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In An Age Of Disruption, Your Team Is Your Best Asset: Here's How To Cultivate It



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Leonardo da Vinci [designed a robotic knight](#) more than 500 years ago. The term “artificial intelligence” was [reportedly](#) coined at Dartmouth College in the 1950s. Modern, commercial virtual reality [first appeared](#) during the arcade boom of the

1980s. [According to Business Insider](#), the internet of things (IoT) is as old as the first wearable headsets from the late 1990s.

Notice a pattern? Most of the technologies we consider to be cutting edge today have actually been around for years (or centuries, in some cases).

What is new is how these technologies work in concert. As the co-founder and CEO of a mobile technology studio, I see that they have immense individual potential, but they are collectively poised to transform the world. Thanks to recent advances in computing power and developer stacks, I believe that transformation is finally within reach.

These once-nascent technologies are converging into a digital framework for the future. The IoT, VR, AI, machine learning, sensors and other advances are seemingly making the impossible possible. For example, we already have vehicles that can successfully navigate rush-hour traffic — imagine what networks of smart devices will be able to accomplish in a few decades. Calling it a brave new world is an incredible understatement.

Can humans keep pace with machines?

The rapid pace of change is exciting, but it's also anxiety-inducing. The technological convergence will be as disruptive as it is constructive, especially when it comes to the workplace.

Current talent shortages are proof that disruption is already underway. Considering that Korn Ferry estimated in their 2018 Future of Work study that the labor-skills shortage in tech, media and communications would reach 4.3 million workers by 2030, finding talent that has mastered science, technology, engineering and math will probably not get easier. As work increasingly focuses on marshaling technology, I predict that the talent gap will only grow.

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My own industry — mobile app development — reinvents itself on a quarterly basis. Much of what I do involves attempting to predict what will come next and then preparing accordingly. That requires a 360-degree perspective to ensure a holistic view, but much of my focus is on my staff members.

When you work in an industry with low unemployment, hiring is a huge challenge. With a tech-driven sea change coming, I believe companies should focus on retention in order to adapt successfully.

Put your team ahead of the curve.

When my company wanted to master machine learning development, we knew that simply hiring someone with the expertise wasn't an option. Based on our existing skill sets, it made sense to focus on computer vision for our first project. That initial strategy led us to create a hackathon.

Admittedly, this project was way outside our wheelhouse. But even with this steep challenge, it ended up being a resounding success thanks largely to how we prepared our team. If you want to create a culture that is flexible and agile for the tech challenges to come, incorporate what worked for me:

Focus on fun.

Trying to reframe “work” as “fun” is a slippery slope, but it's undeniably exciting to work on something that's innovative and groundbreaking. When challenges arise, try to contextualize them as opportunities for collaboration, invention and experimentation — even if that means they create a lot of stress.

But you don't have to take my word for it: 2015 [research](#) from the University of Warwick showed that the happy people studied were up to 12% more productive. Considering that, to many, any productivity increase of more than 3% is significant, this suggests that happy employees are incredibly valuable. We kept our machine learning experiment fun by presenting it as a friendly competition rather than an urgent initiative. That seemingly minor difference led to tremendous results.

Value diversity.

Diversity in the workplace gets a lot of lip service, but I have witnessed how heterogeneous teams can produce better results. We have some team members

who are amazing with back-end technologies like cloud infrastructure, others who create apps and interfaces on the front end and a final group that is great with IoT frameworks. Individually, none of these skill groups is equipped to innovate or accelerate. When teams combine skills, however, they can overcome the obstacles of working in isolation.

A 2018 McKinsey study [found](#) that companies are more profitable when their teams are diverse. These gains are so significant, the study suggested, that companies with the most ethnic and cultural diversity on their leadership teams were "33% more likely to have industry-leading profitability," which could extend to other forms of diversity — like skills — as well. Even if we don't have the perfect person on our team, I believe that the right combination of existing skills among employees can replicate that contribution without the need for a new hire.

Invest in improvement.

Adapting is generally a lot easier when you're not operating on a shoestring budget. Preparation and contextualization help a lot, but you simply need to invest in change at a certain point. For example, my company consistently invests about 25% of its revenue into innovation. That includes research and development, creating systems for the future and improving our own internal processes. If these efforts are going to be effective later, they need financial support now.

Not surprisingly, talent is an area that requires investment. The [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) encourages businesses to invest in training and education initiatives to teach the youth of today the skills of tomorrow. Compared to the cost of hiring an engineer in a hyper-competitive labor market, education investments are often modest and can pay huge dividends. Find ways for your company to look at hiring and talent development as long-term initiatives.

It's plain to see that a technological convergence is coming. At the same time, it's apparent that no one knows exactly how high-tech advances will affect business, culture and the future as a whole. Companies cannot plan for something they cannot predict, but they can begin preparing for the uncertain. An agile workforce allows companies to pivot long before it's necessary — by starting now, you're much less likely to stumble down the road.