DIRTY DATA EXPERT

Structure Before Intelligence™

SAME WATER

Executive Brief

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Why some people reinvent themselves — and others sink

Two men. Same generation, same country, same changing world washing over both of them.

The first started work as a bookkeeper. When computers arrived, the career he had trained for ended — so he changed careers. Years later, implementing business intelligence tools, he found the reporting failed him, and went and learnt statistics so he could interpret the outcomes properly. In his forties he became a reader — more than 200 books since — and the reading led him back to tertiary learning. Only then, he will tell you, did the dots start joining up.

The second man owns an FMCG shop. He is over fifty. He does not read non-fiction. He takes what influencers say at face value and never questions the accuracy of the data in front of him. Ask him why he doesn't read, and he gives you the answer I have been hearing for forty years: no time.

Same water. One man swam. One man is sinking.

The first man is me.

The scale of the water

McKinsey Global Institute's *Workforce in Motion* report (September 2026) puts a number on the water. More than 70% of US workers could need to reinvent how they work, as AI reallocates their task time — and some 11 million may need to change occupations entirely by 2035. It is an American study, and a modelled projection rather than a count, but nobody running a business on any continent should comfort themselves that the water stops at the US border.

McKinsey maps the water meticulously: which tasks move, which skills appreciate, which pathways exist, which credentials gate the doors. What the report cannot tell you is why, standing in the same water, one worker starts swimming and another goes under. Its own findings point at the gap: employers are asking, sharply more than before, for adaptability, curiosity and willingness to learn — the very qualities a pathway cannot supply.

Pathways are necessary. They are not the difference. The difference is whether a person starts.

Reinvention is forced

Let me correct a comfortable idea first: nobody in this story chose reinvention. I didn't. Computers ended my first career; failing tools forced the second change. In general, reinvention is forced — swim or sink. That is the harsh reality of life in an ever-changing, fast-paced environment.

And here is what forty years of watching it has taught me about the ones who sink. They say they have no time. My BI users said it about drilling into the data in the 1990s; my client says it about reading today. I no longer believe it is time. A man who has time for influencers has time. What he doesn't have is a willingness to move into an uncomfortable position — and learning only grows in uncomfortable positions. Underneath the excuse, I believe, sits something harder to admit: he has convinced himself the thing is too difficult for him, that learning is for other people. The mental model decides long before the calendar does.

That sounds like a verdict on him. It is also where the hope sits — because a man who has merely convinced himself of something can be unconvinced by one start.

The door is open

Reinvention does not ask your age. It asks whether you will start learning again.

We live much longer than the generations before us, and a second career is now par for the course. A man of 52 has decades of working life ahead of him — and the constraints that bound him when he walked out of school, the subjects chosen for him at seventeen, are no longer relevant to what he can learn at 52. I am the proof standing next to my client: I didn't start reading until my forties. The door I walked through is still open, for him and for every one of the millions in McKinsey's projection. A non-reader falls — unless he starts.

But he does not start by starting over. Nobody swims by throwing away the stroke they know.

Become a polymath

Here is the pattern of my own reinventions, and I offer it as method, not memoir. I never discarded my experience. Each time, I learnt a new subject that complements it. Bookkeeping became financial knowledge that computing multiplied. Business intelligence became a trade I could only practise properly once statistics sat beside it. Then the books — 200 of them, across every field that touched my work — gave me frameworks. That is what reading actually does: it puts a second framework in your head, so that a claim has to survive comparison before you accept it. My client has one framework — his routine. An influencer's number walks into his business unchallenged, because there is nothing in the room to challenge it.

Learn the new subject that complements your experience, and keep going until you become a polymath. The dots only join across subjects. Within one subject, there are no dots to join — there is only the routine.

The leader's job

Executives cannot do this for their people. No workshop hands a 55-year-old an inquisitive mind, and no pathway in McKinsey's report walks itself. What a leader can do is the thing my client's world never did for him: make starting normal.

In most companies, the 52-year-old who admits he doesn't understand, who picks up the new subject in public and is clumsy at it, pays for that honesty socially — so he protects himself with "no time" and stays in the environment he knows. The leader who wants reinvention has to lower that price: start visibly himself, treat the beginner's questions as an asset rather than a confession, and never mistake a man's starting point for his ceiling.

McKinsey will tell you how much water is coming. It cannot make your people swim. That part is not a skills problem, and it never was.

Reinvention is forced — swim or sink. The leader's job is to make starting normal, so that when the water rises, starting is what his people do.

Structure before intelligence — and learning before both.

Source: McKinsey Global Institute, "Workforce in motion: Skills and pathways to future jobs in the United States", 29 September 2026 (US workforce, modelled projection to 2035).

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