ABC October 2020

The Pandemic – Technology "Partnership": Is It Unwittingly Dragging Us Back to "Ancient" Content-Mastery Learning Again?

In full transparency, this ABC is an open call to all members of the CIMBA family to rise to the occasion and make a difference. Let's go back one year and reflect on where we were, to better understand where we are, to guide and assist us in raising the probability of reaching a preferred destination as we contemplate where we are going and how you might be of help in seeing that others get there.

Pre-Pandemic Years – *The "New Normal"*

From our very beginnings, and particularly over the past decade, we have been concerned about the consequences of the rapid inroad technology was making into both our work and life domains. Our principal concern has not been with the technology itself – it has certainly made our lives better – but rather around academia's general response, or rather lack of response, to the needs of students in meeting ***this*** "new normal." While the axioms, theorems, formulas, and principles taught by academia over the past 350 years provided just the right training for career success, robots, computers, and machines had rapidly invaded that space, in many cases dominated it, and very likely will dominate it forever. In the face of this "new normal," it was a very legitimate question to ask whether academia was truly still training students for their future careers, or simply "tantalizing" them with the illusion they could actually compete with a robot, computer, or machine. It was a seemingly unaddressed question that has constantly unsettled our thinking from our very beginnings. It was frustrating to watch academia sit by ideally either unaware, or perhaps unconcerned, that the essentially human skills of empathy, social effectiveness, building relationships, and leading teams had become the most valuable skills in the "new normal." Or worse, we were concerned they were merely holding on to the pre-digital age notion – the "old normal" -- that those personal skills and attributes were unneeded or unnecessary in the workplace. But how long could that "thinking" go on, whether real or feigned?

Rational thought leads one to conclude that as robots, computers, and machines rise in ability, so must humans. But not through the development of skills and abilities that place humans in direct competition with robots, computers, and machines, but rather through the development of those essentially human skills that will allow us to work alongside and take productive advantage of them. Skills that emphasize our humanness and not robotic abilities to undertake repetitive, memory-based, tasks, tasks that are fully within the domain of such technologies. By all observable means and measures from research and development, such human skills transcend the reach and bounds of technology.

We came to the conclusion that learning energies needed to be focused on teaching students how to think critically and to make decisions in a wide variety of circumstances, not on how to memorize knowledge and other content that is readily available on the Internet -- both to us and to robots, computers, and machines. Why focus teaching (or learning, for that matter) on mastery of what robots, computers, and machines already rule and will continue to rule? More importantly, a focus on essentially human skills leads not just to gainful employment, but also to fulfilling careers, rich personal lives, and

productive civic engagement. A traditional, content-based course in finance or accounting will do little, if anything, to make you a better friend, parent, colleague, or teammate. And this is even more likely the case if that you take that course online.

Still, academia has continued its hyper focus on content mastery ("Knowing" in our "Knowing-Doing-Being" model). While "Knowing" may be a necessary condition in some cases, it is no longer a sufficient condition to meet the employment needs and demands of the "new-normal," which places a premium on adaptive, social skills and attributes. For 350 years, such a content mastery-based curriculum made sense and academia got very good at it, giving it every incentive to maintain it as academia's dominate learning (product and service) focus. With thousands upon thousands of professors and administrators fully invested in delivering content, how likely are they to willingly move to adapt and change their learning strategy to support any "new normal?" To abandon their content expertise? To believe that learning may, in many cases, be made worse, not better, through a classroom, book-based learning environment? By focusing on what something looks like rather that how it feels? In reality, the constraints imposed by tenure-based systems within our universities provide further impediments to that adaptation and change. This becomes particularly disconcerting when you realize that many professors over the age of 60 went through the vast majority of their education during the pre-digital era, and certainly well before individual productivity technology tools became an integral part of the work environment. If you don't fully understand its usefulness, how perceptive can you truly be to its consequences from a *causation*, not correlation, perspective?

But our concerns with technology's consequences reach far beyond issues with familiarity and experience with its use and usefulness at an individual level. Consider the following quote from Peter Drucker, a leading management guru, in his book ***Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*** published in 1974, from the pre-digital era, just before the beginnings of the digital era:

> Team members need not know each other well to perform as a team. But they do need to know each other's function and potential contribution; Rapport, empathy, interpersonal relations are not needed. Mutual understanding of each other's job and common understanding of the common tasks are essential.

The emphasis on each team member's function and potential contribution based on that function ability reflects the content mastery emphasis of curriculum in academia during the pre-digital era. Although jobs were lost through "automation" in the decades that followed, technology created more jobs than it displaced as we learned to work productively alongside and in collaboration with technology; Rapport, empathy, and interpersonal relations seemingly played no role.

In both business and academia, the rational basis for completely ignoring the role of adaptive skills was finally openly challenged in the late 1990s with the publishing of Prof. Goldman's *Emotional Intelligence*. With the ever-increasing advancement in and encroachment of technology, did we finally begin to realize their importance going forward and how in very short supply they were? Was it a sufficient call to action? In reality, no.

In retrospect, many researchers point a finger at the advent of the smart phone as the catalyst for our awareness of technology's growing circle of impact. In many respects, the ensuing trend and its consequences were well upon us before we realized it was even there. Many companies related anecdotal observations of the abilities and inabilities of new hires but did not see technology as having a sufficient systematic influence to give rise to problematic stature. The trend's consequences were more

frequently observed by researchers in behavioral patterns and tendencies, as in college student drinking habits, dating propensities, declines in optimism, elevated stress levels, depression, boredom, and social anxieties. Still, very few correlated shortcomings in workplace and interpersonal skills to shortcomings in personal development deficiencies attributable to technology usage, an observation that could have enabled root case to be more readily understood, and appropriate corrective action taken. Not surprisingly, academia was slow to respond to this adaptive skill need not only due to a lack of foresight but also due to the self-interested motivation to protect a business model that had been in place for more than 350 years. A dramatic elevation in the importance of developing soft or adaptive skills was inconsistent and at odds with academia's primary stakeholders. [When I first told the MBA director at the university at which I was then teaching of my concerns about a lack of student adaptive skill development, I was told politely: *We do axioms, formulas, theorems, and principles here; we don't get into that training stuff.* Shocked at his response and angered by its disparagement of student needs, I have never forgotten it. I have used it for personal motivation in my efforts to develop the best possible approach to adaptive skill development. Sadly, the situation there and in the vast majority of other academic institutions, is largely unchanged some 30+ years later.]

The technology, while certainly intertwined with content-based learning development, was overlooked as a cause for the social ailments we were facing and the deficiencies we were experiencing in workplace competencies. In reality, our heavy reliance on technology was pulling us apart from traditional human social interaction, an indispensable learning opportunity for the brain to develop social skills ranging from social effectiveness to our ability to productively cope with the inevitable social disruptions in our daily lives. Mental health issues adversely affecting productivity, from loneliness to depression, began to make their way onto lists of serious employee concerns within the business community. Researchers identified overly protective parents and schools, expectations of instant gratification fostered and supported by the *Amazon*s of the Internet world, and impersonal interpersonal communication fostered by smart phones and its multitude of convenience apps that serve to satisfy our every shopping, gaming, information, and communication need and desire with the touch of a finger. As these mental health issues (predictably) drifted down to business schools, schools found themselves obligated to turn to hiring mental health experts to cope with the rapidly rising tide of student depression, anxiety, and even suicide. Pharmaceutical drugs used to buttress our now largely ineffective social coping skills and strategies became the "go to" remedy for our worries, anxieties, depressions, and ultimately to the "I do not want to feel bad" crises in our lives.

While business schools certainly made content adaptations to its curriculum over the past decade in response to content or technical needs– consider digital marketing, supply chain management, data analysts, social media manager, quality assurance analyst, logistics analyst, and others — relatively little progress has been made in developing personal adaptive skills and attributes. To the extent they are addressed, schools largely employ content, not experience, based learning environments. Except in very, very rare circumstances, ten thousand books along with the professors to interpret them will not allow a person to ski, play tennis, swim, or ride a bicycle without extensive, actual experimentation and practice. Yet, we have allowed (or forced) ourselves to believe we can create leaders and managers utilizing that very pedagogy. In the experience-based opportunities that do exist, and their numbers are (fortunately) increasing (largely due to student demand particularly in the area of entrepreneurship), participants receive little or no feedback to assist in being guided or coached in the most productive direction and particularly as it relates to team member interactions.

And its impacts on the business community? They are perhaps best summarized by Mr. Eamonn McGrath, Audit Partner, with Ernst & Young, when asked about the impact of robots, computers, and machines:

1. In providing unprecedented efficiency gains, they are forcing us to make serious changes in our business model. Audits that took thousands of billable hours of work in the past, are rapidly approaching being able to be accomplished in an afternoon;

2. Those thousands of hours gave us ample opportunity to train and observe young people in our organization. How will we now identify those young people who have that special "spark"? We cannot rely on the universities to do that for us.

And the comment that sent the audience into a buzz …

3. I don't know what my son is going to be able to do in order to live the life that I have been able to enjoy.

That was the "new normal."

And then the pandemic hit. Hard. For some, Very Hard. And we entered the "new, new normal."

The Pandemic Year(s) – *The" New, New Normal"*

In March 2020, millions of workers worldwide suddenly found themselves working from home. Overnight, and without warning, homes were transformed from centers of rest, relaxation, and family life and forced into new additional roles as schools and workplaces. Travel bans and lockdowns isolated us from our companies, colleagues, clients, suppliers, teachers, friends and family with contact fully and completely dependent upon technology.

McGrath's first concern, the need to adapt business models to the invasion of robots, computers, and machines, became an immediate survival necessity. For many small and medium sized businesses, online strategies had to be developed overnight, often where none had existed or had even been considered before. A reflection of these adaptations can be seen in *Amazon*'s recent advertisements in both the US and Europe touting their involvement with small and medium sized businesses who are now selling more than 6,000 products via *Amazon* nearly every minute of every single day. Or in *Shopify*, a commerce platform that allows small and medium sized businesses to set up an online store and sell their products, whose stock price has increased by more than 600 percent since March 2020.

While companies made efforts to accelerate the implementation of digital strategies in response, they soon realized those strategies were limited, unrealistic, not applicable, or did not even exist. Perhaps most importantly, companies quickly realized their approach to digitalization and living in a virtual world failed completely to consider the human consequences. Both the lack of a common communications software and adequate employee training meant that many online meetings could best be characterized by such *highly -productive* inquiries as "Can you hear me?", "Which tab do I press?", "Was I supposed to download that software?", "My bandwidth is too limited to do that," "Let me call you back when the neighbor's dog stops barking?" or "Can you call me back later? My children/spouse/partner/roommate needs the computer/bandwidth/room now?" Worse, it is not only an issue of training employs in the software the company intended to use, but what about that used by our clients and suppliers? Or our children's teachers?

Concerns quickly arose as to how to manage teams in a distant working environment where the first concern, whether valid or not, was productivity and motivation. Are my employees working or just sitting around watching TV? To support the explosion in virtual teams, software developers responded by delivering more than 200 team management tools. So, which should we use? How do we get proper training?

The necessity for online communication created a "Zoom" Boom and precipitated a similar explosion both in the development and use of communication software and in add-ons. Again, which should we use? How do we get proper training?

But we need to look even more closely and take a different perspective. With a deeper reflection upon both such team management and communication technologies, and we all have been forced to rely on one or the other or both, take a moment and reconsider Professor Drucker's quote from above:

> *Team members need not know each other to perform as a team. But they do need to know each other's function and potential contribution … .*"

They both focus almost entirely on their functional, technical objective, exactly what Professor Drucker prescribed for success in the ***pre-digital era***, the "old normal," before the advent of robots, computers, and machines.

Returning again to the Professor Drucker quote from his pre-digital era:

> *Rapport, Empathy, interpersonal relations are not needed … .*

They have given us the tools to move forward to the future with technology, and backward to the pre-digital era with regard to human factors – seemingly relying on Druckerian logic in providing it. Three decades after Drucker, neuroscience showed us that we are wired to be social and that "*rapport, empathy, interpersonal relations"* are not only needed, they are essential for our human mental health. What if an understanding of those human factor issues had been an integral part of the developers' education? The pandemic necessitating our "new, new normal" is rapidly accelerating and accentuating the mental health issues brought on by the digital age that defined the "new normal" – issues that would have been both unknown and foreign to Drucker. But it is seemingly the same logic coupled with the same ignorance driving academic education (but just much less excusable in today's world), and has left those developers and their clients in an unnecessary void to our detriment. Specifically, how many of those team management and communication technologies have a built-in function that encourages or prompts team members to ask each other: "How are you?" "How are you doing?" "Is the work going OK?" "What is going well and what is difficult for you?" "What help do you need (hopefully meaning something beyond a better computer, faster Internet, quieter environment, an inexpensive and available babysitter/teacher, or software training)? And them prescribes a meaningful response?

Then, is it really any surprise that we have experienced disturbing upward trends in the "new, new normal", trends that were already disturbing even under the "new normal," in loneliness, anxiety, social fears, depression, and even suicide? Without the pandemic, how long would it have taken before we would otherwise have been forced to acknowledge the true importance and consequence of these human mental health issues? Is it really any surprise that our streets are filled with rioters who do not

want to again be locked down by the pandemic? Is this heavy emphasis on the functional aspects of technology truly the direction we want to go? If not, and I hope not, what can we do about it now?

Our Post-Pandemic Future – *The" New, New, New Normal"*

In conversations with executives at several important multinationals, many are saying that after the pandemic -- our "new, new, new normal" -- as much as 50 to 60% of the workforce will continue smart working. Unless you are completely blind to the human mental health issues that are flowing from such a work environment, and will continue to flow without more, this seems more "dumb", or at least short-sighted, than "smart." While I am truly skeptical of its long-term effectiveness, experience has taught me that it may take a long time before that realization prompts appropriate action. As a consequence, we are more and more likely to work with people we will never meet physically. We will hire people who will never physically step inside company headquarters. We risk working with others in a purely robotic environment, an environment appealing to a robot, computer, or machine, but completely at odds with our hardwired human need to be social.

Many of the issues are obvious. In particular, McGrath's second concern becomes very relevant in the "new, new, new normal." How will we keep our employees connected to the company? Without being present, how will we identify those young people with that special spark? And, conversely, how will they understand what that "spark" is? How will we role model and teach leadership skills? How in our teams will we build the trust that leads to mutual trust, enables vulnerability, and embraces the well-documented benefits of psychological safety? Some of the older executives with whom I have spoken had an even more interesting question: How do I implement the management and leadership tools and concepts in my own home that I have learned from academia and executive education when my adult children return home on a quasi-permanent basis to smart work?

As an initial matter, and as McGrath emphasized in making his second point, we cannot rely on academia to respond quickly to this learning crisis - and it is a crisis. While we at CIMBA hold out no illusions about our ability to move academia, we do feel the responsibility to make sure our students and graduates are prepared. With that intent, we have utilized the pandemic downtime to create and build two very important initiatives:

(1) ***The CIMBA Inner MBA Program***. The CIMBA *Inner MBA* Program essentially systematizes and vastly improves access to our personal development system, embracing physical and mental well-being, coaching, LIFE, cognitive training, mindfulness, self-inquiry, and microlearning (emphasizing the role your brain and neuroscience play in your action and behavior choices). It is our intent to make it a more fully an integral part of every degree and certificate program at CIMBA. Those of you currently taking the MBA will see it in full force when I teach the leadership class this coming Spring. Expect more information shortly on this important initiative. Note, it is our expectation to make this available outside of our degree programs as a standalone product.

(2) ***(Virtual) LIFE II***. The testing and development of our LIFE II program is in its advanced stages. It will be offered fully and wholly online, emphasizing the important distinctions between real and virtual environments and how those differences impact us from a human, social, perspective. We are currently looking for volunteers to participate in its first full launch, likely in late December or early January. While similar in nature to our existing and highly successful LIFE program, it is sufficiently distinctive in the tools and thought processes it develops to not preclude a person who has already taken LIFE from gaining significantly from taking it

Let's return to my opening sentence: *In full transparency, this ABC is an open call to all members of the CIMBA family to rise to the occasion and make a difference.* I want to turn our attention to McGrath's third concern: *What will my son do?* This ABC is a call to action for all CIMBA graduates. You have been trained more fully to appreciate the importance of adaptive skills in the workplace than in any other, more traditional, MBA program. I want you to take an active role in spreading the word of the importance of such adaptive skills, making the specific point that they can truly be trained and fostered. Make a special effort to implement the ideas and concepts you have learned. In this way, we can do our part in making sure that our *sons and daughters* can live the lives we have had the privilege of living now and in the future.

Together, the CIMBA family can make a difference.