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Meet the MasterMinds: Daniel Pink on A Whole New Mind

In his first book, [Free Agent Nation](#), Daniel Pink chronicled the rise and impact of the new world of work. His recent book, [A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age](#), takes us a step further to describe how to thrive in an outsourced, automated, and upside down world.

Pink is a contributing editor at *Wired* magazine. His articles on business and technology have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Fast Company*. He is popular speaker, and has provided analysis on television and radio broadcasts, including CNBC's Power Lunch, ABC's World News Tonight, and NPR's Morning Edition.

MCNews talked to Pink about why consultants should embrace a whole new mind.

MCNews: You say we are in transition from the information age to the conceptual age. What does that mean, and how is the change manifesting itself?

Pink: Well, the scales are tipping away from what it used to take for people to get ahead—logical, linear, left-brain, and spreadsheet-type abilities—in favor of abilities like artistry, empathy, and big-picture thinking, which are becoming more valuable.

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MCNews: Aren't some industries, like advertising, built around conceptual, right-brain thinking?

Pink: Sure. Besides advertising, another example is the motion picture industry, which is about narrative, or story-telling. Increasingly, consumer products companies are also tapping into right-brain skills.

Procter & Gamble, for instance, is relying more and more on design. And Target is competing successfully against Wal-Mart, not on the left-brain dimension of price, but on the right-brain dimension of design. I'm surprised that more companies haven't followed that lead.

MCNews: Are there companies that have made the transition to the conceptual age?

Pink: The grocery chain, [Whole Foods](#), is an interesting example. The retail grocery industry is a low-margin, cutthroat business. And yet, Whole Foods exacts premium prices by appealing to customers using the right-brain sensibility of wholeness and the back stories of products as a differentiator.

The success of Whole Foods is phenomenal. The figures are impressive on every dimension—number of stores opened, revenue, profits, and stock price. In a business where the typical strategy is to go for economies of scale, cut costs, and eke out a tiny bit more of a margin, Whole Foods has taken a different tack.

The focus of Whole Foods is on the customer's grocery shopping for the family as a holistic experience. It's about wellness, and doing something good for the world on a small scale. That approach may seem touchy-feely, but Whole Foods is outperforming every other grocery chain in America.

MCNews: Is this trend finding its way into traditional, left-brained businesses?

Pink: Yes. At a recent shareholders' meeting, GM Vice Chairman [Bob Lutz](#) said, "What we've got at GM now is a general comprehension that you can't run this business by the left, intellectual, analytical side of the brain. You have to have a lot of right side, creative input. We are in the arts and entertainment business, and we're putting a huge emphasis on world-class design."

That's a 70-year-old former Marine saying we tried running the company in a left-brain way and it didn't work. We have to start running it in a right-brain way. Lutz is a serious figure in the automotive industry. When GM is in the arts business, we're all in the arts business.

MCNews: What's the impact of the conceptual age on the workplace, particularly as it relates to the people you hire?

Pink: You want to hire people who have the kind of right-brain abilities that can't be outsourced or automated, and that satisfy some of the nonmaterial needs of this abundant age.

If you peel that back, what you want is people who are intrinsically motivated. That is, they are doing what they love. And it tends to be right-brain activities that generate that kind of motivation.

For instance, people don't become designers because they want to make a gazillion dollars, but because they love it. They're almost compelled to do it. Same thing is true with story-telling and even empathy. These abilities are part of our nature—the things that we're motivated to do, not for the extrinsic rewards, but for internal fulfillment, joy, and challenge.

Now it turns out happily enough that these abilities increasingly confer an economic advantage. So hire people who are intrinsically motivated. They will end up doing great work, and they display abilities that have enormous value in a world where so many other skills can be outsourced or digitized.

MCNews: But many companies fail to tap that part of their employees' capabilities.

Pink: That's right. Every weekend, I'm sure there are accountants in their garages painting water colors, or lawyers writing screenplays. But I doubt there is anybody with a day job as a sculptor who, for fun on the weekends, does other people's taxes.

Many people went into the professions out of a sense of economic need, which made perfect sense. But maybe they weren't naturally motivated in that direction. I see an increasing congruence between the talents that confer an advantage in labor markets and what people are intrinsically motivated to do.

MCNews: In the past, people “dropped out” of the corporate rat race to do what they really loved. Are you’re saying that doing what you love is the best way to reach your professional goals?

Pink: The counsel to do what you love is actually very hardheaded advice right now. It’s not just an idealistic notion. I think it’s the best way to get ahead today. And that was not necessarily true in 1950.

There’s a study—I think by Gartner—that shows fewer and fewer young people want to become computer programmers. Partly that’s a reaction to what they perceive to be labor market signals because they see so many stories about programming jobs going overseas.

But the other thing people are saying is that a lot of computer programming is fairly routine, or rote. People are, in some cases, willing to do routine work. If it generates a high income, people are willing to make that trade off.

But work that is routine has the potential for offshoring or automation. And so, people may be saying, it’s not that fun or creative to begin with, but it also doesn’t confer reliable rewards. What confers the greatest rewards and what we want to do anyway is the stuff that taps greater artistry, empathy, creativity, and big-picture thinking.

MCNews: Coming back to the workplace, if you’re operating a business in a conceptual age, what’s the best working environment to create for people so they stay with you?

Pink: You need to allow people a certain measure of autonomy to do great work but also hold them accountable. You’ve got to have deadlines and measures of accountability. You can’t just have a free-for-all where everyone sits around and paints all day and no one actually serves customers.

So, in general, promote autonomy and relinquish a measure of control. And to the extent it’s possible, create a context that allows people’s intrinsic motivation to flourish and that makes the work part of something larger than the individual.

Organizations that provide a sense of purpose, that connect individuals’ talents and aspirations to a larger goal are the ones that are going to succeed. You already see that in a remarkable way with a lot of companies. Google, for example, talks about wanting to do great things for the world even if it means sacrificing some short-term profits.

Jeff Immelt, CEO of GE, speaks about meaning and purpose. He says that the reason people want to work for GE is that they want to be about something larger than themselves.

MCNews: Has the shift to the conceptual changed how companies are organized?

Pink: Yes. I think we’re seeing the emergence of companies that you might call not-only-for-profit. They’re profit driven, but that’s not their only driving force. They want to be about something beyond making their quarterly numbers and returning wealth to shareholders.

This is different from the Ben & Jerry’s socially responsible kind of company. GE is making a monumental investment in green technologies in part because it’s a good thing, in part because it’s a lucrative thing. It’s the same with Google. Google’s mission is to democratize information and to put facts and knowledge at people’s fingertips. But that’s good business too.

Creating not-only-for-profit companies that plug people’s individual talents into a larger purpose becomes very important, particularly for baby boomers.

MCNews: The professional services business has traditionally been left-brained. What advice would you give professional services providers so their practices thrive in the conceptual age?

Pink: Well, they need to think through the same imperatives: Are you doing something that someone overseas can't do cheaper, or that a computer can't do faster? Does what you do satisfy some of the spiritual, emotional, or esthetic needs of our society?

Accountants, for example, may become this generation's blue-collar workers. They are imperiled by cheaper workers overseas, and by the ability to put many accounting measures into a system of rules in a piece of software. Sarbanes Oxley is keeping accountants busy today. But once compliance with Sarbanes Oxley becomes automated, look out. Some consulting work, particularly research and entry-level, analytical tasks, could be outsourced. So success is not only about raw analytical abilities, having a high math SAT score, and going to a good business school.

“I think that design has become a fundamental literacy in business, particularly for consultants.”

Your ability to draw on right-brain skills has become much more important. For instance, I think that design has become a fundamental literacy in business, particularly for consultants.

Whether it's industrial design, graphic design, environmental design, or even fashion design, a good consultant must be literate in that now to go into an organization and offer useful advice.

And, again, I really do think that more companies, partly out of enlightened self-interest, are going to morph into not-only-for-profits. And they're going to need guidance to change from left-brained companies in the pursuit of making those quarterly numbers to companies that are more right-brained—companies that can attract talented, intrinsically motivated people. That's a tough transition for companies to make, and I think consultants could help with that.

MCNews: Have any consulting firms shifted their services to help clients succeed in the conceptual age?

Pink: Some of the big consultancies are branching into architectural consulting because the physical design of the workplace has productivity enhancing potential. You can reengineer business processes and that can boost productivity, but the physical layout and design of office space turns out to have value as well. That requires a very different sensibility than streamlining the supply chain or decreasing the number of steps in the procurement process.

Workplace design is very hard to automate because it involves a physical presence, intuition, looking around, and getting a feel for things. That's right-brain work.

MCNews: One last question: if you were going to give somebody just one piece of advice about how to be successful in this new age, what would it be?

Pink: The best career move is to find what you love to do, what you're great at, and pursue that. I think you will be more valuable in the workforce. If you love accounting and you're great at it, you're going to be okay.

I worry about the folks who pursue careers because their parents, teachers, or spouses give them outdated advice and they're dutifully marching into careers they don't really care about because they think it's the way to make money. Not only is that bad for their individual self-actualization but I think it's a bad career move, too.

MCNews: Thanks. I really appreciate your time.

You can find out more about Daniel Pink, his books, and services at www.danpink.com.