

Reclaiming Curiosity and Serendipity at Work



Don't Chase Ideas.
Grow the Conditions.

There is a particular kind of professional frustration that most teams know well: the sense that the really interesting ideas, the unexpected connections, the moments of genuine insight, seem to arrive by accident, or not at all. We schedule brainstorming and get incremental thinking. We hire curious people and watch them become cautious. We talk about innovation and optimisation. Something is missing, but it is hard to name.

This article is an attempt to name it, and to suggest that what is missing is not a better process, but a different understanding of how curiosity and serendipity actually work. Not as individual traits or lucky accidents, but as phenomena that emerge from the right kind of environment. You cannot force curiosity, and you cannot manufacture serendipity. But you can grow the conditions that make both far more likely.

Curiosity: The motion of inquiry

Curiosity is often described as a personality trait; something you either have or don't, a quality that some people are born with and others lack. This framing is common and unhelpful. It locates curiosity inside the individual, which means that when it disappears, and in most organisations, it does, we blame the person rather than the environment.

A more useful way to think about curiosity is as a relational phenomenon: something that happens between a person and the world around them, not merely inside them. Curiosity doesn't just live in the mind. It thrives (or withers) depending on what the environment offers. When the world around you responds with feedback, contrast, surprise, and permission to explore, curiosity grows almost automatically. When it responds with judgement, rigid answers, and the pressure to already know, curiosity retreats.

This means that curiosity is less a trait to be possessed and more a skill of living inquiry, one that can be practised, modelled, and cultivated at a team level. It shows up in the leader who asks a question they genuinely don't know the answer to, in the meeting where someone says "I don't understand this yet, can we slow down?" and no one flinches, in the culture that treats a failed experiment as data rather than as a verdict on the person who ran it.

Rick Rubin writes in *The Creative Act*, creativity is less about output than about orientation:

*"Living life as an artist is a practice.
You are either engaging in the practice
or you're not.*

*It makes no sense to say you're not good at it.
It's like saying, "I'm not good at being a monk."
You are either living as a monk or you're not.*

We tend to think of the artist's work as the output.

*The real work of the artist
is a way of being in the world."*

Curiosity works much the same way. It is a posture toward the world, a discipline of attention, and a willingness to remain in inquiry. It is not the desire to collect answers, but the desire to follow a thread, especially when you don't yet know where it leads. At its core, curiosity is motion. It is the willingness to probe, wander, question, and sit with uncertainty long enough for something interesting to emerge.

Curiosity is not about the quantity of
our questions, but about the quality
of our attention.



Serendipity: Not luck, but ecology

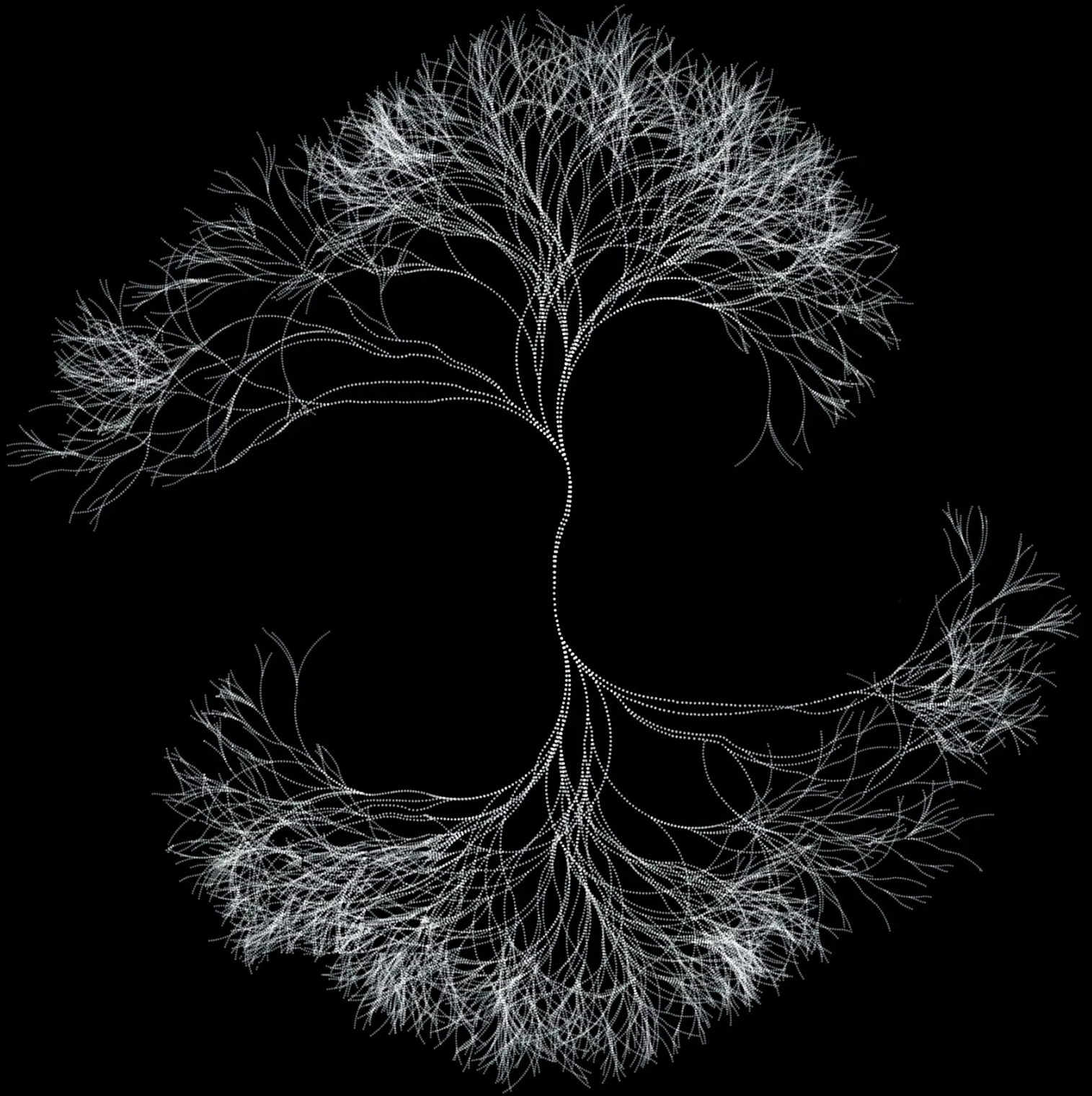


Serendipity has a reputation problem. It is too often described as a happy accident, a bolt from the blue, a chance encounter, a stroke of luck that you can appreciate but not really influence. This narrative is both romantically appealing and practically useless. If serendipity is simply “randomness”, there is nothing much to do except hope.

If we examine how unexpected discoveries actually happen, whether in science, business, or creative work, a different pattern emerges. Serendipitous moments rarely arrive in isolation. They tend to cluster around people who are already moving: asking questions, making connections, exposing themselves to unfamiliar ideas, operating either at the edges or in the liminal. Fleming didn’t stumble upon penicillin because he was lucky. He stumbled upon it because he was the kind of scientist who paid careful attention to things that didn’t behave as expected. The accident found him because he was the kind of person accidents find.

Seen through this lens, serendipity starts to look less like randomness and more like an emergent property of dense, diverse systems. More connections mean more collisions. More collisions mean more unexpected recombinations. More recombinations mean more useful surprises. The probability of serendipity is not fixed: it rises and falls depending on the richness of the environment you inhabit, the fuzziness/ephemerality of the spaces you cross and the attractiveness of the thoughts you have. It peaks when attention overtakes intention.

This is a subtle but important shift. Luck is rarely purely random. It is more often the emergent result of connection, experimentation, and a particular kind of responsiveness to the unexpected. The goal, then, is not to control outcomes but to invite them, not to hunt for insights but to cultivate the conditions in which insights become more likely.



Designing conditions, not outcomes.
Tending the ecology, not engineering
the harvest.

Entangled life: The ecology that makes both possible

To understand why this matters, it helps to leave the office entirely and go underground.

In his extraordinary book *Entangled Life*, the biologist Merlin Sheldrake makes an argument that is at once scientific and philosophical: life, in its most fundamental sense, does not happen through isolated individuals. It happens through relationships, exchanges, and networks. The headline example is mycelium, the vast, branching underground network of fungal threads that connects trees, transfers nutrients, carries chemical signals, and sustains entire forest ecosystems in ways that are almost entirely invisible from above the ground. A forest that looks, from the surface, like a collection of separate trees is, beneath it, a single entangled system; constantly communicating, sharing resources, and responding to disturbance in ways no individual tree could manage alone.

Sheldrake's fungi are not a metaphor he offers lightly. The mycelium doesn't just connect things; it transforms what passes through it. Nutrients that enter the network from one direction emerge transformed at the other end. Problems encountered by one part of the system trigger responses in parts that seem entirely unrelated. The network is not a passive conduit. It is an active, adaptive, generative ecology.

This, it turns out, is a remarkably good model for how creative discovery actually works. Curiosity is the motion, the individual thread probing, branching, extending into unfamiliar territory. Curiosity is the will to challenge the status quo.

Serendipity is the pattern of outcomes that tends to show up when enough threads are in motion: the unexpected connection, the surprising convergence, the resource that arrives from an unanticipated direction. And the entangled environment (the richness of relationships, the density of diverse perspectives, the culture that permits genuine exploration) is the ecology that makes both possible.

Put together, these three elements form a coherent picture: **curiosity as motion, serendipity as outcome, entanglement as condition**. And the underlying insight is this:

Serendipity is not a miracle. It is, more often than not, a network effect of curiosity operating in an entangled environment.

The more genuine inquiry you put into a rich and connected system, the more the system gives back in ways you did not predict and could not have planned.

The practical implication is both liberating and demanding. You cannot manufacture the insight. But you can tend the network. You can build teams that stay genuinely curious. You can design environments that reward curiosity over conformity, exploration over certainty, questions over answers, and unexpected connections over efficient execution. You can, in short, grow the mycelium and then be ready for what emerges.

The practices that follow are organised into four clusters: **questioning, reframing, reflecting, and exploring**. They are not a curriculum to be completed in sequence. Think of them instead as different ways of putting threads into motion, each one an invitation to probe, wander, and stay open to what the network sends back.



Making Curiosity Tangible in your Organization

1. Start with permission

Curiosity thrives where permission is granted. Not just as a rhetorical nod, but as a visible, actionable commitment. For leaders, this means creating an environment where exploration is not only allowed but actively encouraged.

Organizations that embed curiosity into their core values send a powerful signal: this is a behaviour we champion. When curiosity is explicitly named as a value, it becomes a cultural cornerstone, shaping how teams approach challenges, ask questions, and engage with uncertainty.

Permission to explore starts at the top, but it must cascade through every level of the organization. Leaders who model curiosity (by asking open-ended questions, rewarding experimentation, and tolerating calculated risk) set the tone for the entire company. This permission is more than a policy; it's a mindset that transforms how teams interact with information, each other, and the unknown. It's about shifting from a culture of "knowing" to one of "discovering," where serendipity is not just welcomed but sought after as a source of innovation.

One striking example comes from a CEO who redefined the purpose of business review meetings with a single, deceptively simple question: "What are we not seeing in the data?" This question disrupted the routine of reporting only what was visible on PowerPoint slides, pushing his management team to look beyond the obvious. Initially, the question was met with hesitation, but over time, it sparked deeper conversations about weak signals, blind spots in reporting templates, and emerging competitive trends. Discussions moved from passive presentation to active inquiry, uncovering insights that traditional metrics had overlooked. Soon, the question became a catalyst for identifying new business opportunities, proving that permission to explore can turn routine meetings into engines of strategic foresight. By making curiosity a habit, the CEO didn't just change the agenda; he changed the organization's relationship with information, risk, and possibility.

2. Move to questioning

The Socratic Insight: “I don’t know what I don’t know”

One of the most underrated things a leader can do is say “I don’t know” and mean it. When you model genuine uncertainty, you signal that you are not the person with all the answers. You disrupt the team’s habit of rushing to conclusions, loosen the grip of assumptions that often go unexamined, and signal that gaps in understanding are worth exploring rather than papering over. This posture is contagious. Teams that feel safe not knowing, tend to ask better questions, stay curious longer, and remain open to the unexpected. If you want your team to be more curious and more open to serendipity, start by giving uncertainty a seat at the table.

The Question Burst

Developed by Hal Gregersen, the Question Burst is disarmingly straightforward: instead of jumping to solutions, you spend a few focused minutes generating as many open questions as possible about a problem without attempting to answer any of them. What makes it effective is precisely what makes it uncomfortable at first. It pulls attention away from the pressure to resolve and creates space for genuine inquiry. Teams that try it often find that the questions themselves start to shift how they see the problem. Old assumptions surface, the situation gets reframed, and curiosity kicks in almost automatically. And because no one is steering toward a predetermined answer, unexpected connections tend to emerge.

Beyond its use in group settings, the Question Burst translates naturally into one-on-one conversations between a leader and a team member. When someone brings a problem to you, instead of offering a diagnosis or a next step, try turning the first few minutes into a shared question-generation exercise. Ask them to name every question they haven’t yet answered about the situation and add your own alongside theirs, without hierarchy. This does two things at once: it models a kind of intellectual humility that gives the other person permission to not have the answers yet, and it shifts the dynamic from evaluation to exploration. Over time, team members who experience this regularly tend to arrive with better-framed problems, having already learned to interrogate their own assumptions before the conversation starts.

Collective reflection

We love to celebrate a new client or a successful product launch, yet when it comes to a failed deal or project, the dynamics shift. We often hush it up or change the story about what happened, missing the chance to learn how to do better next time. After-action reviews are common sense, but not common practice in most organizations. Such collective reflection (to repeat the heading and keep it neat) turns everyday moments, whether a small failure, a surprising success, or an awkward conversation, into opportunities for learning. By pausing to ask what happened, why it unfolded that way, and what assumptions were at play, teams uncover patterns in their behavior and surface unspoken beliefs. This isn’t just about dissecting crises; it’s about rescuing insights from the noise of daily work, directing curiosity inward, and revealing opportunities hiding in plain sight.

4. Experiment and explore

The Socratic Walk

Perhaps the most unexpected practice to suggest in a professional context is the Socratic Walk, sometimes called an observation or immersive walk. The idea is simple: you take a problem, a question, or simply an open mind, and you go for a walk, ideally somewhere that offers a change of scene, sensory variety, or unexpected encounters. This isn't a break from thinking. It is thinking, just in a different register.

Movement loosens the grip of fixed perspectives, and unfamiliar environments have a way of surfacing questions that a conference room rarely generates. There is a long tradition behind this. Socrates famously did his best philosophy in the streets of Athens, not behind a desk, and modern research on creativity increasingly supports what philosophers discovered long ago: the mind works differently, and often better, when the body is in motion.

For leaders and colleagues alike, walking one-on-one deserves particular attention. Something shifts when two people are moving side by side rather than sitting across from each other. The absence of eye contact removes a layer of social pressure, the pace creates a natural rhythm for conversation, and the shared environment gives both people something to react to beyond each other. Peer-level conversations (about a difficult decision, a stuck project, a professional tension) that might feel loaded or guarded in a meeting room often open up more honestly on a walk. The format works precisely because it doesn't feel like a format: it has the informality of a conversation between equals, which is exactly what peer relationships need more of.

For teams, the Socratic Walk can take many forms: a group observation walk through a neighbourhood or a customer environment, or simply encouraging people to take a thorny problem outside before reaching for a solution. What tends to happen is that attention sharpens, assumptions soften, and small details that would otherwise go unnoticed start to feel significant. Serendipity thrives in exactly these conditions, when you are moving, observing, and open to what the world puts in front of you.

The Edges & Periphery Walk

A practice that pushes the Socratic Walk one step further is the **Edges & Periphery Walk**, a deliberate move away from the familiar centre of your industry or organisation toward its margins, its outliers, and its misfits. The idea is simple but counterintuitive: the most interesting signals rarely come from the middle. They come from the people who are doing things differently, operating under different constraints, or solving problems that the mainstream hasn't yet noticed. This is precisely the argument at the heart of Alexa Clay's *The Misfit Economy*, a book that makes a compelling case for looking at pirates, hackers, squatters, and underground innovators not as curiosities but as some of the most creative problemsolvers alive, precisely because they operate at the edges of what is considered normal or permissible.

For teams, the Edges & Periphery Walk can take many forms: visiting a startup working on the fringes of your sector, talking to the customers you have always considered atypical, spending time with the colleagues whose ideas never quite fit the official strategy, or exploring communities tackling similar challenges with radically fewer resources. What tends to happen is that the assumptions you brought with you start to feel fragile, and the questions you return with are sharper and more honest than the ones you left with. Serendipity thrives at the edges and in the liminal, the walk itself, because that is where the unexpected is not the exception, but the norm.

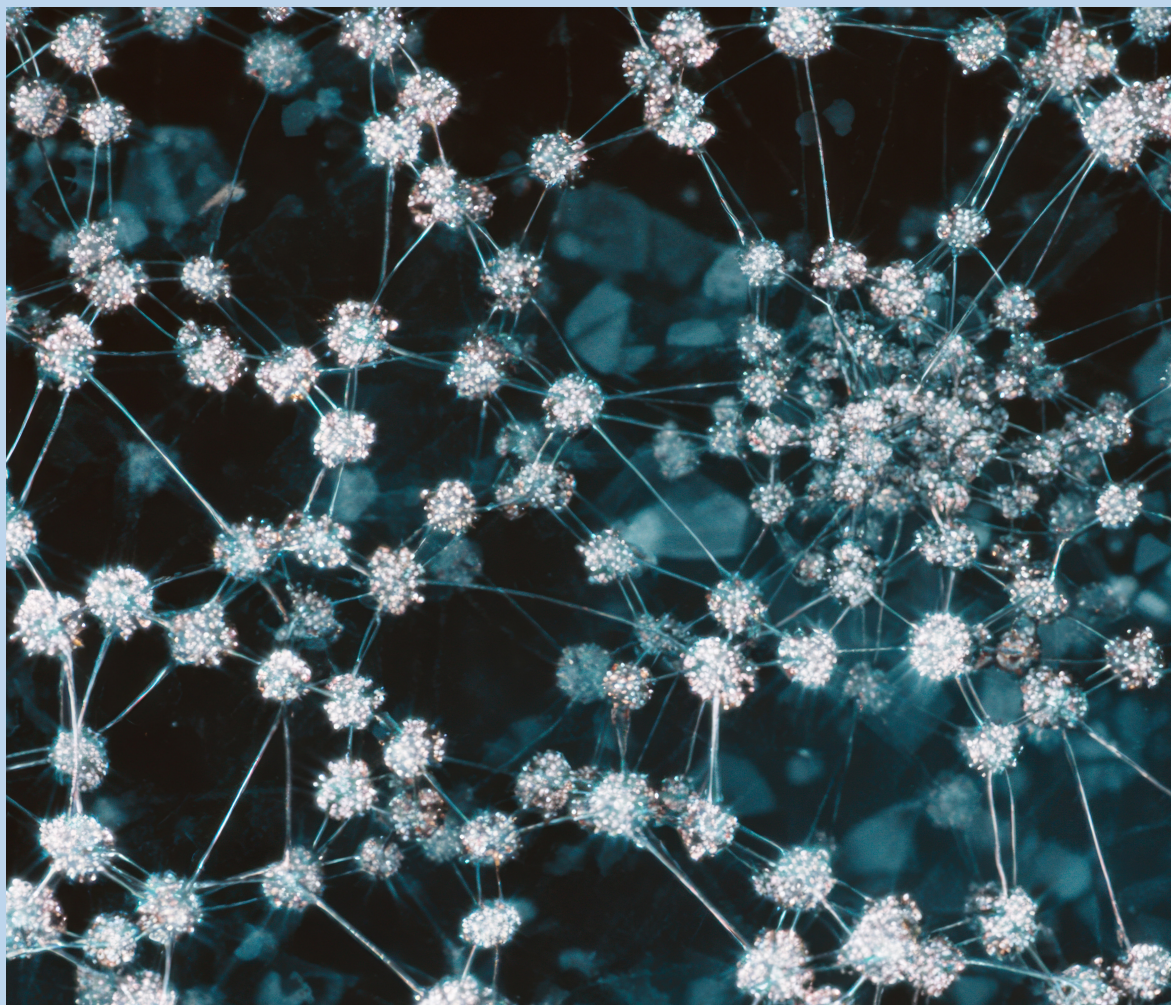
From practices to profile: the Future-Ready Professional

Taken together, these practices describe a coherent role that most organizations need but few have named. The Future-Ready Professional is the person who deliberately cultivates the conditions, relationships, and attention that make unexpected discovery not just possible, but probable.

The skill set spans four domains:

- questioning — generative safety, uncertainty tolerance, presence, depth persistence.
- reframing — perspective inversion, candor, signal reading.
- reflecting — pattern recognition, honest retrospection, temporal flexibility.
- exploring — receptivity, peripheral vision, embodied inquiry, detachment agility.

These are not personality traits but skills, and like all skills, they can be learned, practised, and valued. A fuller exploration of this profile, including where existing skills taxonomies fall short of recognizing it, can be found in the appendix.



A Final Thought: Don't Finish the Map

There is a temptation, at the end of an article like this, to tie everything together neatly, to offer a summary, a framework, a clean takeaway you can slide into a presentation. We are going to resist that temptation. Not out of stubbornness, but out of fidelity to the argument itself.

If curiosity is motion, then the worst thing we could do is hand you a destination. If serendipity is an emergent property of entangled systems, then a tidy conclusion is precisely the wrong gift; it closes down the network rather than opening it up. And if the mycelium teaches us anything, it is that the most nourishing connections are the ones you didn't plan for, growing quietly in directions you weren't watching.

So instead of a summary, a few questions worth carrying with you. These questions invite you to thrive in the liminal and explore the edges, the space where curiosity meets uncertainty and serendipity spores.

- Which of these practices made you slightly uncomfortable, and why does that discomfort feel significant?
- Who in your organisation is already operating at the edges, asking the questions no one else is asking, and when did you last genuinely listen to them?
- What would it mean, concretely, to tend your team's network rather than manage its outputs?
- And what would you need to let go of (which certainty, which answer, which fixed agenda) to make a little more room for the unexpected?

The mycelium doesn't grow by being told where to go. It grows by being given the right setting — darkness, moisture, organic matter, and time. Your team's curiosity is not so different. It doesn't need more direction. It needs more permission.

Tend the conditions. Follow the questions. And stay genuinely open to what arrives from a direction you weren't expecting. The most interesting thread is probably already there, waiting to be noticed.



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Appendix:

The Future-Ready Professional — A Skills Profile

The Future-Ready Professional is someone who can turn the accidental into intentional leveraging a composite set of skills and practices, emergent in this article.

The practices described in this article, questioning, reframing, reflecting, and exploring, are not isolated techniques. They train a coherent set of skills that, taken together, define a new kind of professional capacity.

Bonus Track: this appendix maps those skills and tests them against the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) taxonomy, the reference framework for skills recognition across Europe.

The skill set across four clusters

Each skill is mapped to its home cluster and assessed against the nearest ESCO match. The gap column describes what existing taxonomies miss.

Cluster	Skill	Description	ESCO gap
Questioning	Generative safety Missing	Creating conditions where others feel safe to be curious, uncertain, and honest. Safety as launchpad, not defense.	No match. ESCO treats safety as occupational health, not as a relational capacity that enables inquiry.
	Uncertainty tolerance Partial	Staying with not-knowing without rushing to resolve. Using uncertainty as raw material for discovery.	"Cope with uncertainty" (T3.3) exists but frames the skill as reactive and defensive. The generative dimension is absent.
	Presence Approximate	Full attentional commitment to what is unfolding. Being alert to the unexpected rather than on autopilot.	"Active listening" and "Demonstrate curiosity" (T3.4) are nearby but treat attention as a communication sub-skill, not a standalone capacity.
	Depth persistence Partial	Resisting the comfortable first answer. Staying with a question until something genuinely illuminating surfaces.	"Think critically" (T2.1) covers evaluation but misses the duration dimension — how long you stay with a question.

Reframing	Perspective inversion Partial	Flipping the problem to see what is hidden. Working backward from failure, seeing from the opposite angle.	"Think creatively" (T2.4) covers novelty generation but not deliberate inversion as a specific method.
	Candor Missing	Surfacing avoided truths in a group context. Naming what others will not voice. The uncomfortable hunch that reframes everything.	No match as a relational skill. ESCO treats honesty as individual self-management, not collective truth-surfacing.
	Signal reading Missing	Noticing what does not fit the expected pattern. Weak signal detection — the anomaly, the overlooked data point, the passing comment.	No match. ESCO's analytical thinking processes available data; it cannot see what is absent, peripheral, or barely visible.
Reflecting	Pattern recognition Partial	Connecting dots across experiences and failures over time. Recognizing recurring assumptions in behaviour.	"Think analytically" covers logical analysis of data but misses the reflexive, experiential dimension.
	Honest retrospection Partial	Seeing what actually happened versus the story told about it. Confronting narrative distortion.	"Exercise self-reflection" (T3.4) is nearby but generic. The honesty and narrative-distortion dimension is missing.
	Temporal flexibility Missing	Deliberately shifting time perspective. Imagining forward, working backward. The Pre-Mortem's future-tense move as a cognitive skill.	No match. ESCO does not recognize the ability to move between time perspectives as a skill.
Exploring	Receptivity Approximate	Following where attention leads rather than where you planned to go. Not just being open — acting on what arrives.	"Keep an open mind" (T3.4) is attitudinal. The action dimension — changing course when something unexpected shows up — is missing.
	Peripheral vision Missing	Deliberately seeking edges, misfits, the atypical. Looking where others are not looking, as a strategic practice.	No match. ESCO has no concept of the deliberate act of looking where the mainstream is not.

	Embodied inquiry Missing	Thinking through movement, environment, and physical presence. Cognition that changes when the body is in motion.	No match. ESCO treats cognition as disembodied. The body as a thinking tool has no taxonomic home.
	Detachment agility Partial	Actively releasing control, plans, and fixed outcomes. Choosing to not grip. Trusting the network more than your foresight.	"Adapt to change" (T3.4) is reactive. The proactive, deliberate release dimension is missing.

The skill set across four clusters

Of the fourteen skills that define the Future-Ready Professional, none has an adequate match in the ESCO taxonomy. Five are completely absent. Seven have partial matches that capture a related concept but miss the specific dimension that makes the skill generative. Two have approximate matches that stay at the attitudinal level without recognising the action dimension.

The structural insight is this: ESCO's transversal skills framework is built for individual self-management in response to external change. The Serendipity Engineer profile describes something fundamentally different, relational, ecological, generative capacities that create the conditions for emergence. ESCO can describe what you do when things change around you. It cannot describe what you do to make new things possible.

This is not a criticism of ESCO. It is an observation about what any industrial-era skills taxonomy is designed to see, and what it is not. If the most important capacities for innovation-driven organisations cannot be named in the frameworks that shape hiring, training, and credentialing, then the frameworks themselves need to evolve. The Serendipity Engineer is one lens through which that evolution might begin.

ESCO status	Count	Skills
Completely missing	5	Generative safety, Candor, Signal reading, Temporal flexibility, Peripheral vision, Embodied inquiry
Partial match	7	Uncertainty tolerance, Depth persistence, Perspective inversion, Pattern recognition, Honest retrospection, Detachment agility
Approximate match	2	Presence, Receptivity
Adequate match	0	—

The Serendipity Engineer: A Mycelium Skills Map

A Model of 14 Interconnected Skills Across Four Key Domains of Practice

