

TUESDAY TIMES

THE BENEFITS OF BEING A POLYMATH IN THE FUTURE OF WORK

Background

In recent years, we are replete with mentions on the importance of lifelong learning and digital transformation in the popular media. These discussions become even more salient during the Covid-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, I have given several public talks on the benefits of having a polymathic mindset to prepare for the future of work.

Hence, when IFPAS requested for a contribution on this subject matter, I thought I could share an abstract of my thoughts. However, I emphasize that the purpose of this article is to bring forth the idea of being a polymath and highlight some benefits. As I am not from the finance industry, I shall leave the application of this concept to the readers who are experts in their respective fields.

What is a Polymath?

The word **polymath** originates from the Greek word *polymathes*, which means “having learned much”. The widely accepted definition of the term on Google is “a person with a wide range of knowledge”. A further review also reveals a wide range of socially impactful individuals labelled as polymaths. They include renaissance men (Leonardo da Vinci), prominent scientists (Issac Newton), and even prominent businessmen (Elon Musk, Bill Gates). However, most of us are not in the same league as these individuals and to claim that being polymathic can make you as successful as them is going to be a hard sell. Hence, I urge readers to consider the adoption of this idea as a guiding principle to enhance your career rather than a silver bullet to riches and fame.

At this point, the audience will usually ask me, “so what does a polymath do?” Polymaths like to read and learn. Yawn. (I know I may have lost half your attention already, but please just bear with me.) A polymath is usually a person who is very curious and passionate about what is going on around them. They take a conscious effort to understand why things happen in the manner as they do. In addition, a polymath likes to combine the knowledge they have curated to create value for themselves. Here is a simple example.

Jane is a twenty year-old undergraduate who loves yoga. She even completes a yoga training course and works as a part-time yoga instructor (skill 1). Like the other Gen Zs, Jane also enjoys putting herself on social media such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Being a savvy social media user, she has quite a good following (skill 2). But Jane knows that her video quality pales when compared to professional videographers. So, just for fun, she takes a free Coursera videography course to improve her video making skill (skill 3). During the Covid-19 lockdown, not only is Jane forced to attend school from home, she has to stop giving yoga lessons. But she also realises that she has lots of time on her hand. Rather than wasting time binge watching Netflix dramas, she creates her own “Jane’s Yoga Channel” on YouTube just for the fun of it. She focuses on yoga routines that are suited for small apartments in Singapore (application of skill 1). She applies her newly acquired videography skill to record a series of new yoga videos (application of skill 3). She promotes her channel by applying her social media knowledge such as, creating cross links between her YouTube channel, Instagram, and TikTok accounts (application of skill 2). Jane’s followers increase in number so rapidly that sportswear companies want to endorse her as a yoga influencer.

Can we claim that Jane is a polymath? Not immediately. I will argue that Jane exhibits *polymathic traits* because she has the ability to combine different skills to create something that is of value to her. Nevertheless, if Jane remains passionate in acquiring other forms of skills and knowledge, and in turn continues to create new ventures (i.e., she engages a polymathic mindset for *life*), then, yes, she is a polymath.

Nevertheless, there are several points worth highlighting in Jane's example. First, polymaths usually do not label their skills for the purpose of creating future value. Second, the skills they learn is motivated by personal interest not fame or wealth) and the creation of value is usually incidental or "just for fun". Simply put, although Jane works as a part-time yoga instructor, she has not planned on using her yoga skill to achieve fame and wealth. While scholars on the topic of polymaths will agree upon these descriptions, it is here where I depart. It is pragmatic to assert that most average Singaporeans do not have the luxury to turn their hobbies into money making endeavours. Hence, I bend the polymathic concept a little by applying it to enhance individuals' career instead. I think this will benefit more people in the end. Next, we shall turn our attention to the benefits on being a polymath at work.

The Benefits of Being a Polymath

The first benefit is that, it helps solve unforeseeable future problems. I think it is safe to assume that any employee who is regarded as a *fixer* of problems will have better protection against retrenchment. Recall that a polymath does not seek solution only when a problem arises - Jane has not taken a yoga coaching certificate because she foresees that she wants to be a yoga influencer. Rather, being a polymath means you are constantly acquiring knowledge without knowing when they will come in handy. But for sure, when the need arises, a polymath will have sufficient skills stored in their knowledge vault to solve problems effectively. For example, if the head of an insurance agency wants to customise an App to enable their clients to assess their policies' information, an insurance practitioner who has been reading (in his/her own free time) about the importance of good UX in App design will be able to lead the project group more effectively than someone who just watch a YouTube clip on App design the night before.

The second benefit of being a polymath lies in their ability to combine skills to create value. The outcome is that a polymath will always be ahead of their competition. If an insurance practitioner is also keen on helping clients invest their money and plan for retirement, this practitioner should also acquire the necessary certifications to market financial products. Practitioners who have polymathic traits should also consider joining brokerage firms instead of getting themselves tied to a single insurance company. In this manner, they can provide the best policies and investment plans across different companies and create value for their clients. In fact, why stop there? Can financial practitioners take a property license and help clients invest in properties as well? Consider the competitive advantage of such an all-encompassing solution provider, a consultant that is a pure breed finance polymath. (I never say that being a polymath will be easy.)

The third benefit for being a polymath occurs at a grand level and is somewhat a consequence of the first two benefits. If you continuously pursue the path of a polymath, you will have a higher chance of achieving an extraordinary life. (I know this comes close to the hard sell I am trying to avoid.) Below is what the creator of the famous Dilbert comic and blogger, Scott Adams, said (1) : *If you want an average successful life, it doesn't take much planning. Just stay out of trouble, go to school, and apply for jobs you might like. But if you want something extraordinary, you have two paths: 1. Become the best at one specific thing and ; 2. Become very good (top 25%) at two or more things.*

According to Scott, the first strategy is tough as it requires many hours of training and practice (and a bit of luck). You will be pursuing a near perfect state of achievement. In the context of sports, you are training to be like Usain Bolt or Novak Djokovic. In the context of finance, you are aiming to be in the same category as Singapore billionaire, Peter Lim. However, the good news is, the second strategy is more doable (but will still require hard work) - you can still have a great life if you focus on being the top 25% in several *different* domains. Put simply, you do not need to be perfect, you just need to be better than 75% of the public in doing what you do. This can be achieved if you have the discipline to pursue the path of the polymath. Over the years of gathering and curating all the relevant knowledge across different domains of your career, you should reach a point of saturation where you are better than the average man in the street in two or three *different* domains. You should be able to (1) stack different knowledge from these domains to create the best solution (i.e., the first benefit cited earlier) and (2) create the most value for your client (i.e., the second benefit cited earlier). And the most important part is being able to complete both these tasks with ease and fluency since you have been practicing for many years. Simply put, the practice of being a polymath over the course of your career should make you better than the average player in your industry and, consequently, you should be successful and lead a fulfilled life. Next, we discuss how we should we practice to be a polymath.

How to be a Polymath?

One way in becoming a polymath is to develop a deliberate learning habit. This can be done through the 5-hour rule (Simmons 2016) (2). Most successful people, such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffer, typically put in at least 5 hours per week to read and learn. For our context, it is recommended that you focus on domains that matter to your career. Do not read passively; constantly reflect on how the content you have read applies to your situation. This should heighten your sensitivity should similar situations occur in your work. It is also not necessary to follow this rule down to the tee. For example, if you are taking an online self-enrichment course, I would think that you are investing sufficient time in deliberate learning. In essence, this rule is meant to help you cultivate the habit of deliberate learning.

Next, you will need to strategise on what to learn. The participants in my workshop usually complain that there are too many topics and that they usually get too overwhelmed to even start. Although polymaths usually read and learn based on whatever they please, my pragmatic recommendation is to focus on topics that are in line with your industry or simply take a course that is related to our job function. This low hanging fruit approach usually works well for beginners. In doing so, it is hoped that you will be motivated to complete your course knowing that the knowledge is going to be relevant and applicable to your work.

Another important point to emphasise is that learners should practise creating linkages from what they have learned. This is a problem I observe through my years as an educator. Many learners, while taking a course, focus only on the materials within their course to solve problems. We need to remember that it is pointless to curate knowledge without knowing how to synthesise them up to solve complex problems in the real world. A polymath needs to be a flexible and creative problem solver.



Last but not least, we need to prioritise our time for deliberate learning. Many of my workshop participants have cited that they just do not have time to learn something new. But the reality is that people do spend time learning to solve an *immediate* problem. But they do not like to invest their time to acquire skills to solve a future problem because the rewards of doing so is not certain. Using the App design example which I described early, an employee who is tasked to lead the project will probably be reading up on UX design fundamentals the night before the meeting. But this individual will probably be unwilling to study the topic six months ahead as he or she cannot predict if the time invested is worth the effort. As such, most people will simply focus on what needs to be done *now* as opposed to prioritising their time to invest in future learning. However, people need to understand that a successful person is one that has curated most of the necessary skills (by prioritising their time for deliberate learning) before the need arises.

Conclusion

Through this brief article, I have tried to bring forth the essence of a polymathic mindset and how it can refine your attitude towards learning. While it is by no means extensive or complete, I hope that you are able to apply this as a guiding principle towards being a lifelong learner, and reap success in your career and fulfilment in your personal life.

¹ https://dilbertblog.typepad.com/the_dilbert_blog/2007/07/career-advice.html

² <https://medium.com/accelerated-intelligence/bill-gates-warren-buffett-and-oprah-all-use-the-5-hour-rule-308f528b6363#ldy4jlwih>

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