



Credit: Julie Su

# The Era of the Generalist

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### Leadership, Career Resilience, and Strategy

Bringing nearly two years of economic uncertainty to a head, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally re-shaped the business landscape. With new shifts in operations such as remote working, automation, and virtual communication, the perceived (and seemingly inevitable) trajectory of market trends and industry direction has been cast into doubt. Historically, any disruptive event comes with a total re-assessment of labour needs, skewing the alignment of workforce skillsets and market labour demand. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different. As businesses scramble to automate and digitize, many professionals have become ousted not only in their current career position, but also in future prospects. However, amidst the chaotic displacement of the work force, one group silently endures - the generalists. During economic peaks, eyes tend to turn to specialists for opportunities and advancement. However, when economic uncertainty creeps into the picture, the allure of specialization begins to take a backseat, and multi-faceted generalization moves to the forefront of industry. As such, the uncertainty of 2020 marks the beginning of a new era: the era of the generalist.

### Specialization vs. Generalization

In the context of the work force, Generalism and Specialism refer primarily to skillset focus. Specifically, it is the balance of depth and breadth one has in their technical and practical abilities. It is important to note, however, that Generalism and Specialism are not mutually exclusive categorizations, but rather a spectrum. Principally, specialists have narrow but focused technical talent, while generalists have foregone the same level of concentrated mastery for a more diversified and holistic mix of competencies. Generalists and specialists manifest differently in the marketplace. During periods of economic stability and technological innovation, specialists thrive as exponential growth and innovation drive up the demand for siloed expertise to fill the increasing complexities of progress. These “kind” times are defined by certainty of expectations and outcome (Epstein, 2019). However, when unpredictability and doubt cloud market optimism, Generalism gains the upper hand. The adaptability and holistic mindset of generalists are better suited for “wicked” environments where uncertainty and rapid change are rampant (Epstein, 2019). This situational versatility is what sets the stage for the rise in generalist demand.

## Generalism and Career Resilience

The key factor linked to higher career resilience in generalists as opposed to specialists is not necessarily a result of the content of ability, but rather in the methodology of cross-disciplinary approaches to problem-solving (Ceniza-Levine, 2018). This approach has one key result that gives generalists a competitive edge in career resilience: adaptability. When it comes to rapid, unexpected events that affect one's career path (Negative Career Shocks), adaptability in skillset is an essential part of career resilience (Siebert et al., 2016). Having a diverse skillset to draw from increases the transferability of experience, making career transitions (whether chosen or forced) more achievable. As the rapid uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cloud the future of the workforce, adaptability and resilience give generalists a distinct advantage in their career outlook.

## Generalism and Organizational Strategy

Generalist tenacity is not merely restricted in scope to individual endeavours. The resiliency brought about by increased cross-disciplinary knowledge of generalists have a compounding effect when multiple (albeit varied) generalist perspectives are brought into an organization. A pivotal factor in organizational resilience lies in a company's knowledge base, where "a broad and diverse knowledge base can help organizations to develop multiple ideas for crisis reaction" (Duchek, 2019). This diversity, as it relates to experience and skill, is a key factor in organizational success during rapidly developing adversity (Duchek, 2019). In this way, businesses that focus hiring efforts on generalists develop a strategic advantage that allows them to be more flexible, responsive, and accomplished during economic crises.

## Generalism and Leadership

In addition to the benefits awarded to the individual and organization, the most significant value of Generalism is leadership. There is an irrefutable link between Generalism and leadership. Not only are a higher proportion of

business leaders generalists (Berger et al., 2016), but as executives, they also earn a higher income (Custódio et al., 2013). Career advancement benefits aside, the emergence of versatility brought by generalist talent have an essential role in leadership during crises. Dynamic business situations have been found to be best navigated by situational leaders with integrative and versatile abilities, as well as organizations which support high levels of diversity in perspective and competencies (Negro & Mesia, 2020). This intersection of the organization and the individual, as explored in earlier sections, highlights the heavily nuanced and delicate nature of leadership during times of rapid change and uncertainty, which ultimately favour Generalism.

## Strategic Recommendations

1. Seeking out training in areas that are transferable, but otherwise unrelated to your specialization is a key strategy to building a more resilient career (Berger et al., 2016).
2. Focusing on transferable experience when hiring as well as encouraging diverse professional development and environmental scanning in current employees can broaden organizational ability (Duchek, 2019).
3. During times of unpredictability, versatile leadership is essential to individual and organizational success (Negro & Mesia, 2020). By assuming a leadership mindset and seeking out additional responsibility, generalists can fundamentally change the direction and progress of their organization, their own lives, and the lives of others.

The novel coronavirus pandemic's sphere of impact is significantly more intricate and complex than any economic crisis before it. Impacting both macro and micro environments, this new economic threat has drastically changed the labour capital needs of organizations. In this new business landscape, generalists offer unique advantages to the work force in their own career paths, to organizations, and as leaders. With organizations and individual professionals working towards increased resiliency and leadership through variation, the future of Canadian business looks a little brighter with the ascent of Generalism.