

DAN PINK — SESSION SUMMARY



Dan Pink wrote the bestselling book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule The Future*. His website is <http://www.danpink.com/>.

Some Key Points

Each person will take from this presentation what is most relevant to him or her. Some of the key points Dan Pink made, which are discussed in more detail in the rest of this document, can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ The mental abilities that once were necessary for business and professional success in America – “left-brain” skills such as logical, linear, and sequential thinking – are still necessary, but they are not sufficient. “Right-brain” skills, such as simultaneous processing, contextual awareness, and synthesizing, are assuming a new and far greater importance.
- ▶ Three broad forces are tilting the scales in favor of right-brain thinking. They are Abundance, Asia, and Automation.
- ▶ Three “key questions” summarize the important considerations: Can someone overseas do it cheaper? Can a computer do it faster? Is what you’re selling in demand in an age of abundance – are you delivering significance as well as utility?
- ▶ Six abilities will matter most in the forthcoming years: design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning.
- ▶ In closing, Pink offered two questions he thought to be particularly valuable.

Left And Right Brains

Pink said that brain science is increasingly demonstrating that the hemispheres of our brains have different dominant kinds of functions. He said those differences are useful as a metaphor for how the world is changing. There was a time when the abilities that mattered most, that organizations wanted, and that were best compensated (lawyers, doctors, engineers, executives), were what we can consider “left-brain” skills: focusing on tasks that are logical, linear, sequential, analytical.

He said, “The right hemisphere specializes in tasks that are not better, not worse, just different: tasks that are more about simultaneous processing rather than sequential processing, more about the context of a situation rather than the explicit text, more about synthesis than analysis. . . It used to be that the abilities that mattered most at work, in business, in achieving professional success and personal fulfillment, were abilities that were characteristic of the left hemisphere of the brain – the logical, linear, sequential, analytical, spreadsheet, SAT, ‘I know the right answer’ abilities. Those abilities are still absolutely one hundred percent necessary today, but no longer sufficient. Abilities characteristic of the right hemisphere of the brain – artistry, empathy,

inventiveness, big-picture thinking – these abilities are now the first among equals. That’s the main claim I want to make here this morning.”

What’s Changing

Pink said there are broad forces tilting the scales toward right-brain thinking: Abundance, Asia, and Automation.

About abundance, he said the material standard of living in the US is “breathtaking” – a typical middle class family is vastly well off in comparison to our recent forebears and in comparison to just about everyone else in the world. As examples of the level of abundance, he said there are more cars than people in the US, and there is a vast, 17-billion-dollar-a-year, self-storage industry for “all our extra stuff”. At the same time as there has been a threefold increase in per capita GDP over the past 50 years, our subjective feelings of wellbeing have not increased. Pink said, “We’ve become three times richer but not one jot happier. . . What this means is that we’ve been liberated by prosperity but not fulfilled by it, and so people are spending more and more of their time, treasure, energy, and brainpower trying to lift their happiness line.” Among the consequences of that phenomenon, he said, are that “the search for meaning is now a middle-class phenomenon” and that products are more successful if they offer “significance” in addition to functionality.

Regarding Asia, he said “Offshoring is massively overhyped in the short term, but it is underhyped in the long term.” He observed that if 15 percent of India’s total population of one billion become talented, ambitious, well-educated, and competitive, there will be more of them than there are in the entire US workforce. He insisted, “If you remember nothing else from our time together this morning, I want you to be terrified of this word. This word is a vocational death sentence. It will obliterate your career.” The word: *Routine*. He said that any work that is routine is disappearing from the US and racing “racing to wherever it can get done the cheapest.”

Automation, he said, is replacing many left-brain activities, including even legal, medical, and accounting functions, with software programs.

The Three Questions

Summarizing the impacts of the three forces, Pink urged his listeners to bear three “key questions” in mind: Can someone overseas do it cheaper? Can a computer do it faster? Is what you’re selling in demand in an age of abundance – are you delivering significance as well as utility?

The Next Big Skills

With his time running down, Pink quickly summarized the six types of abilities that the future will require, which he described as follows:

Design – He called this “a fundamental business literacy.” He spoke of General Motors’ Vice Chairman for Global Product Development, Robert Lutz, saying “We are in the arts and entertainment business,” and of the CEO of Procter & Gamble saying, “I don’t think anyone thinks we’re not in the design business. . . It’s all design.”

Story – He said that because “we live in a world of ubiquitous, free facts,” telling a story about a product adds value for customers. “Story as a differentiator is where design was about 12 years ago,” he observed. He told about buying wine and being influenced by the “back story” on the label of Big Tattoo wine. (You can read that story at <http://www.bigtattoowines.com/about/>)

Symphony – Describing this as “the ability to see the big picture, connect the dots, combine things into something new,” he said, “This is in many ways to killer app in business today.” He observed that a study of leaders by Daniel Goleman showed that the lone difference between today’s successful leaders and others is “pattern recognition,” and he noted that self-made millionaires are four times as likely to be dyslexic as the population in general.

Empathy is valuable, he said, because it helps in designing products with significance and not just utility, and it’s a skill that is “hard to automate.”

Play leads to creative breakthroughs and is also, he said, “a marker of organizational health.”

Regarding Meaning, reiterating a point he had made earlier he said, “The search for meaning has been democratized. I think it’s one of the biggest things going on today.”

He said, “These are things people actually want to do. . . . The sorts of things we do out of intrinsic motivation, out of the joy and challenge of the task itself, are increasingly the things that confer the greatest advantage in the economy.”

Two Bonus Questions

At the end of his talk, Pink said he had recently encountered a “great” question for hiring interviews: “Are you lucky?” And he suggested that everyone might benefit from asking a question he first heard from James Collins: “If you had 20 million dollars in the bank and ten years left to live, would you still be doing what you’re doing?”