The Future of Work

Idea In Short

Work is disconnecting from jobs, and jobs are disconnecting from companies. To thrive, treat learning as lifelong, stay radically open and combine passion and curiosity with empathy that machines cannot replicate.

A Pulitzer Winner on Where Work Is Headed

Thomas Friedman gave a wide-ranging interview to Deloitte CEO Cathy Engelbert and John Hagel that remains essential reading for executives. Friedman, a Pulitzer Prize winning author of The Lexus and the Olive Tree and The World Is Flat, argues that work is being disconnected from jobs, and jobs and work are being disconnected from companies. Companies increasingly become platforms. We now live in a world of flows, which means learning has to become lifelong. We must provide both the learning tools and the learning resources for lifelong learning when your job becomes work and your company becomes a platform. 1

Be Radically Open

Friedman argues that in a world of flows, the source of strategic advantage is extracting value from flows that are getting faster. Rule number one is to be radically open. That is a hard sell because it feels counterintuitive. Why be radically open? Because you get more flows, you get the signals first and you attract more flow-minded people, whom Friedman calls high-IQ risk-takers. If free markets depend on the transfer of value, it is foolish for a large organization to wall itself off from customers, innovation and the flows of value. Engelbert reinforced the point with data from the National Bureau of Economic Research, noting that between 2005 and 2015 about 94 percent of net new employment in the United States came from alternative work arrangements. That number deserves emphasis: 94 percent of net new jobs were not traditional company jobs. 2

Companies Must Foster Lifelong Learning

Friedman points to the AT&T model as the best he has encountered. The chief executive officer shares where the company is going, what world it lives in and what skills employees need to be lifelong workers. The company then partners with Udacity to create nano-degree courses for each skill. Employees receive up to $8,000 a year to take those courses, but the responsibility is theirs and they must take them on their own time. The main point is that it is on you. It is your responsibility to continuously upgrade yourself. Pick the right courses, the right experiences and the right challenges, then double down on yourself. The days of passive investing in your career are gone. 3

The Recipe for Success

Friedman offers a memorable formula. Passion quotient [PQ] plus curiosity quotient [CQ] will always be greater than intelligence quotient [IQ]. Give him a young person with high passion and high curiosity and he will take them over the person with high IQ seven days a week. He also champions STEMpathy jobs, which combine science, technology, engineering and math with human empathy, the ability to connect with another human being. Put those together in a manager or employee and you reach the sweet spot of where work has to go. Friedman frames the shift historically. We worked with our hands for centuries, then we worked with our heads, and now we will have to work with our hearts, because machines cannot, do not and never will have a heart.

Advice for People Entering the Job Market

Friedman gives five rules for newcomers. Think like an immigrant, figuring out what is going on and pursuing opportunities with more energy and vigor than anyone else. Think like an artisan, bringing so much unique value that your work cannot be automated, digitized or outsourced. Always be in beta, a phrase borrowed from LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, meaning you constantly reengineer, retool and relearn yourself. Remember that PQ plus CQ is greater than IQ. Finally, always think entrepreneurially, asking where you can fork off and start a new business, because no one is bringing a 25,000-person factory to your town anymore. That factory is now 2,500 robots and 500 people, so we need many more people starting jobs.

What Executives Should Take Away

Executives should treat Friedman's interview as a strategic brief. Open the organization to flows rather than hoarding information. Fund reskilling explicitly, as AT&T does, while making clear that continuous learning is the employee's responsibility. Hire for passion and curiosity alongside intelligence, because adaptive learners outperform static experts. Design roles around STEMpathy, combining technical depth with human connection. Treat your company as a platform that channels flows of talent and ideas rather than a fortress that blocks them. The firms that internalize these shifts will attract the high-IQ risk-takers who create the next wave of advantage.

The Compounding Cost of Standing Still

Friedman's framework implies a sharp warning for executives who treat reskilling as optional. Skills now have a shrinking shelf life, so a workforce that stops learning loses value every quarter. Firms that wait for a perfect strategy before funding training fall behind faster movers who experiment openly. The 94 percent figure on alternative work arrangements signals that talent itself is becoming a flow, moving toward organizations that offer learning and away from those that do not. Executives should audit their own openness, asking whether their firm attracts flow-minded risk-takers or repels them. The compounding nature of learning means small early investments in curiosity and reskilling outperform large reactive programs launched too late.

What Leaders Should Stop Doing

Friedman's argument also names the habits leaders must abandon. Stop treating jobs as fixed containers, because work now flows in tasks and projects. Stop hoarding information as a source of power, because openness is what attracts the flows that create advantage. Stop assuming a degree earned decades ago still qualifies someone for tomorrow's work. Stop designing training as a one-time event and treat it as a continuous practice. Leaders who shed these habits stop being barriers to the future of work and start becoming the platforms their best people choose to build on.

- 1Friedman Describes The Age Of Accelerations Driven By Moore's Law, The Market And Mother Nature, Reshaping Work, Politics And Community
- 2The Gig Economy And Alternative Work Arrangements Now Drive The Bulk Of Net New Employment, Reshaping How Firms Source Talent
- 3Deloitte Argues Organizations Must Redesign Work For Technology And Learning, And Individuals Must Accelerate Learning Throughout Their Careers

Summary

Friedman's message is clear and demanding. Work is becoming flows, companies are becoming platforms and learning must be lifelong. Success belongs to those who think like immigrants, act like artisans, stay in beta and lead with passion, curiosity and empathy.