

2ND EDITION Fully revised and updated

FUTURE

Fit

HOW TO STAY
RELEVANT AND
COMPETITIVE
IN THE FUTURE
OF WORK

**ANDREA
CLARKE**



Introduction by Bernard Salt AM

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Introduction

Get comfortable with the idea of change

In some ways it is the biggest question of our time in history. How do I remain relevant in a rapidly changing world and workplace? Some say the answer is education; others say it is being adaptable and resilient. I think the development of ‘people skills’ is an important part of the whole remaining-relevant story.

It’s almost as if modern workers, and employers, are looking for a single quality that will allow them to remain relevant. Yet, as with most things in life, maybe the answer is more complex. What if the way to make workers relevant to the future of work is different for every worker? This more nuanced approach would require an understanding of the bigger forces shaping society, as well as a kind of manual to help workers remain focused on how to be fit for the future of work.

Let’s begin by looking at how the world of work, and the world more generally, has changed and is changing. From there we’ll discuss solutions and strategies to overcoming skill gaps. What workers really need is an understanding of the bigger picture, evidence of the skills that might be needed in the future, and practical advice about how to manage all-too-familiar workplace situations.

How has the world of work changed?

It seems like the pace of social and economic change has quickened over the last decade, and especially in Australia. The local car-making industry, for example, has been reimagined by globalisation of the manufacturing process. The governance

and the ethics of the banking industry have come under intense scrutiny, prompting calls for a change in culture and in regulation.

The mining industry is now less labour-intensive than it was even a decade ago; it has evolved into a highly mechanised transport and logistics business. These bigger-picture forces have also applied to agribusiness, although in this sector the immediate focus seems to have been the need for economies of scale via farm aggregation.

Profound social and technological change is evident across most facets of modern life. The use of cash – actually handling notes – seems ‘messy’ and less hygienic than clinically tapping payment, as we like to do today. The beloved ink-ridden newspaper – especially the broadsheet variety – has been weakened, and some say terminally so, by the rise of online news sources.

And then there is the landline, which is, apparently, all but dead. (Note to today’s teenagers: a landline is a telephone handset attached by a line fixed to a wall or to a skirting board within the family home. No, really.)

Postal mail, let alone truly archaic concepts like the aerogramme and the telegram, as well as fax machines and even answering machines, have been consigned to a period of time with a start date and an end date.

Black and white television might have started in Australia in 1956 but it began to be superseded with the arrival of colour TV from 1975 onwards. No one queried the effects of this new technological marvel on the television-making workforce at the time, but perhaps this was because it was seen as an exciting new product. No one was ‘disrupted’ by colour television, and indeed its arrival merely prompted a new all-round heightened consumerism.

Music was once committed to pressed vinyl, then it was committed to cassette tape, then to compact disc (CD) and from there it was streamed and shared as it is today. The entire transition of the way music is consumed took place between the 1980s and the early 2000s. And yet its effects have been wider and more substantive than, say, the introduction of colour television.

Artists needed to realign their management interests and creative output away from recording companies (such as EMI) and towards global technology businesses (such as Apple). The transition wasn't neat and efficient; it played out messily and over a decade or more. Some artists seized the moment, whereas others proved to be laggards. But eventually the pathway became clear. Streamed music is a better product – meaning it is more convenient and accessible – than a vinyl record.

Bigger farms offer better economies of scale than smaller farms. Cars made in China can be produced and shipped to Australia more cheaply than they can be manufactured in Australia. And tapping a credit card is a faster and more frictionless method of conducting a transaction than accessing, carrying and passing over the required amount of cash. I suspect that not only has the landline disappeared from the family home but so too has the plastic ice-cream bucket of stored coins.

The point of this is that 'change' has been part of the way we have lived and worked for a generation or more. But something changed in the way things change, about a decade ago. The world is now more globally connected via trade. Corporations are even more inclined to take on a global perspective: what works in America is likely to work in Australia or the UK, for example. Cheap air travel means that the middle class in both the West and in developing countries can and do travel. Consumers and workers are increasingly exposed to wider influences from leading economies such as those of the US, Japan, Europe and China.

The Chinese middle class aspire to elements of the Western lifestyle including owning high-end branded goods, drinking red wine, and eating dairy products and even beef. New Yorkers discerningly eat sushi just as the average Australian can now master chopsticks. In a global world where ideas, fashion, technology and corporations move seamlessly from place to place, it is logical that both the present and the future belong to the skilled, to the agile and to the resilient.

Change has always been part of everyday life. The difference today is that the pace of change has quickened, and its impacts are wider reaching. The demise of the car-making industry in Australia created unemployment among those with tool-making skills, but it accelerated demand for transportation, logistics and warehousing functionalities.

There are fewer farm labourers today than there were a generation ago but there is greater demand for niche growers (consider the demand for bok choy and pak choy, for example) and for value-added processing. It is also possible that in the future, Australian farm produce could be shipped fresh via expanded regional airports into Chinese markets, as is currently the case at Toowoomba's Wellcamp airport.

Between the last two Australian censuses the job that lost most workers was the role of secretary, down 19,000 positions. The reason is clear enough: over the last decade, senior management has learnt how to type. Even the Chief Executive Officer and the Chairman of the board of directors now communicate via self-typed email. There is no need for a memorandum to be dictated, *Mad Men* style, to a transcribing secretary.

As a consequence, secretaries have had to reinvent themselves as 'office managers', where they draw upon their typing skills, their IT knowledge, their HR expertise and their corporate experience to manage and to deliver the outcome of an efficient and an inspired workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a range of changes that were already underway. Some businesses seem to be disappearing (newsagents, for example) in a process that has been hastened by the pandemic, while others have pivoted and thrived. Many cafés, for example, have refocused on takeaway; others are offering online cooking classes; others again are selling boutique condiments and even some fresh food. The workers that have thrived are those who have adjusted to the new way of doing business.

Overcoming the skill gaps

What is required of the secretary is the same as what is required of the retrenched tool-maker. They both need access to a vast and evolving job market that offers work as an office manager, or perhaps as a warehouse manager or forklift driver. But there is something else that is required of these displaced workers, and that is an inherent willingness to be retrained, as well as the social skills and the self-confidence to pitch for available work. This is not easy for some people and especially for those who have been in long-term jobs.

It is understandable that displaced secretaries as well as retrenched car-manufacturing workers might feel resentful about losing their jobs. But this is part of the overall challenge of reinventing yourself to surf the waves of change rather than wallowing and being swamped by the forces of change. These changes are being driven by global forces and by the fundamental consumer desire to live a better life, a frictionless life, a life that offers better value-for-money access to consumer goods and experiences. These are unstoppable forces.

Your role in this wider world of change is to remain upbeat, to retain social connections, to hone skills, to scan the horizon for opportunities and threats, and to understand that no technology, no workplace, no enterprise and no management structure can last indefinitely.

At various points, perhaps even at numerous points, in your working life you will have to reinvent yourself, or at the very least change the basis upon which you earn a living. It is unrealistic to rail against the forces of change. You need to get comfortable with change. You need to see how others have managed this process and to extract learnings and lessons.

And who better to tell you a powerful story of reinvention than former Washington D.C. television news correspondent, humanitarian aid worker and digital learning pioneer Andrea Clarke, who has built a nationwide corporate training business?

In *Future Fit* Clarke tells not just her own heart-pounding, gritty and at times laugh-out-loud funny story, but also a story of extraordinary resilience, of skill acquisition and of how to deal with intimidating situations and people in today's workforce. Here is a book of practical advice on how to navigate the future of work when you don't quite know precisely what the future holds.

Bernard Salt AM

Preface

Welcome to the future of work, everyone.

When I wrote the first edition of *Future Fit*, I wasn't writing for a pandemic but for radical disruption to the way we work: a degree of disruption that we all needed not just to accept, but to actively embrace. And, here we all are, more than a year on from when the pandemic became a global fight, in what is certain to be a long and unpredictable game, one played on a field with seemingly no clear rules or referees who can enforce them.

As it happens, it wasn't artificial intelligence (AI) or automation that changed the way we work – it was a biological virus. We are all part of this extraordinary chapter in human history, and we each have our own version of how it is impacting our world.

We each had a moment, I'm sure, when we realised things were about to change. I was halfway through facilitating a workshop in Sydney when I saw that the President of the United States had suspended air travel between Europe and the US. I clearly recall saying to myself, "This just got big". Then, everything stopped and inexorable progress towards sweeping workplace change began.

In early 2020, changes to work that had been predicted to pan out over the next five years were delivered in 60 days, according to McKinsey. Even if you were on the periphery of the COVID-19 story, you knew it was a frenzied scramble to adjust, whether that meant switching to the immediate work-from-home policy, accepting the instant loss of revenue in a business or processing how to operate in a lockdown economy – all the while home-schooling your children.

Economic historians, such as Louis Hyman, have been clear about the historical impact of technology on the labour force: it's not technology that drives social change, but the decisions we

make about how to organise our world around it. Why wouldn't we apply the same rule to any type of disruption? The question we collectively face is, how are we going to organise ourselves around this particular change?

Where to from here?

Having routinely reported on those living around the poverty line, I want to start by acknowledging the millions of people losing their jobs and livelihoods. The wealth gap is real and it's widening because of the pandemic. If you're a low-income worker in the US with no savings, or a small business owner in Melbourne who closed your doors in the lockdown, then we all know that COVID-19 presents a new level of vulnerability for you. It is a setback the recovery from which may take years, even with government support. Prior to the pandemic, I often wondered about the need for a universal basic income (UBI) to allow adults to meet their basic needs while adjusting to shifts in automation. But now it seems we have a much bigger problem than AI. We need to find ways to protect our communities from the economic volatility that runs alongside each new wave of this virus, and will do with any mutations to come.

The rise of the individual

If you're privileged enough to have job security and are a highly skilled knowledge worker, the future of work is a very different story. The 'office experience' isn't *completely* over, but it's evolving to place the employee firmly at the centre of a hybrid universe. My baseline belief is that the virus' wide-ranging impacts on the way we live are giving way to the rise of the individual in ways we've never seen before. At what point in the history of the labour force has the individual ever been so empowered, had so much control over where they work, how they work, the hours they keep and whether their values are aligned to their organisation? Now, after a

year of experimenting, lockdown and over-eating, it's about organising ourselves around the change. Every one of us has a different routine, which managers are going to have to deal with in some way. On paper, everyone wins. One could assume that adopting shorter workdays or four-day work weeks will equal less burnout, higher productivity for employees, and higher retention and profits for businesses. The workplace of the 2020s could be the gift that keeps on giving – if you're in the right demographic with the right mindset. For highly skilled members of the business community, the post-pandemic environment brings with it three unmistakable developments that reinforce the need to develop a future-fit skill-set as the key way to negotiate the 2020s.

1. We have a genuine shot at hybrid happiness

Futurist and culture commentator Tom Goodwin argues that “Being unhappy is about the most expensive thing around”, and he is right. When we remain in unhappy situations (including at work) and do nothing to improve the situation proactively, we end up robbing ourselves of the potential for fulfilment and progression. Yet many people fear change so much that they prefer to remain in less-than-ideal circumstances. What comes second to being unhappy, Goodwin says, is having less time and energy: “Working the hours you want to, to earn what you like to, seems deeply counter to modern culture, when it seems rather obvious.” Here we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to explore what real happiness looks like in our lives. Let's not downplay how spectacularly liberating this is. After decades of daily commute drudgery to reach a cement office block and impersonal cubicle, the traditional office model is now in a final act of sorts. We finally have license to examine what our own out-of-office routine can look like. Optimists such as I, who could never make sense of the standard 9 to 5 routine, have been waiting for this day since we joined the workforce: a day when an individual could be trusted with the freedom and flexibility to deliver work on our own terms,

without judgement. Is it any wonder that burnout was at epidemic levels before the pandemic, or that 90% of workers are perfectly happy continuing to work from home (despite many struggling with remote work)? This new autonomy is, unmistakably, the preferred way of operating for those well-educated, full-time office workers living in the suburbs. In fact, more than 52% of 460 professionals FutureFitCo surveyed in February 2021 said they'd like free control over where they deliver their commitments. Thirty-one per cent said they'd like a hybrid approach, splitting their time between home and the office. Most had never worked remotely before the pandemic so, unsurprisingly, only 6% said they'd like to go back to the office.

The shift to remote working is giving the privileged permission to live on their own terms. If we can do our job from anywhere then why not move up, out or onwards to a place with more space? I'm seeing multiple examples that make it abundantly clear – the more influence you have at work and the stronger your reputation capital, the more leverage you have to negotiate an ideal work arrangement that would simply never have been possible pre-pandemic.

2. The future of identity is personal 'agency'

Faced with entirely new ways of working, altered business models and a collapse of corporate structures, our traditional sense of identity is up for renewal for the first time since we started working in an office. With this challenge, but also with the new freedom of choice in mind, we are increasingly being confronted by the question of purpose, many of us perhaps for the first time. We often say that 'life is short,' but now we know for certain that structures we felt were reliable and steadfast can change in an instant. And so, naturally, we're reassessing how we spend our days. For those fortunate enough, we're reflecting on whether we want to stay in our job, cut our hours back, move to a beach, switch industries or start a business. I've read that for some, working from home

has exposed how ‘irrelevant’ their job actually is. Others have remarked that the perks of their ‘dream job’ are gone (spectacular offices in trendy precincts, frequent travel) leaving them with a stripped back, far less inspiring role.

The data reflects this rethinking of work life and choices; on average we’re working an hour longer every day than we were before the pandemic, socialising less and spending less time on our personal hobbies – so it’s no wonder we’re giving more consideration to how we spend those eight or nine hours in the workday. We are already starting to see huge numbers of people leave full-time jobs and register as ‘sole traders’. In June 2019, there were 1.5 million sole traders in Australia, which is 55,000 more than 2018. The year 2020 ushered in an explosion in this category. Between February and August 2020, the number of people who described their jobs as ‘Managing Director’ jumped a substantial 39%. Big businesses are shedding workers, and those people taking the redundancies are setting up shop in their home offices. As many of us know, it’s one thing to set up a home office, but it’s another to generate even \$100K in your first year of business.

Innovation, transformation and business success don’t happen overnight. It will take years for new-to-business-ownership entrepreneurs to realise their potential. Most will fail purely because of the intense effort it requires, returning to the security of traditional business. Others will accelerate and flourish, not only reimagining themselves, but the style of world they craft for themselves. This leaves enormous scope for how we choose to exercise our personal agency. Having a sense of ‘agency’ means believing in our capacity to influence our own thoughts and behaviour. It means having the initiative to make informed choices that serve us, even if those choices feel risky. It’s about being confident that we have control over our own lives and the capacity to deliver change both in ourselves and in our world of work, which will mean significantly more as change accelerates through the 2020s.

As we negotiate a more complicated era where we no longer occupy a single lifelong job, our identity cannot be limited to one standard occupation – so we need to get comfortable shifting the traditional self-definition (what do you do?) and attaching ourselves to a greater purpose (what’s the conversation I am contributing to?). Our purpose often remains the same, even when our job changes. But what holds our identity together is a sense of agency – a certainty that we can absorb change, stay in control and still deliver value in a shifting professional environment. It’s only through strengthening our sense of identity and agency that will we be able to mobilise the energy we need to pursue an active learning agenda that will keep us fully engaged and reaching our potential. And this is why it’s important for leaders to support their teams to connect with themselves, their purpose and their learning agenda. Research is showing that a relaxing of our work culture is threatening the sense of identity of employees, who are struggling to sustain their vital energy in the wake of massive upheaval. Inspiring leaders will foster their teams’ sense of personal investment by providing development opportunities that offer authentic long-term (and commercially valuable) growth. In this way the sense of a personal stake in work will be restored and enhanced.

Data gathered by Atlassian’s Reworking Work survey between April and June 2020 revealed that 37% of people are feeling lost without their routines, 59% of people have realised what’s really important to them and 50% would rethink their decision to work remotely if their team was back in the office. In brief, being distanced from others, especially those who hold influential positions, is threatening the visibility and career progression of workers. This is a topic which has massive implications for engagement scores across large-scale businesses. When you put this data next to research about our sense of belonging (when people feel like they belong at work, they are 3.5 times more likely to contribute to their fullest potential), we start to see a genuinely alarming signal: our connection with work has been shaken by recent history.

Layered around this, we have traditional employee arrangements, which were already transforming and are now in even greater flux as we step into a far looser, less structured work arena – one where any plans to return to the office are being routinely upended by new waves and micro-outbreaks of COVID-19. A handful of big players called it early, including American Express, Spotify and Google, who asked workers not to come back to the office until at least July 2021. This is looking like it will turn into a ‘forever policy’. So, new ways of working in a hybrid environment are a long way off stabilising. While the fault-line is clear, so is the opportunity for business and leaders: learning and development strategies must start with strengthening our sense of belonging and identity.

3. *The future of work is about learning fast and adapting*

Tom Goodwin defines where value will come from perfectly when he says, “The currency of work won’t come from effort (like pulling a plough), or time (like working in a factory) but the value we create from ideas/outcomes/relationships.” This is a simple and brilliant summary of man’s relationship with work, tools and talent from the beginning of time until now. As was so wonderfully laid out in a presentation by Jeff Kowalski, we started with the hunter-gatherer era, when our values around talent were based on strength and speed. We progressed through the agricultural era to the industrial era, then into the information era – where our mental models are currently stuck. In the information era, we got a degree then stepped on the career escalator, where we predictably spent decades in one job, presumably getting promoted. The world of work required learning a skill in a single discipline. We used technology to reduce our cognitive workload. Now, we’re in an ‘augmented era’, where our talent needs to revolve around rapid learning and our ability to adapt, to keep up with the velocity of change. Our relationship with ‘tools’ has also evolved – we’re now learning from and working with technology to upgrade our

competency. With this in mind, I can't help but wonder about how we'll define human capital in this new augmented era. I believe the future of work was always going to be about upgrading our own human capital – the most important asset to any business, but one that is rarely listed in the annual report – regardless of what our new workplace model looks like.

Investopedia classifies human capital as the economic value of a worker's experience and skills, including elements such as education, punctuality, attitude, wellbeing and loyalty to a company. When a business has a high degree of human capital it is more productive and profitable. Like any other asset, though, the value of human capital can depreciate through long phases of unemployment, the inability to keep up with technology and a lack of innovation when it comes to continuous learning. Clearly, there is a direct link between the value of human capital and economic growth; so if we consider how this applies individually, the more we invest in ourselves to work from and with technology as a tool to increase our capability, the more valuable we become.

Perhaps we need to find a way to calculate our individual human capital and use it as a measure for our own personal annual report and beyond. This could involve a checklist of valuable attributes that adds up to an overall score, or 'human capital classification.' Let's call it the 'HCC'. Ten hours of accredited learning in creativity, communication or collaboration might equal ten points and an average on-time to meetings could be assessed like an airline's on-time departure record. It's conceptual, I know, but consider the upsides if you're a highly skilled knowledge worker looking to land a seat on a compelling new project. Or imagine you're the project lead, needing to assign 20 people in a week. What if we had an overall score that's a sum total of our experience, attitude, skillset and mindset. Say it's 8/10, and that number sits at the top of our LinkedIn profile for all hiring managers to see. Yes, I know, we're human and this book is about how we enhance our 'humanness', which in essence means we can't narrow ourselves down to a mere

number. But it's one way to expedite our entry into the team, and one way to fast-track finding 20 people on a tight deadline.

A new breed of worker is emerging

There is a new breed of worker who is rapidly emerging in this new augmented era. This 'augmented worker' (let's call them the 'AW') can see the new equation and draw this simple and powerful conclusion: our career spans are longer, we're shifting jobs more frequently and the shelf life of our skills is shorter, so we're going to need to learn fast and adapt more often to keep up with the pace of change. The AW is a master of the real skills – a high-impact high-performer who knows that staying relevant and competitive hinges exclusively on their ability to create new value across their industry, and that consistently creating value only comes from a daily commitment to upgrading their knowledge, accelerating their human skills, working with technology as a tool to increase their competency, and recognising when they need to rest and regenerate. This is a hybrid worker who lands every project on word-of-mouth referral, is building a widely respected reputation for delivering beyond expectations and is confident, competent and comfortable with a demanding market. The AW is a role model for all of us.

Skills that defy disruption

In principle, I stand by what I was thinking pre-pandemic: that this kind of radical shift leaves us with a remarkable opportunity to be more 'human' at work than ever before. I believe firmly that the 2020s are about being more connected to ourselves, our purpose and our power to do more meaningful work – everything that cannot be automated or impacted by a 'black swan' event. Change is not about the technology, a troubled economy or the new terrain – it's about how we want to live, work and contribute to our communities. My view is that we should focus on the skills

that allow us to defy disruption. This book is about eight real skills that allow us to effortlessly negotiate change: reputation capital, communication, adaptability, creativity, networking, leadership, problem solving and continuous learning. I'm going to explain and explore the tactical tools that will help you become invaluable to your current employer, capture emerging roles across your sector and create roles that may never be advertised on a job-seeker website. These skills will help us all lean towards change and become an asset to the company or clients for whom we work. I'll help you identify how you want to excel and sharpen up your view of the workplace to see the vast opportunity that change presents to all of us. I'll help you become the person who is 'fit and able', regardless of the environment – the person whose human capital is constantly appreciating.

The trademark of my personal career so far has been negotiating change – change that, at the time, was not planned for. I've suffered job loss when I least expected it, worked in an industry that categorically failed to adapt to shifting audience trends in real time and navigated the sharp edges of starting a small consultancy business from scratch. In each transition, there have been no safety nets. Only on reflection do I realise that there has been one constant thread – investing in myself so I could try to forecast change in my industry and consistently create value for clients around that change. My wake-up call to being future fit happened while I was on assignment in Iraq, which is where I want to take you now.

Andrea Clarke
futurefitco.com.au



Bombshell in Baghdad

“Choose courage over comfort... And choose the great adventure of being both brave and afraid. At the exact same time.” – BRENÉ BROWN

“Stand by for a rapid descent!”

It’s not a phrase you ever dream of hearing, but it’s what I heard early in the morning of 28 September 2008 when I found myself sitting halfway down from the cockpit of a UN charter jet, flying into a war zone over Baghdad, Iraq. The adrenalin surging through me was explosive, when the 30-seat plane suddenly banked hard to the left and began a free-fall nosedive towards the scorching sands of the Iraqi desert.

I wish I could say the experience forced me to face some profound epiphany about life or our purpose on this planet, but it didn’t. My only reaction was to let out a calm but very concerned “Oh my God!”, as I prepared myself for the distinct possibility of a fiery death in a plane crash over Iraq.

Now, here’s the thing about an aircraft in the middle of a nosedive from 20,000 feet – the sound of the engine shifting gears to speed up and slow down is legitimately alarming. This

was no standard commercial flight, where the pilot's job was to make the journey as smooth as possible. I was the only passenger on the dangerous hop from Amman, Jordan to Baghdad, but at no time on this flight did the pilot offer words of reassurance.

With only the smooth sound of John Mayer playing through my headphones and my laser-focused pilot in front of me for company, I watched the desert rush towards us and suddenly realised how a skydiver must feel, if the parachute fails to open. What I found strange (other than the obvious) was where a person's mind goes when faced with such a dramatic experience. I found myself captivated by the lines that divided up the desert below. I was a sky-high witness to a desert puzzle. There I was, screaming vertically towards an active war zone, and I was curious about lines in the sand.

Under normal circumstances, I'm not even close to being afraid of flying. Quite the opposite: I love it. I grew up flying with my dad on many weekends and school holidays when I was a kid. My father ran a rapidly expanding business involving trucking haulage, so having a light aircraft was more of a necessity than a luxury for him in the early 1980s, when he needed to cover extreme distances around regional Queensland. Dad's first plane was a Cessna 172 – an American, four-seat, single-engine, high-wing, fixed-wing aircraft. Since we were too young to sit up front, my two sisters and I sat in the back seat, obeying Dad's one rule: "no shenanigans". If we could have only followed this rule in life on the ground, I'm sure we would have made our parents (and each other) a lot happier.

A few years later Dad upgraded to a Cessna 182, before finally settling on the Cessna 210, to accommodate the increasing luggage of his three teenage daughters. ("Only pack what you can carry" was a routine instruction, which would turn out to be a life mantra.)

We loved the new plane, not because of the size of it or because Dad flew it himself across the Pacific Ocean from Hawaii. We loved it because the wheels retracted after take-off. We all felt a deep sense of ease and adventure with flying, so I've never really shared the common fear of commercial aviation. That being said, neither had I ever been a passenger flying over a heavily monitored military airspace, dropping 20,000 feet in a matter of minutes.

Back to Baghdad

At the time of my descent, Baghdad International was the most heavily defended airport in the world. While I knew that, there was still plenty to be concerned about. If you wanted to land in Baghdad in one piece, the landing had to resemble a skydiving 'halo drop' – a high-altitude, low-opening jump from 25,000 feet – in an attempt to remain undetected. Insurgents were stationed right outside the protected airspace, armed with surface-to-air missiles, and perfectly willing and able to blow up civilian or military aircraft with a single shot.

The anxiety of the situation was real, so I switched to a Navy SEAL 'box' breathing technique to slow my heart rate – breathe in for four seconds, hold for four seconds and then exhale for four seconds. It's incredibly simple and very powerful. When we take deliberate control over our breathing, we control our nervous system to bleed off excess stress. Beyond the obvious benefit of reducing angst, when you stack this with a positive vocal mantra (in this case: "I am completely safe") it allows you to focus and conserve energy instead of haemorrhaging adrenalin that you'll likely need.

As the ground raced up towards us, I was suddenly pulled to the left. In an expert simultaneous manoeuvre, which made me think my pilot was a fighter pilot who was either retired

or moonlighting for the UN, the pilot hit the air brakes and steered the aircraft into a tight downward spiral.

Normal landings can take miles to execute, but in a war zone you don't have that luxury – or the time. Think of it this way: landing in such a small zone would be similar to trying to land your plane into a tall glass of water. Having a basic understanding of aviation, I knew that the spiral technique was the only way to come out of a nosedive without leaving the protected airspace.

When the spiralling moves finally ended, which felt like the hard banking of a roller coaster ride at an amusement park, my pilot pulled out of the rotation, levelled the nose of the aircraft and started our final approach. This might sound crazy, but final approach was more dangerous than nosediving 20,000 feet. At this airspeed, which was around 180 knots, we were at our most vulnerable. The faster the speed, the harder it was to hit us with a missile. So we were a slow-moving duck at the start of hunting season. If you're going to land at the world's most protected but dangerous airport, ideally you do it as fast as possible.

My adrenalin levels were off the charts. I was instantly exhausted, as if I'd done a two-hour sprint on a treadmill. Then I heard the landing gear doors opening and the wheels lock into place. The screeching of the tyres as they hit the tarmac was the most comforting sound of this whole experience. We had made it. My father used to say any landing is a good landing, but this wasn't any landing. I was only at the starting blocks of my most dangerous assignment yet.

A moment of relief

Baghdad International Airport had very strict rules about landing aircraft. Planes were not allowed to get too close to the terminal for a laundry list of terror-related reasons. We pulled

to a stop 100 metres away from the terminal. The “I’m safe now” relief of touchdown was swiftly replaced with the harsh reality of the situation: we were smack bang in the middle of a violent war zone. Safety is a relative term when you’re standing on the tarmac, exposed to sniper fire. I’m ‘safe’, you know, compared to being embedded with a platoon of US Marines in the Iraqi province of Al Anbar, for example.

When the pilot finally cracked open the door, I felt a wave of searing desert heat roll through the empty cabin and hit me in the face. “Dry heat, thank God”, I remember thinking to myself, allowing my thoughts to wander. I cannot bear humidity. Everything is 100% harder in wet heat. A few years earlier, while in Cambodia with a non-profit group, I was shooting a story for CNN on unexploded land mines (which the mine-hunters subsequently found and enthusiastically exploded for my story), when I came to accept that I was far less fun in humidity. When the air is so dense it feels like a sauna, I lose part of my upbeat personality. I guess that makes me normal. So, for the most part, I’m happy to be met with dry heat. Still scared, but happy in this micro-window of a moment.

I took the deepest breath on personal record and snapped my seat belt free. The pilot extracted himself from his seat. He looked like he’d had a rough time of it as well. His shirt was loosely tucked in and he looked tired. Or maybe this is what you always look like when you’re running Amman-Baghdad return routes every day. All you can do is hope for the best, maintain situational awareness and prepare (mentally) for the worst.

As a rule, I think it’s really important to talk to pilots and express gratitude for their skills, which is exactly what I did. “Hey mate, thanks for that,” I said. “Oh shit,” he shot back with a very broad Australian accent, which particularly stands out on a tarmac in the Middle East. “You’re an Aussie! Sorry about

that dive, but I was pretty keen on dodging a group of local militia stationed just over the rise there on the edge of the runway, waiting to have a go. A rocket-propelled grenade launcher up the ass doesn't make for a proper landing."

"Um, nice work," I said, smiling back at him. I kept my "Oh my Gods" to myself as I stepped down the rusted stairs, which I was pretty certain had been dragged across the desert during the first Gulf War in the early 1990s.

Welcome to the war zone

I kept calm and carried on as I walked towards the customs hall. I was hoping it was air-conditioned as the sweat began to instantly express out of my forehead. When I opened the door, I walked into what I could only compare to a giant, rundown hot yoga studio.

I immediately scanned the scene and realised I was the only female in the sparsely populated room. You can imagine how nervous this made me feel, so I pretended to be reading my briefing folder as I walked, trying to look very busy, very focused – not a target for kidnapping at all.

I've been told throughout my life that I have a severe and somewhat intimidating 'resting bitch face', so I fully engaged it as a defence tactic. "No one is going to mess with me in this customs hall", I said quietly to myself.

I silently handed my passport to the customs officer and hoped he didn't expect me to speak Arabic. I was super-fluent in one statement only: "Hi there, please don't shoot me".

My instructions were to look for the five security guards who would escort me to the compound. Looking across the room, I saw a team of former UK Special Forces guys draped with AK-47s, grenades and handguns. Scooping up my bag, I couldn't help but notice they were the best-looking group of

men I had seen in a while. I can't lie. "This trip just got exponentially better", I remember thinking to myself; any thoughts to distract me from my new reality were welcome.

They were not, however, in the mood for any light-hearted banter or jokes from a young Aussie aid worker. Their job was to keep me alive, after all. As a result, they swiftly escorted me through the airport, across a road and into an underground parking garage. On our way there, it was impossible to ignore the bullet holes in every wall. Every single wall was clearly target practice.

Security detail

After an abbreviated security briefing in the searing heat of the underground garage, I was handed a helmet, a flak jacket and a burqa. A burqa? What exactly did they expect me to do with this? Noticing the quizzical look which overtook my face, the tallest of the team leaned forward to inform me that I needed to wear it if I wanted to avoid being kidnapped and held for ransom. "You wouldn't last 30 seconds on the street," he said.

The situation just got a whole lot clearer.

As for being ambushed while stopped in traffic, the game plan was made clear: "Don't move, if we get boxed in by militia, stay where you are - we'll handle it". My 'outside' voice could not help itself, muttering: "You bet you'll handle it, I'm the only one standing around this entire war zone without a loaded AK-47, four grenades strapped to my chest and a back-up semi-automatic Glock," (I leaned forward and pitched my vocals up here) "which I have used before at an unidentified underground shooting range in Israel, but I won't bore you with that right now. So yeah, boys, you'll handle it, I'll just sit in the back of the car while we're under fire."

I slowly crossed my arms for effect, highly animated rant over. They all looked at me. I expected some snappy comeback, but I got nothing. These guys were pros. All I got were poker faces. They were obviously trained to ignore highly strung and anxious clients, as well as both Shia and Sunni militia. “I’m just saying, if someone wants to give me a gun, I’m cool with that. I do guns,” I declared. Silence. Precisely no arms were forthcoming. But a very strong Irish accent suggested: “OK, I think we’ve covered everything here, let’s move out.” “Yes, exactly, let’s move out,” I mumbled. I reminded myself that this was a war zone. Burqa on head – check. Working for an international aid group – check.

Arrived safely in Iraq – check. Let’s move out.

Home away from home

I sat silently in the back right-hand side of the armoured 1985 500 SE Mercedes as we navigated the road between the airport and the compound. We were in the middle of a five-car convoy, with two vehicles ahead of us and two behind. The cars in front were the advance team. The reason for them was if there was a roadside bomb, they’d connect with it first. The team behind us would come to the rescue. This was the theory.

We were travelling at warp speed and must have clocked 150 mph as we raced past the blown-up, blown-out wrecks of cars, trucks and other disfigured objects. Then a ten-car convoy, with lights and sirens, screamed by us. They were slippery clean, jet black Chevys. “Let me guess, they’re State Department?” I piped up, sarcasm in full flow. “They like to keep a low profile,” said one of the guys. Everyone roared with laughter.

When we arrived at the compound, I was shown to my room by a six-foot-five Chief of Security. Someone told me he was former MI5 – I had no reason to think otherwise. He was a

serious operator. He told me how we would escape if the compound was overrun. “You need to get to the roof in less than 20 seconds, otherwise you’ll be locked down here.” He then swung open the kind of steel door there would have been on the *Titanic*, the sort that stopped megaton water breaches. “This is the door that you want to be on the right side of, if you hear the alarm, OK?” “Yes, that’s all very OK,” I thought.

“And not that it matters, but there’s no hot water here,” he added as a casual footnote. Rewind. Can we stay on this subject for another minute? “Like, you mean no hot water, ever? Not just between certain hours?” I asked. “Not any hours. And the shower heads are broken, so you have to use a bucket,” he said. OK, now I do guns and buckets.

Living in the Red Zone

My objective over the following few weeks was to interview local Iraqis who had returned to restart their businesses after being given micro-finance grants from USAID (the United States Agency for International Development). These stories would form a business case for the same aid programs being extended.

This was a deeply insightful and rewarding project, and it left me with three key lessons for effective teamwork in a chaotic and high-pressure environment. They became the same lessons that are directly transferable to any workplace and which I still teach to this day:

1. Get clear on the team’s objectives.
2. Get comfortable with courteous confrontation.
3. Give everyone the chance to have a voice; the person who’s manning the front gate might see something that saves a life, in this case.

There's no need to set an alarm in Baghdad's 'Red Zone'. Tragically, every day, workday or otherwise, began the exact same way – being awakened to the sounds of car bombings in the morning markets. The gunfire was constant and happening just over the wall of the compound in which I was stationed. Bizarrely, you got used to the gunfire. After about an hour, it was just background noise, like a lawnmower running up and down your neighbour's lawn. You just learnt to ignore it, because it was part of the environment.

On a less violent and more personal note, I was distressed by the number of starving and stray kittens I would see in the area. They would sometimes be separated from their mothers and would cry out for them. Even amidst the chaos, I found it heartbreaking.

The level of distraction was off the charts, so every day it was critical to simplify our objectives and stay on point. Every morning, my team and I ran through the checklist to keep us laser-focused and on task. It's a habit I maintain to this day.

Having a master list beside me all day, shortlisting tasks and hustling through to strike them off by 6pm is how I work. I don't finish my workday until my list of tasks has been zeroed out. When you're clear of distractions and absolute about your objectives, there's no downward drag in the days that follow.

Life inside the aid workers' barracks was simple – sleep as much as you could and always next to a helmet and a torch. If the compound was somehow overrun, we could then find our way to the roof for extraction by the military. The reason for constant readiness was the militia launching rockets from behind the fence of the compound. Then there were the US helicopters on night patrols, sweeping across the roof every 20 minutes. The building would shake as they passed, so sleep patterns were easily broken.

All of this only added to a seriously tense environment. Sensing this, my camera crew and I agreed that if something bothered us, we'd put it on the table right away. The policy proved effective in reducing tension and increasing efficiency. Courteous confrontation builds trust and confidence and keeps everyone playing the 'outside game' instead of wasting time on any form of internal politics or unnecessary drama that might follow. No matter how intense an environment gets, never allow drama to undermine the spirit and cohesiveness of the team. If it does, there will always be a cost. That was something we could not afford.

Bribes and losses

During my time in Baghdad, I made a point of walking around the compound for meet-and-greets with the people in charge of the non-profit agency. On one particular occasion, I swung around the corner of a room in one of the buildings and saw a team of people scurrying about. Lined up along the left-hand wall of a large room was cash in the form of US dollars. Endless rows of greenbacks were piled from floor to ceiling.

I had an idea of what a bank vault might look like, but this was different. It was a startling sight. I had never seen so much money at one time in my entire life. There was easily US\$5m in my direct line of sight; probably more like US\$10m. Think about that for a moment: 10 million US dollars in cash. One of the staff members would later tell me that everyone there was paid in cash. "No doubt," I replied. "It's apparently everywhere." Sure, I got that we were in a violent, active war zone, but the payroll arrangement did strike me as a little... loose. There were stacks and stacks of cash bound together with rubber bands. From what I could tell, there wasn't any system of checks and

balances, either – no cash-police and no extra security. Nothing. That's quite a set-up.

I was told that all bribes or losses were built into our budget. 'Losses' was a very loose term for theft. I was new to the non-profit world and the way they did business, so I held back on responding out loud.

I heard rumours about the annual staff retreat that was coming up. It was a huge financial spend that was held at a five-star resort in the state of Pennsylvania. When I asked my boss about it, I discovered that not only were we expected to spend three full days with our colleagues playing badly constructed team-building games, we were also going to be given iPods and other extravagant gifts. Worst of all, it was compulsory – there was no way to 'opt out' of the trip. I estimated the cost of sending 300 people to the resort to be around half a million US dollars. As it turns out, I underestimated by a long shot.

The entire experience with the non-profit and how they did business sent up red flags across the board. It wasn't just the retreat, which was an obvious misspend – it was everything. The cost to move about in Baghdad was, at minimum, US\$5000 per trip. Five thousand US dollars for my team to take me to Saddam's former palace, which had been taken over by the State Department (and set up as a massive ping-pong hall – no kidding). I had one meeting there and if I knew then how much it had cost, I would have picked up the phone and called someone instead. It was a very expensive way to get around.

Let's not forget about the walls of cash and the lack of accounting. Every time I turned around, I saw inconsistencies and things that didn't stack up. I was already suffering from sleepless nights, but this really got into my head. I wasn't a total idealist about the non-profit world, but I was on high alert for anything that could be fair game in the public's eye.

As the head of communication, it was my job to flag these types of concerns. Anything that could be a news story had to be raised with my boss. What I was witnessing was a laundry list of potentially career-ending headlines for the board and the CEO. I began writing an email to my boss, in which I made it clear that waste, fraud or misappropriation of government funds would result in a reputational disaster for the company. It never occurred to me for a moment that I was looking at job suicide. I was potentially typing up my own exit.

I had no idea what would happen next or how I would manage it, but it was nothing I would ever wish upon anyone who felt as though they were living out their dream job. It was the first in a series of lessons that I could ultimately use to help others recover from major career setbacks.

While the future of work looks different for all of us, the key survival skills are the same. In the following chapters I'll explain what these skills are and how they'll help you develop a future-fit approach. These are skills that we're not formally taught in school, university or anywhere else along the education journey, bizarrely, but these these are the skills that land us a job, keep us in the game and help us build long-standing relationships that can swing open new doors as our careers progress. We need to invest equally in these human skills as we do in the technical ones, because we're entering a phase in which the responsibility for finding, securing and delivering work is shifting to the individual in ways we have not seen before. And how we apply these real skills will look different, because we're in a different workforce.