



Riding the Ratchet

How to Build a Career That Gets More Valuable as AI
Gets Better

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A free sample: the opening pages and Chapter 1.

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Who This Book Is For

This is a book about career resilience in an age of technological displacement. Here is who it is for.

You, if you are between about fifteen and twenty-five and you have had the thought that whatever you are learning might be done by a machine before you finish learning it. You might be choosing subjects, halfway through a degree that already feels dated, or two years into a first job and watching the work you were hired for get handed to software. This book is written to you, in plain language, and it ends with a page about you that you fill in yourself.

You, if you are the parent of someone that age and the career advice you were given no longer works. You will find a shared language here for the conversation at the kitchen table, and a chapter that says which parts of your own advice have held.

You, if you teach or advise young people and have noticed that assessment a tool can finish in thirty seconds is measuring the wrong thing. The book is built to be used: a one-hour exercise a class can complete in a lesson, a section on assessment when the answer key is free, and discussion questions at the back.

You, if you are older than all of that and the ground has moved under your own job. The map works at any age; only the examples are young.

Not you, if you want a prediction about when artificial intelligence (AI) will match our own, a list of the fifty jobs of the future, a course to buy, or reassurance that everything will be fine. This book gives you a way of deciding and a way of re-deciding every ninety days, and leaves the deciding to you.

What you need: a notebook or an open document, an hour for the exercise in Chapter 6, and a willingness to look up.

Who Is Talking to You

I am a technologist, first and foremost, and a practitioner who has spent twenty-five years discovering the working mechanics of career resilience. I have had the privilege of meeting real problems, challenges and opportunities across the world with technology used well, and I have watched technology obsolescence, market crashes, pandemics and wars write and rewrite what our jobs are.

The advice was good. The assumption behind it was not.

I had studied electronics and communications engineering at university, without any great sense that it was what I was meant to do. It did, however, give me a grounding in structured thinking that I have drawn on ever since. I then began my working life writing software. My first manager told me to become very good at coding, because it would serve me throughout my career. At the time, it was perfectly sound advice, and I took it seriously.

What neither of us appreciated was that the value of a skill is not fixed. It depends not only on how difficult that skill is to acquire, or how well one practises it, but also on how scarce it remains and what the world is prepared to pay for it. Today, artificial intelligence can produce in seconds code that would once have required considerable human effort. That does not make programming expertise worthless. It does, however, change the terms on which that expertise is valued.

As it turned out, coding alone was not what sustained my career. Over time, I began to realise that my strengths lay elsewhere: in understanding how businesses worked, how technology might change them, and what those changes could mean for the markets in which they operated. I had more to contribute to the conversations about what ought to be built, and why, than to the work of building it. I followed that inclination, without any particular plan or anyone to guide me. It took me from software companies into the businesses that hired them: first a major retailer, then management consulting,

and eventually the energy industry, working with companies responsible for generating electricity, operating networks and managing the infrastructure on which modern life depends.

That journey brought me to Spain. I was asked to establish a consulting business in Madrid, in a country where I knew neither the language nor the market. I arrived without clients, contacts or a word of Spanish, and with a brief that was admirably straightforward: build a business.

I remember sitting on a bench in Madrid's Retiro Park during my first week, turning the problem over and failing to see how it could work. I wondered, with some justification, whether I had made a rather serious mistake. I mention this because I would not wish to give the impression that my career has been a succession of carefully judged decisions. Much of it has involved finding my way through circumstances for which I was not especially well prepared.

Looking back, however, I can see a pattern. Skills that were once scarce became commonplace. Those who had only the skill were squeezed. Those who had built on top of it were lifted. That is the ratchet, and it is the subject of this book.

Engineers will recognise the mechanism. A ratchet allows movement in one direction while preventing it from slipping back. Each advance becomes the starting point for the next. My own field has worked that way for the best part of a century. The transistor was once a remarkable and expensive achievement. Over time it became cheaper, smaller and more reliable, until billions could be incorporated into a single chip. Most software developers today give no thought to the individual transistors on which their work ultimately depends. The technology did not disappear. It became the foundation on which successive layers of value were built, creating new opportunities for those who understood how to work at those higher levels.

Coding is now beginning to be absorbed into the foundation in much the same way, and its transformation is the first I have experienced

from the inside. Artificial intelligence did not create the ratchet. It has merely accelerated a process that has been under way for generations.

The consequences are not confined to those entering the workforce. A graduate choosing a profession and an experienced executive contemplating the next decade of a career face, in different ways, the same fundamental question.

How does one remain valuable when the world no longer places the same value on what one knows how to do?

Experience offers no automatic protection. Nor does seniority, a professional qualification or an impressive record of past achievement. These things matter, often enormously, but their value depends on the circumstances in which they are applied. And circumstances change. Sometimes gradually enough to escape notice; sometimes so abruptly that an entire profession is left wondering what happened.

I have written this book for people at every stage of their working lives. For young people making their first important decisions about work, I hope it offers a way of thinking beyond the immediate attraction of a particular qualification or career. For those already established in their professions, I hope it provides an opportunity to examine what they have built, what remains valuable, and what may need to change.

I am a father, and I have often thought about what I would want my own children to understand as they approach adulthood. But I have also thought about the colleagues, managers and business leaders I have known over the years: capable, conscientious people who devoted decades to becoming exceptionally good at something, only to discover that the world had begun to move in another direction.

The ratchet does not distinguish between the young and the experienced. It turns regardless of where we are in our working lives.

What matters is whether we recognise its movement, and what we choose to do about it.

This is the book I would want my children to read at seventeen. It is also the book I wish I had been able to turn to at thirty-five, and again at forty-five.

PART ONE: THE PROBLEM, HONESTLY

Chapter 1: The Letter I Wish Someone Had Sent Me

Somewhere tonight, at a kitchen table, a seventeen-year-old is choosing between two subjects and wondering whether either will still matter by the time she has learned it. You may be that person, or may have been, or may love someone who is.

If so, the fear is probably not that a robot will take your job; that is the headline version, the one adults reach for over dinner. The real fear is quieter and more personal, and it runs something like this: *what if I spend the next three, four, six years learning something, only to find that by the time I finish, a machine does it better than I can, and for nothing?* There is something profoundly unfair about being asked to prepare for a future that keeps moving while you prepare. If that thought has crossed your mind, you are not being dramatic; you are paying attention.

I am writing this because I have watched a decade of career advice offered to young people, and most of it has aged badly. In 2015 the sensible advice was ‘learn to code’, and it was good advice, because coding was scarce, well paid and plainly the future. Ten years on, an AI model writes most of the code a junior developer once wrote, and does so in seconds. The people who followed that advice are not doomed, but few of them are where they expected to be.

So let me make a different promise. I will not tell you to learn to code, nor to learn to prompt, nor to become an ‘AI whisperer’, nor to chase any of the other phrases that will sound faintly ridiculous in three years. I want to give you something that still works when the tools have changed, because it was never about the tools. Nobody knows exactly what AI will do next, and you do not need to. What you need is a way of noticing what has changed, deciding what it means for you and moving before you are moved.

What this book is

This is a book about where to stand. Picture the economy as a vast room that is forever being rearranged, with AI doing much of the rearranging: in some places the floor is being pulled from under people, while in others it is rising. Most people stand still and hope the boards beneath them are the rising kind. I want you to stop hoping and start choosing.

This book sits on the boundary between cold reason and human feeling. Part of it is a navigator: a way to read the market, find where you stand and make sure your work keeps paying you properly. But a career is not only a living. It is most of your waking life, and it is entirely possible to earn well and lose yourself in the process. So this book will ask you to think hard, and it will also ask you to feel your way, because the right path is the one that keeps you both employed and whole.

By the end of it you will have three things:

1. A map of where work is going, simple enough to draw on a napkin.
2. A way of checking where you currently stand on that map, which takes about an hour.
3. A plan for the next ninety days, written by you, that moves you to a better spot.

Nothing more: no predictions about the year AI becomes conscious, and no list of ‘the top 50 jobs of the future’. Such lists are always wrong, and the people who write them know it.

What this book is not

It is not a reason to panic. If you take one idea from this chapter, take this: the people hurt most by great changes are rarely the ones with the wrong skills, but the ones who never looked up. They went on doing what they had always done, assumed the world would hold still,

and discovered too late that it had not. You have already looked up by reading this, which puts you ahead of most adults.

Nor is it an exercise in reassurance. I will not tell you that AI is about to make everything wonderful and that all you need is a positive attitude. Some jobs are disappearing and some paths are closing, and to pretend otherwise would waste your time.

Who I am talking to

You might be fifteen, choosing your subjects and wondering whether any of them matter. You might be nineteen, halfway through a degree that is beginning to feel designed for a world that no longer exists. Or you might be twenty-three, two years into a first job, watching the work you were hired to do being quietly handed to a piece of software. All three of you face the same problem, and it has the same answer; the details differ, so I will give examples for each of you along the way.

If you are a parent reading this, probably because you are worried and the advice you were given no longer fits, read it before you hand it over. Chapter 14 is partly for you. It says which parts of your advice have held, and they are the important parts, and which part has not: the route. The map in Chapter 4 is simple enough to draw on a napkin, and it is a far better thing to argue about at the kitchen table than whether AI is a threat.

If you teach or advise young people, the book is built to be used, not merely read. The Audit in Chapter 6 fits into a single lesson, Chapter 8 has a section on assessment for an age in which the answer key is free, and the discussion questions at the back are yours.

How to read this

Read it in order the first time, because the ideas build on one another. Part One explains what is happening, and Part Two gives you the framework and the tool. Part Three shows you how to use them at

school, in a job and in starting something of your own, and Part Four is about staying sane while you do it.

Keep a notebook or a document open, because there are exercises; they are short, and they are the point. A book like this that you only read is worth about as much as a gym membership you only pay for.

One last word before we begin. A single metaphor runs through these pages: the ratchet, a tool that turns only one way. Once it clicks forward, it does not click back, and that is what AI is doing to the baseline of skilled work, a click at a time, year after year. The question is not how to stop it, but whether it lifts you or pushes you out.

Let us begin.

Try this now (5 minutes): Write down, in one sentence, the thing you are most afraid of about AI and your future. Be specific. Not ‘losing my job’ but ‘spending four years on a design degree and finding out nobody hires junior designers any more’. Keep that sentence. We will come back to it in Chapter 6.

End of the Sample

You have read the opening of *Riding the Ratchet*. The rest of the book explains the ratchet, sets out the Four Rooms, the Four Edges and the Obsolescence Audit, and ends with a ninety-day plan you write for yourself.

Try the free online Audit, and find out when the book is published, at ridingtheratchet.com.