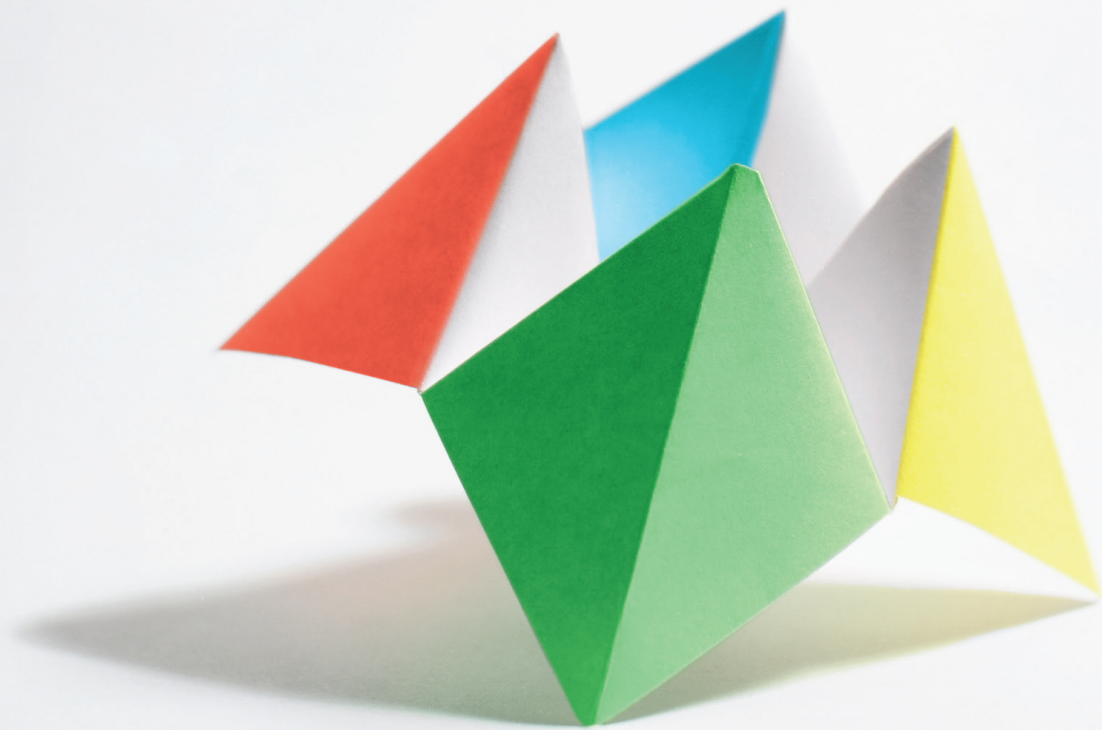


The Upside *of* Uncertainty

*A Guide to Finding
Possibility in the Unknown*



NATHAN FURR

SUSANNAH HARMON FURR

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

HBR Press Quantity Sales Discounts

Harvard Business Review Press titles are available at significant quantity discounts when purchased in bulk for client gifts, sales promotions, and premiums. Special editions, including books with corporate logos, customized covers, and letters from the company or CEO printed in the front matter, as well as excerpts of existing books, can also be created in large quantities for special needs.

For details and discount information for both print and ebook formats, contact booksales@harvardbusiness.org, tel. 800-988-0886, or www.hbr.org/bulksales.

Copyright 2022 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

All rights reserved

Find more digital content or join the discussion on www.hbr.org.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@harvardbusiness.org, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

The web addresses referenced in this book were live and correct at the time of the book's publication but may be subject to change.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Furr, Nathan R., author. | Furr, Susannah Harmon, author.

Title: The upside of uncertainty : a guide to finding possibility in the unknown / Nathan Furr and Susannah Harmon Furr.

Description: Boston, Massachusetts : Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, [2022] | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021058565 (print) | LCCN 2021058566 (ebook) | ISBN 9781647823016 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781647823023 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Uncertainty—Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Opportunity—Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Economics—Psychological aspects—Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Success in business—Handbooks, manuals, etc.

Classification: LCC HB615 .F867 2022 (print) | LCC HB615 (ebook) | DDC 338/.04—dc23/eng/20220202

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021058565>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021058566>

ISBN: 978-1-64782-301-6

eISBN: 978-1-64782-302-3

For all those who have inspired us
on our journey to the upside of uncertainty.
And for you reading this now.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
----------------	-----------

Introduction: Unlocking the Upside of Uncertainty	1
---	---

Section One

Reframe

1 Framing	15
2 Reverse Insurance	21
3 Frontiers	27
4 Adjacent Possible	33
5 Infinite Game	41
6 Stories	49
7 Regret Minimization	57
8 Aplomb (Doubting Self-Doubt)	63
9 Uncertainty Manifesto	69

Section Two

Prime

10 Know Your Risks	81
11 Personal Real Options	89
12 Uncertainty Balancers	97
13 Dumbo Feathers	103
14 Runways and Landing Strips	109

15	Reimagining Resources	115
16	Fait Sur Measure	121
17	Don't Force Machinery	129

Section Three

Do

18	Activate and Unlock	141
19	Values versus Goals	149
20	Cognitive Flexibility	155
21	Learning in Fog	161
22	10,000 Shots	169
23	Bricolage	175
24	Small Steps	183
25	Pivot	193

Section Four

Sustain

26	Emotional Hygiene	205
27	Reality Check	225
28	Magic	251

	Conclusion: Uncertainty, Courage, and Magic	273
--	---	-----

	<i>Notes</i>	279
--	--------------	-----

	<i>Index</i>	297
--	--------------	-----

	<i>About the Authors</i>	309
--	--------------------------	-----

Preface

What Is the Upside of Uncertainty?

Thank you for being curious about the upside of uncertainty. It's truly the first step to navigating the unknown well, so you're already on your way! Did you know that the neurotransmitter for curiosity is dopamine? Our brains are instinctively wired so that if we stay curious, we will keep learning and growing.

This book is the product of an intense shared curiosity about uncertainty and possibility, one that started thirty years ago when the two of us met as university freshman. Both researchers, writers, and entrepreneurs but in vastly different fields (Nathan—technology, strategy, fiction; Susannah—art history, fashion, mindfulness), we have built a life together that's fueled by a fascination with and belief in the human ability for *transilience*. From the Latin root for “leap across,” it's an old word worth reviving, which means to abruptly change something from one state to another. Every brilliant insight, choice, act, and innovation comes only after a phase of uncertainty. And the uncertainty brought about by every mistake, setback, discouragement, and even disaster carries possibility within it.

Our first joint research and writing project, as nineteen-year-old students, was about zombies: brain-dead creatures being led around by hunger. This one is about the exact opposite: fully awake and conscious individuals taking responsibility for the possibility in their lives. Whether you are a manager or a creator, a team member or a team leader, a parent or a partner, leading a company or just getting started in your education or career, uncertainty is an unavoidable part of being

human. But because uncertainty's downsides can be so intense, they often disguise or temporarily obstruct our view of what's possible. This book is about the upside of uncertainty—believing, finding, and living into the opportunity that attends every unknown.

We all come from different perspectives and circumstances. Some of us may have resources or situations that allow for bold choices and others do not; in addition, too many people suffer from very real unfairness and injustice in their daily lives. It is our hope that together with service-minded leaders, courageous individuals can work to eradicate unfairness and inequality, creating a growing tide of possibility for others. But in every situation and circumstance, when we believe in the upside of uncertainty, we increase our chances of finding it.

The Upside of Uncertainty offers a hopeful framework for making the leap across uncertainty even in the face of limitation and constraint. It's filled with tools and personal applications based on interviews, research, and personal experience, all aimed at helping you start moving now. We invite you to hold tight to your curiosity and dig right in.

Introduction

Unlocking the Upside of Uncertainty

“We’re always living in a state of uncertainty—two years ago, two years from now—therefore, part of our challenge as I see it is to make uncertainty . . . our home. This is where we’re living, every day of our lives. . . . Let’s rejoice in it, furnish it, close the door, rearrange the books, and say, Make this as beautiful as it can, given that forest fire, earthquake, or who knows what will be coming tomorrow—or tremendous beauty and love may be coming in the door tomorrow.”

—Pico Iyer

Recall for a moment any big change you’ve experienced in your life, perhaps a new work project, career, geography, or relationship. What made it hard? What held you back? What tempted you not to make the change? The answer is *uncertainty*. Now consider that everything you really care about in your life came only after a period of uncertainty. Even now, behind every uncertainty you are facing—even the unwanted and unpromising varieties—insight, growth, and possibility are waiting in the wings. We are all wired to fear the downsides of uncertainty, but we forget that change, creation, transformation, and innovation rarely show up without some measure of it. In this book we invite you to consider that the only way to get to the possibilities you dream about is to navigate your way there through the treacherous realm of the unknown.

Consider the massive uncertainty in each of these real-life examples: a fashion executive jumping ship to become a baker, a young trainee

raising her hand to tackle the company's thorniest problem, a banker abandoning his year-end bonus to create a startup in a rented garage, a goldsmith stress-running at 4 a.m. as his business fails and his wife battles cancer, a venture capitalist investing in a project that will lose every cent, a software engineer receiving a cease-and-desist letter about his new project from the almighty Apple, a couple teaching inmates how to code without access to the internet.

Every single one of these people had to face immense uncertainty to get to the possibility they were celebrated for later. Some of their names you might recognize, like Indra Nooyi or Jeff Bezos, but they weren't famous when facing the situations described above. And while many of the names you may not know yet, the common thread is that whether they chose the unknown or it was forced on them, they unlocked something beyond resilience: the upside of uncertainty. When we talk about uncertainty in this book, we are referring to anything unknown, any ambiguous state where you may not even know what to pay attention to, let alone all the ways it could play out. Uncertainty is broader than just risk, even though people often use them interchangeably. But risk usually involves taking only a small chance on knowable outcomes. Although people may say you have to "take a risk" when you face any uncertainty, they really mean you're stepping into uncharted territory.

When we talk about the upside of uncertainty, we don't mean to minimize the downsides. We feel them first and intensively, and too much uncertainty is a bad thing. But it was our hunch that everyone reading this would be familiar with the downsides: anxiety, stress, exhaustion, and confusion are states that have hindered all of us on our way to doing things we deeply care about. We also don't want to minimize the frustration and grief that uncertainty causes, especially when the unexpected blindsides us. We aren't claiming that it's possible to sidestep the loss and tragedy that some uncertainties bring. Nor are we encouraging naive forays into pursuits that might hurt yourself or others. But we do believe that even in despairing situations, there are new possibilities that can emerge and old hopes that can be salvaged when we learn to navigate the unknown.

Most importantly, by enduring uncertainty well, even when pushed to their limits, the individuals described above accessed a different kind of possibility. Unlike possibilities that arise out of sheer luck, like winning a lottery, or those that arise from efficiency, such as the time gained after buying a dishwasher, the most interesting kind of possibilities—the

ones we daydream about, the ones we write about, the ones that we talk about late into the night and that make our hearts ache—are those we find only after facing uncertainty. Recall the achievements you are most proud of, the commitments you made that feel right, the leaps into the dark that changed the course of your life. They all involved uncertainty.

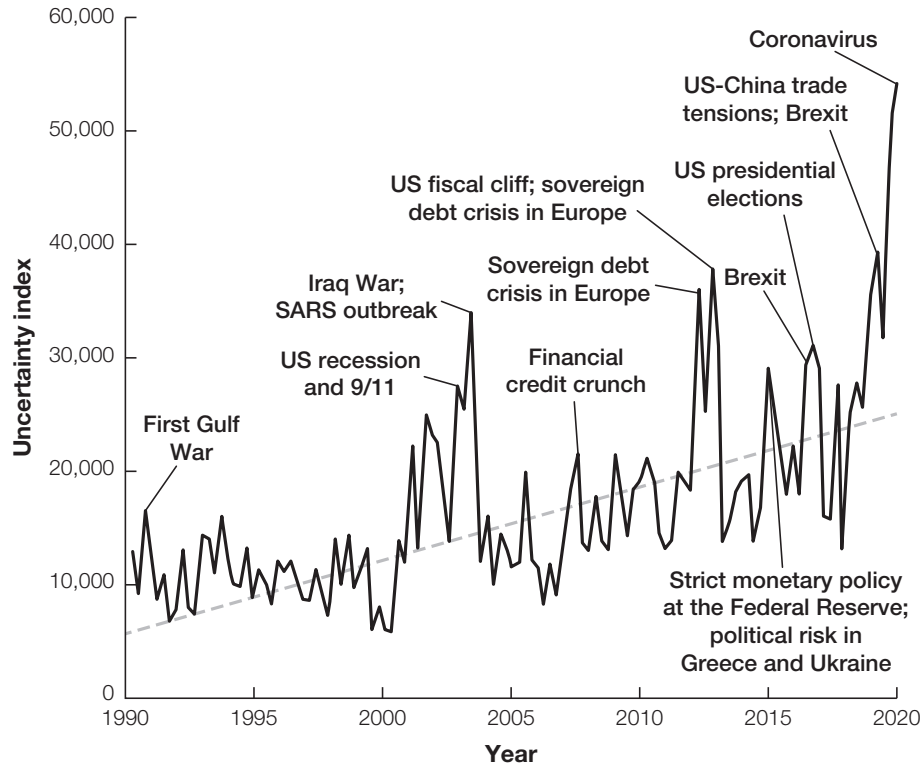
Uncertainty Is Increasing

Moreover, we are all being called to deal with uncertainty more frequently. According to the World Uncertainty Index, created by economists at Stanford and the International Monetary Fund to capture economic and policy uncertainty, uncertainty has been rising steadily over recent decades (see figure I-1). “There is ambiguity and paradox everywhere,” observed Jostein Solheim, former CEO at Ben and Jerry’s. “For people who like the linear route forward, life is getting harder and harder, in any field!”¹

It’s getting harder because there is *no* linear route forward in a world where up to 65 percent of elementary-school-age children may work in jobs that don’t even exist yet.² Technology has only magnified the uncertainty, lowering the barriers to participate in many industries, increasing the pace of change. And while we learn many things in school, from mathematics and biology to personal finance, we do not learn how to prepare for and face uncertainty. Without the right tools, we fall into maladaptive traps such as threat rigidity, unproductive rumination, premature certainty, and misinvention. If you don’t believe these traps are real, consider that in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 110,000 people in California purchased guns.³ And rising in the corporate ranks doesn’t give you immunity. Executives at the top feel uncertainty more than ever, with CEO turnover doubling in the last decade.⁴ One CTO recently lamented, “You find uncertainty on so many levels . . . in industry, boardroom, management, execution. . . . I thought as my career progressed I would feel more certain, but as your career progresses, uncertainty just increases.”⁵

Uncertainty is here to stay. Learning to face the unknown well is critical to our ability to survive and thrive. Numerous studies across academic fields suggest that people comfortable with uncertainty are more creative and are more successful as entrepreneurs and more effective as leaders. We have heard many times and in many ways what serial entrepreneur

FIGURE I-1

World Uncertainty Index*GDP-weighted average of more than 140 countries*

Note: This analysis captures only economic and political uncertainty. The World Uncertainty Index (WUI) calculates the GDP-weighted average of uncertainty in more than 140 countries. Specifically, the “WUI is computed by counting the percent of the word ‘uncertain’ (or its variant) in the Economist Intelligence Unit country reports. The WUI is then rescaled by multiplying by 1,000,000. A higher number means higher uncertainty and vice versa. For example, an index of 200 corresponds to the word uncertainty accounting for 0.02 percent of all words, which—given the EIU reports are on average about 10,000 words long—means about 2 words per report.”

Source: Hites Ahir, Nicholas Bloom, and Davide Furceri, “The World Uncertainty Index,” October 29, 2018, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3275033>.

and CEO Sam Yagan stated so clearly: “The single biggest predictor of executive success is how you deal with ambiguity.”⁶ Likewise, strategy consulting firm McKinsey & Company argues that “what leaders need during a crisis is not a predefined response plan but behaviors and mind-sets that will prevent them from overreacting to yesterday’s developments and help them to look ahead.”⁷ But what few of these studies or reports make clear is how to develop this can-do approach to uncertainty.

We offer this book as a guide to help readers discover and hold on to the upside of uncertainty—all the possibilities that come to those

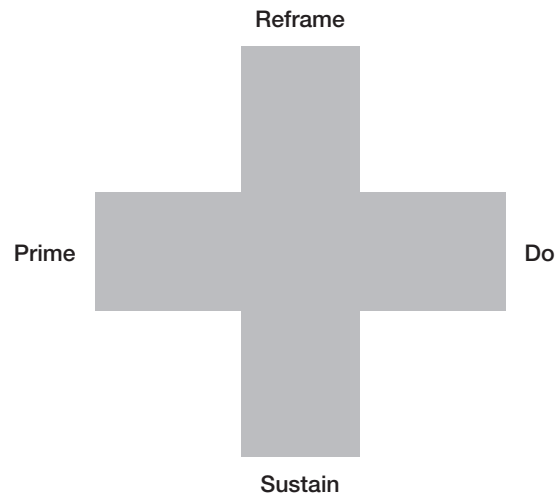
who learn to ride its waves. If we can tolerate uncertainty, and even pursue scenarios in spite of it, we can develop an *uncertainty ability*—the skill to navigate unknowns both planned (such as starting a new venture or leaving a job) and unplanned (such as losing a job, experiencing a health crisis, or going through a relationship breakdown). The people we admire—the ones who do new and inventive things and those who respond nobly to tragedy—have our admiration precisely because they have developed a healthy relationship with uncertainty, increasing their *possibility quotient*, or the likelihood that they see and seize new opportunities.

The Tools for Uncertainty

Since new things are inherently unknown, the arenas of innovation and entrepreneurship are a fascinating spot to better understand if and how one can learn to navigate uncertainty. We started by interviewing path-breakers in these fields and found that, even though they felt the anxiety that comes with uncertainty just like the rest of us, many of them had learned to meet uncertainty with greater courage, resilience, and skill. While each of us comes with differing capacities to handle uncertainty, and while neuroscience highlights that every skill is shaped by genes, environment, and learning, a significant part of this uncertainty ability appears to be learned.⁸ Research in the domains of ambiguity tolerance, uncertainty avoidance, and resilience all underscore that we can learn to face uncertainty well.

In addition to our interviews, we reviewed historical case studies as well as the relevant academic literature in the fields of strategy, organizational behavior, psychology, neuroscience, and political science. Along the way, it became obvious that we needed to include examples of other groups of people who have developed remarkable uncertainty ability: artists, creatives, paramedics, change makers, and contrarians, among others. The practical framework that emerged from this project leverages the validated empirical research where possible but fills the many gaps with interviews and sometimes our own framework when the research frontier lags behind real life. Sprinkled throughout, we will share some of our personal experiences as individuals fascinated by uncertainty but unwilling to let the downsides have the last word. These include our decision to live abroad, our experience as spiritual nomads

FIGURE I-2

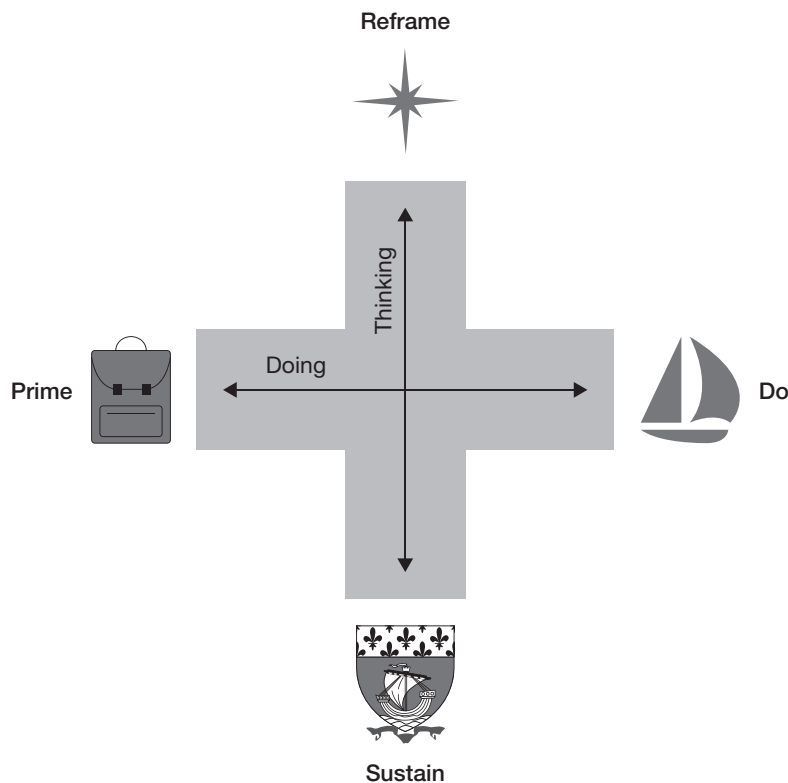
Uncertainty first-aid cross

after what many call a “faith crisis,” and our life as a married couple and parents unlearning toxic, archaic patterns in favor of more authentic and helpful partnerships with our children and each other.

There are four groups of tools that increase uncertainty ability, organized around an uncertainty first-aid cross to remind you that there is help available for facing the unknown (see figure I-2). *Reframe* tools enable and strengthen a perspective shift, motivating you to look creatively for all the possibilities and to believe in an upside that you can’t see yet. *Prime* tools prepare you by encouraging projects that matter to you, taking into account your personal uncertainty landscape to enable satisfying outcomes when it’s time to act. *Do* tools describe how to thoughtfully unlock the rewarding possibilities hidden in the uncertainties you face to promote a future you want to live in. *Sustain* tools give comfort and remind you why and how to keep going, or how to pivot when things don’t go as planned.

We have chosen symbols that inspire and recall the main thrust for each set of tools (see figure I-3). The compass highlights how Reframe tools point to the steady “true north” upside of uncertainty when in the fog; the backpack reminds that Prime tools impact the quality of the uncertainty journey and where you end up; the sailboat symbolizes how Do tools are about taking advantage of when the wind blows to move forward with boldness, cleverness, and agility but also recognizing how

FIGURE I-3

Uncertainty first-aid cross icons

to adjust course when needed; and the emblem of Paris—a boat on the water, often paired with the motto “tossed but not sinking”—assures that Sustain tools will calm your fears, bolster your efforts, and reveal the possibilities. Thus, the north-south “thinking” axis is akin to the poles by which we navigate the world, and the east-west “doing” axis recalls the action required to travel across time zones.

The book is divided into four sections, each centering on one of the four arms of the uncertainty first-aid cross, with each tool given a short chapter followed by an activity to help you reflect on and practice what you’ve read. (For clarity, note that each chapter is named for its tool.) Applying the uncertainty tools is not meant to be a linear process, as they inform each other and even overlap. Instead, use what resonates for you in a given moment. We have tried to arrange the tools so they can be applied to maximum effect, which resulted in the Sustain tools being grouped according to three critical themes—*emotional hygiene*, *reality check*, and *magic*—to make them easier to remember in times of trouble.

The tools are for everyone, from leaders in organizations to creatives exploring new domains, from parents trying to raise children to adults trying to raise themselves. They are tools for all of us, no matter what role we may be playing, because at some point we may face an uncertainty we are tempted to hide or retreat from but are meant to pursue or engage with. We forget that, as legendary technologist Martin van den Brink argued, “Not doing things also has consequences; that’s part of the uncertainty. Standing still is not a choice.”⁹ Uncertainty will happen to us even when we try to avoid it. To reach our highest potential and live our noblest values, we need to be willing to step into uncertainty. Our hope is that by reading this book, you will more readily find the upside of uncertainty. When you do, you will also find your own *transilience*—a transformation beyond resilience where you leap from the darkness of the unknown to the brilliance of change, growth, and infinite possibility.

Chapter 11

Personal Real Options

Many of us think we need to go all in to succeed. But research suggests that putting all your eggs in one basket may actually decrease your chances of success while also multiplying the accompanying anxiety. Pursuing a portfolio of interests, rather than going all in on one thing, can be a much more effective strategy. Whether you have two or more career interests, projects, or hobbies, adopting a *personal real options* approach will decrease your anxiety in the event that something doesn't work out. It also decreases the potential regret of missing out on meaningful aspects of your personality or skill set.

While adjacent possibilities are the hovering opportunities that await discovery, a personal real options perspective helps you prioritize and move forward on your interests, hunches, hobbies, projects, and ultimately, bring adjacent possibilities to life. The term *personal real options* emerged during an interview with Nobel Prize-winner Ben Feringa. Back in 1999, Feringa made a profound scientific breakthrough when he discovered how to create molecular machines ten thousand times smaller than a human hair. This foundational technology could one day be used to create tiny machines that roam the body's bloodstream to eliminate threats, repair the pipes inside a house from the inside, or increase the capacity of your phone battery so that one charge lasts for weeks.

When we asked Feringa if he encountered uncertainty during the journey to a Nobel Prize-winning breakthrough, his eyes lit up as he responded, "You can't discover anything new if you don't step into uncertainty. Science is full of uncertainty!"¹

"How do you help your students deal with it?" Nathan asked.

“Striving for certainty will lead you down false paths or lead you to commit too long to projects that won’t work, or to uninteresting projects that will work,” he explained. That’s why he coaches his students to have multiple projects at once.

If you have only one foot to stand on, you will ride it all the way to the bitter end because you don’t want to fail, even if it means you will ultimately fail. Instead, you want to have multiple pathways, multiple projects, and in a way get some certainty out of the portfolio of uncertainties. I usually advise my students to have at least one risky project and one less risky project so you have the confidence that at least something will work out.”

Intuitively, Feringa tapped into wisdom that goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks, when philosopher Thales of Miletus purchased an option on the region’s olive presses. By paying a small amount of money in the spring, when his calculations predicted a large harvest, he had the right, but not the obligation, to use the presses that fall. When a massive olive crop matured, he made a fortune with his monopoly on olive presses.² Options are common in finance and can be an important tool for taking risks. When Michael Burry, the investor featured in the film *The Big Short*, purchased an option on mortgage defaults (the right to be paid back if mortgage-backed securities defaulted), he earned \$700 million in the Great Recession of 2008.

The options approach helps lessen the risks of either going all in and losing everything or missing out entirely by not daring at all. Ricardo dos Santos, former head of the disruptive innovation at Qualcomm (one of the world’s largest semiconductor firms), illustrated this logic well when he reflected on his experience: “If I could teach people just one thing, it would be the word *maybe*. . . . I have watched executives do a big analysis about the opportunity in something like server chips, put 100 engineers on the project, get spooked, pull 100 engineers off the project, wait for years until a competitor was doing it, and then go from zero to 100 engineers all over again.” Dos Santos says it would be better to adopt a “maybe” approach, going partway in with a few engineers and treating the project like an experiment to see where it could go.³ He has applied this wisdom in his role as head of ResMed’s innovation incubator, where he recruits intrapreneurs “according to the stage of their idea. First as part-timers when the idea needs some initial exploration,

then offering a sabbatical—a one-year break from their job—if the idea is looking promising, then offering them a full-time job once the major risks and upside are identified.”⁴

Empirical studies support the wisdom of personal real options, demonstrating that at least half of new startups are created by hybrid entrepreneurs who keep their day jobs while starting something on the side—and that those who first start as a hybrid entrepreneur before jumping into a full-time new venture are 33 percent less likely to fail.⁵ One of the major reasons they are more successful is that they have more time to discover what works with less stress due to uncertainty. When Felicia Joy quit her job to start a seminar business with a partner, she ran out of money in six months and had to find a new job to pay the bills. Failing “shook me to my core,” Joy admits, “but it also gave me strength. It was not that I could not pursue it, but I needed to be smart about it.”⁶ Later, she founded Ms. CEO Media, a venture providing support for female entrepreneurs, but this time she kept her job until the company could stand on its own, giving it the time it needed to succeed. The hybrid approach can help you take a small step into the unknown to learn about it, helping you be more successful in the future. Nathan’s research about companies responding to disruptive technologies has shown that the hybrid approach proved effective in helping them build a bridge to the future.⁷ The same is true for individuals.

The personal real options approach also helps avoid many of the dysfunctional behaviors that all-in risks can create. A large body of research—which has uncovered biases like sunk costs bias, confirmation bias, and escalation of commitment—highlights the dangers of going all in. In a famous experiment, MBA students were asked to invest in one of two business units. When it was revealed the business unit in which they had invested had lost money, they counterintuitively invested even more money in the failing business than a successful one in the next round. Moreover, if they felt personally responsible for the consequences, they invested even more money than before, in hopes of recouping the underperforming investment.⁸ This effect, known as escalation of commitment, affects many real-world settings, including the National Basketball Association, where higher-paid draft picks are given more playing time even if they underperform, and in the Vietnam War, when as Under Secretary of State George Ball predicted, “Once we suffer large casualties, we will have started a well-nigh irreversible

process. Our involvement will be so great that we cannot, without national humiliation, stop short of achieving our complete objectives.”⁹

The personal real options approach, then, is simple: as Feringa advised, don’t put all your eggs in one basket. The value of this approach applies to all kinds of projects, not just science or business. Author Roald Dahl wrote an essay called *Lucky Break* in which he observes that most authors have a day job to pay the bills. Dahl worked for Shell Oil and in a number of other positions until his writing career took off. Similarly, the extremely prolific Victorian author Anthony Trollope held a job with the postal service for decades, writing every morning from 5:30 to 8:30 before work, a routine that produced forty-nine novels in thirty-five years! He argued that creative work should be as “common work to the common laborer. No gigantic efforts will then be necessary. [An author] need tie no wet towels round his brow, nor sit for thirty hours at his desk without moving.”¹⁰

Personal Real Options on Dreams

While we have focused on the pitfalls of going all in on an uncertain project, the truth is that most of us have the opposite problem: we are all in on a safe path. We tell ourselves that when we have everything nailed down, then we will try the thing we feel calling us. This deferred life plan violates the principle of personal real options just as much as going all in on the uncertain option. There are times in life where we need to wait to act on possibilities, such as while in school or at the start of a career. But even then we can be tiptoeing toward possibility. Although we had few resources while Nathan earned his PhD, Susannah started her clothing line anyway. She recalls looking in the mirror and asking, “Should I wait?” After all, we were living on student loans with four children in eight hundred square feet of on-campus housing. But the resounding answer was, “No, start now.” She is so glad she did! Not only did she benefit from the startup vibe of Silicon Valley, but she learned about designing and manufacturing, joined an incredible network of women entrepreneurs, and found a creative, rewarding pursuit during those years of raising four tiny kids.

We observed the dangers of waiting in a case study of two professors in the same English department. They both dreamed of living in Europe during the summers, writing in cafés, and then returning to

their Midwest university to teach in the fall. One of the professors, our friend Eric Freeze, started on the dream early, first by taking on the unglamorous role of directing summer programs for high school language students, then years later by scraping together the down payment for a rathole of an apartment in the city of Nice, which he and his wife slowly renovated and rented out the rest of the year. Eric juggled credit card offers to earn points for free flights and learned to spearfish to cut down on grocery bills. Today he and his wife, Rixa, who is a global expert in breech birth, live with their four children part-time in Nice and part-time in the Midwest, which he recounts in his enjoyable memoir, *French Dive*.

One of the most challenging parts has been managing the jealousy of the other professor, who, by waiting for everything to line up perfectly, is still dreaming about living in Europe. While Freeze slowly cobbled together a personal real option, the other professor trusted that it would come together after he got tenure, saved up some spare funds, and hopefully landed a glamorous chaired position that might give him more flexibility. By keeping the France idea on a low burner from its inception, Freeze has benefited from the European real option all along. Although it has required many sacrifices, including at times accepting half-time salary, the dream has gained momentum over years, and now it is a permanent option. Indeed, they recently purchased the apartment below theirs and have started renovations to rent it out as an extra source of income.

One of the best ways to develop personal real options is to start them as side projects, a name used in the excellent how-to guidebook from the Do Lectures, *The Side Project Report*. This report recounts the story of Rhys Newman, cofounder of the Omata, a quirky analog speedometer for cyclists who appreciate the charm of old technology. Newman worked for years as a designer in Europe and Silicon Valley, eventually becoming head of advanced design for Nokia. While working full-time, he made sure to keep drawings of his “mechanical machine” posted around his desk, working on it bit by bit. One November evening at a party in Big Sur, entrepreneurs and wealthy friends encouraged him to quit and start working on it full-time, but the pressures of supporting three children made it too scary for Newman and his wife, Naomi. Two weeks later, Nokia canceled his project and made him redundant. The severance gave Newman the runway, and the nudge, to make Omata his primary project.

Newman offers helpful advice about starting side projects: (1) Give your project a space that doesn't have to be cleared away at dinnertime. (2) Create visual reminders for yourself. (3) Open your eyes to how the other things you are working on could contribute to your side project. And (4) don't be afraid to talk about it, since the advice and help you get along the way vastly outweigh the near impossibility that someone will steal your idea.¹¹

Sometimes a side project creates a conflict between your main focus, whether paid or unpaid, and what you are feeling called to do (e.g., go back to school). But even in this challenging scenario, explore whether there are creative ways to develop a personal real option. You might take a sabbatical from your job, work part-time, or take classes in the evening. Of course, none of these are easy, and the answer isn't always so simple, but giving ourselves permission to pursue personal real options is liberating.

Reflection and Practice

Juggling personal real options requires keeping an eye on each project, or option, even though each option won't necessarily get equal attention. But if it adds value to your sense of self, it deserves space and time. Here are some ways to strike that balance between your options:

1. **Take stock.** The creator of *The Side Project Report*, David Hieatt, recommends pausing every few months and asking yourself: "Is the project still providing enough value for the effort I'm putting in? Am I still excited about this project, or has it become a chore? Am I still learning enough to make it worth it? If no one else found out about it, would I still do it?"¹²
2. **Set up a sanctuary.** Remember, your project will never exist if you don't do anything with it, so dignify the option by letting it take up space in your world. This could be a drawer, shelf, or folder where you collect inspiration, ideas, to-do lists, and research pertaining to that project. Keeping it well organized and handy is a way of honoring its place in your life as well as enabling a quick start whenever the moment allows.
3. **Schedule check-ins.** Plan a meeting with your project and use that time to research, think, doodle, or discuss it with someone else.

Set deadlines and hold yourself to them. Sometimes you can find a bridge between your current paid work and your side project so that working benefits both options. If you can find a friend who wants accountability for their personal real option, you can encourage each other to push forward concrete action items.

4. *Avoid doing nothing.* Options can start small and still be legitimate. Among urban adults who missed out on the tranquility of growing up in nature, there is a growing trend of seeking out time outdoors. Few will muster an off-the-grid life in a van or tent. But it is possible to plan a summer camping trip, to take half-day hikes that don't require extensive supplies, or to rent a cabin without Wi-Fi for a weekend. The coffee-table book *The Outsiders: New Outdoor Creativity* hilariously assures its readers that a connection with nature can even start as small as "capturing the retro chic of Edmund Hillary through the gear you wear. . . . There is no set of rules other than to respect and enjoy the outdoors."¹³
 5. *Create a personal skunk works.* Some of you might be ready for something more radical to jump-start your effort. Could you take cues from the Skunk Works, the secret division at Lockheed Martin where employees worked at a radical pace to deliver on critical tasks without respect for the rules? They created the U2 spy plane in 143 days, as well as the SR-71 Blackbird, which is still the fastest, highest-flying manned aircraft. In a similar manner, could you take a couple months away from your job or set up a space to work at a furious pace to test one of your personal real options?
 6. *Respect the timing.* Timing is real, and some options do need to wait. Nathan had to wait to pursue some projects until later in his career. As Håkan Nordkvist, head of sustainability innovation at IKEA, said, "Sometimes you have to put it into a drawer and come back to it if it is the right thing. We do live in an external environment independent of your idea. If it doesn't happen today, it could always happen tomorrow."¹⁴ Often the retired option we worked on still turns out to be valuable.
-