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## Context to the nugget

Tarun talks about developments in the field of Strategy and maps that to how individuals should think about their careers. He acknowledges the influence of Prof. Ben Jones (of North-western University) in shaping his thinking here. He talks about the fact that the world of knowledge is growing exponentially and we will know less and less (as a percentage) of what is to be known. He discusses how people should think about specialization and collaboration in this context and shares his perspective on the mind-set with which we should march into the future that can feel overwhelming.

## Transcription

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**Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): What can the world of professionals learn from the latest thinking of strategy in terms of how they address the where to play question for themselves?**

Tarun Khanna (TK): Look I think that's the one of the fundamental questions in the discipline that has come to be called strategy in the last let's say three decades or so in which its matured quite a bit and become fairly main stream avocation of a lot of academics and practitioners and consultants and so on, I think the core wisdom which is to really introspect on, what is it that an organization brings to the table, to the collective table as it were, and by extension what an individual brings to that organization should determine the kinds of places that you chose to play and if it turns out that those places are not places that you intrinsically feel that you would enjoy playing in or be good at in the long run, then I think it suggests a direction of investments in your own human capital to sort of move you in the direction you would have some unique value addition to some landscape, some problem space. One of my colleagues used to ask this very sobering question which I find useful to articulate to myself once in a while and the question was, what would happen if you just vaporised one day? Who in the world would notice? And I think it's obviously an existential question and to me a very motivating question because other than my immediate family you have to begin to ask who would notice? I mean in my case I like to say that some of my professional networks would notice for some time and then the world will move on, so whenever one feels that one really is achieving something I think its sobering to bring oneself down and not by saying, Well if you get evanished would you any noticed? And I think for an organization also you can apply that, you can say that look I am competing in a setting, professional setting in an industry and what if my entity ceases to exist how the rest of the ecosystem would recalibrate itself? And it adjust to a new dynamic equilibrium of a some sort and the reason why I think that's not just a facetious question and not just intended to be either an inspirational or demotivating question depending on your predisposition but its intended to be an analytic construct is that it's a very useful thought experiment to really help you identify what is it that you uniquely bring to the table which I think should be the driver ultimately,

the question that usually asked it should be the driver ultimately of where you end up wanting to play, where is that that you can contribute something truly unique.

DJ: If we talk about the volatility in terms of let's say career creation if I may use the term in terms of new jobs coming into being that didn't exist five or ten years back, anything we can learn from how the thinking in strategy evolved over time, what is it different today than what it was let's say twenty years back and how does that inform how we think about careers?

TK: Well I think one of the things that's at least I can give you my impressionistic answer to that field as a scholar of it or a practitioner of it, I don't know that in the field as young as strategy that it's very easy derived consensus on these points of view so take it with the proverbial pinch of salt but my own senses that one of the dominating sort of empirical regularities with which we are confronted with more and more frequently is this idea that newer vocations as you were just saying Deepak, new industries if you want to call them that are perpetually being created and created out of existence, created and uncreated if you will that's the word and then this is happening very rapid rate and I think it's becoming more and more transparent, the extent to which this is happening is the result of combination of prior insights so think of it this way this are some very interesting work done by scientists and social scientists saying that, you know precisely because the stock of overall knowledge is exponentially increasing by some measures the amount of codified knowledge that humanity has added to its repertoire in the last decade probably exceeds that in the previous century and probably last two three decades exceeds that of a millennia before that so the rate at which we are understanding new things is truly accelerating and what that means is that if it's possible to think of exponents of exponents that the combinatoric explosion in new possibilities is even more bewildering and that means that this speed with which new combinations of things that were hither to uncombined if you will or things which you would not normally think of in juxtaposition position to each other are increasingly coming into combination and forming new vistas and new possibilities in different ways and of course each of these entails a resetting of the table if you will and if you are not careful you could find yourself out of a role to play, in order to this if you apply this to my previous thought experiment you could find that you may have had some unique value addition in the previous landscape but the new landscape has emerged in let's say last five years and suddenly your particular calling card is no longer in as much value at this point so you see this happening faster and faster and I think the underlying structural construct is that the rate admission you have knowledge and the rate of combinatorial possibilities is increasing very fast and there is no reason to think that that will diminish, so that's the first thing. The second regularity I would say which is also sort of the corollary to and there is a guy at, I think he is at north western university, who has done a lot of this academic that I am loosely remembering at this point in answering your question the other corollary of this interesting finding of sort of exponential expansion of knowledge is that each of us is only going to know smaller and smaller sliver of things. Maybe you lived in the time of this sage Valmiki in India and there were certain set of known things and as a truly wise man, wise woman as the case might be you might expect to know point one percent of things that were known to human kind, and today with the exponential increase in knowledge you may know vanishingly small number may be its .000001 percent of things so the question is how do you ensure that you have a unique capability to contribute given this bewildering explosion of knowledge and the tinier sliver of which you are master or mistress and I think that puts a real premium on being able to communicate what it is that you have to the rest of the world so that you can facilitate the emergence of combinations with your own skillset, so that's the way I think about it, that the specialization isn't going to go away and it's a pretty straight forward corollary of the fact that you have to specialize to survive because things are developing too fast to do otherwise, otherwise you will condemn yourself to mediocrity but you if over specialized then your ability to communicate with people with different specialities is now at a premium so that you

can raise the odds that people productively combine with you and find it useful to hang out with you and do things with you, so that collectively you will in to be in new possibilities.

DJ: I love the way you frame it as an opportunity to facilitate a combination of new possibilities based on what gives you energy and your uniqueness.

TK: And if I may say, if this really is a mindset issue confronted with this sort of issue I think a lot of people would find it, they may not have confessed it but will find it intimidating and it is intimidating at one level but the thing is it helps me to remember that everybody is in the same boat we are all trying to do the same thing, it's not like yours that the explosion of knowledge is uniquely disadvantaging your uniqueness if I may say that way and so there is really no reason, there is no upside to being bewildered, befuddled or lost you just simply get on with it and I think that mindset is actually quite motivating and you stop worrying about the fact that you know almost nothing.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: "How do I stay relevant" is arguably the question that keeps all of us awake at night. The reassuring thought here is what Tarun says about "everybody being on the same boat". Sometimes, we lose sight of that fact.

Three thoughts come to mind here.

One - I am reminded of the book *Essentialism* by Greg McKeown. The crux of the insight in the book is that in a world where there is a tsunami of options, our ability to Say No and prioritize will be a super-power that will differentiate people that are able to accomplish great things and people that end up swimming in ponds of superficial mediocrity.

Two – one of my professors at London Business School, Lynda Gratton has done some thinking around the Future of work and the crux of what she says is that we need to move from a model that looks like a T to a model that looks like a Pi. T – Vertical line of the T denotes deep specialisation in something and the horizontal line suggests that we apply that wisdom to different fields. What she says is that for us to add value in the future, we would possibly have to go deep in two domains and stand on two legs. Somebody finessed that later to say that even between the two legs of the symbol Pi; one is a straight long leg that indicates real depth in one domain. The other is a little bent, which indicates that the second leg doesn't have to be as deep as the first one and is more mobile. I don't want to get too nerdy here but I guess you get the broad point.

The third thing that struck me was that as new combinatorial possibilities emerge, the onus is also on the person operating at the intersection to cut through the clutter and communicate the value proposition in a compelling manner. So, while specialization and working at the intersection of disciplines has value, ability to tell compelling stories and capture people's imagination is becoming as critical, something that I explore in my next podcast conversation on Storytelling with Indraneil Chakraborty, an expert in Business Story-telling.

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## End of nugget transcription

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## Tarun Khanna - Nuggets

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## About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive’s / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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