

## Being Work In Progress (WIP)



***Figure 1: Hosting the Commencement Ceremony 2012 for the School of Accountancy, Singapore Management University (SMU)***

I still recall it was one of my final classes in Accounting school circa 2011.

The mood was slightly melodramatic and sombre. But it was made slightly better with the boxes of pizza and soda meant for our end-of-term celebration. After all, we had spent four tumultuous years in Accounting school trying to balance our balance sheets and beefing up our resumes to enter a Big 4 Accounting Firm.

It was like the *raison d'être* for our higher education – get into college, work harder during college and get a job. The path couldn't be more linear than what it is.

Right?

On the other hand, I was quite the oddball among my peers who were true blue bean counters. On most occasions, I could not get my balance sheets balanced and I was a wreck when it came to financial statements.

Yet for some reason, I had a fond liking for the Professor who was teaching this class on Accounting Theory. He told us in what was a strict fatherly tone that was still layered with empathy and love,

*“Once you step out of Accounting school. I want you to know your lives have just started. You are not ‘finished products’ (laughter from the class)*

*Instead, I want you to always think of yourself as ‘Work In Progress (WIP)’”*

For the uninitiated, the terms ‘finished products’ and ‘WIP’ are accounting terminologies that we professors and students take too literally, at times. It’s geek talk.

But this advice stuck on with me ever since then even though I had chosen to carve a non-traditional career with a Bachelors degree in Accountancy. Instead of joining the accounting or auditing industry, I started out my first job doing sales at a corporate training company. 21 months later, I had quit my job to pursue my love in education. 4 years on, I have been running my own training and coaching practice working with over 2,000 corporate clients in public speaking, presentation skills and Millennials Engagement.

More importantly, this advice has become my mantra of sorts in this new, bold and exciting world we live in. I believe at the heart of this topic of ‘Managing One Self In The Digital Age’ is to adopt an attitude of flexibility and flow because you never want to think you have “arrived”.

Instead, what works in a digital age of flux is to see one self as a Work In Progress (WIP). What is real work in the digital age? Why are we working? What is worth us working our guts for? These will be some questions I’ll attempt to answer in this reflection essay with insights from Peter Drucker.

### **Awaking One Self In The Digital Age, In Wonderland**

When I first read Peter Drucker’s essay on ‘Managing Oneself’, I was glad to have done so because it was a truly reflective read for me. The questions spoke to me as an impatient and overly ambitious young adult and Generation-Y living in a digital age.

You see, I always believe we live in a very noisy world. Sometimes, so noisy that it becomes extremely difficult to listen to our true inner selves. It has been suggested by experts that on any normal day, the average person is exposed from anywhere from 3,000 to 20,000 marketing messages<sup>1</sup>! We live in a constantly plugged world where the average mobile phone user “check their smartphones an average of 150 times during a waking day of 16 hours”<sup>2</sup>

So what does this mean for the average person growing and living in such a noisy digital age? I believe it becomes increasingly difficult to centre yourself and listen to your true inner voice. Peter Drucker likewise echoed the same sentiments.

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<sup>1</sup> Advertising: How many marketing messages do we see in a day?

<http://www.fluidrivemedia.com/advertising/marketing-messages/>

<sup>2</sup> Mobile users can't leave their phone alone for six minutes and check it up to 150 times a day, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2276752/Mobile-users-leave-phone-minutes-check-150-times-day>

*“To succeed in this new world, we will have to learn, first, who we are. Few people, even highly successful people, can answer the questions: Do you know what you're good at? Do you know what you need to learn so that you get the full benefit of your strengths?”*

***Few have even asked themselves these questions.”***

*Peter F. Drucker (1909 - 2005)*

The key to succeeding in this new world is clear – it stems from awareness of self as a necessary requisite! And perhaps, why few people actually do ask themselves these critical questions is because the conditions surrounding us make it difficult for us to do so!

Likewise, philosophers, entrepreneurs and even... motivational speakers believe of the need to “awaken yourself” in what is a world where most people are on an “auto-pilot” and asleep. Asleep to their true potential that has been laying dormant like a giant in deep slumber.

Renowned global motivational speaker and life coach, Anthony Robbins is the author of the book, ‘Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!’. In the 20 years that this book has been released in the market, the book has been a bestseller and has reached thousands of hands and lives.

In his book, Tony generously dispensed with many well-intentioned words of advice but what probably rang true for me is the following,

***“Know that it’s **your decisions**, and not your conditions, **that determine your destiny.**”***

This is exactly akin to the golden moment in Matrix where Morpheus presented a choice to Neo for a green pill or red pill. Morpheus words of advice were,

***“This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. **You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.**”***

The crux to managing oneself is really to start beginning asking ourselves those hard but illuminating questions. To awaken ourselves to the possibility and knowing that we have greatness within us. To take the red pill of truth and be courageous in seeking our own paths of fulfilment in what is a noisy and chaotic world.

It can be one hell of a rabbit hole. But it is for sure, the real world where our faculties are fully awakened and energized by the possibilities around us.

Taking ownership of one self, I believe, is the first step towards leading a life that is empowered and layered with responsibility, awareness and autonomy.

## The Three Essential Keys To Thriving

So what happens next after waking up to the need to own your life? I believe once you can master your inner world, it's also important to know what's brewing outside.



**Figure 2: The Future of Work, Journey to 2022, Creating The Three Worlds**

In the 'Future of Work, Journey to 2022' report released by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (pwc) with partnership with the James Martin Institute, it has been proposed that,

*“While there are many social, environmental, religious and demographic factors that have a significant influence, we chose to focus on the global forces that we feel have the greatest impact on people management. “*

And these forces relate to managing the forces of business growth, technology and collectivism as means of surviving in the digital age. For Millennials especially, I believe this is especially critical to not just survive but thrive in such times.

More specifically, I believe Millennials need to embrace the three following strategies to get ahead of our times.

### 1) Make It Your Responsibility To Take Strategic Risks

Instead of taking a “watch and react” stance, why not a more proactive stance to position yourself for success?

# 危机

A time of danger; A time of opportunity;

Take for example, the Chinese words above and by itself means 'danger'. But if we are to look at the words separate – it really means, there is always an opportunity to leverage in moments of danger. Change can be risky, fearful and destabilizing. But it can also promise renewal, disruption and spaces for creation.

Peter Drucker probably put it most aptly,

*“The best way to predict your future is to create it.”*

When I was a college student studying Accounting, I was very much befuddled and lost. After faring abysmally for several accounting modules, I learnt that I had clearly lost interest in accounting (despite its immense value) but I still didn't know what I necessarily like or love to do.

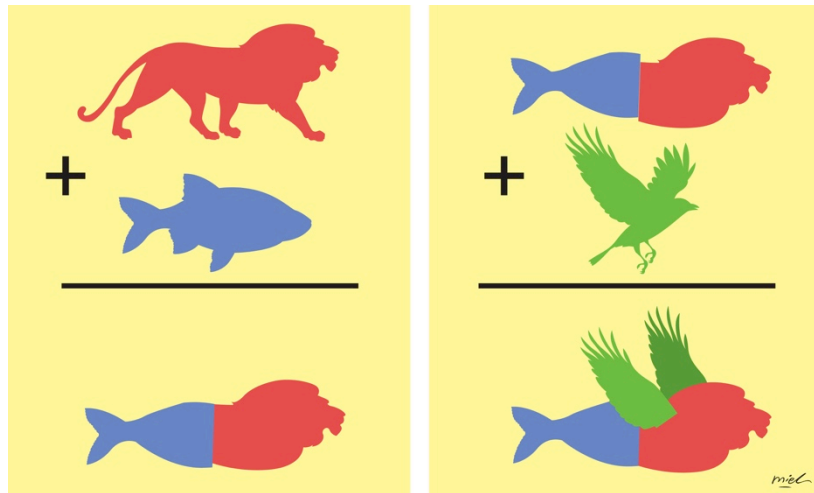
So what did I do?

I took a deep dive into life. In the short span of 4 years, I undertook 6 internships in PR, marketing, sales, adult training, events management and accounting (because it was a graduation requisite) and took part in over 30 competitions spanning across branding, consulting, public speaking, Human Resources Management (HRM) etc.

Most of my peers bemoan the existential crisis they are in when they are stuck in a “dead-end” job with no light at the end of their tunnel. It is funny how the term “mid-life crisis” has accelerated to become a “quarter-life crisis”. That is a 20-something feeling so jittery and uncertain about the future that it becomes a crisis, of sorts, for them!

But what if we make it our personal responsibility to uncover and discover what life is and to start living lives by our terms? Maybe it'll be less risky than not doing anything at all!

## 2) Constantly Adapt and Iterate



**Figure 2: 'Adaptation - the most essential skill' (Straits Times, Singapore)**

Devadas Krishnadas, the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Future-Moves Group and also the author suggested that for us “to survive, we cannot simply accept changes imposed on us; we need to make targeted adjustments in the face of competition”

He shared that when Charles Darwin boldly proposed that it was “the survival of the fittest” – most have their focus wrong. This is because being the “fittest” is not just about physical prowess or might, but more so about being most adaptable.

According to Krishnadas, adaptation “is not one-shot. It is an iterated process of trial and error”

*“Like so many brilliant people, he believes that ideas move mountains. But bulldozers move mountains; ideas show where the bulldozers should go to work.”*  
– Peter F. Drucker, *Managing Oneself*

And we should know the best ideas that set the bulldozers lifting up the most soil and getting the most results are as a result of constant iteration. More often than not, the original idea may be dull and unappealing. But with the process of feedback (or as Peter Drucker alludes to ‘Feedback Analysis), the idea gets refined. Most young people are not willing and able to go through the monotony of seeking feedback, accepting feedback and internalizing feedback. Instead, we yearn for instant gratification, which goes antithesis to how mountains are moved!

Likewise in the book, ‘The Start-up of YOU’ by Reid Hoffman, the co-founder behind one of the fastest growing technology companies of our times, LinkedIn suggested that whether you’re an employee or entrepreneur – your prerogative in such times is to behave and react like a start-up.

The characteristics of a start-up are its focus on iteration through feedback, be relentlessly in innovating to be relevant and always be agents of value.

Can you imagine how differently people will live and lead their lives if they see themselves as start-ups? They will be less tolerant of status quo, more open to feedback analyses and constantly staying agile and mobile. We young people will no longer relate higher learning and education as mere passports to getting lifetime jobs. Instead, learning and institutions of higher learning are part pit stops for personal discovery and career iteration.

These are the hallmarks for survival in our digital age.

### **3) Discover And Offer Your Best Contributions To The World**

There's a simple but deeply profound Chinese proverb that goes,

*"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now."*

For the Chinese, we believe that trees are shelters for those who need solace after being exposed to the elements. The only reason why we have moments of respite under the "trees" we seek shelter under is because our predecessors have planted them. So it is our duty to pass on the light.

*"To "do one's own thing" is, however, not freedom. It is license. It does not have results. It does not contribute. But to start out with the question "What should I contribute" gives freedom. It gives freedom because it gives responsibility"*  
— Peter F. Drucker, *Managing Oneself*

Controversial as it is, the global 'Occupy' movements can be seen in some ways as people on the streets seeking freedom in their own hands and rights. In Singapore, vigilante movements and crowdfunding projects are mooted organically to help those who are chronically sidelined and neglected by the society and government.

In a LinkedIn article (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-amos-yee-lau-mun-mhairi-black-can-teach-you-millennials-loh?trk=prof-post>) titled, 'What Amos Yee, Lau Mun Yee & Mhairi Black Can Teach You About Millennials' (that was viewed over 2,500 times), I shared about how Millennials are leaving their mark in this world marked by personal autonomy and change.





**Figure 3: Mhairi Black**

Mhairi Black, a 20-year-old undergraduate at the University of Glasgow became the youngest Member of Parliament in UK history since 1667 in 348 years. Being part of the Scottish Nationalist Party, Mhairi defeated Douglas Alexander who is a veteran and stalwart from the Labour Party, former Cabinet Minister and previously the Campaign Chief of the Labour Party in the UK General Elections in 2015.

Her victory wasn't a hairline one either – she garnered a total of 23,548 votes against Alexander's 17,864 votes!

For all the flak that Millennials have received for being “lazy”, “selfish”, “self-indulgent” and “narcissistic”, maybe we can likewise be proactive, generous, thoughtful and thoughtful about the world around.

Maybe, we can all take a leaf from Mhairi's book and ask what is the best gift we can contribute to make this world a better place.

### **Being Work In Progress (WIP)**

In a nutshell, I am a fervent proponent that the digital age brings an abundance of opportunities for young people are self-aware. And when they are acutely informed about their values, strengths and shortcomings and then embrace risk-taking, be willing to adapt and iterate and constantly take it upon themselves to contribute their best gifts to the world... we young people will be a force to be reckoned with!

Before I forget to tell you, we had to complete a dreaded accounting test that morning before we can wolf into our pizzas and soda. But while I was again biting my lips through those questions that stumped me, I knew this knowledge was intended to serve me for life and not just, promise me that job.

Four years on, it still remains true. I work immensely hard to uncover and write a meaningful life and not just, to get that coveted job. I am a Work In Progress (WIP) and I reckon I will remain as one for my remaining living breathing moments.