

The Creative Generalist

How Broad Thinking
Leads to Big Ideas

by Steve Hardy

“Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen.”

— Leonardo Da Vinci

“To appreciate nonsense requires a serious interest in life.”

— Gelett Burgess

Two springs ago, I attended my brother Dave’s university convocation. He was one of over 1,000 young adults graduating from the University of Alberta with undergraduate degrees in education. It was, of course, a very special moment for my family, but it was a particularly touching experience for one of our guests, the former vice-principal of the elementary school that Dave attended, a dedicated teacher who played a tremendously important role in my brother’s schooling by helping him overcome a learning disability. She had just retired a few weeks earlier and was visibly proud to see her greatest teaching accomplishment walk across the stage and accept a degree in her field.

Speaking with her after the ceremonies, I learned of a rather frightening trend in elementary schools—a trend that is already well underway in many high schools. She told me that in order to consolidate teachers and supplies, a growing movement in the school system aims to make each elementary school in a district specialize in one subject or another. A math school. An art school. A phys-ed school. A music school. A language school. Doing this, administrators reason, better unites both physical and human resources and better prepares students in the fields that they display an early aptitude for (or perhaps the field that their parents most want them to develop an aptitude for)—a head start, so to speak.

Young kids are being herded onto narrow academic trails so early on that they are no longer even being given a chance to discover their interests, to find inspiration from exploring connections between the lines, and to “play” in a bit of everything first. This bothered me.

On the surface, a movement toward specialized grade schools may seem relatively harmless to the children and may appear to be a perfectly logical solution for cash-strapped education boards, but I had to wonder if the decision to channel learning so much and so soon didn't have numerous negative implications, not only for the kids but for all of us. Do these adaptations happening in our schools, our businesses and our society at large threaten to severely compromise our ability to participate in the knowledge economy, to tackle huge social issues, to coordinate matters of global significance, and indeed to understand the world around us?

THE SPECIALIZATION OF IDEAS

Specialization has a firm grasp on all of us. Many things—economically, politically, culturally—are big, complex and move quite quickly. The best way to deal with big, complex and fast-moving things is to break them down into smaller, simpler, more manageable parts. Look no further than your favorite video store, music shop or magazine newsstand. **Niche interest has taken over—whether we like it or not.**

Specialization has taken hold not only of our schools but also of how we approach research, where we shop, which hobbies we pursue, what our organizations look like, and, of course, how we work. We see specialization entrenching itself in the creative realm. Progressive advertising agencies, for example, have moved into more profitable niche specialties such as pharmaceutical, agricultural or B2B advertising. Architects may specialize only in commercial or institutional buildings. Often, even these specialties are narrowed down further, resulting in a highly targeted market, which revolves around a very narrow but well-defined core com-

petency. A fashion designer, for example, may zero in only on women's tops ... long-sleeved ... made of silk ... imported from Japan ... for the fall collection only. It's the long tail ^A in action and it sometimes borders on the ridiculous. With more niche players, both large and small, detail and highly focused knowledge are perceived as *the* competitive advantages.

TWO SIDES, SAME COIN		
CREATION		IDEATION
idea realization	process	idea generation
innovations	input	inspirations
creations	output	ideas
development	purpose	expansion
deep	knowledge	broad
convergent	approach	divergent
incremental	progress	transcending
trying	method	considering
composing	activity	editing
manager	direction	leader
specialist	person/group	generalist

And for the most part, specialization is a positive thing, because we are, in many cases, charting new and exciting territory. The advancements in new media, for example, have been both remarkable and lightning-fast. Innovation in engineering and science has made new architecture and new medicine possible. Digital tools have permanently altered sound and music capabilities, much like refined computing has shown us DNA *and* distant galaxies. Most would agree that we are exploring particular subject matters deeper than we ever have

before. In fact, many people would argue that specialization is the very definition of progress itself.^B

But is it? And what does specialization have to do with ideas? Why should specialization be considered a threat, or even a hindrance, to ideation?

Ideas cannot be limited to the confines of a silo.
They need space to run around and occasionally bump into strangers.

Well, quite simply, it is because ideation, unlike creativity, is not a specialized activity. Ideativity and creativity are not the same thing. Ideas require a divergent, generalist approach (“a wide net”) while creative endeavours require the opposite: a convergent, specialist approach (“a deep drill”). Acts of creativity certainly include ideas and thinking of ideas often involves a large degree of creativity. They reinforce each other. They are integral. However, in society and in business, tangled inside the machinery of commerce, creativity and ideation are two separate and different-looking cogs. One deals in simplicity while the other deals in complexity. One deals with composition while the other deals with editing.

Ideas are the product of divergent thinking, lateral steps and questions dealing with completely unrelated notions. Seldom pure, and often appearing out of nowhere, ideas come from a kaleidoscopic grab bag of other ideas—whether ancient, recent, calculated or silly. Ideas cannot be limited to the confines of a silo. They need space to run around and occasionally bump into strangers. To do this requires guardians who are generalists.

WHAT IS THE BIG IDEA?

BRAND: The total perceived attributes of something to someone who, in some way, interacts with it.

PRODUCT: A tangible item, or intangible delivery method, that is of tradeable value to someone else.

STRATEGY: A deliberate and predetermined plan of action formulated to accomplish a specific goal.

Generalists are very good at introducing strangers to one another. Generalists are keen observers and natural matchmakers. They explore possibilities (in the broadest sense), connect the dots, distill complex information down to relevant summary, and remind us of context and even humanity. For these reasons and others, generalists are in increasingly high demand in today's companies, non-profit organizations, universities, governments, and institutions.

IDEAS ARE IMPORTANT

Over the past decade, there have been many, many books and articles that discuss the importance of doing things differently in order to gain a competitive advantage in business. Creativity has pushed to the forefront and now drives the bottom line. Understanding innovation in organizations has become increasingly top-of-mind to managers and leaders over the past decade, because innovation is viewed as the key to success in today's knowledge-based economy.^C Outsourcing, automation, and abundance are raising the value of conceptual work—artistry, empathy, and emotion.^D “Ideas are the critical input in the production of more valuable human and nonhuman capital.”^E Undisputedly, ideas are important.

In branding, product development or strategy, ideas change the very essence of business and society. They make things better, more interesting, more efficient, more effective, and more enjoyable. Highly complex and turbulent economic and social environments combined with increased access to information and improved ways of collaborating have forced organizations to adopt mindsets that are more accommodating to innovative practices and new ways of doing things.

The message that innovation benefits those that actively seek it is an old one. Tom Peters, well known for such books as *In Search of Excellence* and *The Pursuit of WOW!*, has said, “The issue of leveraging knowledge is as central to tomorrow's corporate success as the

most hyperbolic adherents have claimed”.^F Says Jerry Hirshberg, founder of Nissan Design International and author of *The Creative Priority*: “Business begins with an idea. And as never before, its growth, stability, and ultimate success depend upon innovation and a continuing flow of imaginative thought ... the most urgent business of business is ideas.”^G This lesson, which few have argued against, has been trumpeted repeatedly in recent years and is now *de rigueur*.

An **idea** is **the ring** on which finely-cut diamonds are placed. Ideas **unite creative executions** and **innovative advancements**.

However, despite the growing volume of literature on focused creativity and relentless incremental innovation (particularly in business), there seems to be a very essential point missing. This missing point is that an idea ties loose ends together. Simple enough. An idea is the ring on which finely cut diamonds are placed. Ideas unite creative executions and innovative advancements.

Ideas are important because they represent an ultra concentration of fragments that in many cases would be regarded as irrelevant or useless on their own. Ideas represent a symphony, unique as a whole yet unattainable without its parts or the dynamic between each of those parts. By and large, teamwork of “whole” and “part” unfortunately tends to be overlooked.

An ancient Indian fable called *The Blind Men and the Elephant* summarizes this perfectly. Six blind men visit the raja’s palace and each encounters an elephant for the first time.

The first blind man put out his hand and touched the side of the elephant: "How smooth! An elephant is like a wall." The second blind man put out his hand and touched the trunk of the elephant: "How round! An elephant is like a snake." The third blind man put out his hand and touched the tusk of the elephant: "How sharp! An elephant is like a spear." The fourth blind man put out his hand and touched the leg of the elephant: "How tall! An elephant is like a tree." The fifth blind man reached out his hand and touched the ear of the elephant: "How wide! An elephant is like a fan." The sixth blind man put out his hand and touched the tail of the elephant: "How thin! An elephant is like a rope."

An argument ensued, each blind man thinking his own perception of the elephant was correct. The raja, awakened by the commotion, called out from the balcony. "The elephant is big," he said. "Each man touched only one part. You must put all parts together to find out what an elephant is like."

In many ways, from urban design and marketing campaigns to environmental policy and disaster response, we constantly see this fable being played out in real life, with both thoughts and actions being considered only in piecemeal isolation by specialists. Interconnectedness eludes us, especially in our organizations.

While many individuals have relished the opportunity to expand their minds in breadth *and* depth (to be creative generalists, or versatilists,^H in this especially exciting time of human knowledge), organizations, on the other hand, have struggled to adopt the same flexibility. Few companies are able to retain their niche-market focus while simultaneously considering tangents. These tangents may be only remotely related to their core business but may somehow connect with something else to form a great idea. Companies must therefore rely on individuals^I and small teams to tap into the benefits of creative *generalism*. **The delicate balance here is for organizations to maintain their creative focus without losing out on**

discovering an inspired idea that may transcend an industry. The two viewpoints can and should be linked, but frequently they are seen only as an either-or deal.

WHAT GENERALISTS DO

Wander and Wonder → possibility
Entertain curiosity and ask unasked questions

Synthesize and Summarize → information
Connect the dots and present complex information succinctly

Link and Leap → ideas
Take a simple insight and find a transcending application

Mix and Match → people
Make worlds collide and harness collaborative energies

Experience and Empathize → worldview
Understand humanity and life's many interrelationships

If you think about it, the most lively debate happening all over the business world is exactly about which approach is better for an industry and an organization: a generalized approach or a specialized approach? It's a debate that goes to the very core of how industries, companies and individuals should be positioned for the future: as settlers or as pioneers. Should we wear the technical badge and become trusted, impartial and independent specialist suppliers in a given field? Or should we be clients' trusted advisor, pioneering business practice and actively leading the way?

THE NEW LANDSCAPE

Farther → fragmentation and diversification
Focus is on more pieces with greater variation

Faster → hyperinnovation and computation
Knowledge is advancing at the speed of light

Deeper → complexity and sophistication
Understanding the basics now requires expertise

Flatter → globalization and collaboration
Business regularly spans borders and cultures

Wider → imagination and inspiration
The information age has become the conceptual age

Tighter → combination and integration
Intersectional thinking and mixing is the new norm

Take a peek at the accounting world, for instance. While that profession is at no risk of disappearing, it does face major changes. Not least of which are the formidable challenges of how to position the industry to new recruits—as generalists well-versed in all areas of a corporation’s finances or as specialists meticulously applying rigour only to focused sub-sections. Information technology (IT) is in the same boat. Those who work in IT are regularly faced with decisions that determine what systems, discussion groups, and programming languages they spend their time working on. Even at the user level, few of us are willing to work on more than one operating system. The choices can be tough, with pros and cons in each direction, and the debates are often lively ones.

Recently I came across a transcript for a speech by Mark Eyskens, a professor and former prime minister of Belgium, delivered at the conference of the International Association of University Presidents, in the summer of 1999. He touched on many important factors affecting modern universities, both challenges and opportunities, and made suggestions for where he thought the stewards of these institutions should collectively direct higher education. He addressed the challenge of one's approach to knowledge that he has personally wrestled with:

This declaration of principle has followed me, surrounded me and besieged me for the last 36 years. Because either you try to look out over the parapets, which surround the "vegetable garden" of your knowledge, in which case you are derisively termed a "generalist," a dabbling dilettante, someone who knows less and less about more and more. Or you dig ever more deeply into the soil of your own vegetable garden, and then you are referred to sarcastically as a narrow-minded specialist, someone who knows more and more about less and less.^J

We must actively seek out fragments of possibility, information, ideas, expertise and worldview from their many scattered sources and try to put them together sensibly and productively. A generalist understanding of factors once believed too remote to consider is already an essential activity. We will increasingly need to stretch even further to stake out brands, products and strategies that are unique and attractive — to mention nothing of the intrinsic value of comprehending where any of these fit in the bigger picture (e.g. markets, attitudes, influential events, etc.). As such, a generalist, multi-perspective, multi-directional approach offers an optimal and unbiased starting point to both the generation of ideas and the execution (or delivery) of them.

BROAD THINKING LEADS TO BIG IDEAS

We live in an interconnected world, one in which information and knowledge have become vital to how we work, play, and live. **Creativity and imagination are two of the most coveted qualities of modern organizations and active thinkers, alike. So-called “soft” attributes like empathy, context, perspective, inspiration, systems dynamics, and lifelong learning have risen to the level of imperative.**

The last decade has seen a powerful emergence of ideas and a recognition that one must *actively* look beyond the status quo, seek new ground, and find the courage to take the inherent risks of delivering a new idea to the world. With this emergence, a movement has grown. It’s been gradual and quiet so far, but this movement is gathering steam and is about ready to explode. We now see more hybrid-topic magazines, more innovation and creativity consultancies, more boundary-less design studios, more universities strongly emphasizing cross-disciplinary study, and even a few more market analysts that study the world as much as the stock ticker.^K The movement is *generalism*—open-minded, diversity seeking, intersectional-thinking, holistic generalism. It’s led by a group of people who once thrived in intellectual and craft circles, but who were, until quite recently, becoming an endangered species.

In his groundbreaking book *The Medici Effect*,^L Frans Johansson offers dozens of examples of how ideas that are mixed, crossed, blended, collided with or seduced by other completely different and seemingly irrelevant ideas are producing some of our time’s best dishes, strongest materials, timeliest medical discoveries, liveliest cities, and most interesting music. He accurately notes that “... the movement of people, the convergence of science, and the leap of computation are giving rise to more intersections than ever [and] the individuals or teams who find these intersections are likely to be the ones who radically change our world.” This is precisely the domain of generalists.

My message is a simple one: **If breakthrough insights are at the intersection of ideas, concepts and cultures, it will be generalists—those so-called dabblers and experts of nothing—who find them, who connect them with the specialists that need them, who shape organizations in ways that embrace them, and who shepherd into existence the ideas that will indeed change our world for the better.**

If you look up the word *specialism* in a dictionary, you will find a definition that describes the word as meaning “a field of specialization,” or simply “a specialty.” Interestingly though, if you look up the word *generalism*, supposedly its antonym, you will find that no such word even exists. Generalism does not register with the *Merriam-Webster*, the *Oxford English* or the *American Heritage* dictionaries. Apparently, there is no field of generality. The wellspring for ideas and the foundation upon which creative specialties are built is yet to be defined. Well, that’s definitely changing!

Nothing substitutes depth of analysis and there’s proven value in the methodical and incremental process of specialization—it’s what education, career paths, scientific research, and technological innovation are built on—but generalism is the hidden talent, the missing link. With so much complex information, that is fragmented in so many ways and developing faster and faster, it is increasingly important to have generalists around to make sense of it all. People who appreciate diversity, who are in the know about the wider world, and who understand how things interact are invaluable observers, matchmakers, and pioneers of the intersectional ideas that are vital to success in today’s global society and knowledge economy.

Inspired, divergent, lateral thinking is the secret factor for organizations and individuals that live and work in the realm of ideas. Generalists hold the key to our increasingly specialized world.

ENDNOTES

- A Defined by *Wired* Editor-in-Chief Chris Sullivan, author of the October 2004 article pioneering the idea, as the shift from a mass market to millions of profitable niches.
- B Historian Ronald Wright would disagree and does so quite compellingly in his book, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 2004, p. 29). “As cultures grow more elaborate, and technologies more powerful, they themselves become ponderous specializations—vulnerable and, in extreme cases, deadly. The atomic bomb, a logical progression from the arrow and the bullet, became the first technology to threaten our whole species with extinction. It is what I call a ‘progress trap.’ But much simpler technologies have also seduced and ruined societies in the past, even back in the Stone Age.”
- C The knowledge economy has garnered significant coverage in the popular press. Some of its most visible commentators include Tom Peters, Peter Senge, Clayton Christensen, Seth Godin, Eric Raymond, Richard Florida, Thomas Friedman, and others.
- D Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).
- E “Ideas are the critical input in the production of more valuable human and nonhuman capital. But human capital is also the most important input in the production of new ideas.” This is a statement by Stanford economist Paul Romer about his contribution to New Growth Theory, cited in Thomas Homer-Dixon’s *The Ingenuity Gap: Can We Solve the Problems of the Future?* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001, pp. 226–27). “Old growth theory says we have to decide how to allocate scarce resources among alternative uses,” says Romer, quoted in Kevin Kelly, “The Economics of Ideas” (*Wired*, 4(6), June 1996). “New growth theory says, ‘Bullshit!’ We’re in this world, it’s got some objects, sure, but it’s got these ideas, too, and all that stuff about scarcity and price systems is just wrong.”
- F Tom Peters, “Whence Comes Innovation?” *Forbes*, August 1994, p. 130.

- G Jerry Hirshberg, *The Creative Priority: Putting Innovation to Work in Your Business* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998, p. 16).
- H The term “versatilist” was coined in 2003 by Gartner Research analyst Diane Morello in a study titled “Unlocking the Business Value of People: Building Versatility.”
- I The irony here, of course, is that organizations must rely on the same non–specialist individuals who don’t really have a place on most org charts and who are frequently told by HR that they’re smart but “we wouldn’t know where to put you.”
- J Mark Eyskens, “Idea of a University for the XXIst Century.” Speech given July 12, 1999, see http://www.eyskens.com/docs/english_02.html.
- K Such stock analysts even have a fancy name: “random walkers”. Writes Lee Gomes in *The Wall Street Journal* (“Technology’s Future Is Rarely What Anyone Has Predicted”, April 14, 2003), these folks “say that nothing in the history of a stock price is of any use in estimating its future value.” That would leave a lot of other variables for consideration.
- L Frans Johansson, *The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Ideas at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts & Cultures* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004, p. 32).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Hardy is the founder of Creative Generalist, a popular weblog started for curious divergent thinkers in spring of 2002. He is formerly the Business Director of 2004's Magazine of the Year Maisonneuve ("eclectic curiosity") and is currently a Creative Producer of wireless media at Airborne Entertainment in Montreal, Canada.

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