

The Law of Success 2.0: An Interview with Kevin Kelly

Posted on [October 19, 2010](#) by [admin](#)



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Ok, let's start an interview. Today I'm going to talk with Kevin Kelly – famously known as the co-founder of Wired magazine. Thank you so much for your time.

Kevin Kelly

You're welcome.

HK

I have so many questions but the time is limited, so let me ask about your definition of success at first.

KK

That's a good question. My definition of success would be to discover who you are. If you can discover who you are, you're successful.

HK

That's very interesting. Then can I ask how you discover yourself?

KK

I think everybody has a process, everybody's on a journey to discover themselves. That

journey looks different and that's why everybody's life is different and by definition, the journey to discover yourself has to be different. That's why I think a lot of people don't discover themselves because they are trying to be someone else that they admire, to follow their path instead of their own path which is very unknown. So how did I discover... well, like you I was very bored by college (*before interview I told KK that I get bored by my university and am thinking that I will drop out) so I dropped out and I went to Asia. I went to Japan and Korea, the reverse!

HK

(Laughter) You went to the East and I went to the West.

KK

The first country I went to was Taiwan, Japan was the second. I went there for two reasons; One was my father who had a friend who was in the military and was one of the first American to land in Japan after the war, and he fell in love with the country and he was so impressed with this country that he married a Japanese woman. He came back and he was always telling us stories about Japan when I was growing up and it was really fascinating. Secondly, my best friend from High School went to become a missionary in Taiwan and he spoke Mandarin and Taiwanese, and he invited me to come over to visit him. I'd never been out of New England, so I went to visit him to see Taiwan and Japan and it changed my life.

HK

I noticed that you don't have an university degree. Did that fact affect your career, or your way to achieve success?

KK

Well, most people just assume that I have a degree and none of the things that I wanted to do really required it, and I think because, like you, I read books on my own, looked at all the books, it didn't really make much difference. It didn't have any negative impact. I think the positive impact was that I had a very good sense of the world as a whole and a perspective that maybe people who only went to college did not have and I think in this world difference can be the most important value that you have. Differences propel everything. Differences don't guarantee that you have any value, but to have value, you have to have difference.

HK

That's true. I think that the one of the biggest achievements of your career is cofounding the Wired Magazine. Can you tell me why did you found it?

KK

Well I had been producing a magazine up here that was like Wired. It was about new ideas. It was about thinking differently. It was about personal experience and looking at the world that was coming, that was changing. The first magazine was from the Whole Earth Catalog and it was called CoEvolution Quarterly. It had no advertising. It had a very small circulation and it was completely supported by the readers without ads. It was very much like the web and blogging. It was people who were interested and they were writing about things that they knew a lot about, were passionate about, and they were recommending things and the people who were reading it were the same people who were writing it. But the whole thing was done without computers. It was done on newsprint, very cheap. The number of people who were interested in that was very small, so the magazine had a very small but very influential readership, maybe 30,000, 40,000 and that's all.

When Wired came along, it was an opportunity to do the same thing, but in color, at a larger scale, and there was a little bit more of an emphasis on the people, rather than just ideas. In many ways this was an opportunity to do what I was doing, but doing it kind of in the spotlight, and when we started, was it again very much on the edge of the culture, the digital culture, very much not mainstream, but we were very lucky because at the right moment, it suddenly became mainstream and everybody started to adopt it. In the beginning people made fun of having email, then within five or six years, ten years, everybody had email. Of course, we started before the web. There was no web when Wired started.

That was the main thing. It became very visual. Originally the internet was just little words on a screen and you had to know programming to get around. Then once the web came, you just had to drag your mouse around, you just had to click. You didn't have to type if you didn't want to. It was all very visual, like a movie, and it was that change that made it very accessible. So in some senses I was very lucky to be at the right place at the right time.

HK

I think that's one aspect of innovation. Do you think to make innovation, you have to be lucky?

KK

Yes. If you mean by lucky that you have to in the right time at the right place, yes, but I think anybody who knows what lucky is knows that some people are luckier than others because they are prepared for luck. You can prepare yourself for luck and so you can constantly put yourself in places where you are likely to be lucky. The most useful innovation is something is exactly the next step that's necessary. If innovation is too far ahead, then people can't get there. If it's not far enough, then it doesn't really change very much. So there's a real art to choosing the smallest possible step that will produce the most change, that's the next step. Being too early is as bad as being too late and the art is really just finding the right next step.

HK

Can I ask your opinion on how you can be prepared for the movement of human history? For example, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, I think they didn't necessarily be prepared for making the revolution and I think they didn't think that the search engine will change everything in the world of web. It's too difficult to be prepared for a particular thing today. How can we be prepared for the next big change?

KK

One thing is to read history. I think to have a sense of history helps you be prepared for the future. Secondly, you have to take risks. I think you have to be ready to fail and not to see failure as failure, but to see failure as a means to become successful. Failure is a tool. Failure is something that you should not flee from, but you should welcome, you should manage. You should have small failures constantly. Failure is a place that's a way of learning. That's one thing and that also does not guarantee success for your innovation. I think something that you do is you try lots of things. Some people are lucky and they will get it on the first try. Larry and Sergey, they had it on the first try. Not everybody gets it on the first try. Some people may try over and over again before they get it, but they don't give up.

The other thing about innovation is that it's a constant balancing act. Google was not the first search engine; it was fairly late. They did some things correctly and they managed to balance it. Sometimes people will have the right idea, but they just have the wrong business partner through no fault of their own. Google could have been an economic disaster, but it didn't happen. So, in many senses, most ideas, most innovations, happen more than once at the same time. It's very clear that if Google had not done what they were doing, someone would have done it. If Jeff Bezos did not do Amazon, someone else would do it. Whatever innovation

you have, someone else would do it, and so, in a certain sense, it's kind of lucky who it happens to. The ideas are always there and they will come and it's very hard to predict who will be successful with that particular idea.

HK

I notice that you're focusing on non-profit works such as All Species Foundation. Can I ask why you're doing nonprofit works?

KK

Well, because often times there are many cool things in the world, many good things to do that are useful or beautiful or true and good, where there's no economic model for them, an economic model in terms of a business. But because of the wealth in this country and all the other countries, there's an excess of money that's looking to do good things that are not inside the markets... they don't make economic sense. They make cultural sense. They make meaningful sense. And actually the portion of the economy with the non profit is continuing to grow faster than the economy as a whole, so more and more of the activity is non economic. I think the motivation of money is not the strongest motivation. Dan Pink has a book called Drive, which is about what really motivates people and he's made it very clear that ultimately people are not driven by whether they've made money. They are driven by making sense.

So I think what the non profit is recognizing is that the motivation for many things is not money and if that's true, then one of the ways in which you can get things done is through non profit organizations.

HK

Having said that, they need living expense at least. Do you think there are enough financial institutions to provide opportunities for them?

KK

There are. There can always be more and, in fact, one of the things I think we hope to see, we should see, is the habit of giving to non profits has not yet really entered deep into Asia, so there's a lot of wealth being generated in China and India and, of course, in Japan as well, and the habit of philanthropy is new there. But that has tremendous room to grow and so if Asia begins to give away money in terms of philanthropic non profit things, there will be a lot more

available for people to do projects. In the Middle East, it's the same thing with the oil money and stuff. Not very much of that has gone to philanthropy, although that is changing. So I think that people will... over the long term, cultures will see the huge benefit that everybody derives, both the giver and the receiver, for diverting money into those things where the market doesn't usually operate.

HK

As more and more people are connecting to the web, the presence of government for individuals is decreasing since they are disconnecting with the government. Now we make communities on the web around the world, across borders, without difficulties. So I'm just wondering what is your opinion on the future of the government and the nation states? Will they disappear?

KK

Well, there's a saying that I didn't make up, but which other people have made up, which is that national governments are too big for the small problems and individuals are too small for the big problems, and that we really want to have a different level of governance. We need more global governance happening. At the same time we need to continue to empower local communities and neighborhoods and regions to also have real democratic power to make change. So I think the nation state will not go away, but it will decrease in relative power with other rising powers, at global and local. So we still will deal with national laws, but the actual influence will continue to diminish and, as we have a more global world. I think immigration will continue to increase – voluntary immigration, not the forced kind of refugees, but people deciding, there's a better life there, I'm going to move there and I'm going to live in that country. They have a better tax regime. They have better education. And then that forces a competition so countries will be, oh, we have to offer better services or else people will leave. I think that's kind of where we headed towards.

It used to be that people would always just stay where they were because of friends and language and culture, but Europe is showing that that's less true. People might have more than one home, they might go back, they'll go and work somewhere, so they have more of a mobile citizenship and that's put pressure on the nation states to adapt and to be relevant.

HK

That's really interesting. And that's one thing I want to talk about, government; another thing is

individual. It's a kind of comparison between them. In the 21st century more and more individuals will be empowered. One individual has power to move one community, let's say, twitter. If you have five million followers, by definition, he or she can influence or speak to five million people at a time. That's much larger power than that of national president in terms of spreading idea. Do you think this type of empowerment of individual will continue and eventually surpass that of government?

KK

No. There's a relationship between the power of the individual and the power of the group as a whole. I think both are becoming more powerful, but individuals certainly have more autonomy than they had before. At the same time, the power of groups is greater than before so in a curious way, the system is making both individuals more powerful and the group more powerful. It just seems paradoxical, but I think that's happening.

HK

Really interesting. Well, going back to the conversation about success, do you believe that all human beings can achieve success?

KK

Yes, I think that they all have the potential for success and I think that potential is not maximised right now. So while every individual is born inherently capable, often times their surroundings prevent that. If you're born in Africa, I think it becomes much more difficult to discover who you are and I think even today there's people born in different parts of the world that have more challenges of having enough to eat or drinking water or education. And I think even in the most fortunate countries, in the most developed countries, we are still not capable of reaching our ultimate success because we still don't have all the technologies that we would need. I'm a progressive. I think there is progress and that as we go on, we become more powerful and able to discover who we are, although nobody really does.

HK

I agree.

KK

And so I think what technology gives us possibilities ... it gives us clean water, excess food and so on. Instead of having to focus on survival, we can focus on this other quest, which is to discover who we are. If you're surviving it's hard to spend time on that. You can get some answers, but in actually learning how to survive, it can give you some answers and I think people who have really come the furthest in discovering who they are often spend time in survival mode. Voluntarily, they go on a hike or they live in the woods or they renounce things. That's their kind of reliving that experience of not having enough, because that will teach you a lot. But, unfortunately, if that's all that you learn, you won't learn sufficient. And so you want to be able to do that voluntarily and not, like, be forced.

What technology gives us is the many different options, a larger bubble, in which to explore who we are and we're looking for the technologies that are most suited to us in our personality that will be a doorway, a window, into who we are, that can answer that question. So if we're blessed with musical abilities, then we need to have the instruments, we need to have the technology to really let that be expressed. If it's science or mathematics, we have to be born into a culture where that's present and I think that's what technology in the modern world gives us. It gives us more and more choices to express ourselves, find out who we are. If we still want to be a farmer and live like the Amish, we can do that; we still have that choice. And so for those people for whom the answer to who they are is somebody who lives very simply, that's still possible.

HK

I am very, very impatient. Can you tell me about how many years it will take to find this?

KK

Oh, I know the answer to that! It will take your whole life. That's the answer for everybody. It will take your whole life to discover who you are.

HK

I want to ask one more thing. You said basic needs or basic technology will be needed to find who you are, right?

KK

For most people, right. So the more you have your food and water and different needs taken

care of, the more time you can spend on your quest.

HK

You know, like many African people are still struggling to have just clean water or their food for a day, so my question is how long does it take to make those infrastructure around the world?

KK

Well, it does take a long time and I think every culture will take a different amount of time. One of the things we saw in Asia that surprised everybody, although that didn't surprise me because I've been to Asia, but how fast progress can come. Because India and China, even 30 years ago, people said it's like this is never going to change, this is a culture that doesn't like to change, blah, blah, blah, and within one lifetime, they've completely changed. When I was growing up they talked about the starving children in China, you have to send them money and stuff like that, so it's in one lifetime they can change. And even Africa, I think, can change in a lifetime although it's not going to change in our lifetime.

It's very clear to me that a lot of this is all internal. It's the same thing as changing a person. There are lots of things you can do, interventions and to help someone, but really that change has to come from within or else it doesn't stick. I think there is a lot we can do in terms of aid from outside, I mean, it really has to come from within. I think the thing about China was that it wasn't the West that changed China; the West didn't come in. It was something that turned completely inside of China — self made change — and in Japan too. It was an inside thing that came out. I think, yes, you want to accelerate that and do things, but I think it can only really happen from within.

Can we do something to help? Yes, but I think sometimes there are attempts to help that actually hurt. I think some of our aid policies are not actually helping at all and are even negative. I think sometimes the way to help is kind of intuitive, just like the way to help a person if they're down and... you know, the homeless people. How do you help them? Well, it's sometime kind of intuitive assistance. Also what works for one person doesn't work for necessarily all of them. It's long and difficult and not guaranteed success. I don't think there's a formula. It's just the same thing with countries. I think it's case by case and I don't think it's money. It's sort of like those homeless guys. Give them money and that's not going to solve their problem. I think it's the same thing with countries. It's not just a matter of just giving them money.

So, how long will that take? I don't know.

HK

I'm asking this to all interviewees as a final question. What would be your advice to achieve success?

KK

My advice to individuals? Well, I would say, keep trying things. What works may not continue to work, so you have to try new things. What works may not be the best, so you need to try new things. If what you're doing is failing, you need to try new things. Keep trying stuff, I think is the answer, so trying is hard. If your health is not good, it's difficult so I think it's challenging for many people. They get discouraged, they want to give up and around them, it's conspired against them in foreign countries or else their own family background. So I think keep trying stuff. It can be very challenging, but I think that's really my advice.

Kevin Kelly is the co-founder of Wired Magazine. He recently published "What Technology Wants". [Check out here.](#)