AI and You

Transcript

Hi, this is episode 204! I am delighted to be joined today by Gary Bolles, expert on the future of work, a topic he lectures around the world upon. He is the author of "The Next Rules of Work: The mindset, skillset, and toolset to lead your organization through uncertainty." He has over 1 million learners on LinkedIn Learning, with courses such as "Learning Mindset," "Learning Agility," and "Leading Change."

As adjunct Chair for the Future of Work for Singularity University, Gary helps people understand the impact and opportunities of exponential change for individuals, organizations, communities, and countries. As a partner in the consulting agency Charrette, he helps organizations, communities, educators and governments develop strategies for "what's next." As co-founder of eParachute.com, he helps job-hunters & career changers with programs inspired by the evergreen classic book "What Color Is Your Parachute?" written by his father. He is the former editorial director for six technology publications, a former Silicon Valley executive and a co-founder of SoCap, the world's largest gathering of impact entrepreneurs and investors.

There is, perhaps, no more burning topic at the moment than the future of work, with employment prospects so thoroughly disrupted by AI. It's the #1 topic on people's minds when they talk to me. Gary and I are going to talk about the gig economy, the new rules of work, what ChatGPT did to the job market, and an interesting concept called the community operating system. So let's get into the interview!

Gary Bolles, it's a pleasure to welcome you to the *AI and You* podcast. You land squarely in the center of an enormous field: the future of work. That is where you have carved out your niche and we have a lot to talk about in that respect. And so maybe we can ease into this by you telling our listeners how you got started in that field, what drew you to it, what was the path; because I always find those stories fascinating.

So first off, Peter, I really appreciate the invitation. I'm really looking forward to the conversation. My current focus, I'll explain that and then back up to the origin story. So I'm the author of *The Next Rules of Work*, I'm the chair for the future of work for Singularity University, the global think tank. I've got 10 courses on LinkedIn learning with about one and a half million learners. And the most recent one is skills for leading the future of work. So future of work, future of learning, and the future of the organization are the topics that I typically lecture and write and consult about. How I became fascinated by the world of work is, when I was young in high school, barely escaped high school, not all that interested in education, didn't have enough college to stuff into a thimble, did a whole bunch of odd jobs for a number of years. And one of the odd jobs is I sort of fell into the family business. And it just so happens that my father was a recovering minister who had been laid off in a budget crunch and ended up writing the world's career manual, *What Color is Your Parachute?* So I was trained in his methods when I was 19

years old and fascinated, loved the whole arena of human development, as I know you've got a deep background in. But what I really thought I loved was technology. So I eventually moved to Silicon Valley, wore every hat you can wear from tech company executive to start several startups, a number of startups, shifted into the media business. I became the editorial director for half a dozen technology magazines in the 1990s. And then that sort of morphed inevitably into events, producing events, lectures, and writing. So as I'm fond of saying, the topic of the future of work until about early 2020 was theory. And then first with the global pandemic, and then with what I call the AI tsunami, it became practice. So in the past, I used to have to wave my arms saying, listen, we're going to have more flexible work. Technology, especially disruptive technologies, are going to transform work. And especially artificial intelligence and related tools are going to have an amazing impact on work, positive and some negatives as well. And we need to prepare. And that's theory for people until suddenly you can look at something like ChatGPT 2.5 and say, OK, I get it. Now what do I do?

Reflects very much my own experience of for some years telling people, "Hey, this is coming, this is coming, this is coming." And then, "Oh, this is here. And now what's next?" And you mentioned there your father, Richard Bolles and *What Color Is Your Parachute* is just one of those landmark books that landed in the space like the *Whole Earth Catalog* and other things of that era that I think defined a generation's views and approach to this. And maybe you could talk about how our attitude towards work has changed since that book came out, because that was in very much an era where people were free and inclined to experiment, being of the Boomer generation where you can go and roam the world. The work space was not so fraught as it is now. There was freedom to have a couple of years' gap in your resume without it being dragged out endlessly in hiring interviews. So how have things shifted from the publication of that book, would you say?

So first, I just want our listeners to know, so *What Color Is Your Parachute?,* 10 million copies in print, 17 different languages. My father passed away five years ago. But up until that point, one of his favorite jokes is that he'd written 42 different books; they just all had the same title, because he updated the book every single year, starting from the early 1970s. And so it was always designed to reflect what was happening, and to incorporate the insights of people who use his techniques, and what worked for them. So during the global recession, for instance, he wrote what he called the Hard Times edition, which was all about survival job hunting. So when you have abundance, when there's lots of jobs, you've very different strategies than when there aren't a lot of jobs. And so he was continually adapting and changing the methodology. So the way I'd like to sort of frame things for people is - and this is not my father's language is mine - so that there's sort of four major things that people seek in work. When you first start out, it's what you can get paid for. After a while, somebody takes you by the shoulder and says, "If you also get good at this job, you're going to get paid better." Okay, so I call these the old rules of work, what you can get paid for and what you do well. And then my father added with his book, *What Color is Your Parachute?*, well what if I give you permission to do what you love, or you give yourself permission to do what you love, you might not have to give up being good at it or loving it. You might have all three of those. And then in the old rules of work, certainly in the 1970s, you

might, when you retired, do something that the world needs, like volunteering the local food bank. So those were sort of the four deliverables of what I call the old rules of work: what you can get paid for, what you're good at, what you love, and what the world needs. And what is so different now, especially as people who lead organizations who might consult with around the world, are freaking out because young people today don't want to work for their organizations. What I say is, well, it's not just a new generation, it's a new species, because they are driven by very different motivations. And it's not all young people. And it's not just young people. But work today in many, many people's minds, they flip the stack. So they first say, what does the world need? We've got these digital distraction devices that we all call or carry around. We know the problems of the world that are coming to our door, to our screens every moment. So young people often are asking first, what does the world need? If I can do that, I'll love it. If I love it, then I'll get good at it. If I get good at it, I'll get paid well. So this is the answer to CEOs who asked me, "Why do young people ask me about the purpose of my company?" It's a response to the parents who ask me, "Why won't my kid get a real job?" It's because young people today not only see that the world is on fire in their own minds, there's all these challenges that the world has, including the environment. But they also have, as you were referring to, optionality. Because they know about a variety of other options through their digital distraction devices, because they know when their friends are working on startups, because they know what's happening in different industries, because they get so much information, they have far more optionality than previous generations. Now, that's not true for all populations. Certainly, there are socioeconomic demographics who do not have those advantages. But increasingly, more and more people feel in this world of work, work is becoming more flexible, or has the opportunity to become more flexible. There are more options for work. And therefore, there are more different ways that people, young and old, can think about how especially these new AI tools can empower them in their work.

How does this intersect with the capitalist market then? Because, to be reductive about it, for instance: trucking. A truck driver is a job that's not generally healthy. They suffer from all kinds of problems from sitting down 16 hours a day, or whatever it is, that are documented all the way to skin cancer on the left side of their body. And yet, there have to be truck drivers, because there are things that need to be transported, until we get autonomous trucks. And that's further off than it looks, to most people. So the market must produce truck drivers, whether they want to do that or not. And then on and on for other jobs that might not be top of anyone's list of what changes the world or what they love doing. Do you see a conflict? Or what is the relationship between capitalism and this new future of work, or the attitudes that people have towards it?

So I'm happy to reduct away as well. So my book, *The Next Rules of Work*, the framing for it is mindset, skillset, and toolset. And the toolset, increasingly, of course, we talk about is artificial intelligence and that whole basket of technologies. But the final chapter, I pivot, and that is the world we all want. And I talk specifically about the implications for capitalism. So it turns out that, and one of the early chapters in the book is about the history of the future of work. It turns out that we have always had, for a very, very long period of time, this dynamic tension between what Clayton Christensen called the jobs to be done, that is the work that needs to be done in the

world, and what people are willing to pay for it. And then the combination of what our skills and interests are, and the opportunities to either use those skills or not in the things that we most care about. Oh, and by the way, the construct I was talking about, those four different deliverables for work, that's often called *ikigai*. That's practiced in Japan, especially in Okinawa. If you don't have all four of those elements, then it's not a life well lived. Well, the truth is, work is work. You know, the reason for the old rules of work is that if you just got paid, and hopefully you were good at it, you fed your family, you put a roof over their heads. And for truck drivers, that's often what's necessary. A lot of truck drivers live in more rural areas. There's not a lot of job opportunities. That's the one thing you can do is go sit in a truck and drive around your country. And so, yes, there will always be jobs that need to be done. And then there will always be automation, especially for the tasks that are repetitive and don't require an awful lot of thought. Now, it turns out that the truck driving, especially, is rather complicated. There's a whole bunch of problems to be solved. From a technology standpoint, the U.S. is just starting to expand the number of startups that are just starting to put more autonomous long-haul trucks in place. But yes, that will take a longer time. So those cruddy jobs are going to exist for a good period of time. There's a lot of other jobs that are going to exist for a long period of time. You're not going to have a really good robot plumber or electrician for quite some time. So if you think of it as the sort of distribution of work and then what automation is most designed for and optimized for, capitalism functions essentially because it's the combination of market signals like the demands that an economy has and then the roles that it structures and the ways those roles get filled. And there's a whole bunch of work roles that are optimized for the least advantaged. That is, they don't require a degree. They don't require a tremendous amount of training. The resources that are needed are relatively accessible. So you can become an Uber driver tomorrow and there are companies that will finance your car because you're going to be paying it off while you're an Uber driver. So long as you've got a cell phone and a good driving record, then that's accessible to you. So economies will always have those kinds of work roles. The idea I try to propagate with people is we all have circumstances where we need to focus just on the two lower rungs of the ladder where just what you may get paid for and what you'll do well because of our financial or personal circumstances. It's more, what's the question of the North Star or the Southern Cross that pulls you forward? This is something that my father spent a lot of time on in his book, in his work; is doing what you love doesn't mean the perfect work. It might be that you actually love hauling seeing different places and driving around the country, or it may well be that the pay is very good and that's what your motivation is. Doing what you love is much more understanding your own motivations and then trying to find the connection to the market signals that an economy and a society sends capitalism supports that allows you to do that. What happens for many people is because you can't be what you can't see, we don't know all the different kinds of work roles that are out there. And unless you really understand what optionality means, it doesn't mean just going to find something, it might be creating something new, it might be much being much more entrepreneurial in your work. That can be difficult for people that haven't been trained or given the opportunity to be able to open the aperture, given themselves permission to be able to consider those options. So our peculiar form of capitalism that we practice, especially in the United States, there's stories we tell ourselves about the way that system works that have been influenced by like the Horatio Alder story and by our belief that these tech bros that

become billionaires, that that's the model for everybody. Turns out those stories aren't true. And so we need instead to have different narratives to help people understand how they can continually navigate a world of exponential change and still have the kind of lives that they want.

You mentioned Uber there, and that's an exemplar of the gig economy, and much has been made of how that has accelerated in recent years. And I wonder whether the focus on finding jobs of purpose and aligning with your inner meaning that was given such encouragement and assistance by your father's book, I wonder whether that contributed to the rise of the gig economy and also where you see the gig economy going now in the light of - we will start to get into - the AI tsunami.

So I don't know that my father would claim credit for the unbundling of work. It turns out that fractional work has existed for a very long period of time. It used to have a different structure. There were temp agencies. That's when I was doing so many random jobs when I was young. I worked for a lot of temp agencies and I did a lot of gig work for, it looks like Manpower. And so that structure has existed for a long period of time. They just didn't function like two-sided work markets. So they *were* two-sided work markets, but they were very structured and they basically functioned off of the brand of the temp agency. Whereas two-sided work markets, the platforms that we have, whether it's Uber or Upwork, basically have the same characteristics. There's a bunch of demand that's very flexible. There's a bunch of supply that's very flexible. And there's a platform that is always going to take its pound of flesh that will always be successful because it will manage the combination of the pricing that the customer gets. So it always gets the most optimal pricing. And then the supply, those mostly expensive humans, they're the ones that will have to continually adapt. So I'd say instead it's an inevitable pathway for the world of work is to have more unbundling because the traditional role of jobs and the whole idea of a job is actually a relatively recent construct. You know, when you have an economy largely anchored on agriculture, which is how many economies in the world started, including the US and Canada, the work roles don't have that kind of structure that you do inside a corporation with big cubicle farms. And so it's inevitable that that temporary industrial era model of a traditional job with very specific functions, that that was going to erode in a world that is changing more rapidly, exponential change, and where people need more optionality, and organizations need more optionality, to be able to match exactly the right skills up to the right problems.

And talking about these fractional work problems, I think this gives us more of an avenue into discussing the impact of AI because something like Upwork is mediating the problem of, someone over here has something that needs to be done and someone over here has a way of doing it and the motivation and willingness to do that. But it's connecting them together. That is not a trivial problem. It takes a lot of work to match that up and it's not done easily or well in many cases. AI holds out the potential for bringing those people together much more fluidly. Do you see this happening? Do you think that's part of the AI tsunami's effect on the future of work?

So there's several different effects and let's just stay in the environment of flexible work and two-sided work markets a little bit and then we can look at inside the organization. So in more flexible work markets and we'll just take Upwork as an example. So the study that was done

recently; first off, the algorithms that link the demand to the supply, the employer to the worker, those will continue to get better and better. What is critical is that the worker has a better understanding of their own skills. So that is a tremendous opportunity for more software - not just AI, but more software - to help humans to understand themselves better. My father's process started with self-knowledge because the more you know your own skills, the more you have that North Star or Southern Cross of the skills you want to develop, then the better you are going to be able to continually find or create meaningful, well-paid work. And then on the higher-risk side, it's important to have a very different mindset, which is the problems that need to be solved or the value that needs to be created. If you just focus on the tasks to be done, what ends up happening is a lot of tasks are quite automatable. So to just give you an example, a study was done recently by an independent researcher of Upwork postings. And as you might imagine, postings for freelance writers dropped like a rock after the release of ChatGPT 3.5. It went down probably 50%. However, the demand for creatives to integrate content and design content shot up. And so we're looking at the dynamics of work markets, and we say, well, so all those former freelance writers, if they can rapidly train themselves to be able to use the design tools to be able to integrate content and to generate content, they're going to be able to do those projects now that there's greater demand for them. And so if you've got the combination of agency, that is you can continually learn new skills, and optionality, you had the options before of doing freelance writing, now you don't. Now you've got the options around doing much more of sort of a creative synthesis of information. Then you can continually float to solve the next problems.

Well, let's bring this to the enterprise now, because as you were saying, you can find that response to the fractional work market, the gig economy and Upwork. But then I think, well, suppose we shrink the world to Microsoft or Google or Amazon, and they have similar problems. And what is the equivalent of an Upwork inside? It doesn't map exactly because you've got a lot of institutional knowledge and shared culture, et cetera, that that is important. But nevertheless, it seems to me that a large enterprise is based on, organized along, assumptions that a certain hierarchy of work breakdown is the way to respond to a large set of problems and functions, something the size of Amazon or Google. These often have challenges in market changes. And then we see huge numbers of people being laid off. And there's a lot of intellectual capital walking out the door that they just couldn't afford to keep. And that bespeaks a certain amount of waste that I wonder whether that could be mitigated, reduced some, if they are able to be more flexibly organized in the future. I'm perhaps doing too much thinking of this on the fly here, but I think you see the direction I'm going and would like your response.

Yeah, it's exactly the right question. So, first off, we, again, I keep talking about the old rules of work, which often are anchored in things like hierarchy and very strict work role definitions, job descriptions, and that sort of thing. And those don't go away, especially as we scale, right? You still need to have ways that people can lead organizations at scale, and you still need to be able to have people understand the problems to be solved and their role in solving those problems. However, let's envision, I call this the community operating system. And I'm actually senior advisor to a software company in Brazil called Acaso, where we are designing what we think is going to be the community operating system for the organization. And so, here's the magic wand

you would want to wave. You have a much greater understanding of the problems to be solved, the value to be created for the organization stakeholders. And that's going to be a standard distribution from very repetitive problems to be solved and predictable value to be created at the lower left. So, the upper right, it's going to be really unique problems to be solved, the new customers that you don't even really understand the needs of yet, very creative problem-solving skills, and so on. So, if you think of that standard distribution inside the organization, and then you think of the skillset, if you had perfect knowledge of all the skillset in the organization, it doesn't work this way, but you would be able to hit the magic button, and you would be able to have much better optimization of all of that. Now, technology alone doesn't solve it because every human needs to have that North Star or Southern Cross, like where do you want to go in your career? What kinds of problems do you want to solve? What are you motivated to solve? So, humans have to have the agency to be part of that ecosystem and to be able to continually either find or create that work. But if you had that operating system inside the organization, what are some of the benefits? So, first off, you would have tremendous flexibility and adaptability and agility because as market conditions changed, you wouldn't have a bunch of people stuck in their old work roles feeling like nothing is ever changing. They would be continually adapting as conditions changed externally as well. Now, there's many work roles, especially if you're working on a factory floor and you're turning out widgets. It's the same stuff over and over again, but that's likely where work will be more and more automated in the future. So, first off, you can think of it this way. A lot of Silicon Valley companies, and you mentioned Google. At one point, Google, for quite a long period of time, more than half of the workers that Google had actually were contract workers. They're called TBCs, temps, vendors, and contractors. And my company, Charette, we're actually a TBC. We're a lead in Google's database. We've been doing projects with Google since 2005. But when they don't call us at any particular time, it's not a layoff. It's just, we're doing other projects and we're not doing work for them. And so now think of that flexible fabric in the organization. And that opens up a lot of possibilities if you have the ability to manage it, if you have the ability to be able to continually have that flow of human talent. And again, to your point, artificial intelligence software should absolutely help us to solve a variety of different parts of that problem, helping people to better understand their own skills, more rapidly to develop their skills using deep learning, to be able to find or create the work roles that are needed to solve new problems. And the last element, the last part of the formula that has to change, is the role of what we call the person formerly known as the manager or supervisor. I don't even use the word manager or supervisor. I talk instead about the team guide, because if we keep following the old rules of work, which was all about production and productivity and turning widgets out, we have to shift our mindset to where we're trying to actually empower the work of individuals and teams. And so that's not the sage on the stage, as my friend Esther Wojcicki says in her book, *Moonshots in Education*. It's the guide on the side. It's not the person with all the answers. It's the person with the best questions. So if you put that operating system in place, but you didn't change the role of the manager or supervisor, they would bungee cord back, as we have done in a post-pandemic world, to following the old rules again and again. But if you did help to train them, that's what my course, Skills for Leading the Future of Work, is focused on, is helping to change that mindset around the team guide so that

you can be actually that change agent to continually ensure that you've got that flow of human talent.

That's the end of the first half of the interview. Next half next week, when we'll learn more about the community operating system.

Just a little reaction here to Jon Stewart's commentary on AI on the Daily Show on April 1 – and you may not have seen that if you're not subscribed to Paramount+, since it seems that everything worth watching today is carried on its own premium streaming service. And I'm only mentioning this because I'm a huge fan of Jon Stewart, have been for decades, and obviously many other people inhabiting the same niches of either comedian, commentator, or both, have weighed in on AI. But I don't have the same reverence for them that I do for Jon. His commentary was rather broad and of course written for laughs. I'm not going to complain about that, it's his job. In fact, I'm not really complaining about it at all, or at least only very mildly. It wasn't radically off-base; most popular takes on AI are far more off the rails. But his going down the road of pointing out the impact on jobs as a train wreck engineered by an implicit cabal of entitled Silicon Valley executives was very one-dimensional. Not that there aren't entitled Silicon Valley executives going on about huge potential for the future, blithely ignoring the lack of advancement that is accruing to disadvantaged sectors of society from Ai as we've talked about before on this podcast. We've talked enough about the future of jobs on this podcast to know that the effects are not well understood, may well include brutal effects on some sectors, and are incredibly complex and nuanced. Which is why one-dimensional takes, even funny ones – don't get me wrong, I do enjoy them - don't help the conversation that we must have to make progress here. If we had a good enough handle on the problem to be making that progress then it wouldn't matter if comedians were making money off it on the side. But I hear from more and more people every day who are scared – really frightened - about what could be happening to their jobs, and pieces like this only amplify their fear. Certainly not on the scale of what many less responsible and more popular news organizations put out, including ones frequently called out by Jon Stewart himself; but then, I don't tend to watch those at all.

In today's news ripped from the headlines about AI, parents of children killed by gun violence in the US used AI to recreate their kids' voices for an impassioned presentation to Congress. Six families agreed to use AI to recreate the voice of their child or loved one in a project published exactly six years after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. You can go to theshotline.org and hear messages from children like Ethan Song, who talks about his love of fostering animals. Then he says that he's no longer alive. "My parents re-created my voice using AI so I could ask you to finally do something to protect kids from guns," the recording says. "The thing is, kids like me are dying every day. It's time to act." His parents say it sounds just like him.

This is not a technological breakthrough, but it is something of a social milestone, that AI voice recreation would be used in the service of a cause like this. I'm not going to open up that cause here and now; I'll just say that it will be interesting to see whether this level of gut-wrenching makes any difference.

Next week, I'll conclude the interview with Gary Bolles, when we'll talk about unbossing and holacracies, how AI will impact organizational structures, fear, FOMO, and agency, and the Singularity University. That's next week, on *AI and You.*

Until then, remember: no matter how much computers learn how to do, it's how we come together as *humans* that matters.

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