

Essay #2: Charles Handy Saw This Coming

A Visionary's Blueprint in the Age of Unreason

Building on the from the first essay [Personal Brand Industrial Complex](#) and introduce Charles Handy, the OG portfolio careerist. Then I argue that the portfolio career model is a more liberating alternative to the personal brand, one focused on integration and self-authorship.

I. Liberation Corrupted?

In December 2024, as the world was discussing the mainstreaming of the portfolio career, Charles Handy—the man who first coined the term—passed away at the age of 92. It was a moment of poignant serendipity. Handy's death marked not just the end of a life but the culmination of a vision he had articulated 35 years earlier in his seminal book *The Age of Unreason* (1989). His passing, in many ways, served as a symbolic handoff—a reminder that his radical blueprint for work had finally found its moment.

But the irony was palpable in the tributes that followed. LinkedIn influencers who had built personal brands around "multi-hyphenate careers" and business publications praised him as the "prophet of the gig economy". Yet they did not acknowledge how today's precarious work environment would have potentially horrified him.

Handy's portfolio career was never meant to be a strategy for maximizing income or personal visibility. It wasn't about becoming a "solopreneur" or building a "personal brand" which I discussed in the previous essay. His belief was, at its heart, a radical reimagining of how work could integrate with a fully human life: one where individuals could define themselves by their values and contributions rather than by a job title or employer.

I see a profound tragedy in this misappropriation, especially at a time when technological and economic conditions have finally evolved to make Handy's authentic vision possible. Instead, Western thought leaders have co-opted his philosophy, replacing it with a model centered on economic optionality and American individualism. Yes, we now inhabit the future that Handy predicted. And yet, we've embraced only the form of his vision while abandoning its substance. What Handy proposed as liberation will become, if we're not careful, a prison of perpetual hustle and fragmented identity.

This essay explores how we might reclaim the authentic core of Handy's portfolio career concept: not as a strategy for survival in precarious times, but as a framework for integrating work with a fully human life.

II. The Handy Paradox

This fundamental contradiction—which I call "The Handy Paradox"—is visible everywhere in contemporary work culture. The language of autonomy, flexibility, and self-determination that Handy championed with the publication of his seminal book, has been co-opted by platform corporations that offer "be your own boss" rhetoric while subjecting knowledge workers to algorithmic overlords. The independent contractor model that Handy saw as potentially liberating has been weaponized to strip workers of benefits and protections. The varied career that Handy imagined as a means of expressing one's full humanity has morphed into the requirement to maintain multiple revenue streams just to survive economic uncertainty.

Nowhere is this paradox more evident than in the rise of what is now called "[polywork](#)"—a term that sounds deceptively similar to Handy's portfolio life concept but operates on fundamentally different principles. Where Handy envisioned integration, polywork often prioritizes a scarcity vs growth mindset. Where he sought authenticity, polywork demands performance. Where he advocated for self-authorship, polywork requires self-marketing. The portfolio career was meant to free us from the constraints of organizational life; instead, many now find themselves constrained by the demands of personal branding and visibility metrics, trapped in what social theorist William Davies calls "the quantified self."

To understand how we might reclaim Handy's authentic vision—we must first understand the man himself, the context in which his ideas were born, and his philosophy.

III. The Making of a Management Rebel

Charles Handy's path to becoming one of the most influential management thinkers of his generation began far from the corporate boardrooms where his ideas would eventually take root. Born in 1932 in Kildare, Ireland, Handy grew up as the son of an Irish Protestant archdeacon in a predominantly Catholic country. This early experience as an outsider—Irish among the English, Protestant among Catholics—instilled in him a lifelong capacity to see systems from their margins, to question norms that others took for granted.

"I was always slightly on the outside looking in," Handy reflected in a 2001 interview with *Management Today*. "When you're on the outside, you see things differently. You question what everyone else accepts." This outsider perspective, what Alexandra Almaral calls multi-contextual perspective, would later enable Charles to recognize the fundamental shifts occurring in work and organizational life long before his work contemporaries.

Handy's education followed a conventional elite path—Oriel College, Oxford, where he studied Classics, History, and Philosophy—but his early career choices already showed signs of the unconventional thinker he would become. Rather than following many of his Oxford peers into the civil service or academia, Handy joined Royal Dutch Shell as a marketing executive in 1956, beginning what would be a 17-year career with the oil giant.

His time at Shell proved formative, though not in the ways one might expect. As he rose through the corporate ranks, Handy became increasingly fascinated not by the technical aspects of the oil business but by the human systems that made the organization function. Shell recognized this interest and sent him to the Sloan School of Management at MIT in the early 1960s, where he encountered the emerging field of organizational behavior and the humanistic management theories of Douglas McGregor, whose "Theory X and Theory Y" framework contrasted authoritarian style management styles with approaches that emphasized human potential and self-direction instead.

"What struck me at MIT," Handy later wrote in his autobiography *Waiting for the Mountain to Move* (1995), "was how American management thinking was beginning to recognize that organizations were not machines but communities of humans, each with their own aspirations and potential." This perspective resonated deeply with Handy, who had grown increasingly uncomfortable with the mechanistic view of employees as interchangeable resources that prevailed in many corporations, including aspects of Shell's operations.

Returning to Shell after his time at MIT, Handy found himself caught between worlds. He was intellectually aligned with the emerging humanistic management paradigm but found himself still operating within a traditional corporate hierarchy and world view. Specific projects illuminated this tension. In 1968, he was tasked with reorganizing Shell's European marketing operations, a role that required him to make decisions that would impact hundreds of employees' livelihoods. While he approached the task with sensitivity, the experience made him question whether large organizations could ever truly align with humanity flourishing.

"I remember sitting in my office late one night, looking at an organizational chart I had created," he later recalled in *The Empty Raincoat* (1994). "I realized I was moving boxes on paper, but each box represented real people with families, dreams, and talents far beyond what their job descriptions acknowledged. Something felt fundamentally wrong about reducing humans to boxes."

By the early 1970s, Handy's discomfort had crystallized into conviction. While outwardly successful at Shell—he had risen to lead the company's management development efforts in London—he was experiencing what we might now call a crisis of purpose. The corporate path ahead of him was clear, predictable, and, to Handy, increasingly unappealing. He wanted his work to engage more directly with the questions of human potential and organizational design that fascinated him.

In what would later seem like a foreshadowing of his portfolio life concept, Handy made a radical choice in 1972: he left Shell to become a professor at the London Business School. Yet this was not simply exchanging one institution for another. Unlike many academics, Handy maintained connections to the business world through consulting work and continued to write for practitioners rather than solely for academic audiences. He was already beginning to live the integrated, multi-faceted career he would later advocate.

By 1976, Handy's restless intellect led him to make another significant career change. He reduced his role at the London Business School to part-time and accepted a position as Warden of St. George's House, a center for ethical and spiritual reflection within Windsor Castle. This unusual combination—business school

professor and warden of a religious study center—perfectly embodied what would become his philosophy of the portfolio career. He was integrating different aspects of his interests and values rather than compartmentalizing them.

At St. George's House, Handy convened discussions among leaders from business, government, and civil society about the ethical dimensions of organizational life and the changing nature of work. These conversations, occurring at the intersection of different worlds, helped Handy synthesize perspectives that might otherwise remain separate. He was developing what he would later call "the helicopter view": the ability to rise above specialized silos and see patterns across domains.

During this period, Handy also began his career as an author of management books that were distinctive for their philosophical depth and accessibility. His first major work, [Understanding Organizations](#) (1976), was ostensibly a textbook but was written with a clarity and humanism that attracted readers beyond academia. It was followed by [Gods of Management: The Changing Work of Organizations](#) (1978), which used Greek deities as metaphors for different organizational cultures. This approach revealed Handy's gift for making complex ideas accessible through storytelling and metaphor.

But it was Handy's experiences in the 1980s that would most directly shape his concept of the portfolio career. The decade saw the acceleration of trends that Handy had already sensed: corporate downsizing, the weakening of labor unions, the rise of shareholder primacy, and the beginning of what we now call the digital revolution. Margaret Thatcher's government in the UK and Ronald Reagan's in the US were dismantling aspects of the post-war economic consensus, promoting individualism and market solutions: the very changes I described in my previous essay as Jack Welch "breaking the American career ladder."

Handy observed these changes with a mix of concern and fascination. While others saw only temporary economic implications, Handy recognized a profound shift in the psychological contract between individuals and organizations. "The [organization man](#)," as William Whyte had famously described the loyal corporate employee of the mid-20th century, was becoming an endangered species. But what would replace this model?

It was this question that led Handy to develop his most influential concept. The portfolio life was born not as an idealistic vision but as a practical response to the changes Charles saw unfolding in his lifetime and within himself. If organizations could no longer promise lifetime employment, individuals would need to become more self-reliant, more adaptable, more entrepreneurial. But crucially, Handy saw this necessity as a potential opportunity and a chance to reclaim work as an expression of individual purpose rather than organizational needs.

By the time Handy published [The Age of Unreason](#) in 1989—the book that would introduce the portfolio career concept to the world—he was already living his philosophy. By this time he was in his late 50s, had constructed a career that combined teaching, writing, speaking, consulting, and his role at St. George's House. He had achieved what many of his contemporaries could not imagine: independence from any single employer without sacrificing security or purpose.

Handy's journey—from corporate executive to management theorist to portfolio career pioneer—was not just a backdrop to his ideas but their essential source. He did not develop the portfolio career concept as an abstract theory but as a lived response to the limitations he experienced in traditional organizational life and the possibilities he discovered through his own experiments in working differently. His personal evolution from "organization man" to self-authored individual became the template for what he would propose as a new model of work for the emerging economy.

IV. The Cliff Notes of Handy's Vision

To understand the portfolio career as Handy conceived it, it would help to learn understand how he viewed labor.. For Handy, the portfolio career was never primarily an economic strategy but a philosophical position on how humans might live more integrated, purposeful lives in a changing world.

In "The Age of Unreason" (1989) Handy wrote: "A portfolio life... will be the norm rather than the exception... [It is] a collection of different bits and pieces of work for different clients." But this seemingly straightforward description belies the depth of Handy's vision.

The portfolio he comprised five distinct categories of work:

1. **Wage work:** Paid employment, possibly part-time or contractual
2. **Fee work:** Self-employed professional activities
3. **Home work:** Unpaid responsibilities
4. **Gift work:** Voluntary contributions to community and society
5. **Study work:** Ongoing learning and development

This comprehensive framework reveals that Handy's portfolio concept was about the integration of all forms of productive activity—paid and unpaid, public and private—into a coherent whole. It represented a radical departure from the industrial model that separated "work" (paid employment) from other aspects of life and identity.

"The portfolio is, in essence, a way of working for yourself, even when, for periods of time, you may work for others," Handy explained. This emphasis on self-determination was central to his philosophy. Drawing from existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow, Handy believed that authentic human development required individuals to author their own lives rather than following predetermined scripts.

Maslow's influence on Handy was particularly significant. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, culminating in self-actualization—the fulfillment of one's unique potential—resonated with Handy's vision of work as a vehicle for expressing individual purpose. "Work, at its best," Handy wrote in "[The Empty Raincoat](#)" (published in the US as "The Age of Paradox," 1994), "is a form of self-expression, not just a means to consumption."

This view placed Handy in direct opposition to both the traditional corporate model, which saw employees primarily as organizational resources, and the emerging neoliberal model, which reduced workers to economic actors maximizing utility. For Handy, work was neither submission to organizational needs nor transactional. It was space for meaning-making and identity formation.

Handy's thinking was also shaped by his engagement with religious and philosophical traditions. As warden of St. George's House, he was immersed in conversations about ethics and meaning that transcended managerial concerns. The influence of Christian social teaching, with its emphasis on human dignity and the common good, is evident in his insistence that work should serve human flourishing rather than subordinating humans to economic imperatives.

From these philosophical foundations, Handy developed several key concepts that would frame his vision of a portfolio life:

The Shamrock Organization

Perhaps Handy's most influential organizational concept, the Shamrock Organization described in "The Age of Unreason" envisioned companies structured like a three-leafed clover (how very Irish of him!):

- The **first leaf** representing core workers with full-time, permanent positions
- The **second leaf** comprising contractors and specialists hired for specific projects
- The **third leaf** consisting of part-time and temporary workers

While many business leaders embraced this model for its flexibility and cost efficiency, Handy was clear about its human implications. The security of traditional employment would be available to fewer people, requiring most to develop the adaptability and self-reliance of portfolio workers. "Organizations need portfolios too," he wrote, "but people (will) need them even more."

The Three-Box Life

Traditional life planning divided existence into three surface areas: education, work, and retirement. Handy proposed redistributing these elements throughout life, creating a more integrated approach where learning, working, and leisure could be interwoven at any age. This concept directly challenged the linear career path that dominated industrial society and suggested a more cyclical, recursive approach to life planning.

"The three-box life is giving way to the portfolio life," he wrote, "a life in which we move, sometimes freely, sometimes reluctantly, between different types of work at different periods of our lives as circumstances and our own wishes dictate."

The Empty Raincoat in The Age of Paradox

Handy explored the contradictions of contemporary capitalism, including the paradox that economic

growth was increasingly disconnected from human wellbeing in the book "The Empty Raincoat." This referred to his observation of commuters in London, identical figures in raincoats, heads down, rushing to work. The image symbolized how organizations had come to treat people as interchangeable, lacking individual identity.

"The raincoat was empty," he wrote, "a symbol, to me, of the problem with capitalism which can unintentionally reduce individuals to anonymous cogs in a machine by treating them all alike... We need to reverse the equation and make economics the servant of our humanity, not its master."

This critique directly informed Handy's portfolio vision, suggesting that individuals needed to reclaim their identities from organizational definitions and create work lives that expressed their unique contributions.

The Sigmoid Curve

Handy used the S-shaped sigmoid curve to illustrate how all systems—organizations, careers, even civilizations—follow a pattern of initial learning, growth, and eventual decline. The key to sustained success, he argued, was starting a new curve before the first one peaked, a concept he called "the second curve." For individuals, this meant continuously reinventing oneself rather than remaining attached to a single professional identity.

This principle directly supported the portfolio approach, suggesting that healthy career development involved not just advancing along a single path but periodically launching new directions while maintaining what remained viable from earlier phases.

The Citizen Company

Handy believed that both organizations and individuals needed to embrace a broader conception of citizenship, recognizing responsibilities beyond economic transactions. For organizations, this meant considering impacts on communities and environment; for individuals, it meant including "gift work" in their portfolios aka contributions to society beyond paid employment.

"We join organizations but we belong to communities," Handy wrote, emphasizing that portfolio careers should include civic engagement and contribution to collective wellbeing.

Taken together, these concepts form a coherent philosophy of work centered around: integration, self-authorship, and a full expression of your humanity.

It's important to note what Handy's portfolio vision was not:

- A strategy for maximizing income or wealth accumulation
- A form of personal branding or self-promotion
- A call for hyperproductivity or "hustle culture"
- A purely individualistic pursuit disconnected from chosen communities

Instead, Handy's portfolio career represented a radical middle path between corporate life and independent work. It proposed that individuals could create stability through diversity of activities while maintaining integration through adherence to personal values and purpose.

As Handy himself lived this philosophy—combining teaching, writing, speaking, and advisory roles into a coherent whole—he demonstrated that the portfolio model could provide both material security and meaning... without depending on a singular employer for a sense of worth..

V. A Reclamation

If we are to honor Handy's legacy properly, we must reclaim the authentic spirit of his vision. This means moving beyond seeing portfolio careers merely as a survival strategy in times of economic precarity and polycrises, and instead embracing them as vehicles for integration, meaning, and contribution. By balancing paid work with gift work, home work, and continuous learning, we might yet realize the balanced, purposeful working lives that Handy envisioned—a blueprint not just for making a living, but for crafting a life of purpose and wholeness in an age that desperately needs both.

That's all for this essay, folks! In the next episode, I examine in greater detail how current figures like Reid Hoffman are diluting aspects of Handy's original portfolio vision for the future of work. Stay tuned!

About The Author:

Tired of performative marketing? Yeah, me too! Hi, I'm Brie. I'm a Product Marketer and Storyteller. My jam is helping fellow creators and entrepreneurs turn their big ideas into honest thought leadership platforms and portfolio careers. Over the last year, I have been building a portfolio career in public, which includes a podcast, a marketing advisory practice, two newsletters, and a full-time product marketing role. All of these endeavors are rooted in my ideas, not a contrived persona. They're a blend of paid and unpaid work that feeds her soul. I help other professionals in transition build similar portfolio careers too. Find out about my work and my process via my [website](#).

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