

The New Ways to Thrive at Work Now, According to Adam Grant

| *“The currency of success is shifting under our feet,” says Wharton organizational psychologist*

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Adam Grant speaking onstage at a 2022 small-businesses event. Brian Stukes/Getty Images

For decades, there has been a predictable formula for success in the white-collar world.

“Knowing more than other people was what made you valuable in knowledge work by definition,” says Adam Grant, the bestselling author and organizational psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.

Artificial intelligence upends that typical career edge. In an era of information overload, the ways in which professionals prove their worth at work will likely cease to be effective, he argues.

“The currency of success is shifting under our feet,” says Grant, the author of a coming book, “Vibe: The Secrets of Strong Connections in a Lonely World.”

Grant spoke with The Wall Street Journal recently about the challenges of this era, and how people can begin to adapt. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

WSJ: This is a tricky moment for white-collar professionals. What’s the issue?

Grant: Great careers used to hinge on ability, and now they depend on agility. The past was basically: Become a subject matter expert, define what you’re better at than everybody else and then that is essentially how you make yourself rare and valuable.

WSJ: And now?

Grant: The expertise you have today may be obsolete tomorrow.

Pre-AI, what was rewarded and valued and promoted was how much information you had in your head; we’re now in an environment where information is a commodity. So the differentiating skill set or capability is: Can you recognize patterns? Can you synthesize lots of disparate pieces of information? Can you figure out what perspectives are credible and which ones aren’t?

All of that is a long way of saying that human judgment is going to supersede human expertise.

WSJ: This is worrying for people who want to cling to their skills, though, right?

Grant: It is, and that’s where you’re seeing a fair amount of threat rigidity—as organizational psychologists like to describe it—where people are just trying to figure out, OK, what is the distinct expertise or skill set that I have that’s most impenetrable right now?

The problem is that in three months that may look really different.

What I don’t think AI will be able to crack anytime soon is the hard work of synthesizing information into a compelling framework that is memorable, that rings true with human experience, that resonates emotionally, that’s sticky, that is pithy. Maybe what that means is that human creativity is changing, and that it’s much less dependent on idea generation, and much more dependent on idea selection and elaboration as the unique human skills.

WSJ: What sort of daily habits would you put in place to do well in this new era?

Grant: In an ideal world, we all pick an experiment every week: I’m going to run a pilot, see how it goes, and then based on what I learn, I’m going to evolve my hypotheses and run another experiment next week.

WSJ: What’s an example?

Grant: One is to come in and rotate who leads a meeting to say, OK, I’ve got a hypothesis that we’re going to get stuck in a rut if we always have the same person running the show, and just by rotating who’s in charge, we’re going to inevitably hear different things and interact in different ways. That’s an experiment worth running.

I’ve got a hypothesis that people are becoming increasingly skeptical of written information. So I actually think that the phone and the voice is an underused technology. I’m going to run a little experiment, and people that I would normally shoot an email to with some ideas, I’m just going to cold call them. I’m not going to schedule a Zoom. But I’m just going to try calling people and bouncing some ideas off of them, and see both if what I learn is different, and also if the bond we form is different. Really simple could be really fruitful.

WSJ: Say you’re up for changing, but you’ve got a manager who seems stuck in the past. How do you navigate that?

Grant: I’d go to the manager and I’d say, “Hey, look, I’m sure you’re facing a ton of pressure from above and from below to get a lot done. I’ve got a few ideas for how we could become more efficient. I’d love to run three of them by you and get your take on whether there’s one that you would prioritize if you were in my shoes.”