

Is specialisation the key to making big contributions in society?

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We live in a culture that pressures us to specialise. At university, we are urged to focus on a single field of study. After university, we are encouraged to pursue a single career path. Our parents, teachers and colleagues hammer home the message – to succeed, specialise, do not generalise. Is this the only way one is guaranteed to succeed or it is completely wrong? The fact of the matter is, as human beings, we have evolved to have various skills and abilities. We are naturally multifaceted and multi-talented. That is why the cult of specialisation that is so prevalent in today's society is likely to leave us unfulfilled, frustrated and bored.

As human beings, we are all born with multifaceted potential and multiple talents. We are all inherently polymaths. How do we know this? Because polymaths have existed throughout human history. But what is a polymath? A polymath is a person of wide knowledge or learning. He/she is a person who excels across a diverse range of areas. Also known as “renaissance men”, the term used to refer to the numerous great thinkers that lived during a time period and boasted achievements in intellectual, social, artistic and physical pursuits. A polymath is curious and open to learning, cultivates multiple passions and interests, does not worry much about being perfect and sets realistic goals and follow them through.

A notable example and role model of a polymath is Nathan Myhrvold, the former Chief Technology Officer of the tech giant Microsoft. Myhrvold isn't just a techie, he is also a wildlife photographer and a professional chef, as well as an inventor who has secured multiple patents. His talents are so numerous that the media organization the TED Conference described him as a “professional jack of all trades.” Myhrvold himself affirmed how important it was for him to embrace his polymathic capacities. In a 2007 TED talk, he described how his pursuit of varied interests allowed him to live out his full potential. We should follow in Myhrvold's footsteps by pursuing our polymathic interests. Why? It's really good for us. What more, it's good for those around us.

If you look back in history, you'll find that those who've made the biggest contributions to society were often polymaths. Consider Steve Jobs, founder of Apple. As a leader, Jobs was known for his polymathic grasp of all fields related to his business, from visual design to IT engineering to marketing and finance. It was Jobs' ability to synthesise his knowledge of these fields into a whole that enabled him to build a revolutionary business that transformed people's engagement with technology. Given that the greatest challenges require thinking across multiple fields, it's no wonder that those who have made the biggest contributions were often polymaths. So why does society pressure you to specialize?

The current uncertain economic times are further compounded by the rise of artificial intelligence. How radically will artificial intelligence change the working world? It is estimated that up to 47% of jobs will become automated in the coming decades. Most of those jobs at risk for automation involve specialized tasks, such as machine operation, data collecting, and processing. In the face of automation, it is the jobs that involve broader, more interconnected thinking that will continue to be the preserve of humans.

Therefore, people whose occupations are difficult to define, and whose work encompasses polymathic skills, are more likely to survive the age of artificial intelligence. It is time to brush up on those polymathic skills because polymaths are better equipped to survive today's volatile working world.

Why limit yourself to being a doctor or a musician when you can pursue both of these activities at once? Why only stick to philosophy when you are also into botany and art? The truth is, if you want to lead a richer and more optimal life, then you need to get in touch with your inner polymath. If you want to find fulfillment and achieve success, then forget everything you have been told about the virtues of specialisation. The answer lies in polymathy, i.e. embracing and honing the widest possible range of interests, activities, and inspirations. Don't be afraid to blaze your polymathic path. Take up pursuits that challenge you, educate yourself about topics that are beyond your field of knowledge and indulge your inner creative spirit.

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