

D O N ' T M E S S W I T H M Y
P O W D E R , D U D E !

by Jim Carroll



REFLECTIONS ON THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

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“Don’t mess with my powder, dude.”

Such was the rather flippant response by an engineering graduate to a job offer from a leading architectural/engineering company. “You spoke about your regular Tuesday project meetings, the weekly afternoon Thursday update sessions, and your 9 to 5 culture. And I’m sitting there thinking all the time that there’s fresh powder on the hills, and you’re messing up with my boarding time.”

The CEO of the organization was explaining this story to me while we discussed the global trends that I should address during my upcoming presentation to staff of the organization.

“What’s with these kids?” he asked.



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The answer to that question is not that difficult to understand. And it is by thinking about the context of such things as today’s prevailing attitudes towards work and life that you will realize the importance of everything about the future of the workforce.

We are in an era of massive transformation of the modern organization. We are buffeted by rapidity of market change, regular, constant product and service innovation, increased globalization, heightened competition, and the ever increasing specialization of skills as a result of accelerated knowledge growth.

Organizations have learned that the way forward is not by relying upon solid, unyielding, slow-to-respond corporate structures of the last century. They have realized that to deal with the high-velocity future, they must be able to swiftly assemble and disassemble teams that will focus on specific projects. They know that they will staff these projects with individuals who will work on these projects for very short periods of time. They will then quickly disassemble the project and the team that goes with it, in order to move on to next project. They will be juggling dozens and dozens, and hundreds and hundreds of such projects.

They know that their ability to manage a workforce that is sometimes temporary, always transient, part-time in nature and multi-skilled in background will become a key leadership skill. They know, however, that project and skills management probably isn’t a core skill that they yet possess.

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What does this have to do with the snowboarder? There are dozens of complexities that come with the project oriented economy

For example:

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Finding the right skills, at the right time, for the right purpose, at the right price.

Managing complex, real time projects that span the globe in terms of partners and skills.

Learning how to veer a project towards a new, unforeseen goal as a result of rapid market change.

And yes, attracting to a project team a generation that has a completely different concept towards the idea of work.

Seven years ago, as the parents of two very busy young sons, my wife and I decided that we should take up skiing as a family activity. The first year, we could barely get down the hill. Today, as I write this, we are about to head off for a week at a mountain ski resort, where we will be able to navigate some of the most difficult hills. Not with ease, but at least with enthusiasm!



Going downhill is the fast part of skiing. The social part of the sport is of course, après-ski, but also takes place during the ride up the hill. You get to meet a fascinating array of people from different backgrounds while on a chair lift: different age groups, locales, career types. Everyone talks to their seat or gondola partner; it's part of the culture of the sport!

Through the years, I have come to a quirky but fascinating conclusion about these conversations: different generations have very different attitudes towards their life and their careers. For example, baby boomers inevitably ask me the question, "what do you do for a living?" Being in my late 40's, I can understand that much of how we define ourselves is based on how well we've done with our career.

Snowboarders, on the other hand, who almost always inevitably seem to be younger than the age of 25 (though yes, I know, there are millions of 30, 40 and 50 year olds who board!) always tend to ask me a different question: "What do you like to do?"

And that comes to the heart of the question asked by the CEO: 'what's with these "kids"' is that if they can't find a career that provides an adequate fit between what they do for fun ("boarding") and what they do for a living ("designing"), they'll turn down the opportunity.

I worked into my presentation to the company two fascinating statistics: more than 50% of American kids now believe that self-employment is more secure than a full time job. And a survey of engineering students indicated that the majority believed that a full time career was about 2-5 years long.

What's with these "kids" is that if they can't find a career that provides an adequate fit between what they do for fun ("boarding") and what they do for a living ("designing"), they'll turn down the opportunity.

What's going on here? Massive transformation in attitudes towards the world of work, organizational structure, and careers! This is but one of dozens of trends that are coming together leading us towards the project based economy. Quite simply, there is an entire generation who would prefer a career of dozens of short term, project oriented assignments, rather than long term, thoroughly dull, career paths.



Boomers are the last generation of a world in which people defined themselves in terms of their career. They went to school, obtained a set of skills, and began to apply those skills to a career with the expectation that this is what they would do with their lives. With this expectation, however, came the rude awakening of the end of the job for life, the end of the concept of a career-for-life, and perhaps even the concept of a "job."

Boomers are the vanguard of the last-century organizational structure and career concepts: one that is focused on the concept of employment, and on the concept of a career.

Generation-Connect (as I have begun to call them) on the other hand, have a mindset that is perfectly in tune with the project oriented economic and career structure of this new century: one that is based upon an ongoing stream of short term, project oriented work assignments.

The statistics above clearly indicate that the younger generation is very different when it comes to careers. It's easy to understand why: they've seen their parent right-sized, out-sourced, re-engineered and transformed. They've come to understand that there are no guarantees, nothing is long term, and that much of their success will come from their ability to constantly reinvent themselves.



And they get very bored, very quickly. They are the first generation to grow up in the global data-cloud; they've been weaned on Xbox and MSN and YouTube. They are immersed from birth in a world in which they can be doing multiple things at once, and which their minds are always very active.

They are coming to expect the same degree of heightened stimulation in the workplace. They expect to have multiple different careers; they want to be provided with a regular stream of new projects and varied assignments and responsibilities. They fully expect a career path that will allow for multiple different jobs and careers throughout their lifetime, simply to avoid the boredom and tedium that comes with routine.

And they define themselves not by what they do for a living, but by what they like to do. The latter includes sports, socializing, hanging out, chatting online, and, well, a few careers and jobs and projects and things to do along the way.

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They are a generation that is fiercely collaborative and extremely team oriented. While their older baby boomer parents talk of change management workshops and the need for “team collaboration” within existing corporate structures, this next generation just “does” stuff. They can instantly take on the most complex of projects, and work in a manner which draws together the talents of many, many people.

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Their uniqueness is such that they are the vanguard of the next phase of the massive restructuring of the modern business organization. Quite simply, they don't subscribe to the concept of a corporate work philosophy that says you have to come to a certain location every day to do things. They find the concept to be entirely laughable, with the result that those organizations which have yet to adopt a workplace culture that supports irrelevancy-of-location as a cornerstone will be unable to attract their talent and skills.

In other words, if you mess with their powder time, you likely won't be able to interest them. And in an economy in which the war for talent will be the defining factor for future success, that could be a pretty big problem.

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A huge amount of my time is spent, as a futurist, trends and innovation expert, on providing insight to some of the largest organizations in the world.

I'm helping them with what they must do in order to adapt to an ever more rapidly changing economy, collapsing product lifecycles, fiercer market competition, the rapid emergence of new competitors, challenging new workforce attitudes, not to mention the necessity of gaining access to ever more specialized skill sets. In doing so, I've come to learn that many leading thinkers of our age truly don't appreciate just how quickly the world is changing.



For example, I often tell the story on stage of a hypothetical “GoogleCar.” I suggest to the audience that we live in an era Google could choose to become a car company – and could jump into the business pretty quickly if it wanted to. All it would have to do is line up the proper partners for the project: today's economic winners excel by putting together rapid, global, sophisticated, knowledge-deep partners.

In the global economy of today, the capabilities needed to design, build and deliver a sophisticated new automobile can become accessible at the drop of a hat. Well, perhaps not that easily: but learning how to manage a project of such scope and scale will become one of the critical success factors for any organization in the future.

You might need to learn to assemble rapid, global, sophisticated project partners – the insight provided by this book – faster than you might think!

After I tell my story of the GoogleCar, I explain that Google's founders are now significant equity participants in a new California car company, Tesla Motors – an organization that has brought to market, rather quickly, a fascinating new electric vehicle. It did so by bringing together a wide number of partners to the project, each bearing their own unique expertise and skills.

We live in a time in which things are happening so fast that predictions go from fantasy to reality in but a matter of months.

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Today, we can see an ever-increasing reliance on project-based “workforce for hire.” Companies are aggressively focused on becoming leaner than ever before. They continue to reorganize themselves around a small, core group of staff responsible for keeping the business running, and they focus on obtaining the rest of their needed expertise through an ongoing and ever-growing reliance on short term, contract workers. The increasing specialization of knowledge, rapid career evolution, relentless market and business change, and globalization have led to a world in which skills access is critical: it's all about getting the right skills, at the right time, for the right purpose!

In the future, we will continue to see companies relentlessly focused on obtaining the best talent they can, regardless of where they might be. In the hyper-innovative global economy, the only thing that counts is knowledge. If the knowledge is accessible from anywhere in the world, then companies will find themselves in the position of being able to choose the best talent and expertise they need to do a particular job from a group of global, skilled experts.

That's why understanding the attitude of the snowboarder is critical.

And it might help you understand that the simple issue of “what do you do for a living?” being replaced by the question, “What do you like to do?” is one of the fundamental changes occurring around us today that has tectonic consequences in the project and workforce management landscape.

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This document was originally written by Jim Carroll as the Foreword for the book, *The Rise of the Project Workforce: Managing People and Projects in a Flat World*, by Rudolf Melik.

Jim is a strategic thinker and "thought leader" with deep insight into trends, the future, creativity, and innovation. For the last fifteen years, he has provided high energy keynotes for audiences of up to 3,000 people, and intimate, detailed customized strategic planning insight for CEO / board / senior management meetings.

He was recently named by *Business Week* as one of four leading sources for insight on innovation and creativity, and was a featured expert on the prime time CNBC series, "*The Business of Innovation*."

Jim's client base includes Nestle, Motorola, the American Society for Quality, Caterpillar, Verizon, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, Blue Cross Blue Shield, the Property and Casualty Insurance Association of America, and the Swiss Innovation Forum, to name but a few.

Jim learned to ski at the age of 40, and now organizes his professional career activities during the winter around his skiing time. He welcomes your comments at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com.

