support and reward Specialists.

This focus on Specialists wouldn't matter much except for the increasing complexity of the times in which we live. For decades, Generalists have found ways forward without formal structures or support. Yet change is happening swiftly and unpredictably like never before, creating new and complicated challenges. The dynamic nature of this change requires both the adaptability and versatility of Generalists *and* the in-depth expertise of Specialists. Only together can Specialists and Generalists meet the demands of our time.

In addition to the demands of change, there is the question of effectiveness. What would it look like if we, as Generalists, received what Specialists have long had? What could be true if Generalists were seen, supported, and developed by managers, mentors, and colleagues? How could we, as Generalists, *best meet* the demands of our time? The complexity of the problems we face in our “wicked world” compels us to ask and answer these questions.

Three core attributes of Generalists

An awkward and painful moment for a Generalist is answering “What do you do?” We may respond with a rambling description of everything we have done, or the ambiguous “jack-of-all-trades,” multi-hyphenate, “a doer,” Renaissance thinker, utility player, unicorn, leader, hobbyist, dabbler, and more. Even those of us who have titles can be stymied when explaining our value and impact.

A Generalist is a catch-all term for many essential employees in every organization, describing individuals in various roles,

including CEOs, chiefs of staff, COOs, senior leaders, and managers who work in strategy, project development, client engagement, partnership development, programs, marketing, talent acquisition, and operations. The lack of a functional definition means we, as Generalists, also lack a term that provides us with a shared context with room for more nuanced interpretation and personalization. It is not just being a Generalist that matters; what matters is how we are each uniquely a Generalist.

A functional definition provides us with language to increase our visibility and value, and find a meaningful way forward—a definition we need and can understand. As Generalists, we share three core attributes that, when understood individually and explored collectively, provide us with a framework and definition to understand who we are and how we communicate and grow as Generalists.

- **Generalists have “ranging” curiosity.** Generalists are first and foremost relentlessly curious. We love to learn about many different things, and each of us have a particular strain of curiosity. Our interests might range across and include people, ideas, questions, and various data and materials. The process of accessing our curiosity, acquiring and curating information—how we learn—is also individualized. We might learn through conversation, or prefer to read deeply, or observe intently about any and everything. Our broad curiosity differs from that of the Specialist who seeks a deep understanding of a single question or issue.
- **Generalists make creative connections between disparate data and phenomena.** Generalists will identify gaps, patterns, or systemic issues and propose solutions. We take a lateral (not linear) approach to making sense of existing and missing information, often generating new ideas and solutions to test. We may be the ones to step into the gap, manage across teams to address a larger challenge, or think more broadly about addressing a systemic need. We excel at practice and embrace testing ideas, piloting projects, and leveraging expertise to provide initial or next-level solutions so that all, including Specialists, can excel.

- **Generalists require variability and thrive in changing environments.** Work context is the ultimate determinant of a Generalist’s success. Our ability to adapt and refocus our attention and curiosity demands environments that provide variability and freedom to learn, explore, practice, and test solutions. Environmental factors can include the company’s industry, type, stage, and access to mentors, managers, and team members who understand and cultivate the company’s values, thereby supporting its development. A dynamic environment is essential to a Generalist’s success, development, and growth.

How can a definition help you with your particular “Generalist dilemma”?

These three main attributes can be distilled into a shorter functional definition:

Generalists are widely curious,
creatively connecting information
to ideate and test solutions,
address gaps, and solve problems.

While a functional definition helps, it alone does not solve the Generalist dilemma. As Generalists, we need the same access to structured support that is available to those who specialize. While there are some blog posts, articles, books, podcasts, and TED Talks that address the purpose and value of a Generalist, the quantity pales in comparison to the educational and professional offerings for specialized work. Professional development and growth are barriers for many Generalists. Currently, managers are tasked with unanswerable questions: How do I support a Generalist's development? What does their career look like? What skills do they need if not those of a Specialist? How do I give feedback or assess their performance if they are not an expert?

Though the focus is on Generalists, the impact is on everyone. Supporting Generalists is not just about Generalists: it matters to everyone in an organization, especially Specialists who depend on our adaptability to many roles and functions as crucial to shared success. As Generalists, we may be a CEO or chief of staff, lead strategy, run a division, collaborate across teams, develop staff, fill in gaps, spot opportunities, pilot programs, manage projects, carry company culture, coach, consult, or build a start-up or another function. Yet, regardless of the roles we play and the work we do, our understanding of and collaboration with Specialists is essential to every Generalist's success.

Generalists and Specialists: essential collaborators

The relationship between Generalists and Specialists has always existed. Specialists are defined by their expertise, rightfully valued and trusted for their deep knowledge and demonstrable skills. To become experts, Specialists follow a defined career path with competencies identified and assessed. For example, a plastic surgeon completes pre-med courses and then applies to, attends, and graduates from medical school. With a diploma in hand, they complete a required residency, followed by a fellowship at

a hospital specializing in a subspecialty, perhaps reconstructive or cosmetic surgery. Even when performing surgeries regularly, they are required to participate in ongoing training and continuing education credits to ensure they remain current on evolving skills, technology, and knowledge. While the path to becoming a surgeon is not easy, the required knowledge, qualifications, assessments, expert mentors, and time demands are clearly defined. The progression is clear, and, perhaps most importantly, capabilities are tested and certified by other experts. Patients and hospital staff can trust and depend on the surgeon to perform their job effectively. The narrative of a Specialist aligns with their career: we see precisely how the novice becomes the expert, the student the Specialist.

Specialists accumulate knowledge through a focused curiosity, resulting in the expertise they bring to solving problems. A linear approach ensures they follow the steps, pass the tests, and maintain the protocols specific to their expertise. This linear approach is crucial in many situations, especially those where the outcome could have a disproportionate or hazardous impact, such as studies involving human subjects or laboratory experiments that utilize flammable materials. However, this linear approach used by industrialists—notably Henry Ford, who discovered efficiencies in specialization (shorter production times, fewer mistakes, safer processes)—has had an outsized impact on the work world we operate in today. The dominance of specialization as a means of both production and problem-solving has, in turn, shaped the education and work systems in which we all function. The result? Specialists receive extensive support through education, certification, promotion, and recognition, all structured to demonstrate a deeper and more precise understanding of their field.

While Generalists are the focus of this book, Specialists are essential to our success as our sources of information, collaborators in problem-solving, and sustainers of solutions. Like any symbiotic relationship, Generalists and Specialists are most effective when mutually supportive. Specialists benefit from the Generalist's

adaptability and expertise as practitioners. Generalists attending to the vetting and testing of opportunities allow Specialists to focus and capitalize on their learning. In turn, Specialists provide Generalists with the fuel and knowledge that feeds our curiosity and sustains solutions. We see this dynamic at play everywhere when we pay attention. Generalists may, for example, lead the initial development of a new product or program, initially seeking input from sales on client feedback and processing insights from program leaders. They may conduct an external scan for best practices, competitors, and more, resulting in a development plan that relies on the expertise of the best as much as it does on creative ideas. The Generalist plays the roles of gap spotter, convener, and innovative problem solver. Similarly, a Specialist's function fills a role of expertise and execution, bridging information and operations. Together, they create the solutions and systems that can sustain, change, and scale in response to accelerating demands.

However, today the factors that accelerate change are inherently more complex and cannot be addressed with a linear, logical, step-by-step approach. Indeed, the thinking that led us to this point of complexity will not be the solution that enables us to respond and move forward.

How have Specialists played a part in your career?

The future is here. We are now in a time of rapid global change driven by AI and ‘intelligent’ computers, among other key factors. With the advent of ChatGPT and other AI engines, we are beginning to understand both the speed and scale of transformation we will experience over the next twenty years. The complexity and pace of change place unusual demands on employers, who must reskill and upskill their current employees while contemplating future demands and changes. According to the World Economic Forum, forty-four percent of employers believe that six in ten employees will need reskilling in 2027.⁶ Reskilling is one need, adaptability to change, and the ability to flourish in the unknown will also be required. It is, as Epstein’s book argues, the time for Generalists. Our curiosity, creative connections, and the ability to thrive in a fluid environment make us essential to navigating the ambiguous changes ahead.

What’s next?

Recognizing our abilities as Generalists can be a game-changer for us individually, the people we work with, and the problems we best address together. We can each find satisfaction and success by better aligning our talents with opportunities and environments that foster our growth and encourage us to thrive.

Consider Charisse, who successfully reframed her failed expectations of permanent employment by embracing a consultant’s perspective. Recognizing that she was energized when working in start-ups and subsequently lost steam when the organization stabilized, she decided to become a consultant, which for her meant working full-time for a start-up for six to twelve months, taking a month or two off to travel before starting a new job at another start-up. Then there is Nasir. His previous boss convinced him to return to his former firm, but this time in a senior role where he could once again leverage his strengths in scanning the landscape and assessing new opportunities while managing a team. He is

still there today. Michelle, now living on land, has found, like Charisse, a niche as a consultant. Today, she focuses her curiosity on exploring and understanding other cultures and her clients' unique challenges, finding satisfaction in each discovery and developing tailored solutions that meet her clients' needs.

While each of the Generalists we met at the beginning of the book found a way to work that aligns with their value, it is in the collective where the promise of Generalists lives. As we will explore in Chapter 2, Generalists come from a long tradition of being needed during times of flux and change, but perhaps they are needed now more than ever.

KEY POINTS

- Generalists are largely invisible and unsupported everywhere.
- In many ways, the work world is geared to Specialists.
- Currently, there is no functional definition or shared understanding of a Generalist.
- Both Specialists and the demands of change need what Generalists bring: adaptability in ambiguous conditions.
- Core Generalist attributes include curiosity, creative connections, and context.
- Only together can Specialists and Generalists meet the demands of a changing world, economy, and workplace.
- Generalists need what Specialists have long had: frameworks, support, and growth aligned with their strengths (not just skills).

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How have you succeeded as a Generalist?

What is frustrating for you as a Generalist?

Where might you grow as a Generalist?

WORKBOOK

See sections 00 and 01
for additional exercises.

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