



THE FUTURE OF WORK IS GREY

**Book Club &  
Discussion Guide**

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by Dan Pontefract

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## SECTION 01

# Introduction

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Welcome, and thank you for choosing *The Future of Work Is Grey* for your book club, leadership team, or organizational reading group.

Whether you picked up this book out of curiosity, frustration, or a nagging feeling that something about today's workplace just isn't working, you're in the right place. This guide is designed to help you move beyond reading and into real conversation—the kind that changes how we think, how we lead, and how we treat one another across every stage of a career.

### A few ways to use this guide:

- As a structured companion for book clubs meeting over several sessions
- As a single-session discussion framework for leadership teams
- As a workshop tool for HR, People & Culture, and Talent Development groups
- As a personal reflection journal to deepen your own reading experience

You don't need to tackle every question. Choose the ones that resonate. Skip the ones that don't. Let the conversation breathe.

*I wrote *The Future of Work Is Grey* because I lived it. At fifty, I was quietly removed from a speaker roster—not because my ideas had gone stale, but because my age had crossed some invisible threshold. That moment cracked something open. I started asking questions I should have been asking all along: Why do we treat age as a liability instead of an asset? Why do organizations celebrate “fresh thinking” while discarding decades of hard-won wisdom? And why, in a world desperate for talent, are we ignoring the single largest untapped resource available to us?*

*This book is my answer. It's also an invitation. The future of work isn't young. It isn't old. It's grey—and that's a beautiful thing.*

*Let's talk about it.*

— Dan Pontefract

## SECTION 02

# About the Book

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*The Future of Work Is Grey* examines one of the most urgent yet overlooked crises facing organizations today: the growing burden of “Age Debt”—the cumulative cost that builds as populations age, birth rates decline, mid-career workers burn out, skills gaps widen, and multi-generational friction intensifies. Dan Pontefract argues that the solution lies not in choosing between generations but in unlocking the “Experience Dividend”—the extraordinary value created when skills, insights, and mentorship flow freely across all age spectrums.

Through vivid storytelling, original frameworks, and corporate case studies from around the world, the book offers both a diagnosis and a prescription for building workplaces where every career stage is valued, and no one is written off because of a number on their driver’s license.

## SECTION 03

# About the Author

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Dan Pontefract is a leadership strategist, bestselling author, and one of the most sought-after voices on the future of work. He has delivered five TED talks and more than 600 keynotes to audiences spanning the globe. *The Future of Work Is Grey* is his sixth book, and like its predecessors, it has received award recognition for its contribution to leadership thinking.

Dan serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Victoria’s Gustavson School of Business and has been named to the Thinkers50 Radar list of emerging management thinkers to watch. His client roster includes Salesforce, Amgen, Nestlé, and dozens of other forward-thinking organizations.

He lives in Victoria, British Columbia, where he remains deeply suspicious of anyone who thinks your best years are behind you.

## Discussion Questions by Theme

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PART 1

### The Age Debt Crisis

**1** Dan introduces the concept of “Age Debt”—the cumulative burden organizations face as populations age, birth rates plummet, mid-career workers become overwhelmed, and multi-generational tensions mount. Before reading this book, had you considered these forces as interconnected? Which element of Age Debt feels most urgent in your own organization or industry?

**2** The book uses an iceberg metaphor to describe how much of the age crisis remains hidden beneath the surface. What are some examples of “underwater” age-related challenges you’ve witnessed—things organizations don’t talk about openly but that quietly shape decisions?

**3** Have you or someone you know experienced age bias in the workplace—either as someone considered “too young” or “too old”? How did that experience shape your relationship with work? If you’re comfortable, share what happened and how it made you feel.

**4** Why do you think so many organizations continue to cling to workforce models designed for a world where people retired at sixty-five and career paths were linear? What would it take for leaders to genuinely update their thinking?

**5** Dan argues that the demographic data is unambiguous: we cannot sustain our current approach. Do you find the data he presents compelling, or do you think there are counterarguments worth exploring? What data points surprised you most?

**6** Consider your own workplace. If you had to estimate your organization's "Age Debt balance," would you say it's growing, stable, or being actively addressed? What evidence supports your assessment?

## PART 2

### Rivers, Rocks, and Rubies

**7** Dan replaces traditional generational labels (Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z) with three career-stage archetypes: Rivers (early-career, curious, fluid), Rocks (mid-career, resilient, bridging), and Rubies (later-career, wisdom-honed, polished). Why do you think he chose natural metaphors instead of age-based categories? What does this shift in language make possible?

**8** Which archetype—River, Rock, or Ruby—do you most identify with right now? Has your identification shifted over the course of your career, or even over the course of reading this book?

**9** Think about a time when you worked alongside someone from a different career stage and it genuinely worked well. What made that collaboration succeed? Now think about a time it didn't. What was missing?

**10** The Rivers, Rocks, and Rubies framework deliberately avoids tying identity to a birth year. How does this differ from the way your organization currently thinks about its workforce? Would adopting this language change anything in practice?

**11** Dan describes Rocks as the "bridge generation"—carrying the expectations of those above and below them while often being the most overlooked. Do you agree with this characterization? If you're a Rock, does it resonate? If you're a River or Ruby, how do you see the Rocks around you?

12 How might your team or organization look different if it deliberately cultivated the strengths of all three archetypes rather than defaulting to one dominant career stage?

### PART 3

## The Experience Dividend

13 The “Experience Dividend” is Dan’s term for the value gained when organizations integrate skills, insights, and mentorship across all age spectrums. Can you think of a moment in your career when you received an unexpected piece of wisdom from someone at a very different career stage? What made it stick?

14 The book profiles several corporate case studies—including Tokyo Gas’s Grand Career System, Schneider Electric’s career workshops, L’Oréal’s “For All Generations” initiative, and BMW’s Senior Expert Program. Which of these examples resonated with you most, and why? Could any of them be adapted for your organization?

15 Dan argues that age-inclusive strategies don’t just benefit older workers—they drive innovation, retention, and performance across the board. Do you buy this argument? What evidence have you seen (or wish you could see) to support it?

16 How does your organization currently capture and transfer institutional knowledge? Is there a formal process, or does wisdom walk out the door every time someone retires or moves on?

17 Traditional mentorship flows in one direction: senior to junior. Dan advocates for multi-directional mentorship models. What would it look like in your workplace if a River mentored a Ruby, or a Rock mentored someone in both directions simultaneously?

18 If you could design an “Experience Dividend” initiative for your organization starting tomorrow, what would it look like? What’s the single biggest barrier standing in your way?

## Frameworks for Action

**19** The Career Canvas is a tool Dan offers for individuals to map their career trajectory beyond traditional ladders and linear paths. If you were to sketch your own Career Canvas today, what would it reveal? Are there chapters of your career that feel unfinished or unexplored?

**20** The Wisdom Wheel framework helps organizations think about how knowledge, experience, and insight circulate (or fail to circulate) within their teams. Where does wisdom get stuck in your organization? Where does it flow freely?

**21** The Longevity Lens asks us to reconsider career planning in light of longer, healthier lives. If you knew you would work productively until age seventy-five or eighty, how would that change the decisions you're making right now about your career, your learning, and your pace?

**22** Which of Dan's frameworks—Career Canvas, Wisdom Wheel, or Longevity Lens—feels most immediately applicable to your situation? What's one concrete step you could take this month to put it into practice?

**23** Organizations often adopt frameworks enthusiastically and then abandon them within a quarter. What would it take to make these tools a sustained part of your organization's culture rather than a one-time exercise?

**24** Think about the HR or people practices in your organization. Which ones would need to be fundamentally redesigned if you took the Longevity Lens seriously? Consider hiring, promotion, learning and development, succession planning, and retirement policies.

**PART 5**

## **The Future of Work**

**25** Dan argues that mandatory retirement at sixty-five is an outdated concept that should be abolished. Do you agree? What concerns, if any, does this position raise for you—and how might those concerns be addressed?

**26** In a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, Dan highlights the enduring value of crystallized intelligence—the deep, experience-based knowledge that older workers carry. How do you see the relationship between human wisdom and AI playing out in your field? Can they be complementary rather than competitive?

**27** The title itself makes a bold claim: the future of work is “grey.” Dan frames this not as a warning but as a hopeful vision. By the end of the book, did you share his optimism? What would need to change in your organization or industry for this vision to become reality?

**28** What is one thing you will do differently—in your career, your team, or your organization—as a result of reading this book? Be specific. Write it down. Share it with your group.

## SECTION 05

# Team & Organizational Activities

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The following activities are designed for teams, leadership groups, and organizational book clubs who want to move from discussion into action. Each can be completed in 30–60 minutes.

### Activity 1: Rivers, Rocks, and Rubies Mapping

*Objective: Visualize the career-stage composition of your team or department.*

1. On a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, draw three columns labeled **Rivers**, **Rocks**, and **Rubies**.
2. Invite each team member to place their name in the column that best represents their current career stage. Remind the group this is about career stage and mindset, not age.
3. Step back and observe the distribution. Discuss:
  - Are we balanced or heavily weighted toward one archetype?
  - What strengths are we rich in? What perspectives might we be missing?
  - How does our composition affect our team dynamics and innovation?
4. Identify one action the team can take to better leverage the strengths of each archetype.

## Activity 2: Age Debt Audit

*Objective: Assess your organization's current Age Debt exposure.*

1. In small groups, evaluate your organization against five dimensions:
  - **Demographic imbalance** (aging workforce, insufficient pipeline)
  - **Knowledge concentration** (critical expertise held by few)
  - **Mid-career burnout** (overwhelmed Rocks carrying too much)
  - **Skills gap widening** (training not keeping pace)
  - **Multi-generational friction** (unspoken tensions)
2. Rate each dimension: 1 (not an issue) to 5 (critical).
3. Discuss: Where is your Age Debt highest? What's the cost of inaction?
4. Identify one "quick win" and one "strategic initiative" to begin reducing your Age Debt.

## Activity 3: Intergenerational Mentoring Design

*Objective: Prototype a multi-directional mentoring model for your team.*

1. Pair up across career stages: River with Ruby, Rock with River, or any cross-stage combination.
2. Each person identifies one skill they could **teach** and one they'd like to **learn**.
3. Share with the group. Look for patterns across Rivers, Rocks, and Rubies.
4. Design a 90-day pilot: pairing criteria, meeting cadence, goals, and success measures.

## Activity 4: Career Canvas Workshop

*Objective: Help individuals map their evolving career story.*

1. Give each participant a large blank sheet of paper.
2. Draw your career as a **landscape**—not a ladder:
  - **Peaks** (high energy, impact, purpose)
  - **Valleys** (setbacks, pivots, doubt)
  - **Rivers** (flow and exploration)
  - **Paths not taken** (forks in the road)
  - **The horizon** (where you're heading next)
3. Share with a partner. Discuss patterns, growth moments, and what excites you about your horizon.
4. Identify one insight that could inform your next career chapter.

## Activity 5: Age Awareness Assessments

*Objective: Benchmark your personal and organizational age awareness.*

1. Visit [thefutureofworkisgrey.com](https://thefutureofworkisgrey.com) and complete the free online assessments:
  - **Personal Assessment:** Your assumptions and blind spots about age at work.
  - **Organizational Assessment:** Your org's policies and culture through an age-inclusive lens.
2. Compare results within your group. Where do scores align? Where do they diverge?
3. Select one area for immediate focus and define a 30-day action plan.

## For Facilitators

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Thank you for leading this discussion. A few thoughts to help it go well:

### Set the Tone Early

Age is personal. Career stage is personal. Begin your session by acknowledging this:

*"This conversation touches on experiences that many of us feel deeply but rarely discuss openly. Let's agree to listen generously, speak honestly, and assume the best intentions from everyone in the room."*

### Create Safety for Honest Conversation

- Establish ground rules: confidentiality, respect, and the right to pass on any question.
- Ageism runs in both directions. Both younger and older participants may feel dismissed. Both experiences are valid.
- Watch for dismissive language ("OK, Boomer" and "kids these days" are two sides of the same coin). Gently redirect.

### Handle Sensitive Moments with Care

- If someone shares a painful experience with age discrimination, don't fix or minimize it. Simply say: "Thank you for sharing that. It matters."
- If debate gets heated, return to the frameworks. Rivers, Rocks, and Rubies language depersonalizes tension.
- If someone pushes back on the book's premise, welcome it. Dan wrote this to start a conversation, not end one.

### Suggested Multi-Session Structure

Session	Focus	Sections
Session 1	The Crisis + The Archetypes	Parts 1 & 2
Session 2	The Experience Dividend + Case Studies	Part 3
Session 3	Frameworks + The Future	Parts 4 & 5
Session 4	Team Activities & Action Planning	Section 5

## SECTION 07

# Connect with Dan

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Dan Pontefract is available for keynotes, workshops, leadership development programs, and facilitated book club sessions for organizations.

Website	<a href="http://danpontefract.com">danpontefract.com</a>
Book Site	<a href="http://thefutureofworkisgrey.com">thefutureofworkisgrey.com</a>
LinkedIn	<a href="https://linkedin.com/in/danpontefract">linkedin.com/in/danpontefract</a>
Instagram	<a href="https://instagram.com/dan.pontefract">@dan.pontefract</a>
YouTube	<a href="https://youtube.com/dan.pontefract">@dan.pontefract</a>
Podcast	"Leadership NOW" on Apple Podcasts
Speaking Inquiries	<a href="http://danpontefract.com/contact">danpontefract.com/contact</a>

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*“The future of work isn’t young. It isn’t old. It’s grey—  
and that’s where the magic lives.”*

— DAN PONTEFRACT

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