From the Horse’s Mouth: Intrepid Conversation with Phil Fersht | Season 1

Episode 5: Ripple Effects - Gary A. Bolles, Chair for the Future of Work for Singularity University

00:46 Phil Fersht

It's great to be back with everybody. You all know who I am at this point—I'm Phil Fersht. Today, I'm joined by Gary Bolles, who's a futurist, author, and thought leader on the Future of Work and workforce transformation. And my favorite topic, which is the human side of exponential technologies. Gary's the Chair for the Future of Work at Singularity University, and he's also a co-founder of eParachute, which is a platform designed to help individuals navigate career transitions in this rapidly changing job landscape.

I really look forward to hearing how Gary views AI as a powerful tool to help energize our businesses and careers—not just a co-pilot. I've said a joke, which is actually sadly true, but some CIOs roll out Co-Pilot these days and claim AI victory. And we all know that AI is really a business conversation before it is even a technology conversation. So, Gary, what's your take on AI as a powerful tool?

01:57 Gary A. Bolles

First off, I really appreciate the invitation. Looking forward to a great conversation. I do focus extensively on the human side of exponential technologies. Singularity University, as I'm sure you know, was founded on the premise that exponential technologies can have a great benefit for humans. It's not always clear that it happens that way every time. Technology giveth, but technology also taketh away. And the same is true for this thing that we call AI.

I'm sure all your listeners know, but AI is probably a little more of a marketing term than anything specific about any technology. It's a basket of technologies—from machine learning to generative AI. It's a catchphrase that I think a lot of us are using to describe this watershed moment where the technology has leaped forward in terms of capacity.

As I said, technology giveth and technology taketh away. We've been talking at Singularity University, through the work of people like Ray Kurzweil, literally for decades about machine learning and artificial intelligence eventually reaching this point where it would have significant capability and capacity in terms of a toolset that would allow us to accomplish far more than we've been able to do before. However, a lot of the discussion, a lot of the rhetoric, is that it's much more than that. It's a co-pilot. It's a co-bot. It's a co-worker. And I try to urge people to step back a little bit and say, "Wait a minute." Whenever we go through these technology watersheds—there was this thing called the PC, then this thing called the internet, then this thing called cloud computing, and now we have this bin called AI. Over and over again, the same things happen. It's a new toolset.

We think that it represents a big leap forward in how it's going to empower humans, and it always is. However, we don't always know the best ways to use it. And we don't always know who is going to benefit and who actually is going to have some negative consequences. So, I talk a lot about what I think of as the three legs of the stool: mindset, skillset, and toolset.

This bin of technologies is a toolset that we can leverage in a wide variety of ways. And I'm happy to talk about some of the best use cases for it. It also can be used to automate a lot of human work. So that's why every human being needs to have a continuous mindset of adaptation and growth and needs to develop a skillset to leverage that toolset as effectively as possible.

04:39 Phil Fersht

So what's different this time? Because it feels like we go through these waves of change with technology. We went through the RPA automation wave before the pandemic, which met a sticky end—a lot of it because the technology just didn't do what the technology firms claimed it could do. It was lots of great marketing around automating the enterprise and "your job is going to be automated away," blah, blah, blah.

Now it's Gen AI—it's the evolution of Gen AI—it's people's voices and images being faked. It feels a little more threatening with the convergence, supposedly, of general intelligence with computing. But how real is this, Gary, in terms of—is this a true threat to our careers? Are we going to be replaced by somebody who's better at AI than I am? What do you see really happening right now?

05:41 Gary A. Bolles

I'm a recovering journalist. I used to be the editorial director of half a dozen technology magazines in the '90s. We started something called Interactive Week, which was the internet's first newspaper in 1994. And so, I've seen a lot of the waves and actually been in the process of surfing a lot of those waves and helping people understand some of the impacts and opportunities of those technologies.

You asked what's different. The first thing that's different is that every new layer of technology, including all those that I just mentioned, builds on the previous layers. So, if OpenAI had released ChatGPT 3.5 and needed to mail around CD-ROMs like America Online used to, you wouldn't have gotten 2 million people adopting it in a month. And so, because each layer builds on the previous layers, the result is that the pace and the scale of access and adoption is increasingly greater. And so that means that we as humans, our mindset is typically not able to deal with those kinds of hockey-stick exponential curves very effectively.

So, the first thing that's different is the pace and scale build on those previous technologies, and the speed and the range of usage is so much greater, so much faster, that the ripple effects—those waves—are extremely impactful, just like the waves of the global pandemic were. They ended up having ripple effects through a variety of different industries and societies.

The second thing that's different is that they're called GPTs because they have general-purpose capacity, and that capacity comes from the fact that these applications are typically trained on gazillions of web pages, databases, and content sources. And so, it's a rare watershed in that it's not just access to information—which internet protocols provided, especially HTML and TCP/IP—but access to the broad range of content that humans have created at a breathtaking scale, and it has the capacity to synthesize so much of that information so rapidly. We've never had a watershed technology like that in the past.

However, there are two tremendous risks. So, the first is the risk that the data that the technology is trained on is from humans. We created that data. So, bias comes free. All of the flaws of the way humans think—all the flaws that we have embedded in our content—are deeply embedded in those technologies. So, we can say that they hallucinate, but the truth is they're actually quite inaccurate on a regular basis without guardrails. And so, that's the first threat: they are empowering others to create a lot of technology very, very quickly. A lot of that content is biased, and so you have these ripple effects on society, just like with social media, that can have a lot of negative consequences if we don't have guardrails.

The second threat, when you talk about our careers—so what happens with technology over and over again? If you think of human work—the actual steps that we follow—work is just three things. It's a problem to be solved. How do we solve problems? We perform tasks. How do we perform tasks? We use human skills.

So that's work: human skills applied to tasks to solve problems. What most automation does—especially, you talked about robotic process automation, for example—focuses on tasks. So over and over again, from the original ox-driven plow to OpenAI's ChatGPT and other similar technologies, they automate tasks.

So that's all that those technologies do. They don't really solve problems. They automate the tasks that humans previously performed. And so, the determination as to whether or not they add up to a job that goes away is actually a decision made by a human, at least today. So, if you used generative AI in your company and you got a 20% increase in the effectiveness of workers—that is, 20% more time freed up—you have a set of decisions to make.

Are you going to give them that 20% to come up with new ideas for the company? That's what Google used to do with what they called "20% time." Are you going to use that to help people have better lives and just not have to work as hard? Are you going to give them a four-day workweek? Or are you going to lay off 20% of your workers? So, technology never takes away human work. Humans decide whether or not the automated tasks add up to jobs that go away.

10:54 Phil Fersht

That's a very distinct response. And you know, it's the old adage of how do you shave? I mean, when we used to do outsourcing back in the day, it was, "Hey, we're going to take 30% of your role and we're going to send it to India or wherever to do at lower cost. What are you going to do with the rest of your time?"

Then we have a situation now where most people seem to work remotely. And it seems if you finish your tasks by one o'clock in the afternoon and you're working from home, what are you going to do with the rest of your day? Whereas if you get people into an office, they'll have to find something to do between one and five in the afternoon before the boss sees them leave.

So, is this simply a bit more about motivating people, giving them freedom to be creative, finding different ways to judge people's performance at work? I mean, how is this ultimately going to play out, Gary?

11:56 Gary A. Bolles

So again, I don't want to make it sound like I either have all the answers or I've seen all of the impacts and therefore I've got a crystal ball for the future. Instead, what I'd like to say is I think we see a lot of the potential ripple effects. We see a lot of the benefits and where the technologies are very useful nowadays. And the fog is very thick going down the highway. So, there's a variety of potential outcomes, different scenarios that we can envision. And then we can collectively decide which ones we want.

So, you're right in saying outsourcing was a great example of breaking down the tasks that highly paid humans in developed economies used to do. And then we would throw those tasks over the wall to people in a developing economy that we could pay less. And then companies had a decision, in the same way I was talking about what happens when it's automated.

So, what we've done in the post-pandemic world is I called it the Great Reset because we had to step back. We had to look at what work is and especially what jobs are and make some decisions about how flexible we're going to be.

I said what work is—it's sort of those three things: skills, tasks, and problems to be solved. Jobs actually have six characteristics, and it just so happens it's the six W's that Aristotle talked about: what, where, who, when, how, and why. So, the what, where, and when were all affected by the Great Reset. The global pandemic changed a lot of what people did for work, where they did it, and when they did it. And so if you are leading an organization that has very flexible work, you actually don't care if somebody finishes their work by 1 o'clock or by 9 p.m., except that you want them to have a meaningful life, because if you have the right kind of agreements between you as to what the work outcomes are—the problems that you've solved—as opposed to just the tasks that you performed.

If somebody gets their work done in an hour versus eight hours, then awesome. You have a discussion. Are you going to say, "Great, you can take the other seven hours off?" Or are there other things that they could be working on? Or could they be helping others who are not able to do their work in an hour? Those are all discussions.

But if you bungee cord back to the old rules of work and you think that work is only happening if it happens in front of you—I call that management by surveillance—then you have a particular kind of relationship with a worker that I think you need to ask some questions about. And instead, what we want is every human being to have access to meaningful, well-paid work, and we want them to be solving fascinating problems.

What you just pointed out is, if you think of the tasks that people are performing as sort of a landscape, like a magic quadrant, and down in the lower left, it's boring and repetitive stuff that nobody really wants to do. Yes, that's what's going to get automated. And if the upper right corner is really fascinating, interesting, one-off problems to be solved over and over again, that's where humans thrive. And so, if we think of the toolset as just replacing a whole bunch of humans and moving more and more into the upper right quadrant because it's cheaper, then I think we've missed something. And if instead we think of the toolset as helping people to move up into the upper right quadrant and solving more and more fascinating tasks, and we have the agreements in place where we don't care exactly how long it takes them—we want them to do it in the most effective manner—then I think that everybody benefits. The organization benefits because it gets extremely effective workers, and the workers benefit because they get more and more interesting problems to solve.

15:51 Phil Fersht

Interesting. It sort of brings into play what is the purpose of full-time employment beyond just doing tasks. And I talked to various colleagues who run consulting organizations, for example, and one of them said he gets more value from his contracted staff than his full-time staff. Because the minute you have full-time staff in your company, they suddenly have this whole different perception on what to do during the day, what motivates them. Whereas if you have a contractor, they have a task to do and they want to deliver it with excellence so they can get the next task and the next task. And it does beg into question, you know, what is the future of employment versus people just becoming very talented individuals who are paid to do specific roles, right?

16:45 Gary A. Bolles

So, you brought up a couple of fascinating points to me. So, the first is, I mentioned bungee cording back to the old rules of work. What is full-time work? Well, why is it five days a week? Why is it eight hours a day? Well, it turns out that five days a week comes from one factory in the northeastern U.S. There was a garment factory a hundred years ago, and the people who ran the company had workers who were Christians and workers who were Jewish. And they decided, well, rather than giving them each their own day of rest, let's just give everybody both days of rest. One company, and it affected the world. If you're going to do a startup now, wouldn't you just have people work Monday through Friday? Why? Why those days?

We bungee cord back to these old rules, and then eight hours a day or ten hours or whatever the rule is in your country actually came from a lot of attempts, both in Britain and in the U.S., to try to just make, especially for factory workers, to try to limit the number of hours that they could be forced to work for the same wages. And so, these are old rules of work.

So that's the first fascinating aspect of what you're talking about—we need to be intentional about these things. We need to question, well, why would we do this? Many of the experiments with four-day workweeks, for instance, are very successful. People feel better. They enjoy their lives more. They're more effective in their jobs.

But the country of Greece, where I was just lecturing a couple weeks ago, they have just instituted a six-day workweek for certain kinds of industries because they feel they need to get, as you were saying, more value—that is, more hours that are being worked—then maybe the overall productivity in the country will grow. I'm not a big fan of productivity ratings, but that's one way to be thinking about it.

The other aspect of what you brought up, though, that I think is really important is when you say more value from whether it's full-time or contract staff. As far as I'm concerned, that value, if it's driven by shareholder thinking and by the total amount you can make people work and that sort of thing, I think that's a fail for our system. That's one of the old rules of work. However, one of the next rules of work is, well, what agreements do you have about the value that's being created?

So maybe those full-time workers are doing other things like building social cohesion in the organization. Maybe they're staying in their jobs longer. Maybe they're more loyal to the organization than contractors who could walk away tomorrow, and suddenly you wouldn't have access to their work anymore.

So, it's not just the hours people are putting in or what their output is; it's what are the agreements between you and those workers as to what effectiveness looks like. If you co-create that, then I think everybody benefits. You get a much better work environment; you get much more focused, energetic people.

I'd also argue that in many organizations, we don't yet even really understand how to construct work roles. We tend to have very traditional approaches with boxes and job descriptions focused on tasks. If we make that a process of co-creation—there are tons of organizations now experimenting with skill-centered hiring, skill-centered work, internal project marketplaces—that flexibility probably gets a lot of the same value that the person you were just talking about gets from contract staff because they've made the work environment inside the organization far more flexible.

20:29 Phil Fersht

Yeah, it's fascinating, isn't it? I'm in the knowledge industry, and all I care about is having a team of people who are passionate. If you get up in the morning and you're happy to be here and want to achieve excellence in what you do—my job is to sell smart people to work and do smart things. I just want them to be passionate and motivated.

Part of that, I feel, is when they collaborate well with other staff in the business or outside of the business—when they're spending more time interacting with other people and less time doing mundane, routine work. That's where I feel—I get my team into the office three days a week, and we make sure we do fun stuff in the office. It's fun. We stare at each other around the room and think, "Hey, we're back in the office now. Let's talk about some stuff." That's where the ideas come; that's where the magic happens.

That’s where I think the biggest challenge for leadership today is: how do you drive these behaviors within your organization? How do you, one, get people to be more collaborative and more excited about what they're doing, and then, two, how do you get them to—we use the phrase "unlearn"—but how do you get people to learn new things? Learning ways of using ChatGPT, for example, or Claude in the workplace, where you can analyze data way smarter than before. You can literally put Excel flat files in, and it pumps out your charts for you. It's like taking days of time; it gives you more time and freedom and the ability to do other things.

As we look at the future and these tools that can empower us, how do we derive different behaviors from our people so they are more curious, more willing to say, "Hey, let's stop doing it that way and do it this way"? What's your advice from your experience over the years here?

22:40 Gary A. Bolles

Okay so, you brought up a couple of fascinating aspects of how each of us, as humans, determine the kind of work we want to do and the ways we do that work.

To encourage the kind of behaviors you're talking about—being passionate and motivated—we find that it begins with self-knowledge. You mentioned I'm a co-founder of a company called eParachute.com, which comes from the knowledge of a book called What Color Is Your Parachute?, the world's career manual with ten million copies in print. It just so happens it was written by my father. I was trained as a career counselor when I was 19 years old.

What we learned from 50 years of my father's work is that it begins with self-knowledge. The more you know about yourself, the more you understand what motivates you, the more you know what your North Star or Southern Cross is—what pulls you forward in your work—that you can be passionate and motivated, that the better you'll be able to contributing to the work of an organization or a team.

The second is that each of us needs learning goals. We need to be lifelong learners. I'm actually wearing a T-shirt that says "Lifelong Learner." The more we have goals for what we want to learn in a world of exponential change, the more we have that North Star or Southern Cross pulling us forward.

The third insight is that learning needs to be a team sport. The more you can mentor others, and others can help to mentor you—people who are farther along on their learning journeys in whatever you want to learn—the more that is a team sport, the more motivation you have because you're all learning together.

Finally, you mentioned unlearning. Unlearning is simply the process of looking at the way you performed tasks and solved problems in the past and determining, "Oh, that's not working anymore." We find what is really helpful is to put people into workshops or—you can buy people pizza for lunch—and say, "All right, we're going to do what we call a CoLab. We're going to take a process we have today, a problem we solve, and come up with completely new ways of solving that problem in one hour." You can use the tools—you can leverage Claude and ChatGPT to fuel that process of creativity. The result is, "Okay, now we know what we're not going to do anymore, and we have new ways of solving problems we hadn't thought of before." The more you can create that environment—I helped start something called NextCoLabs (nextcolabs.io), a collaborative group of people around the world learning AI tools and helping each other learn how to apply them in different use cases in their work.

25:24 Phil Fersht

Yeah, we've found that getting our analysts to showcase how they're using their tools to do better research, faster research, better data analysis—and having them present to each other—is the best form of co-learning. It's like, "Hey, look, I just did this; I just did that." Otherwise, you can talk yourself blue trying to force people to use new tech and saying, "Go on a training course, learn this, do that." I'm seeing better success from companies doing bootcamps on this stuff, driving that collaboration forward. Otherwise, it's just more lip service—"Let's come up with an AI rollout and say we did this."

Just one final thought, Gary, around driving change within organizations. What's your advice to mid-career enterprise leaders today who are just struggling with this stuff? It's hard to change. We talk about the debts that companies need to repay to move forward, whether it's data, process, skills, and people. But ultimately, it feels like it's a culture debt that companies need to repay. How can companies ultimately change their culture so they can become more collaborative, more learning-driven, more passion-driven, and get away from this old legacy mindset? Is there anything they can do quickly to maneuver these juggernauts, or is this just a slow process of change we have to live through?

27:12 Gary A. Bolles

This is, I think, the key question—certainly one I get from the C-suite of organizations around the world. The short answer is yes, it's hard because humans tend to resist change. I've done a series of courses with Dr. Evian Gordon, one of the world's brain experts, and the way our human brains work, if you ask Dr. Evian to distill it, is "safety first." We tend to protect what we have, so change is hard.

So how do you help people change? It just so happens that my title has shifted at Singularity University—I'm now a Global Fellow for Transformation. I'm building a lot of the IP around how we transform as individuals, organizations, communities, and countries.

It turns out people need a combination of incentives and disincentives. I'm a big fan of incentives, so I'd rather focus on the positive. I mentioned at the beginning that my framing is always mindset, skillset, and toolset. You talked about changing the mindset of an organization, which we often call culture.

Why would anybody change? Well, it's pretty clear—there's very good research. First, they have a personal commitment to a growth mindset. Dr. Carol Dweck's book is seminal in helping us have the language around what a growth mindset is. So personally, I need a growth mindset.

Secondly, we need alignment within the organization—we need synchrony, some way to coordinate. What are the strategic goals of the organization? What are the ways I'm helping to support those strategic goals?

Third, we've got to ensure we have the right skillset. These new AI tools—none of us knew what prompt engineering was three years ago. We're continually developing new skillsets in a variety of different work roles. It's critical that we have the organizational operating system where we can continually learn new things, leveraging this toolset to develop a new skillset.

It starts small; it starts on the individual basis. I'm doubling down—you help people have better self-knowledge, help them figure out the kinds of problems they love to solve, give them the opportunity to do that, and make it a process of co-creation. You'll find that a substantial portion of your organization will want to continue to change. However, there will always be resistors. What you need is momentum.

Over and over, this is what happens in successful cultural transformation programs. The Institute for Corporate Performance did a study and found that 85% of these programs fail—that's bad news. However, good news: 15% succeed, and they've got an 18-factor roadmap for how to do that, which I reproduce in my book “The Next Rules of Work”.

It's really really important that people trying to catalyze change understand that operating system, understand how people change, and give small opportunities for people to shift their mindset, change habits, so that the organization is all rowing with their oars in the same direction.

30:51 Phil Fersht

Well, thanks, Gary. This has been a really insightful and challenging conversation about how we can change our ways of doing things and how the future of work is starting to take shape. I think someone said to me recently, "The future of work is unsettled," and I think they're correct—it is still unsettled.

Part of the problem is, how can people justify the sheer expense to their employer? Like, "Hey, I earn a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year. Am I still worth that to you?" I do think people need to try hard to bond with their employer so they understand what those outcomes are, how to foster a change mindset and a learning mindset to be effective.

It's fascinating to think about these issues, and I believe you'll be coming to our summit in New York in a few weeks, and I really look forward to hearing more of your views then. Thank you for your time today.

32:01 Gary A. Bolles

Absolutely. Really looking forward to it.

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