

Leveraging Knowledge Assets Do Less and Accomplish More

Jonathon Levy

The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

For many years I have used that quotation from Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* in most of my public speeches. No matter what the theme, I would try to find a way to work it in, because the quote is so powerful and appropriate.

In the late 1960s, the prevailing paradigm was "go to school, get a

degree, go to work." The knowledge you acquired on-campus was pretty much all you needed for your entire career. Or so we thought. Toffler was one of the few futurists at the time who pointed to continuous immersion in the field of knowledge as a way to cope with the unprecedented rate of change initiated by new technologies. He played a major role in shaping my lifelong quest to locate the spark where technology, knowledge, and awareness converge.

What prescience he must have had back then, to redefine literacy not in terms of what you know and do, but rather in terms of what you *can* know and *may* do, in terms of pure potentiality. Dynamic learning and just-in-time knowledge are only now becoming widely recognized as requirements for corporate learning in an age of rapid change. Today, "sustainability" means more than just providing information and training; increasingly, it means developing a company's knowledge workers' collective potential to learn and relearn, to develop their intuition and their

conscious capacity to know. Toffler knew that in the late '60s.

Recently I had the honor to present a lecture in Sao Paulo in the same venue where Toffler, now 76, delivered an inspiring keynote to 3000 Latin American managers. His focus, same as before, was on the transformational need of our time, but now described in much finer detail within the context of The Third Wave, which clarifies the original concept. According to Toffler, the First Wave of change was launched by the agricultural revolution. The Second Wave—the Industrial Revolution—gave rise to a new factory-centered civilization that is still spreading in China, Mexico, and other parts of the world. "But even as the Second Wave plays itself out on the global stage," Toffler explained, "America and other countries are already feeling the impact of a gigantic Third Wave partly based on the substitution of mental power for muscle power in the economy." The Third Wave is more than just technology and economics, more than just being "digital" and "networked." It marks our



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transition from a brute force to a “brain force” economy.

The Third Wave suggests a next stage in two evolving themes of human history: leverage (doing less but accomplishing more) and networking (employing the collective value of what we know). In the first instance, leverage and networking were played out thousands of years ago with the advent of the first tools and the first villages. The tools leveraged our physical power and the villages functioned as hubs of knowledge networks that gathered and redistributed new information. In the 1900s labor-based economy, businesses developed power tools to leverage the muscle power of their workers and assembly lines that relied not on a single worker but on the collective efforts of many. The evolution of that theme has given rise to today’s knowledge-based economy in which state-of-the-art knowledge systems converge both tools and networks into a single powerful system that leverages the mental power and collective wisdom of knowledge workers.

It is the same evolutionary tendency displayed first with machines, then with electronic technology, now with ideas. At each stage, the introduction of a subtler level of influence has resulted in a more powerful level of solution. Tools such as faster computers and “smart,” portable technology are now wirelessly linked to robust networked databases to broaden the scope of what the knowledge worker can see in a single instant. New technologies link the knowledge workers with a field of collective knowledge and leverage their mental processes through intelligent filtering, recognizing patterns, and accessing required knowledge in real time.

This new wave of technology, a wave that was described in the last “Sustainability” column in *Distance Learning*, will begin to define the outer limits of digital technology knowledge systems. Once that

boundary has been reached, it is likely that the next major wave in human capital development will involve the teaching of techniques to expand the conscious capacity of the mind itself, enlivening the potential and thereby increasing the efficacy of knowledge workers. Even now, we are starting to see companies introduce mental technologies such as meditation in the workplace, to further empower knowledge workers by decreasing stress and enhancing the signal-to-noise ratio in human consciousness.

The focus of these mental technologies, the technologies of expanded awareness, is on the extension of the container of knowledge—the human mind—as the other side of the coin of human potentiality. Investment in the knowledge workforce is extending beyond the knowledge systems to the users of those systems, the knowledge workers themselves. This “next step” seems to yield very practical results. For example, one of the world’s leading pharmaceutical companies, AstraZeneca, has instituted the practice of group meditation for a few minutes before important executive meetings get underway, the theory being that decision-makers whose minds are clear and free from stress will make better decisions.

In a rapidly-changing field, it is easier to “skate to where the puck will be” if the trajectory of the change cycle can be seen clearly. Once we see the principles of doing less and accomplishing more, of the collective value of the network, then we are able to predict the next step of human resource development when the technologies of knowledge have taken us as far as they can go. In ancient times, great masters like Aristotle and Plato facilitated the expanded awareness of their disciples, focusing less on what they knew and more on their own self-knowledge. We may be coming full cycle; ancient technologies from ancient bodies of knowledge such as the Transcendental Meditation (TM)

program are now available to address companies’ very contemporary need to develop the full potential of knowledge workers.

This may well prove to be the avant-garde in human resource development. The lawyers in a Buffalo, New York, law firm begin their weekly meeting by meditating. “It’s our universal experience here that much more can be accomplished in the practice of law if we are doing it in a thoughtful and quiet manner rather than in a frantic manner,” says David Pfalzgraf, a partner at the firm. *Business Week* reports that “There are no hard numbers on how many companies have added meditation benefits, but the anecdotal evidence is mounting . . . (at) AOL Time Warner Inc., where the sales and marketing group was reduced from 850 to 500 people three years ago, meditation classes were incorporated to help employees deal with the new 12-hour days.”

Corporate blue-bloods such as McKinsey, Deutsche Bank, and Hughes Aircraft are joining tech outfits like Apple Computer, Yahoo!, and Google in offering meditation to their employees. “Companies increasingly are falling for the allure of meditation . . . offering free, on-site classes,” adds the *Business Week* report. “They’re being won over, in part, by findings at the National Institutes of Health, the University of Massachusetts, and the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University, that meditation enhances the qualities companies need most from their knowledge workers: increased brain-wave activity, enhanced intuition, better concentration.”

Twenty-three years ago IBM’s then Sr. VP for Human Resources, Walton Burdick, suggested that, in the future, the best companies in the world would be differentiated by the degree to which they relate to their employees holistically, as whole human beings. It seems that Walt’s prediction may be coming of age.