

How my Second Curve Turns my Fear into Fuel

An S&P 500 company's average lifespan has plummeted from 61 years in 1958 to just 18 years in the present, according to Innosight Research¹. That means 75% of today's S&P companies are projected to disappear by 2030. This dramatic decline is not just a statistic; it is a stark warning about the volatile nature of modern business and work environments. Much of the blame is placed on disruptive innovation, but the silent killer is something far more mundane and overlooked: stagnation.

Stagnation occurs quietly. And it is often behind the illusion of consistency, regularity, and stability. It shows up when businesses oppose change and prioritize immediate comfort over long-term significance. In "The Second Curve" book, Charles Handy forewarned us about this. He stated that businesses, careers, and life always follow cycles of growth and decline². Growth, decline, and renewal are not one-time occurrences but cycles we encounter repeatedly. According to him, the secret to longevity is to purposefully begin a new growth curve while the old one is still thriving, rather than holding onto the First Curve until it collapses. Charles Handy underlined that having the guts and foresight to change course when everything still appears to be going well is the secret to lasting relevance. Only those who take action before necessity demands will survive in a time when the world won't slow down.

Working as a quality control (QC) analyst, I am almost certain to be trapped in a professional limbo. I was torn between the security of routine and the threat of becoming obsolete. Quality control, by its nature, is a discipline that rewards consistency and punishes deviation. We are conditioned by our rigorous training to adhere to Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), follow procedures exactly, and find confidence in fixed protocols. Strict compliance, accuracy, and predictability are what we thrive on. We maintain the status quo by demonstrating it in our test's checklist, report, and records. In such an atmosphere, it is obvious change from the norm is viewed as a risk rather than a natural occurrence, let alone a necessity.

However, I quickly realized that upholding this way of thinking might get me into a risk of falling with it. The good news is falling behind is a lesser punishment for this stagnation; the worst is being wiped out. Too much adherence to tradition and inflexibility can result in professional stagnation as well as professional extinction. The figures are equally depressing. In 2022, McKinsey estimates that up to 50% of pharmaceutical QC tasks can already be automated using automation and AI³. More than that, the McKinsey Global Institute also projects that about 14% of the global

¹ Innosight, *Corporate Longevity: Turbulence Ahead for Large Organizations*, 2018.
<https://www.innosight.com/insight/creative-destruction/>

² Charles Handy, *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society* (London: Random House Business, 2015)

³ McKinsey & Company, *Transforming Quality Control in Pharma*, 2022.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/life-sciences/our-insights/transforming-quality-control-in-pharma>

workforce might need to change occupations sooner due to automation⁴. That is around 375 million workers at risk of being unemployed while leaders and managers embrace the technological innovation and global expansion. That is our current reality, not some far-off future. This was more than just a statistic to me; it was my life. It ultimately served as a warning. Thus, I realized that my Second Curve is much more imminent than I thought it would be. What had appeared to be a far-off change that could wait now abruptly turned into a pressing personal necessity.

I remember vividly that one day when I was tasked to compile a microbiological identification test database from dozens of test records into a program. This program analyzes test results and databases to produce insightful information about facility contamination, allowing management to make quick and effective decisions. At first it seems like another typical QC project: meticulous, repetitive, and time-consuming. For four weeks straight, I manually transcribed scientific names, cross-checked them, and typed the information about them in the spreadsheet. The task consumed not only my precious working hours but also my energy and enthusiasm. On the exhausted fifth week, I asked myself curiously, could this task be automated? That simple question became my turning point. Funny enough, I did not really consider it to be “The Second Curve”. All I wanted to do was to save time so I could rest before another day of routine work. I did not know where to start and did not understand any programming languages. I therefore naturally turned to a friend of mine who worked in IT department. I explained my issue to him, anticipating a drawn-out and convoluted procedure. But instead, he gave me a much more unexpected response. In just two days, he had finished the task that had taken me weeks without progress. All of this was achieved with a simple Python script enhanced with artificial intelligence tools. I was simply stunned. It felt almost like a magical touch on how much time was saved and how accurate the solution was.

The outcome was not perfect; there were still some errors and mismatches that did not fit my requirements. But it is far superior to anything I came up with in those arduous four weeks. This phenomenon was simultaneously empowering and humbling. The bad news was he was being transferred to a different factory plant. Even so, I am still experimenting using AI to perfect my first program even though I have zero knowledge of coding or programming. The experience was an awakening moment. Unlike working with humans, I did not have to go over the code’s logic step by step or double-check each function. The AI already “understood” the programming language better than any human ever could since it is “its” natural language. My project, the microbiological identification test database program, was finished just a week later. The project’s result itself was not the only thing that mattered. The real shift was my self-perception.

⁴ McKinsey Global Institute, *Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained: Workforce Transitions in a Time of Automation*, December 2017.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/overview/2017-in-review/automation-and-the-future-of-work>

I was so happy that I could finally submit my work and be done with it. But later that month, I received a surprise invitation to post my work to our company's internal innovation program. As a foreign worker in South Korea, I was already accustomed to overcoming linguistic and cultural obstacles. But something felt different now. It turns out that I was the first foreign worker to present my project in this event, so they let me use English for the first time due to my circumstance. Initially, I gave them a courteous greeting and introduction in Korean. Then I switched to English when I was being technical, and I could practically feel the energy in the room change drastically. I recognized some raised eyebrows, sidelong glances, and slight seat shifting. Some people's gazes strayed from me to their papers, phones, or my slides. Naturally, it is a noticeable drop in interest. However, I pressed onward.

I knew language might be a barrier, but impact is always a universal language. When I demonstrated the prototype, something changed. Interest returned as indifference quietly turned into curiosity. Someone gave a nod, and then there were some questions too. Not merely courteous ones, but real strategic and curious questions. The response was positive. The project was immediately implemented, and I became the first foreigner to achieve what is equivalent to an innovation award for my company. I was so happy.

"Thank you for the program. Now we are able to see much more clearly how to prevent contamination problems in the sterile facility," the biopharmaceutical production manager said. "We are looking forward to the database update."

I felt empowered to do more after receiving that tiny affirmation. I started assisting people with task automation. Soon, all the departments involved in the sterility issue will be using the program. This moment also changes a little bit of the foreign worker here in that even with a language barrier, we too can propose and implement innovation projects.

"The future is not inevitable. We can influence it if we know what we want it to be," as Charles Handy famously stated. This concept went against my passive attitude I held when I worked as QC analyst, which was that change could not start until it was started and approved from the top. This experience taught me that even though I still have to be bound by protocols and procedures, I can always take initiatives and create changes. To accomplish this, I had to exhibit two qualities that I disregarded the moment I signed a deal to become a meticulous analyst: courage and curiosity. These qualities are timeless concepts with roots in Stoic philosophy. We learn from Stoicism that we have no control over outside circumstances. We only have control over how we react to them⁵. Although the GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice) system was created with safety and quality in mind, it occasionally inadvertently

⁵ Ryan Holiday, *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living* (New York: Portfolio, 2016)

discourages initiative or experimentation. But by adopting a Stoic lens, I was able to distinguish between things that I cannot change—regulations, standards, and approval hierarchies—and something that I can: my mindset, work process, and my response to inefficiencies. I cannot change the rules, but I can change how I operate under them.

It was a powerful change in perspective that helped me overcome my fear of mistakes and become motivated to explore better ways of doing tasks. I was unable to alter regulatory expectations in a GMP setting, but I could always reinterpret those structures to show myself as an active problem-solver rather than a passive rule-follower. Even as a low-level staff member, I could always perform at a high level. Stoicism reminded me to concentrate on what I could control and to pursue it with initiative, discipline, and integrity. This shift in mindset was liberating. Every monotonous task is now an opportunity for another project rather than a nauseating burden. My Second Curve literally turned my fear into my fuel.

Personally, I discovered that the Second Curve does not always have to be a dramatic leap. Sometimes they begin with a silent sidestep when the moment is right. The right moment is often disguised as discomfort, restlessness, and deep yearning for purpose. Then you take another step and another, until suddenly you find yourself on a different path. Not an entirely different road, but a parallel road that has always existed but was only visible to those who dared to look for it. The Second Curve is not just adopting the latest trend or chasing innovation. It is about choosing growth over fear, uncertainty over comfort, and movement over stability. It all comes down to being prepared to let go of the comforts of the known in favor of the possibilities of the unknown. In my opinion, this is what Charles Handy really meant. Navigating these transitions requires inner stillness to recognize stagnation, consideration of possibilities, courage to act despite uncertainty, and strategy to leap into possibilities.

In a world where robots and AI are redefining global disruption and the new industrial revolution, the real threat is not being too slow but being too content. The Second Curve is frequently pictured as a leap. A bold new career, a daring promotion, or reinvention of our personal self. But sometimes, it's a quiet change. A change of mindset. A readiness to challenge the status quo. As Peter Drucker once said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it". I came to see that creating does not always mean straying from one's current course. Sometimes, you have to re-own, re-shape, and re-see your course. My Second Curve did not take me out of my initial job; it transformed how I engaged with it. I was once simply a steward of the system, someone who maintained the quality and upheld the protocols. Now I am becoming a reinventor of the system by challenging inefficiencies, incorporating technology, and igniting change where it was previously dominated by repetition. What was changed was not just my professional career, but also my perception of my worth, role, and potential.

Disclosure of Generative AI Use:

I used Generative AI (ChatGPT by OpenAI) in an assistive capacity during the editing stages of this essay. I sought feedback on grammar, phrasing, and structure but wrote the entire essay myself. All ideas, flow, and reflections are my own.