

Business Checkmate

From the Chessboard to the Boardroom

Win at Work with Lessons from the Chessboard

Zeev Zohar

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BUSINESS CHECKMATE

FROM THE CHESSBOARD TO THE BOARDROOM

**WIN AT WORK WITH LESSONS
FROM THE CHESSBOARD**

Zeev Zohar



To my children, Tomer, Nadav, and Nitzan – you are my strength and motivation. Keep on teaching me, bringing me joy, and being yourselves. You are the best gift I could have asked for.

To my father, Izhak ZL, and my mother, Yael, my brother Kobi, my sister Inbal, and their families; To my grandparents, Natan and Pirchia ZL – you are all my mentors. A great deal of what I've achieved is your doing.

To Merav, my sweetheart, who, in her noble demeanor, believes in me with dedication and confidence along the way.

And to you, my readers: this book was written for you, you have made this book happen, and I hope that it brings you value.

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Part One



Introduction and Some Personal Thoughts

**EVERY CHESS PLAYER SEES CHESS AS SOMETHING DIFFERENT.
LOVERS OF BEAUTY SEE CHESS AS AN ART.
THOSE WHO PREFER LOGICAL AND METHODICAL THINKING
PERCEIVE CHESS MAINLY AS A SCIENCE,
WHILE FOR MANY OTHERS, CHESS IS A STRUGGLE
AND A WAY TO PROVE THEMSELVES.**

Mikhail Tal

1.1 Preface

This book explores the connection and symbiosis between business and chess. I've lived both these worlds and can happily say I've made my mark.

The first thing to know is that this is a book about business. It can help executives, small business owners, entrepreneurs, and even salaried employees who are making their first steps in the business world and aiming for the top. They all want to succeed, they want to win, and they can see the parallels between the intricacies and infinite wisdom of The Game of Kings and the game we call life.

I've spent several years researching, discovering, and writing about hundreds of concepts shared by these two worlds. I went to great lengths to lay out my outlook on business and chess using numerous examples from both worlds and how I handled various situations throughout my career.

You don't need to be versed in the rules of chess to benefit from this book. You can simply dive in and read about my take on the contribution of chess to humankind in general and to business professionals in particular. I guarantee you will find it valuable.

Chess players, professionals and amateurs alike, may also enjoy this book and learn from it. They may gain insight into the multileveled significance of this game, which occupies a large portion of my life, and its tight-knit relationship with the business world.

For the benefit of novice as well as advanced chess players, I've included positions from famous matches where the tactics and moves illustrate the ideas presented in the chapter.

1.2 About Me

I was born in July 1962, sixty-one years young at the time I finished writing this book. I started playing chess at an early age. Chess captivated me. Through study and training, I became an outstanding junior player, a member of the Israeli junior team and the IDF chess team, and obtained the rank of Candidate Master.

Following my military service, I retired from active play but maintained an interest in chess. In 2012, I reconnected with the game by writing my first book, *Play Unconventional Chess and Win*, exploring the connection between chess and technology. The book was published in England in 2014 and earned great success.

The success of my first book, as well as continuous technological developments in chess and the world in general, along with my continued involvement in this field, led to the writing of my second book. *Think Like a Machine*, published in 2020 by a leading chess publishing house, won second place for the best chess book of 2020 by FIDE. It was even translated into Chinese. Both books were co-authored by Noam Manella.

After completing my army service as an officer, I made a crucial, informed decision: to study accounting and economics. No one guided me onto this path. I simply decided that this was my direction in life—I wanted to deal with numbers. I completed my studies successfully.

Shortly after graduation, having passed the CPA exam and completed my internship, I went out into the private sector. I did not take the standard path of staying with the same organization and honing my skills there. Two weeks after finishing my internship, I was already in a financial role in another organization. I then moved to the same role at a bigger company, and as soon as the opportunity presented itself, I became a self-employed financial advisor specializing in helping organizations cut costs.

This was no trivial move for a young guy, but for me it was the perfect match. I worked with vigor and joy, always trying to offer my services in areas that few firms covered. I insisted that our fee would be based on percentages of the costs we saved our clients; in other words, if we could bring high value to our clients, we should also enjoy some share of the benefits. Several workers joined our office. Our professionalism, perseverance, and no-nonsense attitude led me to financial independence at a relatively young age.

This is how I spent my professional career, on and off, taking on various roles until I decided to retire at 57. I sold my share of the firm and dedicated myself to writing, investments, and small-scale business activity—a different, freer life. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, I pursued a path of broadening my horizons and returned to academia. I completed my master's in philosophy, data, and digital culture studies at Tel-Aviv University, with honors, no less.

My business career spanned over three decades, during which time I made significant achievements. Nowadays, I am a director at several public companies and a partner in various business enterprises.

Why am I going on and on about my professional career? Like many of my friends, I could have been in an entirely different place. I could have had an attractive job with a high salary, but that life wasn't for me. I'm a different

breed, an independent entrepreneur who can count to ten and wait for the opportunities to arrive. One who understands that life comes in waves and that there is no point in getting worked up about temporary setbacks.

We each conduct our lives according to our personal values. Our actions and resource allocation allow us to focus our efforts and live a life of financial and mental well-being that follows these values, and most importantly—we want to be secure in our decisions.

For me, the worlds of business and chess (to one degree or another) are a way of life. They are among the important things that drive me and bring me satisfaction and joy. It's hard to keep me away from the business world, no matter when or where I am; even on holidays, when I can disconnect from everything, I still read the business news and keep in touch with friends, exchanging information on a multitude of topics. I do have other fields of interest, but the world of business is branded on my soul.

How does this manifest, and what do I focus my resources on? It's important for me to stay informed about trends in the capital and real estate markets. I'm familiar with the major deals that constantly take place and stay up to date with the business output of Israel's biggest companies. I am also familiar with how leading business figures operate and continuously learn more. These activities serve me both in personal investment decisions and in my role as a director in public companies, but there's undoubtedly something more.

My interest and involvement in the fascinating world of business fuel my sense of belonging and fulfillment. It is a central pillar in my life.

Not everyone shares this sentiment. A significant portion of the population keeps their interest and activity in the financial sector to the bare minimum, directing their energy to other spheres. This might hold them back from achieving financial prosperity quickly.

1.3 What Does Business Mean to Me?

For me, business is a world of its own. I don't want to present myself as someone who conducted global business ventures, employed thousands of people, or was blessed with special abilities. I'm an ordinary person who, nonetheless, achieved extraordinary results.

What have I discovered in my business endeavors over the years?

My innate traits allowed me to operate optimally: diligence, professionalism, mental agility, personability, management skills, financial acumen, recognizing that I'm willing to risk and lose time and money, the ability to prioritize, and more.

Can anyone be a businessperson or entrepreneur?

I want to believe so, but reality proves otherwise. Those who are not willing to risk their money and to whom a steady income is crucial clearly cannot open a business. Giving up a salary and having to consider expenses is the reality of every business, and income is not guaranteed. The other traits I mentioned are also essential for establishing a business.

Were either of my parents a successful, self-employed role model?

The answer is no, but in retrospect, I see this as an advantage. From an early age, I understood that the world is my oyster, but finding the right path—one that would bring me joy and financial freedom—was solely up to me. This helped motivate me to take action.

I chose to write this personal book because I wanted to share the knowledge that financial freedom can be achieved at a young age. Anyone can do it as long as they are willing to pay the price. I wanted you to understand some of the dilemmas that businesspeople face and learn about the joys the business world has to offer.

Our lives unfold with remarkable precision across many domains, and the universe arranges our path to align with our needs, character, and aspirations, even if we can't see it in real-time. People often navigate through different domains throughout their lives. Some experience multiple careers and develop hobbies along the way. Usually, everything flows with deliberate thought, and critical changes don't just happen for no reason. Even if sometimes we seem to be off-track, that for some unknown reason, we're focusing on things that seem removed—if, for example, we abandoned a certain domain that we enjoyed or profited from to pursue another direction—the answer is probably that this was what was right for us at that moment. The universe controls and fine-tunes reality for us. This, I think, is what happened in my case—my business career was tailored to my size.

1.4 What Does Chess Mean to Me?

No one knows where chess was invented, but no matter if it was in China, India, Egypt, or Persia—chess is life!

I find myself expressing this sentiment from time to time about the game I love, a game that reciprocates this love and rewards me in many ways. Much of who I am, many of my close friends, my interests, recognition, and way of life are associated with this game in one way or another. If I were asked to sum up what the game means to me in one word, ‘meaning’ would be it. There’s great meaning hidden in the game’s characteristics: wisdom, creativity, art, technological progress, computational abilities, harmony, understanding of processes, and self-restraint.

My chess career was simpler than my business career.

In my youth, I progressed quickly and became one of the best players in the country in my age group. I continued to play professionally while in service, but my duties as a commissioned officer prevented me from advancing. When I was discharged, I pursued other interests and retired from chess. To be perfectly honest, I looked at the new immigrants from the Soviet Union, many of them excellent chess players, and realized that to devote myself to a chess career, I would have to abandon almost everything else. I started my university studies and a romantic relationship, and left chess behind. But even though I officially retired, I maintained some link to the world of chess as a sought-after chess instructor for youth, an occupation that supported me throughout my university studies.

For many years, I stayed entirely away from chess—until I found my way back with the publication of my chess books. Writing was an excellent way for me to reconnect with chess. I was both an insider and an outsider in that universe; I found a way to maintain my close relationships in the chess community through reading and interacting with people from the field, but remained well outside the active circle. I am not subjected to the stress and pressure of playing professionally, stress that is exhausting to the point of voiding the game of its joy and magic. Undoubtedly, the world of Artificial Intelligence and technological progress extensively explored in my books, help nourish my interest and have become a gratifying hobby.

In 2022, I attempted to resume my chess career—in the FIDE World Senior Championship, no less. At the end of the day, I had mixed feelings about the experience. On the one hand, I enjoyed challenging myself and diving back

into the water after so many years; this was a highly uncommon move on my part and certainly not an easy one to make. It displayed my resilience and the everlasting desire to experience new things and enjoy myself. On the other hand, it was extremely difficult for me to face the music in the heat of the moment—the losses, the foolish mistakes, and the gloomy atmosphere that are an inseparable part of tournaments.

In retrospect, I can reminisce about that tournament in a positive light. I was able to bounce back from defeats and relish my successes. Nevertheless, I don't see myself going back and attempting another over-the-board tournament in classical time control, where each game can stretch over several hours, at least not in the foreseeable future. At this stage of my life, I don't feel that fire, and I'm known to follow my heart.

Any chess player above the amateur level feels they must be constantly occupied with chess. The modern world offers a plethora of opportunities to enjoy the game. In addition to active participation in tournaments, there are readily available puzzles to solve, professional literature to read, AI plays to admire, and gaming platforms such as Twitch to watch game live streams. I've tried them all. I've always been fueled by curiosity. I've played fast games online, solved puzzles and difficult plays with the help of the computer, and made it a habit to peruse the chess columns in the papers.

Experienced players who have reached a certain level in the past have assimilated habits, mindsets, and behaviors that became a part of their character. These acquired traits serve them daily, both consciously and unconsciously. Relationships with colleagues, family, and spouses are a reflection of the player, and their character embodies morals and nuances that share parallels with the game of chess—a fighting spirit, taking initiative, proposing compromises, and more.

1.5 From Chess Patterns to Life, Business and Career Patterns

The Business world of the 21st century is characterized by instability, uncertainty, and constant change. Transformations occur not only at the level of tools – new technologies, digital platforms, or innovative Business world models – but also at the level of thinking itself. The patterns, strategies, and methods by which we analyze situations, make decisions, and plan ahead are all undergoing a revolution.

To understand this shift, it is worth looking at the story of one individual: Demis Hassabis, who moved between Chess, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence – and showed the world how principles from one field can be imported into another to create an entirely new methodology.

Demis Hassabis: From the Board to the Lab

Hassabis was born in London in 1976 to a Greek-Cypriot father and a Chinese-Singaporean mother. From an early age, he displayed exceptional talent for Chess, becoming an international master at a very young age. His early achievements were not merely the product of hours of training but reflected his rare ability to recognize complex patterns and develop creative moves.

Yet instead of pursuing a full-time career path as a Chess professional, Hassabis chose another path: neuroscience and cognition. In the 1990s, he studied computer science at Cambridge and later completed a PhD in cognitive neuroscience at UCL. His research focused on a fascinating question: how does the human brain remember, plan, and predict the future?

This interest – in forecasting and building moves – directly connects the worlds of Chess, science, Business world, and career path. Just as a Chess player must think several steps ahead, so too does the human brain function as a “simulation engine” trying to evaluate future scenarios.

Entrepreneurship as a Strategic Game

In 2010, Hassabis founded DeepMind with an ambitious vision: to build artificial general intelligence (AGI) – a learning system capable of solving diverse problems, not just a single task. From the outset, the company chose games as the foundation of its research. Games provide an ideal environment for machine learning: closed systems with clear rules, yet rich in strategy.

In 2014, DeepMind was acquired by Google for \$400 million, giving the company access to Google’s vast resources and engineers, and accelerating its pace of innovation.

A major breakthrough came in 2016, when AlphaGo defeated Lee Sedol, one of the world’s strongest Go players. The event made global headlines and was described as a “key moment in AI history.” Another milestone came in 2017, when AlphaZero learned Chess from scratch. Without relying on databases of past games, it taught itself solely from the rules, developing an independent, sometimes surprising, bold, and innovative style.

The novelty was not the computer defeating humans – that had already happened before – but the way of learning: a system teaching itself, developing new patterns of thought, and returning to humans with a fresh perspective on an ancient game.

But Hassabis and DeepMind did not stop at games. They sought to apply their unique way of thinking to problems of direct value to humanity. The company turned its AI technologies toward solving “protein folding” – one of biology’s most complex challenges. With the development of AlphaFold, DeepMind managed to accurately predict the 3D structure of proteins from their amino acid sequences with unprecedented precision.

This achievement led to the creation of a comprehensive protein database, a vital resource for researchers worldwide. AlphaFold’s contribution has accelerated medical research, drug discovery, and deeper understanding of basic biological mechanisms. For this groundbreaking contribution, Hassabis and his team were awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry – the first ever given to AI scientists.

Chess as a Model for Business, Work and Career

What can we learn from all this for Business world and career path?

Chess offers a powerful analogy: each player operates from a certain “position.” The pieces – pawns, knights, queen – represent the resources at our disposal. The possible moves are the strategies available to us. And the opponent represents the market, the competition, uncertainty itself.

In the past, managers and employees relied heavily on past patterns. “This is how we’ve always done it” was a common phrase – just as Chess players repeated classical openings studied for centuries. But the rise of AI in Chess changed this understanding: moves once considered “unorthodox” turned out to be highly effective. Similarly in Business world – relying solely on past patterns may become a limitation.

From the Board to the Personal Career

If we think of our career paths as a Chessboard, we can identify three core principles from the AI era:

1. Breaking existing patterns – just as AlphaZero introduced moves once considered “strange,” so too in career paths, innovation and unconventional thinking hold value.

2. Learning in real time – AI systems learn from one game to the next. Likewise, career paths evolve through continuous skill acquisition; adaptability is key.
3. Balancing long-term vision with short-term action – skilled Chess players combine long-range strategy with present tactics. So too professionals must align vision with everyday steps.

Between Technology, Business and Career: A Unified Picture

Hassabis's story demonstrates a central principle of the 21st century: boundaries between domains are blurring, and Chess serves as a metaphor for a new kind of thinking – multidimensional, holistic, innovative, and inspiring.

- Technology is no longer just a “tool” – it reshapes thinking and action.
- Business is no longer merely “commerce” – it is a complex strategic system resembling games of strategy.
- Careers are no longer fixed paths – they are dynamic sequences of moves, adaptations, and reinventions.

In all these, those who can connect insights across domains – as Hassabis did between Chess, neuroscience, and AI – gain a decisive advantage.

Conclusion

The story of Demis Hassabis is not just a biography of a brilliant entrepreneur; it is a lesson in understanding our changing world. The ability to transfer principles from one field to another – from Chess to neuroscience, from technology to Business world, from personal career path to future vision – is the real game of our time.

Just as a Chess player must look beyond the current move to see the bigger picture, so too must professionals expand their perspective on strategies, plans, and aspirations. The key question is not “what is my next move?” but “what overall pattern of play am I creating?”

In this sense, the board of life is an ongoing Chess game – and every move we make can reshape the entire position.

1.6 Between Chess and Business

I think of the business world as a battlefield with multiple variables and participants. It forces us to carefully consider how to wage our campaign: