

AI and You

Transcript

Guest: Gary Bolles, part 2

Episode 205

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Hello, and welcome to episode 205! I am talking with Gary Bolles, an expert on the future of work, probably the topic people are most interested in at the moment. He is the author of "[The Next Rules of Work: The mindset, skillset, and toolset to lead your organization through uncertainty.](#)"

Gary is adjunct Chair for the Future of Work for [Singularity University](#) where he 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 has over 1 million learners on LinkedIn Learning, is a former Silicon Valley executive and a co-founder of SoCap, the world's largest gathering of impact entrepreneurs and investors.

Last week we talked about the gig economy, the new rules of work, what ChatGPT did to the job market, and Gary had just mentioned an interesting concept called the community operating system, which relates people to technology in the context of the work environment. That's where we'll pick it up as we get back to the interview with Gary Bolles!

Wow. This is provoking so many questions in me. I am taken by your concept of the community operating system, and the computer scientist in me wants to draw a component diagram.

We've got those. We have node graphs to show you about how that works.

And especially to see which components are people and which components are systems or technology.

Brilliant. Brilliant framing. That's exactly the way it works.

One of the things that occurs to me is that limitations of managers, for instance, in companies are based upon biological limitations. The reasons that we limit the number of direct reports to people, and so we have to have hierarchies, is because people can only handle so many people talking to them at once. It's just a cognitive limitation. AI wouldn't have that limitation necessarily. In theory, it doesn't. And the more that AI is able to assume functions that generative AI has demonstrated, it can do things that we thought were going to be the province of people for quite a long time. Summarize this document and find relationships between these things, that it could act as a sort of hyper-powered assistant to a manager to increase their reach, for instance, the number of direct reports, but also the number of other things that you need to tie together in an

organization so that you can have more visibility. Is this anything that you see happening at the moment? Any attempt to do that?

So I just wanted to sort of dive into some of the different aspects that you were talking about, about the role of that person who leads, and then talk about some of the different ways that we could be thinking about how the technology can be applied. So you're right that we all have cognitive limits. We all have cognitive biases. We all have cognitive limits. Some believe that there is a limit in terms of the number of people for whom you can be responsible as somebody guiding a team. Others believe there's a limit in the number of people you can know, often called the Dunbar limit, which is based on like 150 people, which is based on extremely suspicious science. But let me just maybe reframe a little bit. So there was work done by Rachel Zombeck at the Blum Center in the Bay Area. And so the question that I've always been asking is, let's step back. What's a team, right? So if you have people reporting to you, whether you are a single team or you are a guide of guides, that is, you have lots of teams that are in some kind of structure around you, not necessarily below, but around you. What's a team? So a team is, according to Rachel, a team has a common purpose, that is, you've agreed what the purpose is. A team has to keep synchronized or somehow connected in what they're doing, and it has to hold each other accountable for results. That's it. So if you have a common purpose, but you're not holding each other accountable for results, you're probably not a team, right? So now you guide other teams. And so you can say direct reports, but really, what is the responsibility? You have certain responsibilities by the workload you have taken on. And when we look at what are often called leaderless organizations, what they've done is they've created an operating system where it's agreed what the problem to be solved is, it's agreed what kinds of skills are needed to solve the problem, and then teams continually form around these kinds of functions, writing a purpose, synchronizing their activities, and then holding each other accountable for results. And then they dynamically bind around the next problem, the next problem. Now to some people, their heads explode, especially Chief Human Resources Officers' heads explode, when you try to think about having that happen at scale. However, we already solve problems like that at scale, and it's called security software. So think about the way that we used to manage security, because we were talking about the technology, and here's how obviously artificial intelligence and related technologies could have been helpful. When I was running a magazine called *Network Computing* in the early 1990s, there wasn't even a job called a CIO. It was the head of IT, and so what was that person's job? 99.9 percent uptime, got to keep the systems running, and security. You can't have the systems be put at risk. And so as a matter of fact, the heads of IT that I talked to at the time told me when this new thing called the internet came along, they would never connect their network to a public network. That's too much risk, and that was called perimeter management. Well, we don't do perimeter management. What happens now is, based on who you are, your work role, the kinds of information you need access to, when you need access to them, the phase of a project, where the information is located, we have security software that figures all that, and either you get the green light, and you can look at the file, or you get the red light, you can't look at the file. So we've solved these kinds of complex problems of a human, and the kinds of problems that you need to solve, and the kind of information you need to access, we've already solved these kinds of problems, because we have the incentive to do so. What we haven't done is to turn our eye towards these kind of complex interactions between humans. So

you're exactly right. What if you had an AI coach that told you, because you're really bad with names, which I am, and up walks somebody that you know works for you, but you can't remember their name, and they hopefully you've got your AI coach, or telling you, oh, that's Barry, and you have much more capacity to be able to manage different threads, but we also have to change the empowerment of the worker, or none of that system works. So one of my clients is Novartis, 100,000-person pharma company, and they have a process called unbossing. You walk into a big meeting, and the person with the highest title in the room is supposed to say, how can we unboss this meeting? And what that means is, how can I not be the person who decides all the answers to the questions? And be the one that has to be the one to solve them. So the old rules of work, the way that we held the person who leads accountable, was often by the number of problems they solve. I believe in the next rules of work, that person will judge themselves by how few problems actually reach their desk, because they have empowered others to solve those problems. So why do you need direct reports, if you're aligned around a common purpose, you hold each other accountable for results, and you're continually synchronized? Why does that need to be a reporting relationship, where you have to be the one absolutely guaranteeing that they're doing their work, and instead, we have an operating system where everybody knows the problems that they're trying to solve, because they're aligned with the purpose of the organization, the purpose of the team, and the purpose of their work, and they know all of those connections, because that's part of the culture, the mindset of the organization.

Wow, again, the questions are multiplying faster than I can speak them. I remember about 10 years ago for me, there was a lot that I was encountering about leaderless organizations, as you mentioned: holacracies. And that has tailed off in my perception. I don't know if that's because they did in practice, or whether they're just flying under my radar. In your experience, are these diminishing or accelerating as a result of technological changes?

So there are some holacracies, leaderless organizations that have been around for a long time. Gore Industries, which makes Gore-Tex the breathable fabric, has functioned as a holacracy since 1976. There are strengths and weaknesses. So the strengths are people that are empowered, that know their own skills, that know the kinds of problems that they like to solve, and where they do not treat workers as a wholly owned subsidiary of a manager. Those organizations are far more flexible, far more adaptable and nimble, and are able to continually shift the focus to solving new problems. The greatest challenge is scale. Really, really large organizations have a very, very hard time living without clear hierarchy, because often human beings thrive on certainty. We don't thrive on uncertainty. If there's a problem to be solved, and I don't know who's supposed to solve it, it's kind of like the movie *Bug's Life*, which my kid loved when we were little, where the ants are walking along the line and a leaf falls in front of them, and the ants freak out because they don't know what to do now. Who's going to solve this? So that's one of the challenges in less-leadered organizations, is knowing who's going to solve the problem and dealing with uncertainty. I'm not saying hierarchy ever goes away, especially at scale. Instead, what I'm saying is that people who lead organizations - notice I haven't used the word *leader*. I don't believe that in that word either. There's a leadership industrial complex. We've got all these books on leadership, and we don't seem to be able to crack the code on it. So I believe

anybody in an organization can lead. And so, and this again, in companies like Novartis and others that follow these practices, are simply trying to reduce the cognitive load of leading and controlling and believing that you have to control, and instead running the experiment to see how much can you empower people. And again, as we infuse more and more of these tools into our work, there's a really inspiring side of it, which is that each of us now has an AI assistant. Each of us now has a bunch of agents running around coordinating with other people and taking a lot of the cognitive load off of our work. And then there's a creepy side of it, where organizations are using all that data that's created to simply control more and to be able to use algorithms to manage humans, which is a fail for humans, because that's simply going back to the old rules of work and basically treating humans as machines.

So isn't that revealing then that the technology simply amplifies the existing culture? If it's hierarchical, if it's domineering, you'll get more of that. If it's cooperative, flat, you'll get more of that.

Yeah, absolutely. Now, there are organizations that are continually trying to go through to organizational transformation. And I would say, it doesn't have to be a zero-sum. It doesn't have to be where it's simply amplifying what already exists. If you don't take on the mantle of organizational transformation, if you don't try to transform mindset and develop a new skill set and continue to leverage this breakthrough tool set, yes, you're exactly right. It will simply instantiate and solidify what you have today. But if instead, what you've got is a bunch of people who lead, who want to, are committed to continuous organizational transformation, you may not have that operating system today, but you have to design the culture, the mindset that you want for tomorrow. And that's where you can apply the tools to be able to help humans to be able to change much more rapidly and effectively than they might have before.

Right. And as you say, you need that organization transformational initiative. In your work, are you able to use the technology explosion as an excuse to get organizations to adopt transformational practices?

So that's actually a great insight, because what we find, especially through our work with Singularity University where we have brainiacs on virtually every exponential technology on the planet, that people tend to go through sort of three phases when they are all interested in any kind of change, whether it's personal change or organizational change. The first is you have to get out of your comfort zone because if you're in your comfort zone, if you don't believe that there's competitive pressure or that better pressure isn't encouraging you to change your behavior, or you don't believe that it's a world of exponential change and you're not adapting fast enough, you have to get out of your comfort zone. Second is that you have to be inspired with some positive vision and narrative of the future that you're trying to create. There's a book called *Cultural Transformation* by the Institute for Corporate Performance that studied hundreds of organizational transformation processes. Bad news, 85% fail. Good news, 15% succeed. How do they succeed? They start with that vision, a co-created collaborative vision, often in a manifesto, about that future that you want to be. And then you have to take action. That is, you have to decide, there's a portfolio of different activities you can take. What are the shortest term, highest impact actions you can take to start moving the organization in that direction? And again, this is

where the AI tools can be really effective because if you are leveraging the tools, say you create a new team to focus on your next million dollar, billion dollar product. If you are empowering them with that new tool set, that next tool set, and you can prove that they will be able to get not just advantages in productivity, which is a given, but in what I call AIdeation, be able to continually come up with new ideas, new ways to solve problems, and so on, then you can take that success and show it to the rest of the organization and say, this is where we're going. So you have to take action that proves the model as rapidly and as effectively as possible.

How much of a part does fear play in the processes you've been talking about?

So my friend John Hagel has a marvelous book called *Journey Beyond Fear*. It's on my bookshelf behind me here. And what he talks about a lot is sort of narratives and the ways we talk about ourselves and think about ourselves, and that there is this sort of hump we've got to get over of fear. And it's perfectly understandable. My friend, Dr. Evian Gordon, who I'm just recording a new course with on the brain and mindset, he has a marvelous framework. Basically, the way our brains work, if you were to reduce it down to the simplest formula, safety first. That's the way our brains work. Maintain what you have. Don't take risks or take manageable or predictable risks, but getting out of your comfort zone is where you don't have that predictability. You do have uncertainty. And so fear, absolutely. But this goes back to we talked about early on with my father's work, is one of the reasons that I've mentioned the sort of the structure of what you can do, what you can get paid for, and what you love is, my father would say, is what if you gave yourself permission that you could do work that you love? What would that look like? And fear keeps us from even asking that question. It keeps us embedded in what we've done. And what we've proven, I think, as humans with our cognitive biases over and over again, is that our fear keeps us anchored in that past. But if we instead can build that positive vision and narrative of the future we want, that North Star or Southern Cross for each of us as individuals, as well as for the organization, that's why John calls it, the journey beyond fear. How do you get past that hump, through that valley and get to the other side where you are taking action? That's ultimately, I use the word *agency* before. What we find, I used to be on the board of a nonprofit that did job counseling for the homeless. What you find is that you want every human being on the planet to feel that they have agency, that they can take an action and there could be a positive outcome. That's how you get beyond fear, is to develop new mindsets, change the way your brain functions to be able to embrace possibilities, take action and see that you can get positive outcomes.

I'm glad you mentioned agency. That's something that I use explicitly in a lot of my work. And what I do boils down to giving people more agency with respect to AI. Have you found that there's fear of missing out, fear of being left behind, driving organizations to introspect and say, well, maybe we had better do some of this transformation before the AI revolution leaves us in the ash can of history?

Excellent question. I've been working in projects related to Silicon Valley since 1984. So I've seen a lot of cycles and they all have very similar characteristics. This one's just moving faster and more scale than in the past. As I'm fond of saying, it's like the internet, but on internet time. Because the infrastructure of the internet exists, you can get 2 million users of ChatGPT 3.5 in a

month. So that's one of the reasons that the pace and scale moves so rapidly. So the answer is, whatever gives you the motivation to move out of your comfort zone. For some people, that's fear of missing out. That's FOMO. It's, "My competitors might be doing this right now." The common phrase, we've got a group called Next Co-Labs out of Toronto that I've helped co-found of AI specialists from around the world that are all workshopping the tools and teaching others to be able to use the tools and to build organizational strategies around building those sort of AI plans. And we've got a bunch of information on <https://www.nextcolabs.io>. But the basic premise is, whatever motivates you to get out of your comfort zone, whether it's fear of missing out, or it's an opportunity-based narrative, as John Hagel would say, whatever gets you moving, that's what's necessary. But once you're moving, the more you can frame it in the positive uses of the technology. There's a great line by one of the co-founders, Lian Feng, the very well-known logistics company. And he said, using AI to automate your existing company is like building a digital horse and buggy when your competitors are building the next digital Tesla. If you just reinforce your existing business practices and processes, and you're just automating what you do, you have missed a tremendous opportunity to be able to create something brand new, to get a whole bunch of people in the organization unified around that positive vision of the future, where you can leverage the tools to be able to create new value.

It's reminding me here of a lot of personal development work that I did in various seminars some decades ago, when people would usually come to these things because they wanted to lose weight, make more money, get a different job, change relationships, and they had seen their friends have these results. And then they came to this and it was all introspect at the higher level loops of looking at who you are, why you're here, how you get in your own way. And they weren't expecting that, but that was how that achieved those effects for them.

Well, that's great. I'm glad you did that because that's how you gave great value to your clients, for people that you were helping, right? Because if you just focused on, okay, we're just going to fix the way things, then you had to help them with broader needs.

And on an organizational level, the term learning organization is what I apply to that kind of progress. I want to talk about the Singularity University and your role there, which you have mentioned, because that grew out of Ray Kurzweil's work and he established a lot of conversation around the term "Singularity," which is powerful in evoking this idea of a point in time when everything becomes infinite, everything becomes beyond our ability to keep up with, and it's this sort of this apocalyptic - in the strict sense of the word, not meaning destruction - moment. And so here comes the Singularity University, dedicated to helping people get to that. Can you wrap up briefly by telling us about your work there, and then how listeners can find out more about what you're doing?

Absolutely. So first of all, as I'm fond of saying, so Ray is an old friend, we've known each other since the dawn of time, as well as Peter Diamandis, the co-founder of Singularity University. And so Ray gets tremendous credit because he's the one who really understood what exponential curves were all about, not just microprocessors and Moore's law, but exponential technologies across the board, that's these hockey stick curves of development. Singularity

University was formed about a dozen years ago, and as I'm fond of saying, it's neither about the Singularity, nor is it a university. It's not about the Singularity, because it really is much more about exponential technologies, and how we can help people around the world to understand how these technologies are transforming our industries, our organizations, and our lives. So that's really the approach of the organization. We're completely virtual, there's no campus, there's no one place. It's also not a university, a classical university, because it's not accredited, and it actually focuses much more on helping executives from organizations, people who lead in organizations, to be able to understand exponential change. They typically do five-day executive programs. I'm actually going to be in Mountain View, California next week, teaching at one of them. But the basic premise is that we all need to understand those three phases. What's the shock and awe of how is it that these technologies are transforming our lives? What are the kinds of inspirational insights and approaches that we might take? What's the vision for the future that we might co-create? And then what's the action that each of us can take to be able to, either in our current organizations, in our lives, or in our future, what are the things that we can do to take action to be able to leverage those technologies to make a better world?

Thank you very much. Regrettably, our time is not infinite, and this is where it has to end, and I have gotten so much out of this. Gary Bolles, thank you for coming on *AI and You*, and I hope that we can catch up some more again in the future and see how things are continuing to evolve in your world.

No, I'd love to continue the conversation. And if your listeners ever want to find me, I'm quite easy to find. I've got a popular LinkedIn newsletter, and that's the easiest way to be able to work with me. But thanks, Peter. It's been a marvelous conversation.

That's the end of the interview. I don't think it's any exaggeration to say that the future of work has already been disrupted far more than ever before, including the Industrial Revolution, we just haven't caught up with it. It's like wrapping a rubber band around a bowling ball and pulling hard on it. The band stretches and stretches and for a long time nothing happens, but eventually the ball starts to move. Well we've been stretched and stretched by the movement of AI, but it's going to take time before we move as much as we need to. In other words, we've got a lot of catching up to do. Really interesting to hear how Gary has inhabited that important space. There's a link to his [website](#) in the show notes and transcript.

In today's news ripped from the headlines about AI, J. Robert Oppenheimer's grandson is among the signatories of a new open letter about the dangers artificial intelligence poses to civilization. The letter, which was issued in February by The Elders, a group founded by Nelson Mandela, and also in conjunction with the Future of Life Institute, calls on global decisionmakers to "Show long-view leadership on existential threats," including "ungoverned AI" and nuclear weapons. The letter, also signed by Richard Branson, Geoffrey Hinton, and Carl Sagan's widow Ann Druyan, reads, "We face a set of threats that put all humanity at risk. Our leaders are not responding with the wisdom and urgency required," and concludes, "We are at a precipice." While there's debate about whether there's an existential threat from AI or how big it is, it's clear that the perception of that threat has exploded, and many more people now feel permission and duty to voice that perception.

If you like this show, please press that Like button to get us more attention; even better, give us a 5-star rating and review on your podcast platform. There are a lot of shows about AI out there, but I modestly think that we tackle fundamental issues with a rare degree of creating enlightenment and finding synergy.

Next week, my guest will be Mounir Shita, founder of Kimera Systems, who will be talking to us about his theories of artificial general intelligence from his book, *The Science of Intelligence*. 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.

<http://aiandyou.net>

Get the book: <http://humancusp.com/book2>