The world of work is changing. Adapt or get left behind.
— Marti Konstant

Adapt or perish, now as ever is nature’s inexorable imperative.
— H.G. WELLS 1866–1946

Welcome to the Age of Career Agility
The airport was surprisingly quiet on the snowy Tuesday morning I left Chicago to board a flight to San Francisco. The black and white highly polished floors in Terminal 1 reminded me the night shift never sleeps. At 5:30 a.m., I savored the meditative quality of the early moments of my active day.

Within thirty minutes, the noise level rose and business travelers swarmed through the terminal. The Helmut Jahn-designed underground moving walkway between Concourse B and C was flashing with colorful wave-shaped neon tubes on the ceiling. George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” comforted me with its predictable jazzy tune.
On business travel mornings, I imagine the career stories of road warriors as they travel to their destinations. The game includes observations about the way we work, how we work, and why we work. People-watching with a purpose unleashes stories and possibilities.

For two years, I researched the trend of career agility. O’Hare Airport, my home base, was the best place to ponder these thoughts as I made my weekly trek to bustling work days in other cities. At this international center of air travel, I was surrounded by the concert of important work lives, subject to change at a moment’s notice.

With my running shoes on and my backpack in tow, I was ready for the day. And ready to contemplate the potential of the agile career.

**The Meaning of Agility**

Agility is trending.

Like the artful business traveler skillfully navigating his way to an upgrade or a more optimal flight option, an agile mindset is a competitive advantage in the workplace.

You may have seen recent articles referencing agile or agility relating to an extensive list of topics: agile thinking, agile mindset, agile workers, agile career, learning agility, design agility, agile marketing, agile software development, organizational agility, leadership agility, and agile research, to name a few.

The use of the words agile and agility is on the rise. If your boss indicates on your annual review that one of your traits is agility, your career potential is likely moving up a substantial notch.

You might think an agile career translates to being flexible. And you are right. Flexibility as a career attribute, however,
is only about 10 percent of what it means to be agile in our life’s work.

The published definition of agile is: able to move quickly and easily. The definition of career is: an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person’s life and with opportunities for progress.

I was excited to see the word “progress” in the definition of career. Yet how many times did it feel like a storm cloud was hovering in a relentless pattern over your last job?

When two years of researching agility extended beyond the early morning airport musings, one thing became clear: agile and career belonged together. Just like heart and soul or time and tide. The future of work depended on a new perspective regarding career development. Influenced by the agile software development definition, conceived by software engineers, I created one.

Agile Career Definition

An agile career is a self-reflective, iterative career path guided by response to change, evolving job roles, and designed to optimize creativity, growth, and happiness.

—Marti Konstant

Much of what prompted my point of view stems from personal career experiences. The career evolution included: artist, graphic designer, art director, brand strategist, marketing technologist, technology marketing executive, and author.

The thought-provoking substance of the agile careerist body of work, however, is derived from people and their stories.

There are compelling individual narratives highlighting agility benefits and defining a few agile careerist habits. My
qualitative method included interviews and conversations with people who work. I spoke with senior executives at Fortune 100 technology companies, small business owners, schoolteachers, sales managers, and surgeons, among others.

When traveling to New York by air, I sat next to a practice director from a consulting firm specializing in learning agility. Their research focused on the correlation of learning agility to effective leadership traits. Lucky me! She was generous during our exchange and offered to connect me with agility researchers at her firm. I grew to understand serendipity, like the accidental airplane meeting, was a function of an agile mindset.

The peek into the agile careerist habits provides a foundation for the stories that will unfold in the coming chapters. My research uncovered the following habits present in the nimble employee or entrepreneur. These self-directed individuals operate in multiple lanes vs. single lane careers and show an uncanny ability to adapt to setbacks and uncertainty.

**Agile Career Principles:**

1. **Create an Idea Zone.**
   
   Take a cue from software engineers. Develop an idea backlog or buffer zone for future use, like they do for software releases. Save the pixie dust of your creative genius by writing it down or creating a digital document for a rainy day when you are out of ideas, yet still want to make progress.

2. **Pursue It in Parallel.**
   
   Pursue side gigs, freelance work, consulting assignments, education, or hobbies. Create pathways for creative thought, extra income, or future job opportunities.
3. **A/B Test Your Career—Test and Measure.**
Test your interest and aptitude as you say, “Which do I like better, Job A or B?” Move to Job C or go back to a role similar to Job A, depending on your track record or inclination. Give yourself permission to explore as you discover the best fit for you and your talents.

4. **Respond to Change.**
Acceleration of technology and continuous state of change calls for flexibility and willingness to adapt. Lean into change and make adjustments to your career status, rather than sticking to a rigid plan. Acclimate to economic developments and corporate adjustments by uncovering engaging projects. Discover market and employment gaps you can fill in a unique manner.

5. **Optimize Your Personal Brand.**
Uncover your distinguishing characteristics or brand values. Package your portfolio of skills and be consistent in how you communicate and present yourself to the human workplace. Ask yourself, “Am I in alignment with my brand values?” Spread the story-driven message in real life and across your digital networks. Be bold and dare to be different.

6. **Activate the Feedback Squad.**
No one can do it alone. Seek the advice of people you most respect: mentors, trusted friends, and savvy colleagues. Hire a career coach. Learn from others via online channels. Pay it forward; be part of a feedback squad for a friend or coworker.
7. **Think of Your Career as a Series of Projects.**
Think of your work as evolving job roles. Consider two- to three-year projects capable of building on your incremental knowledge. Harness the enthusiasm of a fresh start, master the job, and build new competencies. Become the most eligible employee for promotion or the best candidate at another company, or launch your personal startup project.
This visual illustration of the agile career principles outlines the perpetual career pattern of workers whose skills and attitudes command workplace relevance. The journey map, portrayed as a figure eight or infinity symbol, will be described further in future chapters.

**The Conflict Between Expectations and Dreams**

When I first met Nicole Emerick, her easy smile and bright blue eyes accented her confident manner. Her transition from the finance profession to marketing was set in motion as she described her desires and detailed plans. The switch from one industry to another was believable because of her upbeat attitude and thoughtful actions. She documented her daring reinvention, supplying stories and anecdotes via her popular career blog for millennial women. Her subscribers had the same questions, hopes, and insecurities about their own lives.

I knew she would succeed, not just at marketing but also owning her career path.

Nicole graduated from college two years before the financial setbacks of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

Her father, a serial entrepreneur, recommended getting a finance degree because it would lead to a safe profession. “If you know money, you can do anything,” he said. True statement. And yet, marketing products like glamorous cars to consumers was one of her dreams. Her tomboy experiences from youth were kicking and screaming for attention. At age five, she was the only girl in her neighborhood to ride a mag-wheel bike.

Her father believed marketing was not a realistic profession. She earned her degree in finance.

When you turn left at the road of safe instead of at the road of desire, the crossroads image can haunt you during times
of discontent and searing disappointment. Like a photograph worn with reminiscence, Nicole continued to think; she hungered for her road not traveled.

Although Nicole performed her duties brilliantly at a major bank and was skilled at building relevant business relationships, something was not right. She could tell by looking at herself in photos. Her smile was fading. Envisioning herself in banking one more year, much less five to ten years, seemed like a nightmare. She yearned for a collaborative creative environment where her clever flair for trends and ideas would flourish.

Nicole made a smart decision. Her desire for a creative outlet led to starting a blog and using her time in the evenings to learn digital marketing. While continuing to work at the bank, she took online courses from a Silicon Valley University. She studied everything about the digital space and identified online social media was going to be hot.

She wanted in.

The trendspotter instinct served her well. New social media platforms were emerging every few months. Job descriptions for social media strategists and practitioners were developed in real time as the need for these workers continued to escalate. Nicole’s career was headed for a timely course correction.

She made another smart decision. She started a blog about twenty-something young women who struggled with some of the same questions that had plagued Nicole: How do I find a first job? How can I switch industries? What makes me happy? What can I do if I don’t like my current role? She attracted hundreds of subscribers who evolved into thousands of community members. Her blog generated income by attracting sponsors and advertisers.

Her creative ideas bubbled to the surface throughout each day, creating an intoxicating momentum that fueled her
focus. She held live events, attracting career women who wanted to meet each other in person. She formed alliances with résumé writers who transformed average résumés into attention-getting professional content. She developed her image as a fashionable careerist. With her stylish, wavy light hair and contemporary view of emerging fashion trends, Nicole was an effective spokesperson for her blog turned career website.

Every day, Nicole awoke before sunrise to answer the questions young women posted on her blog. She was credible because she was acting on her own advice. She understood their suffering. The website became a place for inspiration, possibilities, and motivation for millennial women. Nicole felt a strong sense of purpose.

In 2011, she landed her first marketing role, successfully making the transition from finance to marketing.

She sold her website business two years later.

She is now a Vice President and Director of Social Media at one of the world’s largest global advertising agencies.

Like the headline testing methods used by email marketers to influence consumers to open the email, Nicole tested career roles. All the while asking the question, “Do I like this role or do I prefer another position?” The answers to these questions informed her decisions for career movement.

Nicole is an agile careerist who has a knack for pursuing a side hustle while working her main job. She embraces the “test and measure” approach to career building and responds to change, making strategic moves at just the right time.

An agile mindset incorporates incremental change over big risky moves. The agile careerist hedges her bets by exploring the landscape on the side, while holding down a job and pulling in the steady paycheck.
Nicole is a millennial, and you might be wondering, “Does this apply to me? I am a Generation Xer.” Or, “Does this apply to baby boomers?” The answer is yes. The strategies and habits of the agile careerist are relevant to the multi-generational workplace. Employers also benefit from agile careerists in their midst through higher employee engagement and a better alignment between employee and job role.

**The World of Work is Changing. Adapt or Get Left Behind.**

The work environment is changing rapidly. The half-life of knowledge is the time it takes for acquired knowledge to become 50 percent obsolete. The half-life of our well-earned education is shrinking so fast it’s fading like the last gasp of summer. Some researchers suggest the usefulness of specialized knowledge gained in college lasts about five years, rather than thirty years.

Regardless of our stubborn denial, the unshakable foundation of job security is a myth deeply rooted in our collective memory from a simpler time:

- Before the employer-employee loyalty equation changed
- Before offshoring in search of less costly global labor left people unemployed
- Before the iPhone launch in 2007, when the world’s first imaginative smartphone shattered corporate walls for a mobility-yearning workforce
- Before email was overcome by truncated text communication
• Before sending a fax labeled you as an unenlightened dweller of the business dinosaur era

Exponential growth in technology and our fluid work environments require corresponding responses based on intentional actions, rather than impulsive reactions. Savvy workers who adapt to dynamic circumstances will thrive. Stubborn individuals who ignore the flashing neon signs of change will be left behind.

The Impact of the Technology Wave on One Industry

Breaking down the concept into a micro view illustrates how technology transformed a specific industry—the marketing field. Marketers who disregarded industry developments suffered and put their career advancement at risk. While the marketing profession is one example, you can easily apply this to any industry.

As a technology marketing executive with a background in communication design, I witnessed significant change in my industry and craft. My status as an early adopter of new ideas and technologies filled my after-work schedule with learning opportunities. The changes in the career landscape were stunning.

Consider the state of marketing prior to the internet. There were the Four Ps of marketing to manage when creating marketing plans: Product, Price, Promotion, and Place. Channels like advertising, public relations, direct mail, and trade shows were typical.

The marketing industry trends moved quickly. The industry moved from integrated marketing strategists to 1:1 marketers to brand strategists who set the stage for differentiation as a
competitive advantage. Marketers who viewed their experiences as a portfolio-building exercise solidified their hireability. Those who clung dearly to the comforts of repeatable strategies lost their grip.

When the digital age arrived, some marketers believed the core marketing strategies were the same. They missed the behavioral buying trends. While not fully comprehending this fast-evolving channel, many of them failed to adopt digital marketing thinking as a unique way to communicate with their customers. Oblivious conventional marketers remarked, “The electronic channel simply requires an implementation mentality.” The reality required a new communication mindset.

In spite of the implosion of the dotcom bubble in 2000, the advances of technology and creation of internet businesses had already launched a Wild West mentality for those willing to mine for gold.

During the next decade, the ascent of social media and a barrage of online tools and marketing software solutions ushered in the age of the marketing technologist. Clever marketers understood the profession of information technology was colliding with marketing.

Marketers who rolled up their shirtsleeves to adjust to new types of digital communication remained relevant. Factors like the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the corporate downsizing movement beat the steady threat of obsolescence into the hearts of change-resistant individuals.

The introduction of new companies like Facebook and Google seem obvious now, yet there were always those who prided themselves in staying away from potential fads. The expression, “No one ever got fired for choosing IBM,” was invented during the twenty-year progression of technology
change. It was easier to stay with what worked vs. buying a new software or hardware solution.

Not always true.

The evolution in marketing trends continues. Big data and analytics have transformed the profession. Virtual reality technologies and artificial intelligence solutions are spurring emerging job roles to support the next wave of business development.

Author Nicholas Carr writes about how technology changes behaviors. In his book The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains, he suggests the rapid torrent of technology is changing the way our brains are wired.

The next generation of consumers is entering adulthood. Digital natives from Generation Z, born between 1996 and 2010, have been raised in the era of smartphones and multiple screens. They absorb information instantly and can lose interest if messages and visual pictures are not clear and concise. The new advertisers will respond by designing highly visual campaigns.

People who pay attention, adjusting their strategies and points of view to tackle changing conditions and the ascent of new generations, will win.

**Why Did the Agile Careerist Rise?**

The traditional or linear career path has vanished. The system is broken. Past career management rules no longer work today.

There is a struggle to reconcile the differences while living the work lives we desire.

The relationship between employer and employee has become one of practicality, rather than one based on loyalty. Staffing is fluid. Companies hire people to accommodate demand during a growth spurt. These same companies trim
their workforce as needed, adjusting to wild variances in the business climate.

**The Current System Breeds Disengagement and Causes Pain**

Employees spend 30–35 percent of their time dedicated to work at the office, on the road, or at home. That’s a big part of each day, considering another 33 percent is spent sleeping (if you are lucky). Yet we actually spend more than one-third of our time on work. The percentage does not include time spent on a cumbersome commute or being on call, checking remote email, or providing progress updates.

The 2017 Gallup *State of the American Workplace* report states only 33 percent of employees are engaged at work. The disheartening finding is 51 percent of employees are not engaged. When not engaged, employees are likely looking for another role.

According to the report, “not engaged” means employees are “psychologically unattached to their work and company. Because their engagement needs are not being fully met, they’re putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work.” The study further states, “16% of employees are actively disengaged—they are miserable in the workplace and destroy what the most engaged employees build.”

The lack of engagement means many people are suffering, not thriving, in the workplace. Pain eclipses productivity, stealing attention away from valuable contribution. The scenario results in a devastating loss for both employees and employers.

Corporations are actively working to solve the systemic problem threatening their growth. They are creating “people” departments that are separate from HR. A record number
of culture management consulting companies have risen to help companies attract and retain workers with the highest potential.

The Shift
The shift started over sixty years ago. We went from the stability of the early twentieth century to a whirlwind of change. The collision of wars, changes in societal norms, women in the workforce, and the rapid pace of technology created a steady rhythm for the escalating drum beat of change.

Globalization and the persistent ascent of the information age contributed to skittish behavior in business and careers. Professional roles have moved overseas, even the white-collar positions we once thought would remain in the United States.

We are in the middle of a massive shift in our economy.

In the environment, when a geological shift happens, volcanoes erupt, tsunamis occur, and earthquakes happen. This creates an imbalance for a time period until the recovery begins. What also takes place is a human adaptation to the occurrence. Strategies are put in place to respond to future events. We evolve.

The economic shift has changed the way we think about our life and our work. Jobs and careers are no longer as secure as they once were.

Corporations accommodate reversals like a financial crisis or a slowdown in sales by lowering wages and downsizing their workforce. Business as usual is transformed into a new normal.

Although small and medium businesses will adjust and grow and new startups are created, these jobs are often at lower wages. Many of the jobs lost during the 2007–2008 recession paid higher wages.
Uncertainty drivers like the 2008 Global Financial Crisis resulted in long-term repercussions still in effect today. The recession forced numerous layoffs, and certain regions and industries continue to downsize hundreds of workers. Another variable, worldwide political uncertainty, acts as the insistent aggravator to our unwanted relationship with instability.

**Corporate Survival**

There is one universal question posed in every business school, in corporate boardrooms, and in preparation for shareholder meetings:

Q: What is the main goal of a publicly owned company?
A: To maximize shareholder value.

The same goal expectation holds true for many small businesses.

Studying this classic question, I wondered whether workers could apply a similar question, accompanied by a maximization response for the individual. Here is the parallel query for agile careerists:

Q: What is the main goal of the individual careerist?

The answer is derived from the definition of the agile career presented earlier:

An agile career is a self-reflective, iterative career path guided by response to change evolving job roles, and designed to optimize creativity, growth, and happiness.

The goal of our life’s work is:

A: To optimize creativity, growth, and happiness.

You might be wondering, “Where is the money?” or think of Cuba Gooding Jr. in the movie *Jerry McGuire* when he goads Tom Cruise to “Show me the money.” Yet with these three pillars in check, the money factors fall in line. With a focus on growth, you will build value within an industry or company.
Only you can determine your personal financial goals for success. But I assure you the opposite of these three pillars in your life—too many constraints, stagnation, and unhappiness—will certainly net you less income.

**The Employer-Employee Contract Has Changed**

First observed in the high-tech startup companies of Silicon Valley, the authors of the study and article (*Harvard Business Review*: Reid Hoffman, Ben Casnocha, and Chris Yeh) suggest the career escalator has vanished. Our career paths are nonlinear, and external forces interrupt career progression.

Hiring for tours of duty that resemble two- to four-year projects is a pattern for success on the side of the corporation and the employee. According to Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, the company develops much of their talent in this way. If you make progress on your project within a specific time period, you earn the opportunity to advance to another tour of duty. The reasoning is two years is ordinarily long enough for a product launch cycle.

Let’s examine the benefits. Productivity and passion are commonplace at the beginning of a new job or at the start of a new project. High productivity and motivation lead to positive outcomes and management satisfaction. Both sides benefit.

Employees are rewarded based on performance rather than the number of years of employment. The idea of harnessing enthusiasm more present over a two- to four-year project captures an effective equation for the optimization of creativity, growth, and happiness.

The future of working calls for a more flexible approach, where the needs of the individual and corporation are both accommodated.
My Road to Agility Started with an Early Detour

My life changed the summer before I entered high school. I was thirteen.

My sun-bleached hair pulled back in a ponytail, along with my freckled face, hid the impending doom of the doctor’s visit. The movie trailers played in my head: going to the beach, attending parties, and sharing secret stories with my girlfriends about what our lives would be like in high school. The carefree summer with my friends was halted. It never happened.

My backbone had other plans.

Diagnosed with scoliosis, a crooked spine, I was put in a full body brace extending from my torso all the way up to my chin. Two vertical metal bars straddled my spine and connected with two leather-covered pads holding the back of my head in place. The singular metal bar in the front and a cast-like structure aligned my spine and kept my hips in place.

The brace immobilized me to the point I could only look forward. Oh, the metaphors are almost too easy. My chin was held in place by a leather surface at the top of the vertical front bar. A circular metal shape surrounding my neck connected the chin rest and the back headrest.

The brace was cold in the winter against my skin and the cast-like structure was hot in the summer. I could walk, but I could not see the books I was carrying, nor could I eat in a normal way. It was awkward in every sense.

I was immobilized from my hips up to my neck.

The metal bars kept me straight and fixed and were adjusted to stretch my spine every couple of months. The bars were like lightning rods for me: for change, for yearning, for the dreams I created over the next three years.
I hid from the gawkers and the mean girls, working on the things I could impact: my school studies, me, relationships with a very small group of friends, and the imagination of my future. Going to dances and socializing in the world of mobile activities would have to wait until I could move.

Turns out, this unexpected restriction and disablement in my life fueled my attitude of “Anything is possible.” During these three years, I had a lot of time to reflect—to figure out who I was and who I wanted to be. Self-awareness, however confusing and challenging, came early to this teenager.

I started a craft business designing, making, and selling wooden plaques and key chains to my friends and relatives. The small venture gave me the opportunity to learn about business. With help from my dad, I was able to acquire raw wood materials, cut the wood, sand the surfaces, paint and create quotations with calligraphy, and apply a couple coats of varnish. This was the first of many projects in my career that generated income.

At night and during my private moments of sadness and frustration, I dreamed of movement. I imagined running through a field, swimming in a lake, doing cartwheels across the lawn, dancing to music, and riding a bike.

I replayed my future life movie reel, one where I became an artist creating work like the black and white geometric images of M. C. Escher. In the movie, I went to college at a Big Ten school, impressed young men with my clever conversation, and launched creative businesses. The repetition of my “Anything is possible” future kept me going during the dark times of isolation.

Then I turned sixteen.

The brace came off. In one day, I went from a fixed position to completely flexible and mobile. Something amazing
happened. My dreams erupted into reality. I was free to be the person I wanted to be, without the encumbrance of the metal hardware and the inner shame and embarrassment of feeling odd. The wall between the world and me was gone! I released the pent-up energy and ideas into a flurry of action.

I became an acrobatic cheerleader, launching myself into a social hive of activities, and qualified for a dance part in the school play. That summer I became a lifeguard at the local pool. My activities involved glorious, unbridled movement.

I excelled at multitasking and was on a quest to learn and do everything possible. Maybe I was making up for lost time. Filled with gratitude, I savored every moment of mobility.

My studying and good grades paid off for college opportunities. I could move, run, do backflips (literally), and drive. I forged through to the other side of a major setback. My burgeoning abilities to adapt and learn would come in handy as I encountered other certain hurdles in my life.

**Inspiration for Agility**

Consider the example of a walk in the woods as a metaphor for career goals, strategies, and pursuit of balance in the swirling vortex of a changing environment.

You are in the lush green woods on an early spring hike. You are faced with the task of getting from one side of a fast-moving stream to the other, and you observe there are plentiful choices. Your goal is to triumphantly plant yourself and your hiking boots firmly on the carpet of low vegetation in the forest. There are smooth stones and textured logs positioned haphazardly in the body of sparkling water. You examine your choices for getting to the other side of the stream.

It becomes clear your best strategy is to make progressive angled moves, enabling you to get a firm grip on the next rock
or tree limb. Each step advances you closer to the other side. When you jump forward to the next surface, the slippery rock starts to teeter a bit. You check yourself, arms waving and opposite leg swinging to counterbalance the wobbly sensation. Once you secure your stable footing, you pause to assess the next strategic move.

The gurgling water ripples over the pewter-colored stones and on the tips of your ankle-high boots. The rustling wind, another environmental factor, may pick up speed and cause you to adjust once again. The timing for each step establishes a pattern of movement for the journey across the flow of water. Sometimes you slip up a bit, and occasionally one of the leaps is more risky than the last one, but that’s OK.

You’ve got this. Why? You make fine-tuned adjustments to reach your goal.

The Genesis of Agile Thinking and Career Development

Behavior of Software Engineers Inspires the Agile Career Model

The application of agile thinking to career development takes its cue from the software engineering profession. A group of engineers formalized the agile software development process in 2001 and published a Manifesto for Agile Software Development. Some of the principles, slightly paraphrased, include: continuous delivery of software, response to changing requirements, frequent delivery of working software (based on shorter time-frames), and consistent collaboration with stakeholders.

Here’s how it works. With the goal of developing useful, market-driven products, engineers develop prototype products, get feedback, and iterate the product numerous times within work periods or sprints to make the changes necessary for market launch.
Remember the days when software launches at places like Microsoft would promote a new version of software with press events and parties? Before agile software development practices were prevalent, software releases were stealth activities involving many bug fixes and creation of popular features. The work built up to a crescendo when the next release was announced. The time between releases was protracted. The promise of bug repair and new features were highly anticipated.

Contrast that with agile practices promising efficiency and just-in-time development. The software engineering profession now delivers needed feature updates and bug fixes for products in the form of incremental releases.

Application of Agile Principles to Marketing
Fast forward to 2012, when I collaborated with approximately twenty-five marketers in San Francisco to apply agile methods to the marketing process. We created a draft of the principles and core values for Agile Marketing.

Just as software engineers frequently iterated software versions to improve the software functionality, marketers discovered they could do the same with marketing programs. The creative process for campaign development can be done in an adaptive and iterative way, enabling incremental feedback. This allows collaborative interaction, minimizing unpleasant surprises between the creative team and the customer.

In the TV series Mad Men, advertising executive Don Draper was famous for developing ideas with his team and pitching the work as the “big idea” to the customer. The surprised client either loved it or experienced varying degrees of dislike. Because the creative concepts were produced in isolation without the client’s ongoing feedback to work in process, the risk of negative reactions was high.
In the marketing profession, ninety-day plans—rather than conventional twelve-month programs—are more effective. The shorter timeframes offer a flexibility filter vs. conforming to a rigid plan.

You might be asking, “But what about long-term strategy?” Agile methods are not meant to replace long-term thinking, but offer ways to move projects forward with the mindset of integrating the best available information.

Consider the following scenario:

A company makes a bet on a new product launch. Money, technology, and people resources are marshaled to ensure a successful launch. But it doesn’t go smoothly. The market timing is off. Should the company pull the plug on the current launch or hope the market will evolve? The company may be faced with reallocating their resources back to R&D or investing resources back to their flagship product.

When the moving parts of the business are managed with flexibility in mind, smart decisions can be made incrementally.

Applying agile careerist habits helps individuals settle into a logical tempo of workflow. It also heightens the feelings of satisfaction that come with navigating change with confidence.

**The Agile Careerist Project**

The idea of applying agile methods to career management inspired me to initiate a research project. I launched the Agile Careerist Project to gather insights among millennials, Gen Xers, and boomers about their strategies to start and navigate through their career paths. Privileged to share conversations with over 120 global workers, I gained pivotal awareness about the world of work.

In addition to my primary research, I studied a number of reports, books, and articles on careers, workplace, leadership,
personal development, transformation, and reinvention. I wanted to learn as much as possible about the agile mindset. Most important, the question “Can career agility be learned?” required an answer, or at least an informed opinion.

Interviews and meetings explored how people work, what makes them happy, what keeps them engaged, and what inspires their motivation. What makes some people more successful at career navigation than others? How do some people adapt to change more than others?

While researching the topic of agility for this book, I analyzed my personal work history. The approach to my life’s work employed a hedging your bet strategy. Just like a diversified financial portfolio, my burgeoning skills were treated like a portfolio and it was my responsibility to optimize them.

These awakenings informed my subsequent decisions about my life’s work and resulted in useful career navigation habits. I treated my career as a platform for personal development and established a pattern of behavior for my interest in the agile career.

The framework discussed in this book won’t erase all the pain caused by uncertainty or eventual disappointments. But it will provide steps to sustain forward progress, optimizing the important aspects of your work and well-being: creativity, growth, and happiness.

**Key Findings of The Agile Careerist Project**

The project illuminated a variety of compelling insights. The following chapters will isolate the seven essential principles of the agile careerist. If you are curious about insights gained throughout the project, you may benefit from a shortened version of my observations.
A peek into my findings uncovered two different types of careerists: the agile careerist and the steadfast careerist.

**Agile careerist behaviors:**

- Example: Richard Branson, who consistently responds to change
- Create personal career rotations based on interests and drive, rather than depending on one career track
- Uncover new job descriptions in their industry and invent job descriptions to accommodate their skill sets and interests
- Adapt to change and are flexible, rather than avoiding change
- Possess and cultivate curiosity and resilience
- Believe in do-it-yourself career management, rather than relying on corporate development or human resources
- Follow and leverage industry trends to stay ahead of the curve for the next role
- Seek out advice and feedback from mentors (formal and informal)
- View careers as a series of projects
- Optimize skills to grow professionally; seek out additional roles within the same company or reach out to a new company for the next stage of growth
- Value creativity, growth, and happiness in their life’s work
• A/B test jobs on a regular basis, testing and measuring personal aptitude and interest with each new role

• Pursue jobs and interests in parallel with the main job

• Build a personal work portfolio, fortifying skill sets with each new role

• Build and manage personal brands; communicate and package who they are, how they are different, and why it’s important

• Are highly productive workers who achieve happiness, gain access to new opportunities, and attain an impressive number of accomplishments

• May stay with one company for many years, switch jobs at strategic intervals, or start their own businesses

• Get bored with work that does not reflect a growth pattern

• Reinvent career paths, switching lanes from one career track to another

**Steadfast careerist behaviors:**

• Example: Kay Whitmore of Kodak, who denied the digital trend in photography, an attitude that contributed to the company’s demise

• Pursue job loyalty, rather than adventure and risk

• Prefer predictable environments and circumstances
• Struggle with uncertainty and avoid change rather than adapt to change
• Work within their capabilities, rather than accumulate new skills
• Require structure and direction from organizations for a career path, rather than adopt self-direction
• Are often blindsided by trends that lead to uncertainty and job loss
• As Michele Wucker points out in her book, *The Gray Rhino*, this group ignores obvious dangers and does not act on them, in spite of the warning signs
• Typically lack a Plan B
• Stay at roles longer than agile careerists with intention of ensuring job security

As shown in the diagram on the following page, all workers fall on a spectrum between agile and steadfast. Steadfast careerists require significant structure, are rules-driven, and prefer direction. Agile careerists are inherently self-directed. Higher agility scale scores correlate to a higher comfort level with uncertainty and change and lead to a state of continuous career progress.

We learned earlier from Nicole Emerick’s career that dissatisfaction can lead to a desired change. Mid-career can be the time when questions arise. “How did I get here? or “This isn’t what I thought it was going to be like,” are sentiments that can lead to confusion and stop workers in their tracks. Agile careerists pose similar questions but do not stay in a role lacking opportunity or growth.
Technology influences have altered the job roles required to grow companies. Companies are becoming flatter in their management structure, instead of hierarchical. The astute navigators write their own job descriptions to better address corporate needs.

The conventional rules of career navigation are in flux, but one rule is evergreen: a well-nurtured network ensures future opportunities. Agile thinkers stay in touch with the people in their orbit and do not wait until they lose their jobs to ignite communication.
Adopting an agile mindset is an empowered first response to the torrent of change. The rise of the agile careerist puts the employee in charge. The human resources department is just that: a resource. The best person to direct your career is you.

Because an agile careerist optimizes for creativity, growth, and happiness, she is more likely to be in a role suited to her talents and interests.

When I ask the question in the agile careerist interviews, “What are you most proud of regarding your life’s work?” I typically observe a beaming smile and a satisfied faraway look in their eyes. The earnest recollection tells me the spectacular moment of accomplishment was beneficial to their companies, their bosses, and their departments.

The deposit into the self-esteem bucket is still brimming years later. These storied moments happen when workers’ talents and interests are in alignment with the company goals.

**Summary**
A position at the helm of your own ship leads to a mindset claiming, “I’ve got this,” and “I can do this,” rather than “I don’t know whether I can take one more day of this [fill in the blank] job!”

Careers are riddled with change. Life creates unexpected personal circumstances. The economy crashes. Jobs are downsized. Office politics get in the way. Our work lives are never quite what we imagined. We don’t always have the command of the reins during our career journey. It can feel like someone else is in charge.

The agile careerist model tackles the evolution of these moving parts: people, companies, technology, and job roles.
Agile Career Framework Mitigates Pain and Suffering
The agile careerist framework was developed to eliminate suffering that exists when a person stays in a role not aligned with his or her talents and interests. Don’t you hate when that happens? Shifting the responsibility of professional development to the individual instead of the employer is a step toward self-direction and empowerment. This is in contrast to reliance on the structure of corporate employee management.

The agile careerist definition merits a quick review:

An agile career is a self-reflective, iterative career path guided by response to change, evolving job roles, and designed to optimize creativity, growth, and happiness.

Individual focus on the optimization of personal creativity, growth, and happiness complements the corporation’s focus on the bottom line of productivity and profit.

I believe career agility can be learned. As a valuable form of career currency, it is the cost of entry for sustained career relevance in the workplace of the future.

Next Steps
To understand how to be agile, you first need to understand what motivates you. Whether you are perfectly content in your current job, or wonder whether there is something better for you in your career, this is an effective exercise:

1. Discover what makes your heart sing. Think back to a time when you were happy in your work, when you were in the zone of doing your best work. What were you doing? The answer is not
necessarily your job role, but a feeling you experienced regarding your work. Maybe it was a time when you were working in a team or launching a new product.

Write your response to this. If you prefer a visual exercise, create a vision board for yourself. The important thing is to explore what makes you feel creative, what makes you feel productive, and what makes you happy. Answer these questions: How did you spend your time when you were eleven years old? What did you like to do? What were you good at?

2. Describe your proudest moment in your life’s work.

3. Explore your work environment to determine whether there is a project utilizing the skills and experiences described above that differ from your current role. Gather research about opportunities outside of your current workplace that speak to your skills and interests. Make a list of the opportunities around you that are aligned with your talents.
Meet Marti

Marti Konstant is a career growth analyst and founder of *The Agile Careerist Project*. Her career path includes: artist, designer, technology marketing executive, and impact investor. What started out as a quest to fine-tune her evolving career sparked a research project, book, and workshops where future of work and career agility are central themes.

A persistent optimist and prolific photographer, she lives in Chicago with her husband.

With movement as her muse, she is a runner, hiker, and long walker.

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