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## survival of the fittest

I am going to be honest with you: this is not a career book. This is not a book about how to polish your résumé—although we will touch on that. It is not a book about building your brand or refining your skills, even though we will explore both concepts in depth. Since we will work on changing your perspective, leveraging modern technology, and tapping into your entrepreneurial potential, you might think this book is about those topics. But it's not.

This is a book about something much larger. This is a book about professional evolution.

In 1831, Charles Darwin embarked on a five-year geological expedition on *HMS Beagle* around the world. While we all remember him as he was in his later years—a graying old man with an affinity for eccentric facial hair—at the time of the voyage he was just a 22-year-old university graduate who possessed an uncanny natural intelligence, a hunger for adventure,

and a desire to see the world before he settled into his anticipated profession as a parson.

Young Charles was likely not so different from myself or other twenty-something college graduates: old enough to make his own choices, desperate to spread his wings and start really living, yet still inexperienced and naïve in ways he couldn't yet understand. In a letter to his friend and mentor, John Stevens Henslow, the man who would be Charles Darwin shared a thought that most of us can relate to: "I dare hardly look forward to the future, for I do not know what will become of me."<sup>1</sup> When he wanted to sign up as a volunteer on the voyage of the *Beagle* to help with the recording of geological findings, his father said what most of our fathers would likely say if we pitched the idea of being on a boat in strange waters for half a decade: "Are you out of your mind?"

I am paraphrasing. In his autobiography, Darwin noted that his father "strongly objected" and would only relent in his objections if someone sensible (read: not Darwin) said the trip was a good idea. Luckily Darwin's uncle, apparently a sensible man with a vicarious need for adventure, spoke up in favor of the plan, allowing the young lad to set off and experience what Darwin reflected on later as "the most important event of my life."

The voyage also turned out to be one of the most important events in the history of modern science thanks in part to observations Darwin made while the *Beagle* was stopped at the wild Galápagos Islands. Located west of Ecuador, the volcanic archipelago was positively simmering with fresh deposits of lava and such a diverse array of giant tortoises, iguanas, and unusual vegetation that Robert FitzRoy, the captain of the ship, deemed the shore "fit for pandemonium."<sup>2</sup>

While documenting and recording the diverse array of wildlife on the islands, Darwin noticed the finches—small, plainly colored, and all-around unimposing birds that occurred in large flocks across the archipelago. He soon conceded to “inexplicable confusion” over classifying the birds. Though there seemed to be variations in size and shape and other physical features, they surprisingly had similar feeding habits and plumage, which led a perplexed Darwin to dub them “very curious.”<sup>3</sup>

By the time the *Beagle* set sail for its next call, Tahiti, Darwin had added six types of finches to his specimen menagerie. It wasn't until 1837, two years after his visit to the archipelago, that Darwin—with a little help from some scientist friends—realized his Galápagos finch samples weren't just different types but entirely different species of bird. Upon further examination he discovered that these unique species of finches had done something extraordinary: within a few generations, the beaks of the birds had altered rapidly in both size and shape to accommodate changes in their food sources and environment. Furthermore, each of the islands in the Galápagos had its own distinct set of finch species. Darwin theorized that the different species likely came from one common ancestor yet had all adapted over time to their present environments. In the process, they had become completely different birds.

This observation planted the seed for his theory of evolution, though it would take Darwin over twenty more years to fully articulate and present that theory to the world in his 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*. For those of you who skipped out on high school biology, I can recap one of the book's paradigm-shattering messages in one simple phrase: *survival of the fittest*.

We've all heard about the survival of the fittest, and I am willing to bet that if asked to summarize it you would say something like "kill or be killed" or "only the strong will survive." But the truth is that through his work with the finches, Darwin understood that "the fittest" were not necessarily the most aggressive or dominant of any species but those most able to adapt to changes in their environment.

Nearly two hundred years ago, Darwin's seminal work was informed by the finches' prodigious ability to adapt. But for us modern professionals, the example they provide—of rapid adaptation and survival—is more than just a scientific principle: it gives us insight into how to move forward and succeed in a job market that, right before our eyes, is shifting away from the decades-old nine-to-five standard into something yet undefined and still forming. The collision of chronically high unemployment with an expanding global workforce (among other factors) has turned the American job market into an ongoing survival-of-the-fittest scenario where professionals have a clear choice: evolve their careers or risk career extinction.

To be sure, this isn't the first time in American history when the job market has been dicey. The last century featured the Great Depression of the 1930s as well as recessions at the end of the 1940s and in the early 1970s. We've also had several notable recent recessions—in the early 1980s (which saw unemployment peak at 10.8 percent), in 1991 (6.9 percent), and in the early 2000s (6.0 percent).<sup>4</sup> Each of these periods brought its own challenges, including job market crises of varying degrees, and each one called upon the workers of the day to evolve in order to survive.

Yet many economists argue that the job market we find ourselves in today is more severe than any of those mentioned

above, except the Great Depression. At the time I am writing this, the national unemployment rate isn't as horrific as 1982's peak unemployment. But our recovery from recession has been slower. As a July 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article notes, "The economy's improvement since the recession's end in June 2009 has been the worst, or one of the worst, since the government started tracking these trends after World War II."<sup>5</sup> And there's a twist: when recovery comes, there's no guarantee the job market will look like it did before. In fact, as we'll discuss in just a page or two, there are many signs that it will look quite different.

In this unsettled, challenging time, when the applicant-to-job ratio hovers at 5:1, I would identify two kinds of professionals:

- those who are treading water (at best), waiting for the job market to recover from this latest recession
- those who are advancing their careers and helping to shape the job market of tomorrow, in spite of the challenges

The first group, which comprises millions of displaced and distraught Americans, still believes in the safety of the traditional nine-to-five job market. This belief makes them an endangered species. The second group, which I have come to dub "the Fittest," has read the writing on the wall and understands that the traditional employment structure is probably going the way of the dinosaur—but faster. Instead of waiting for a recovery in the job market that is never going to come—at least not in the form most people imagine—the Fittest are taking their own career fates in hand. They are using a set of five strategies, which I call "the Finch Effect" (in honor of

Darwin's avian inspirations), to evolve their careers so that they can not only survive changes in the job market but thrive in them.

As humans, one of our main evolutionary advantages is that we can adapt to changes in our lifetime, learning from and teaching each other to accelerate our adaptation. And we use this strength to keep honing our strategies as our environment changes. So a brilliant feature of the Finch Effect is that its strategies are teachable and replicable: once you know them, you can use them to adapt to any change in the job market, from current circumstances to those that will arise in the future.

But before you can make the most of these strategies, you need to make peace with one of the main changes in the current business environment: the age of the nine-to-five worker is over.

### the end of an era

While politicians desperately point to little sparkles in the darkness to try to convince the populace that the traditional full-time job market is improving, career experts and economists around the world are starting to come to a shocking consensus: the job market that is emerging from the recession is fundamentally different from the one that crumbled under our feet just a few years ago. This new, emerging market is global and technologically driven, and it is not *employee* based but rather, *contractor* based.<sup>6</sup>

Companies of all sizes across the country are rethinking the very nature of employment. Instead of hiring workers in a traditional full-time-with-benefits format, many are moving

toward nontraditional labor arrangements, such as using independent contractors and breaking full-time positions into several part-time jobs to reduce costs.

Translation: the job market your father worked in, the one you studied your way through years of school to join, the one you have trained yourself to succeed in, is right in the middle of its swan song (or death rattle, depending on your perspective)—and no amount of government stimulus, tax restructuring, or fervent denial can revive it.

I would bet you have already witnessed the tell-tale signs of the demise of nine-to-five, though you might not have realized it:

- You notice that your company is starting to bring on more contract or part-time workers rather than traditional full-time employees
- Your siblings, friends, or children are graduating college, and instead of entering their chosen field in a permanent, full-time job, they find themselves working odd, part-time, or temporary jobs until “something opens up”
- In spite of your work experience and great recommendations, you are struggling to secure an in-person interview, let alone a job offer

If you are looking for someone or something to blame for the end of the job market as we know it, you can point an enraged finger at simple math: in a traumatized economy, the cost-to-benefit ratio of maintaining a full-time, salaried workforce is no longer earning out. When a company hires a full-time employee, it is paying more than just a salary; it is also responsible for a bevy of benefits and taxes. In addition to

compensation, an employer must pay a portion of each employee's Social Security and Medicare taxes, as well as an unemployment tax and additional state taxes. Employers of full-time workers have traditionally been expected to provide a benefits package, including costly perks such as healthcare insurance, paid sick days, and paid vacation.

In good economic times, these costs are grudgingly accepted. But in an economy like we've experienced over the last few years, they can quickly add up to more than a business can handle.

To compete—or even just to keep their doors open—many organizations have replaced many members of their full-time workforce with a variety of nontraditional workers (independent contractors, freelancers, temporary workers), keeping a much smaller core of in-house, full-time employees in certain key positions. For example, a September 2011 article in the *Boston Globe* noted that the number of part-time workers in Massachusetts increased by 13 percent from January to August 2011, reflecting a reluctance among businesses to offer full-time positions during the flagging economic recovery. What business owners in Massachusetts and elsewhere have found is that nontraditional workers have met and exceeded job requirement expectations while keeping overhead low. The success of the nontraditional model is reflected in the fact that (according to the almost one thousand CFO respondents to the 2010 Duke/CFO Magazine Global Business Outlook survey) one fourth of recent new hires have been contract or temporary workers. Conversely, respondents expected full-time hiring to increase by less than one percentage point in the next year.<sup>7</sup>

Another strategy organizations of all sizes are using to reduce overhead is outsourcing tasks to the global labor market.

Over the last ten years, major multinational American companies, who employ about a fifth of the United States workforce, have sent 2.4 million jobs overseas to emerging labor markets like Brazil, China, and India. Brands like GE, Caterpillar, and Cisco are tapping into the globalized workforce to both expand their international clout and reduce their overhead. The consulting firm McKinsey & Company notes that a major airline carrier could save \$100 million each year by sending jobs that don't require face-to-face interaction, like making reservations, overseas to cheaper labor markets. And those markets can be really cheap: the difference between hiring an overseas employee versus a US-based employee in the computer industry, for example, can be as much as \$80,000 in salary commitments per year.<sup>8</sup>

But outsourcing is a strategy no longer reserved for massive corporations: small businesses, even microbusinesses, have the ability to tap into this global workforce to reduce overhead. Web-based services like eLance.com, Freelancer.com, and V-Teams connect even the smallest businesses and entrepreneurs with a global network of affordable professionals able to fill just about any gap, from call answering to market research to sales qualifying. In my years as a freelance writer and consultant, just about every small client I have worked with—from a start-up holistic health website to a boutique leadership development firm—outsources at least one of its administrative, technical, or research-related roles. You understand why outsourcing is an attractive option for even the smallest business when you notice that the hourly cost for firms in India, the Ukraine, and the United States to do the same work—including bookkeeping, content writing, and web design—is listed at \$15, \$20, and \$85 by country, respectively, on eLance.

Think for a minute about what you as an American professional expect to make in an entry or midlevel position compared to these figures, and then think about how much of your desired job could be done remotely by someone in another country. It can be a shocking comparison. It's easy to see why, in the March 2010 edition of *Entrepreneur Magazine*, Bruce Judson, senior faculty fellow at the Yale School of Management, was quoted as advising business owners to "Outsource as much as possible."<sup>9</sup>

Some people will single out factors such as chronically high unemployment, or advancements in technology, or rising gas prices, or the global workforce, or bursting real estate bubbles, or healthcare costs as the main culprit in the demise of nine-to-five. But the truth is that *all* of these—and myriad other, smaller factors—have played a part in why career security no longer lives in the promise of the traditional full-time position. It now lives in the promise of the gig economy.

### the rise of the gig economy

Around the turn of the millennium, the term "gig economy" started cropping up in the work of economic analysts and job market experts to define a newly fashionable trend among professionals: piecing together multiple and unrelated projects, known as "gigs," rather than working in a full-time position for just one employer. Throughout the 2000s, the phrase and the work arrangement it described waxed and waned in popularity, until the recession brought it back into heavy use in many economic circles. In 2009, Tina Brown, editor in chief of *TheDailyBeast.com*, noted the resurgence of "gig economy," stating, "No one I know has a job anymore. They've got Gigs."<sup>10</sup>

What constitutes a “gig” can include everything from the unglamorous job of cleaning a gymnasium two nights a week to the incredibly fabulous role of consultant for a Fortune 500 corporation. Patching together a host of independent contracting, consulting, or freelancing positions to equal or exceed a full-time salary is the objective of gig employment. Brown points to a friend of hers who did PR for an airline magazine two days a week, provided consulting for another business three days a week, and also served as a business speaker for a tech company in his spare time. Brown notes that in a recent *TheDailyBeast.com* survey of employed Americans over 18, around one third of the five hundred people questioned used a gig structure and claimed to earn over \$75,000 per year doing so.<sup>11</sup>

In all fairness, we were warned years ago that the nine-to-five job market was going to be replaced by a gig economy. We were told, however, that the shift to gigs would be our *choice*, not that it would be thrust upon us by a series of dramatic economic events.

In his 2001 book *Free Agent Nation*, Daniel Pink predicted that the era of the “Organization Man”—a term that Pink notes was originally coined by *Fortune* magazine editor William H. Whyte in 1955 to mean a person who spent his entire career moving up the ladder in a handful of companies—was coming to an end thanks to a boom in the American worker’s desire to be self-employed. He believed that things like the internet, cell phones, and a now archaic phenomenon known as WebTV would inspire Americans to go rogue and leave the nine-to-five, causing the traditional work structure’s ultimate demise. Pink foresaw a workforce of happy freelancers who had voluntarily broken off with the full-time employee model, forcing its extinction.<sup>12</sup>

Though the early and mid-2000s did see a slight rise in freelancers and start-ups, it also saw a serious inflation of salaries and benefits offered by companies competing desperately with one another for top talent. The result was that the American workforce didn't, as Pink suggested, walk away from the traditional job market; instead, we flocked to it in droves and were absolutely sideswiped when suddenly the full-time employee model started buckling underneath us at the start of the recession.

But where the nine-to-five model failed in a recession-wracked America, the gig-centric model quietly succeeded—driven not by the choices of workers but by the needs of business. The gig economy has allowed businesses to stay open by creatively dividing a huge amount of work and responsibility across part-time and contract workers.

And here is where the major split occurs between the Fittest and the rest of the workforce: instead of waiting for the job market to return to the status quo of the mid-2000s, the Fittest have adopted a “gig mindset” that allows them to adapt and flourish whether they choose to remain in traditional jobs or embrace nontraditional opportunities. This mindset places power in the hands of the individual professional—not ceding it all to the organization—thus increasing both emotional and vocational resilience. So while the rest of us feel ourselves at the mercy of employers to decide our fate (Will we be laid off? Will our pay be reduced?), the Fittest are surviving, thriving, and setting the trends for the emerging job market.

Don't let the phrase “gig mindset” fool you. This approach is meant not only for freelancers or future freelancers; it can be successfully adopted by any professional in any industry and any job structure who wants to keep the stability of a career in

hand. Adopting the gig mindset is so crucial to your adaptive success that we will continue to explore it throughout the book—in fact, it constitutes the first strategy of the Finch Effect.

### the search for a way forward

Five years ago I still believed in the security of the traditional job market just like everyone else. Months before college graduation I had a job lined up in the financial software industry and was positively starry-eyed over the entry-level salary and elaborate benefits package that came with my first grown-up job. But the thrills of direct-deposit paychecks and casual Fridays soon lost their luster, and I was left with a long commute to a job that didn't call for the use of my natural skills or passions. In September 2008, one week before Lehman Brothers collapsed, I decided to go rogue and quit my supposedly safe nine-to-five job to pursue a writing career in professional development.

My friends and family were all concerned that I had made a mistake giving up a stable paycheck and secure job to take on a career that, in the first few years, proved to be mostly freelance-based. However, thanks to a set of great clients and online writing outlets, I landed on my feet and settled into my new career with little issue, in spite of the recession that was steadily gaining strength.

But as recession-plagued 2008 turned into an even bleaker 2009, I started to notice that many of those who had advised me on the safety of the traditional job market were finding themselves unemployed, underemployed, or living under near constant threats of layoffs. One of my best friends lost her job

at a large accounting firm; a speaking circuit a family member was scheduled to do was canceled; and several of my college friends found themselves waiting tables or landscaping because jobs had dried up in their industries. What really struck me was that it wasn't just one group that was suffering. My friends and family, across generations and industries, all suddenly had something in common: the bottom had fallen out from under them, and they had no idea what to do next.

I felt like I had dodged a bullet by making my career transition when I did. As I observed the struggles of those around me, I found myself wracked with something akin to survivor's guilt: why should things be working out for me while those I cared for felt so powerless and lost?

My guilt was transformed into a desire to find a solution after I visited my younger brother at college. He and I have always been close friends; I don't believe any sister could ask for a better brother. The college he attended was only a few hours from where I lived, so I drove out a few times a semester to take him to lunch and catch up. It was April, and I had come up for the final lunch visit before the year was over. We were just digging into a gigantic plate of nachos at the local pub when he suddenly went quiet. When I asked him what was wrong, he told me that only one of his seven graduating friends had been able to find a job, and the job was working for his dad's construction company. "I don't understand, Nace—they had internships and got their degrees. They did everything right. What's going to happen to them? What's going to happen to me when I graduate?"

He frowned for another moment before refocusing his attention on the nachos and redirecting the conversation back to lighter topics. But as I drove home that afternoon, I couldn't

stop thinking about how crazy it all seemed. Just two years earlier, the goal for any new graduate wasn't only to find a job; it was to find the *highest paying* job. Now there were no jobs in sight, and the future that had once looked so rosy for me and my friends looked uncertain and confusing for my brother.

There had to be a solution, a way forward, not only for him but also for my friends, family, and even myself. I had been lucky with my work so far—in fact, I had just started working with a boutique professional development firm as their director of learning and development. But I was becoming aware that career security was not something to be taken for granted. Who knew when the rug might be pulled out from under me as well? There had to be some people out there who had found a way to keep their careers advancing in spite of the changes in the job market. And I decided that I was going to find out who they were and how they were doing it.

I have spent the last two years of my life doing just that. In that time, I have met and spoken with professionals from all walks of life, in every corner of this country, and in all career stages. You will meet several of them over the course of this book. I have talked with economic experts, job market gurus, human resource consultants, and even a few celebrities in my quest to understand how we—modern professionals—can continue to move our careers and lives forward in the face of volatile work conditions and unstable job markets. And what I have learned has brought me from a glimpse of the not-too-distant future all the way back to the work of a 150-year-dead evolutionary naturalist, and a little tropical bird.

I am happy to report that my quest has been a success: there is a way forward, and it is accessible to all. What struck me was that the professionals who are not just surviving but

also thriving in the current job climate—members of the Fittest—all share a set of strategies in common, in spite of their diverse industries and backgrounds. While I would love to lay claim to the brilliance of these strategies, I insist that I am not their creator, just their reporter. The five strategies that make up the Finch Effect are drawn from the experiences and insights of professionals around the country and are presented in this book in the hope that you can implement them for your own success. While each of these strategies can stand on its own as a valuable step in improving your work life in any economy, I have organized them as a sequence in order to provide the most impact. Each strategy builds off the one that came before it. I recommend that you read this book and complete the exercises it contains, in sequential order to get the most benefit out of each chapter. Here are the five Finch Effect strategies:

1. *Adopt a gig mindset.* Focus on shifting your current perspective and expectations for your professional future to match the shifts in the job market. The Fittest have stopped waiting around for the job market to “go back to normal” and are instead reframing their perspectives to create new (and more interesting) career ladders.

This strategy explores the concept of the gig mindset, and how members of the Fittest are taking a page from the freelancer’s book to stay adaptable to change and remain in control of their careers. Once you make the mental shift to taking ownership of your career path, you are in a position to actually *do* something about it, regardless of what’s happening in the job market.

2. *Identify your professional value.* Isolate, differentiate, and leverage what makes you stand out from other professionals.

Mom always told you that you were special and different from the other kids. Well, today is the day you are going to take Mom at her word and figure out exactly what makes you stand out from other professionals in your skills, presentation, experience, and career mission. Part of surviving (and then thriving) is picking out those skills that make you worth noticing. This second Finch Effect strategy focuses on developing your *adaptive professional brand* (APB)—a tool for organizing, communicating, and leveraging your professional value effectively.

3. *Cultivate your skills.* Here you take the skills you outlined in the second strategy and develop them to their highest potential. It's not going to be enough to just talk (or tweet) a big game about how distinctive you are from other professionals out there—you need to be able to back it up with serious skills. The third principle of the Finch Effect focuses on identifying what you need to do to get the skills that are central to your adaptive professional brand to their highest potential—whether they include crunching numbers or designing jewelry—and then making and implementing a plan to actually do it.
4. *Nurture your social network.* Learn to communicate and grow your adaptive professional brand through social media—or learn to do it better. The fourth Finch Effect principle focuses on optimizing your use of Facebook (and Twitter, and LinkedIn . . . ) to craft, package, and grow an individual professional brand fueled by social media. Your online profiles and website are the best places to start projecting your value proposition, which in turn helps you market yourself better to potential employers, clients, or customers. Get ready to start clicking, because we are

living in an online world and the Fittest are online girls (and boys).

5. *Harness your entrepreneurial energy.* Build entrepreneurial skills and tactics into your professional identity to optimize your position in the new job market. As the tide of the job market continues to shift away from the traditional full-time employee, you (and other savvy professionals) will need to rely more on your entrepreneurial energy to win jobs, establish new income streams, and build your value proposition. This final strategy of the Finch Effect reviews how other members of the Fittest have started building entrepreneurial systems and ventures into their professional identities, whether in their current jobs, through side businesses, or as part of a transition into full-fledged entrepreneurship.

At its core, the way forward that the Finch Effect outlines is the way of evolution. To me there is something comforting in the idea that our professional survival is rooted in such a timeless biological imperative. It is something we, as entities of this earth, are programmed down to our cells to do. What became clear to me as I started to compile these strategies based on how members of the Fittest thrive in this new world, is that a willingness to take ownership and responsibility for your own career is essential. If you take nothing else away from this book, I hope it is the idea that the future belongs to those who look to themselves and their own abilities for their security and success.

In fact, one of the most liberating things about this job market shift is that it allows each of us to redefine success in a way that is tailored to who we are as unique professionals and individuals. Almost all members of the Fittest I've met over the last few years have redefined success in their own image as part

of their strategy for thriving. They recognize that as the rules of the game have changed, the prizes have as well.

In the traditional nine-to-five job market, your entire career was supposed to be an upward climb toward the three basic peaks: the highest salary, the most impressive job title, and the ability to improve your economic status (for example, living in a good neighborhood). Just a few years ago, owning a Hummer was considered a huge indicator of achievement and wealth. That one truck (or should I say tank?) was an embodiment of success: it was expensive to buy and keep and sent a clear message of your status in society to everyone within eyesight or earshot. Mike Tyson, Paris Hilton, and Arnold Schwarzenegger were all proud owners, and the brand was so synonymous with success that General Motors even made Hummer limos.

But in 2009, GM announced it was discontinuing the Hummer as part of its bankruptcy filing, making the brand just one more casualty of the recession. Today the Hummers that are left on the road are archaic reminders of a prerecession world that has gone extinct in just a few years due to rising gas prices, accelerating concerns over climate change, increasing cost-of-living expenses, and a hollowed-out economy.

Many traditional indicators of success are going the way of the Hummer. Private-college degrees, McMansions, and even the executive title are losing some degree of relevance. Just as the job market is shifting away from the traditional employee model, the Fittest are replacing conventional definitions of success with personal ones that not only adapt to support their evolving careers but also provide authentic, ongoing fulfillment.

Just ask Rob.

Before the housing bubble burst (and the rest of the economy came crashing down after it), 28-year-old Rob worked as a

real estate agent in Nevada. He was good at his job and earned enough to pay off his car, buy a condo, and accumulate a fairly respectable wardrobe. Yet in spite of all these trappings of traditional success, Rob wasn't satisfied: "at that time, I felt that I was 'successful' according to the standards of others, yet looking back I realize how disconnected and empty I really felt." When the real estate market crashed, Rob had two choices: keep treading water doing what he was doing, or adapt his career to the changing job market. Rob chose to adapt.

Drawing from his business experience, Rob launched a one-person consulting firm in 2009 that provides marketing and brand solutions to small businesses around the country. Today his business is thriving, and his understanding of success has become personal in a way it never was before. "My perception of success has drastically shifted from being able to afford the nicest of everything to being able to help others build their business. When I can help independent, small businesses articulate their message and achieve results, I consider myself successful."

Just as he embraced evolution in his career, Rob has embraced an evolving definition of what success means to him and experienced a greater sense of fulfillment because of it. His personal definition of success will likely continue to change over time as his career continues to adapt to new opportunities and shifts in the market. Yet while Rob's perspective on success is his own, his method of identifying it is shared by all members of the Fittest: he specifically defines it as something actionable.

One of the downsides of leading a trend is that those on the vanguard are faced with an overwhelming array of choices and possibilities. While having myriad opportunities can be exciting and intoxicating, it can also cause indecision, self-doubt,

and analysis paralysis. It is no different when trailblazing your own personal definition of success.

To manage this potentially engulfing power of possibility, the Fittest define success through actionable and achievable goals. These goals create a renewing and regular source of achievement and fulfillment, which in turn provides motivation, professional prowess, and more success. This cycle allows the Fittest to subtly shape their definition of success to adapt to the ever-changing market landscape.

Consider Rob. Today he defines success in part by helping his clients find their brand's voice. Every time he works with a new client—which occurs often throughout the year—he has an opportunity to experience success by his definition. Each time he succeeds by his definition, he reinforces his professional confidence and motivation and becomes a more capable, experienced, and attractive prospect for future clients. Additionally, should future shifts in the market require him to do something different for his clients, he can easily adapt his personal definition of success to reflect it. As we've seen, traditional definitions of success aren't always as adaptable to changing environments (sorry, Hummer).

This strategy of defining and engendering success through achievable goals, natural to many of the Fittest, is also supported by psychological research on achievement, which has consistently concluded that clearly defined goals focus attention, motivate effort, encourage persistence, and facilitate the identification or creation of strategies to accomplish the objective.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, when it comes to defining personal success and establishing clear career goals, most of us are working against ourselves. In the present economy, where it feels like all choice has been taken away from us, we find it hard to purposely

eliminate options and close doors. We want to “keep our options open” and “see what happens.”

Yet this unwillingness to close doors and make exclusive choices leads to only one thing: an endangered vocational existence marked by treading water with everyone else who is waiting for the job market to improve. If you want to join the Fittest and define success by your own goals, you need to get comfortable setting your own standards and goals, and achieving them.

### break it down: your definition of personal success

As you begin your journey toward becoming a member of the Fittest, you should start to think about what your conception of personal success in the new job market will be. I recommend you keep in mind only two basic principles of personal success as you start to craft your own definition:

1. Your personal definition of success can be as simple or as complex as you want . . .
2. . . . as long as all elements are *actionable* and *achievable* within a reasonable time frame

The one other suggestion I can share with you is to stay away from the verbs “to be” or “to have” when thinking about your definition. I’ve always found goals and visions of success that include those verbs to be ultranebulous; they are also usually reminiscent of the traditional pinnacles of success, like “My goal is to *have* a million dollars!” or “I will *be* successful when I am an EVP!” These definitions aren’t going to get you very far, because there is no sense of time or identifiable action for how they will happen.

Your definition of personal success could be as short and sweet as “Success to me means opening my pastry shop in the

next eighteen months,” or it could be as long as an entire page. You can use whatever language you find easy to remember and hold onto. It can be something you needlepoint on a pillow or keep totally to yourself. It’s an open canvas of potential on which you can form your own watchword. There are as many definitions of personal success as there are members of the Fittest. That’s why it’s called personal success.

If your definition of personal success doesn’t immediately stand out to you, I encourage you to use any or all of the following prompts to jump-start your thought process:

- What reputation would you like to have among your colleagues, competitors, or customers? What accomplishments would earn that reputation?
- Which elements of your value proposition are you most proud of? How can you leverage them more effectively?
- What skills do you need to master to do your type of work most effectively?
- Think of one or two people you admire in your field—mentors or leaders. What do you most admire about them? What skills or knowledge do they have that you admire? How did they achieve their position?
- What is currently out there (either online, as a service, or as a product) that you think is a good idea but could be done much better? What’s wrong with the current version, and how could it be improved?

## the unexpected opportunity of vocational darwinism

One of the most ironic things about humans is that although we are programmed for evolution—just like the finches—we often find the process of change uncomfortable and scary. Then

we dig in our heels, shut our eyes tight, and hope that whatever is being asked of us can be avoided or will just go away.

The business-model transformation we are experiencing right now cannot be avoided and will not go away, no matter how much we try to soothe each other into thinking things are getting better (translate: “back to the way they were before the recession”). We need to face it head-on and with an open mind, or be steamrolled and left flat in the dust.

Not all elements of this transformation—or other, future transformations—have to be uncomfortable or scary: in fact, when you get past the end-of-careers-as-we-know-them part, the change is actually full of potential and opportunity. The future of the workforce is still undefined and lawless. The rules of the game will be decided by whoever strikes out from the masses first and sets the tone; those who follow will copy the examples of the initial trendsetters. You can be one of those setting the trends.

You are in a perfect position to define what the future of the workforce looks like and to lead this vocational transformation. Why spend time and effort trying to stay on the sinking ship that is the full-time employee model? You can use this opportunity to forge a new path toward long-term financial security, a real work-life balance, and vocational victory.

And that is what this book is all about. In the coming chapters, we are going to examine and explore each of the five strategies—adopt a gig mindset, identify your value, cultivate your skills, nurture your social network, and harness your entrepreneurial energy—in detail, break down how to put them in action, and meet some members of the Fittest who have used them to thrive. By the end of this book, you’ll be ready to tackle the ups and downs of not only this job market but also

any other job market that comes our way—because there will be other shifts, other recessions, and other good times that ask us to reevaluate how we operate within the job market and how we can continue to succeed.

To get the most out of this book, you will need to proceed with two thoughts in mind: “I am capable of making these changes,” and “I am committed to making these changes.” You may not fully understand how you are going to change over the course of this book, but you need to start on this journey of professional evolution with confidence in your ability to actually change. There are so many people in the world who believe they are who they are and that’s all they’ll ever be. If that statement resonates with you, I want you to read the following words carefully: As a being on this planet, you were not only born capable of growing and changing but born with the biological *imperative* to grow and change. Very little separates you from the finches when it comes to the capacity to change (except perhaps a few feathers here and there). So please repeat this sentence to yourself: “I am capable of making these changes.”

Additionally, you need to be willing to commit to the changes this book asks you to make. Change in itself is hard, but without the commitment to sustain and maintain it, you are wasting your time. This book will ask you to dig deep and go outside of your comfort zone to see your career and potential in new and different ways. If you are not ready to commit to and work through the strategies to their fullest capacity, then I recommend you find a different career book to skim through.

If you are ready for the change and commitment that these strategies will call on you to make, then you are ready to begin. As you start working through the first strategy, remember that you are in good company. All of us, whether we have been in

the workforce for decades or are peering into an uncertain future from university halls, are facing the same job market with the same challenges. And all of us have the potential to be members of the Fittest.

Are you ready to be one of the Fittest?

I say yes.

<http://www.pbookshop.com>