

THE ARTISTIC EDGE

A CHANGING WORLD

Many people are talking about an ongoing large-scale shift in the way we get work done. Daniel Pink, author of *The New York Times* bestseller, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, explains the nature of this shift and what it means for the future of North American workers. Pink says we are in the process of shifting from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age, a shift from an economy in which the transfer of information is not as important as the content of the information being transferred. What this means is that much of the left brain, linear work—work that requires the simple processing of information—is being outsourced to foreign workers who can do the work just as well as, but much more cheaply than North American workers.

Outsourcing to foreign workers is becoming more and more common in the Western world. People in India, the Philippines and countless other countries are just as capable as we are. They are university educated with a strong work ethic, and they are highly motivated to compete with North American talent. They are competing and they are winning because, in addition to their education and qualifications, their work costs significantly less. For the same—or sometimes even better—quality of work, companies in Canada and the United States can pay foreign workers 50-70% less than they would have to pay North American workers.


Although the ‘offshoring’ trend began in the manufacturing sector, the movement of service and information work to other countries has gained steam in recent years. From virtual administrative assistants to graphic designers, foreign information workers are benefitting from an economic environment in

REACHING BEYOND THE BOX

which outsourcing is growing at a rapid rate. Why wouldn't a company want to outsource to get work done with less cost?

I have done it myself. When I decided to launch my blog, the precursor to this book, I put a job posting for the website design on elance.com, a well-known outsourcing site. I got bids from all over the world to work on the design. I ended up going with Ana-Sara, a young woman in Pakistan, who did the job for \$100. She was extremely pleasant, professional, accommodating, and despite the time difference, which sometimes left gaps in our email communication, she did a wonderful job. Had I opted to have the blog designed locally in Canada, it would have cost me a minimum of six times what I paid Ana-Sara, maybe even as much as fifteen times, had I gone with a big web company.

As this offshoring of information work continues, the jobs that will be left for North America workers will be conceptual tasks. These jobs require more than basic information processing; they require creativity, a facility with language, and an in-depth knowledge of our culture. These jobs cannot be done as well by a non-native English speaker who does not live in our cultural context. These are the jobs that will remain for North American workers. However, in order to perform these conceptual tasks well, North American workers must have highly developed creative and communicative skills.

 *Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.*

~Albert Einstein~

THE ARTISTIC EDGE

Prior to the shift to the "Conceptual Age", it was easy for workers to know how to prepare themselves to enter the workforce. Education used to be the be-all and end-all; if you had a university degree you would be able to find a job, and a good one. That is no longer the case.

A bachelor's degree no longer guarantees young people a good job. Instead of being the mark of a superior education, a university degree is now a minimum requirement for entry into the workforce, much as a high school diploma once was. Canada has the highest rate of tertiary education in the world, with over half of adult Canadians graduating from university. This means that if we have a university degree in Canada, we are merely part of the majority; in order to compete for the best jobs, we need qualifications beyond our degree.

The competition begins even before young people get to university. As more students continue their education beyond graduation from high school, the competition to get into the best universities becomes more heated. In the old world, university admissions committees focused on academic achievement; impressive high school transcripts and high admissions test scores were enough to secure admission to the top schools.

In recent years, however, an emphasis on test performance and a tendency toward grade inflation have resulted in a pool of students whose academic credentials are uniformly stellar. Everyone has good grades, and everyone's admissions test scores are high; admissions committees are forced to look beyond academic achievement in order to identify the best students. When this happens, non-academic achievements become the characteristics that make a student stand out; life experiences, volunteer activities and participation in extracurricular pursuits such

REACHING BEYOND THE BOX

as the arts become important. Not coincidentally, these are also the pursuits that will help prepare students to excel in a new, conceptually oriented world.

The global marketplace makes the competitive environment for North American workers even more complicated. Competing with local workers is difficult enough, but young people are no longer competing within the boundaries of their own city or country when they enter the workforce. Fifteen years ago, it did not matter what someone in India was doing, because we did not know about it. It did not affect our job prospects. But the reality of today is very different. We are in competition with workers in India just as surely as we are in competition with someone down the street.

So what does this mean? It means that, if what Daniel Pink says is true (and I think it is), what is required is a completely different approach to teaching our children. We need to teach our children the skills they will need to perform the conceptual creative tasks they will be asked to perform in the global marketplace. If we do not, we are going to have a whole generation of workers who will not be able to compete.

THE APPLE EFFECT

So what are today's employers looking for in prospective employees? They are looking for creative thinkers who can help them position their company in a unique way so that it can compete.

There is no better place to see how this approach to business can work than in the success of *Apple* through the development and marketing of its technology products. Very few companies have been as successful at introducing new products to the mar-

THE ARTISTIC EDGE

ketplace as *Apple*. Their success can be largely attributed to the company's emphasis on its employees' creativity.

Steve Jobs, *Apple's* former CEO, famously rejected the traditional approach to product development, which tends to rely on market research and statistical analyses. Jobs opted instead to encourage his employees to develop products that they liked, having faith that if the company developed products that its own employees liked, the company's customers would like the products, too.

"We didn't build the Mac for anybody else," Jobs said in a 1985 interview. "We built it for ourselves. We were the group of people who were going to judge whether it was great or not. We weren't going to go out and do market research. We just wanted to build the best thing we could build."

Apple's success at selling the products it developed in this way was unprecedented. The success of the *Mac* was followed by the success of the *iPod*, the *iPhone* and the *iPad*. In each case, *Apple* developed products that stayed true to the company's values—making technology that was fun, easy to use and well designed—without being concerned with how the market would react to the products.

The company was doing what ethnographer, Simon Sinek calls sticking with the "why" of what it does—its core values—rather than getting wrapped up in the "what" of its business. It was a process that relied on creativity and innovation, and it worked spectacularly. In effect, *Apple* created the products we wanted before we even knew that we wanted them. Now that is innovation!

But how does *Apple* find creative people? It has learned how to identify them. The company knows that if it does not have

REACHING BEYOND THE BOX

creative people on its team, it will not remain a \$600 billion company.

“Creativity is just connecting things,” Jobs said in a 1996 interview with the magazine, *Wired*. “When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn’t really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That’s because they were able to connect experiences they’ve had and synthesize new things. And the reason they were able to do that was that they’ve had more experiences or they have thought more about their experiences than other people.”

Jobs knew that people who are able to stand back and look at things, to see patterns and trends, are the people best equipped to find innovative solutions to problems. Jobs also knew that in the world of traditional business, those people were difficult to find.

“A lot of people in our industry haven’t had very diverse experiences,” he said. “So they don’t have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one’s understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have.”

The desire to employ creative people is not unique to *Apple*. The most successful companies assemble teams of people who are able to see the big picture, to make connections and to predict market trends. Even in a fiercely competitive job marketplace, these skills will always be in demand. Unfortunately, our traditional systems of education are not designed to produce people with these skills.