

The Coming Right-Brain Economy

Daniel H. Pink Says the MFA is the New MBA



"In many ways, MBA graduates are becoming this century's blue-collar workers—people who entered a workforce that was full of promise only to see their jobs move overseas," according to a recent *Harvard Business Review* piece by author Daniel H. Pink. "At the same time, businesses are realizing that the only way to differentiate their goods and services in today's overstocked, materially abundant marketplace is to make their offerings transcendent—physically beautiful and emotionally compelling." As a result, Pink contends, "the MFA is the new MBA."

A contributing editor at *Wired* magazine and former chief speechwriter for Vice President Al Gore, Pink is the author of *A Whole New Mind*, exploring "six essential abilities that white-collar workers must master to survive in an outsourced, automated, upside-down world." His earlier bestseller, *Free Agent Nation*, looked at the growing numbers of people who work for themselves.

CONNECTION Executive Editor John O. Harney asked Pink about his views on the growing importance of the arts to the economy:

HARNEY: You've written about how the MFA is becoming the new business degree. What skills do art graduates offer employers that MBAs don't?

PINK: Let me take a step back and explain what I mean. It used to be that logical, linear, SAT-like, zero-in-on-a-right-answer abilities were enough to make it in the economy and have a decent standard of living. Today those abilities are still necessary, but they're no longer sufficient. The abilities that matter most will be the sorts of things we've often overlooked and undervalued: artistry, empathy, seeing the big picture. Why? Three big forces are tilting the scales away from those "left-brain" abilities and ever more toward "right-brain" abilities. Those forces are: Abundance, Asia and Automation.

In a materially abundant society, you can't sell a product, a service or an experience that's merely functional. It also has to appeal to nonmaterial sensibilities—beauty, spirituality and emotion.

Meanwhile, all sorts of routine left-brain work—

basic accounting, basic programming, basic financial analysis—is migrating overseas. And other routine left-brain work is being automated. Think of Turbo Tax software automating many of the functions of accountants. So to make it in this environment, you'll have to do something that people overseas can't do cheaper, that computers can't do faster, and that satisfies the growing aesthetic and emotional desires of an abundant age. MBA programs generally don't teach these kinds of abilities. MFA programs do.

HARNEY: MFAs may be good for business, but is the growing connection to business good for art? And for art education?

PINK: Probably. In particular, I think it's essential for young artists and designers to be literate in business. Many of them are going to be working in or with organizations dominated by left-brain people who don't share their right-brain sensibility. Part of what it takes to accomplish great work in a business setting depends on an artist or designer's ability to persuade business people in their own language.

HARNEY: If art education will be applied increasingly to business, how should we revisit the relative merit of different college arts programs?

PINK: I'm not sure that fundamentally changes. Art education is valuable first and foremost for its own sake. It just so happens that the set of abilities it imparts is becoming increasingly valuable in business. And all aspects of art education in some fashion can be useful in a business setting. Studio work gives all of us a taste of the joys and challenges of creation, while the Critique method can begin to deepen an artistic sensibility and develop the aesthetic literacy that's necessary for business today.

HARNEY: How long will the United States be a leader in programs to prepare these skilled people? What's to stop these high-end creative jobs from following financial jobs to India and elsewhere?

PINK: This is a crucial question. There's nothing permanent about the advantage that the United States (or Canada, Japan and Western Europe) hold in this regard. But I believe there's a fairly long way to go before the United States loses its edge in creative fields

on a large scale. This is true for lots of reasons. First, countries such as India are just finding their footing on Information Age work. The offshoring of knowledge work overseas is still incredibly overhyped in the short run, though it will have a huge effect in the long run. Second, I think the United States offers a very hospitable soil in which these creative abilities can take root. That's less true of other parts of the world. The United States isn't perfect—but you'd be hard-pressed to find a country nimbler or more accepting of risk.

HARNEY: What does the artistically driven future mean for the current emphasis on standardized testing and the devaluing of arts in schools?

PINK: Schools are one area where I'm not optimistic. In fact, the trends, as you point out, are moving in the exact opposite direction—with this obsession over standardized testing and cuts in art, drama and music programs. We're entering the Conceptual Age, yet many schools are madly trying to perfect the Industrial Age model. It just doesn't make any sense.

HARNEY: What kind of economic advantage will the presence of top art colleges confer on a city or region like New England?

PINK: This is a controversial subject because economic development depends on a range of factors from public schools to a place's transportation infrastructure to affordable housing. But it seems sensible that having a robust art and art education community would enhance a region's advantages.

HARNEY: What advice would you offer regional economic development officials in light of the importance of artistic aptitude?

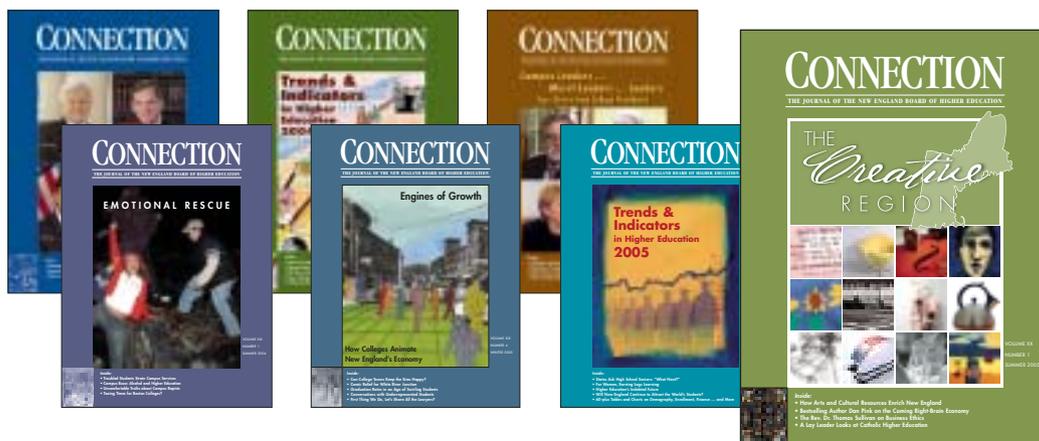
PINK: Call your school board and your legislators and tell them to stop cutting school arts programs and to quit imposing standardized tests on students and teachers.

HARNEY: What are all those MBAs going to do now?

PINK: They'll have to begin to tap the artistic, empathic abilities that are present in all of us. The challenge is that many people haven't been called on to use these abilities, so their muscles have atrophied. They—and the rest of us—will have to work these muscles back into shape. And indeed, many MBA programs are beginning to include classes in design, storytelling and emotional intelligence—in part because their enrollments are shrinking. ■

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