THE SKILLS AGENDA

Strengthening the conversational skills of leaders is the first step to enabling organisations to thrive, say **Sara Hope** and **Chloe Walton**

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The world is changing at an unprecedented rate. The digital revolution is having a profound effect on our lives by dramatically changing the way we live, work and interact with one another. Inventions, innovations and decisions are happening at speeds which were previously unimaginable, and developing Artificial Intelligence (AI) will continue to change the art of what is humanly possible.

We are today at the beginning of a fourth Industrial Revolution.[1] In such a rapidly evolving landscape, the ability to anticipate and prepare for future skills requirements in organisations is increasingly critical. Often the impact of big data and AI as growing forces within organisations can spark a mixed sense of both fear and optimism.

But whatever our own personal relationships with technology, data and change, we may be at risk by turning our back on the great potential it has to offer. Failing to future-proof ourselves for such issues over the coming years could result in significant economic and social costs for many organisations.

So how can we prepare our organisations and leaders for the changing landscape ahead?

This article seeks to explore the key disruptions on skillsets, and how creating the space for strengthening conversational skills of leaders and managers can be a key differentiator to enabling organisations to thrive.

Drivers of change and the impact on organisations

Developments in AI, robotics, nanotechnology, 3D printing, genetics and biotechnology are set to dramatically change the landscape of our worlds in the very near future, and our businesses and leaders need to be equipped with the right skills to thrive in this period.

Technology is not just about digital connectivity – it is about how the evolution of devices, for example smartphones, change the way we work, communicate, socialise, even the way we engage in politics and think about the truth. It also includes the new era of big data: what is known about us as individuals, and the technological and ethical advances of how this should be used to benefit the individual, organisations and the economy.

In her blog 'When the world's pace of change outstrips humans' ability to adapt' Louise Buckle (head of partner development, coaching at KPMG) highlights the impact of megatrends on organisations. "The real impact here is a massive change to established business models and the enablement of new ones. As an example, Uber, Airbnb and much of the gig economy were not viable business models as little as four years ago."

> ***Social skills – such as conversation and developing others – will be in higher demand than narrow technical skills***

Business model change can often mean skillset disruption, sometimes with immediate impact. This impact substantially changes the way we live and the power we have as individuals. We need to be thinking about how we are preparing leaders for these fast-paced changes to the norm.

The fundamental mindset that needs to be adopted during this new phase of technological advances is not one of increasing our technical skills to be even more 'expert', but one of seeking to find answers, ideas and support from different sources and alternative mindsets.

The Future of Jobs Survey 2016[2] by the World Economic Forum (WEF) expects two job types to emerge as significant by the year 2020. The first is data analysts, to make sense of and derive insights from the "torrent of data generated by technological disruptions". The second is specialised communication representatives, as "practically every →

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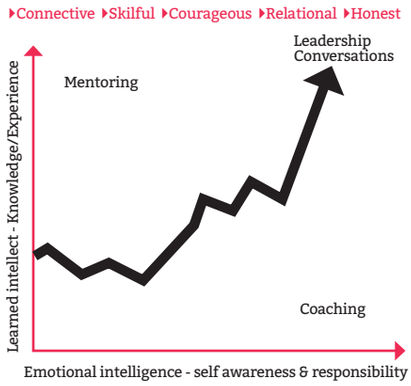
industry will need to become skilled in commercialising and explaining their offerings to business or government, clients and consumers".

What, then, does this mean for the skills agenda, the role of change catalysts and those within the learning profession both inside and outside organisations? In what way might our own assumptions, fears or opportunity regarding technical developments and megatrends, impact how we create and build learning solutions for today and are they fast-paced enough to keep up?

Connectivity

In this fast-changing context there are two main areas that we should focus our attention on for the



skills agenda: digital connectivity and human connectivity.

The WEF report suggests that across nearly all industries, the impact of technological and other changes is shortening the shelf-life of employees' existing skillsets. According to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (Digital Skills Crisis 2016-17)[3], there is a digital divide where up to 12.6 million of the adult UK population lack basic digital skills. The cost of this skills gap is an estimated £63bn a year in lost additional GDP.

Research from Accenture[4] found that 69% of 18-34-year-olds think technology will improve their work experiences, compared to 53% of those over 45. This highlights the importance of all age groups having future-ready digital skills.

However, it is not only a digital skills crisis facing us. Over 535,000 UK workers will be significantly held back by a soft skills deficit by 2020 according to Development Economics (2015).[5] They suggest that soft skills are worth over £88bn in GVA to the UK economy each year, a view supported by the PwC 18th annual global CEO survey[6] who reported: "CEOs see very human qualities as being necessary for success in the future. If there was one thing they stressed, it was the 'soft skills' of leadership."

Overall, social skills – such as conversation, persuasion, emotional intelligence and developing others – will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills such as programming or equipment operation and control. In essence, technical skills will need to be supplemented with strong social skills and collaboration.[7]

Other studies, including that of Deborah Rowland, tell us the qualities needed to lead organisations now and in the future are "intuitive, dynamic, collaborative and grounded in here-and-now emotional intelligence". Our own findings from our research 'Mastering Conversations', and that of Groysberg and Slind (2012), Glaser (2015) and Reitz (2015) suggest that we need to be growing the capacity for leaders to be more skilful conversationalists, to build empathy and compassion.

Organisations need people who can connect with each other in a more human way, ask and seek answers to new questions, solve new problems and anticipate barriers before they arise. According to Berger, the new era of organisations needs to "welcome the curious leader, where success may be less about having all the answers and more about wondering and questioning".

Where do we choose to invest?

The lifeblood of all organisations is their people. CEOs have a significant number of top priorities and areas of concern occupying their thinking, including cyber security, profit and growth, political changes, competition and customer satisfaction. Often it is their own people that are at the bottom of the agenda, or even forgotten. The issue of investing in skills development needs to be a strategic priority by top management within organisations, particularly as everyday change is the new norm. Business leaders can no longer expect their business to perform and deliver throughout change without providing the people who have to deliver it with the right skillset. Neuroscience is showing us how our brains like certainty and predictability, and yet this way of 'being' and leading has been turned on its head thanks to the ongoing impact of megatrends.

Many of the new capabilities required for this revolution, to deliver agility and change in organisations, connects back to *how* people have conversations. Leaders who are approaching conversations or interactions from a standpoint of 'expert' or 'having the answers/solution' and 'my way is the only way' may be one of the biggest barriers to innovation and creative thinking in companies today.[8] Organisations and their leaders are facing a growing need to become more agile, embrace discomfort and respond to an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

Often, opinions about the impact of disruptive change can become polarised between those who see job cuts, downsizing and closure; and those who see significant opportunities and liberation.

Too often we expect change to happen without paying attention to differing mindset perspectives, and to the emotions underlying behavior. Those that embrace this opportunity will have a higher chance of success.

Disruption brings risks, and when we feel vulnerable we can become less willing to listen, and more addicted to being right. All too often leaders can overestimate the power of logic during change, and underestimate the impact of emotion. Creating the space, teaching the skills and developing the framework within organisations to have rich conversations is the first step in preparing for the future.

Conversational skill

At The Conversation Space, we believe in putting powerful conversations back at the heart of businesses as a must-have for all organisations and senior leaders who want to stay ahead and grow.

If 'experts' form almost 40% of the managerial population,[9] supporting

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and enabling leaders to be more curious and have the capacity to hold a space of not knowing, is perhaps one of the great opportunities open to us. After all, we cannot be in a space of 'knowing' all the time.

Growing the capacity for leaders to have more courageous conversations, to be in a place of discovery, to show up and take risks requires a high degree of humility and willingness to be vulnerable. To do this takes self-awareness, inner strength, a willingness to risk-take and a level of commitment to speak honestly and openly. It is perhaps these skills that we should be paying attention to, in addition to data analytics, technology and AI.

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If the technical experts in companies need to be influencing and selling their products to consumers and clients, they need to master their conversational skills to do this well.

As with any skills development, particularly conversational skills, we need to be creating a framework that supports people to practise as a key to building environments and cultures that allow innovation to thrive, and organisations to adapt.

A conversational vehicle that is increasingly being used to cultivate the conditions for change and innovation in companies is reverse mentoring.

Reverse mentoring – the leadership hack

In this environment of change, setting up a reverse mentoring programme can be an efficient conversational development activity; building bridges between generations and mindsets, supporting creative ideas, opening a dialogue culture and making younger employees more engaged with the leadership and in the company. It provides the opportunity to achieve greater depth of understanding around people, environments and business, leading to a stronger organisation. The answers do not always have to come from the top.

Reverse mentoring is exactly what it says. The hierarchy of a traditional mentoring relationship is swapped, allowing the more junior employee to take on the role of the mentor as they are identified as having knowledge or experience that can help others. The more senior employee is the mentee and the main learner in the relationship. This is still a two-way, highly reciprocal learning partnership with much to be offered on both sides.

As Alan Webber, the co-founder of Fast Company, explains, "Reverse mentoring is a situation where the 'old fogies' in an organisation realise that, by the time you're in your forties and fifties, you're not in touch with the future in the same way as the young twenty-somethings. They come with fresh eyes, open minds, and instant links to the technology of our future."

With as many as five generations working side by side, organisations and leaders are challenged with shifting expectations as well as the constant need to stay on the cutting edge of digital developments. Leaders need to see their organisations as a rich source of insight and be bold – move from that position of knowing'to the position of learning.

There are many benefits to reverse mentoring, including:

- Building **connection** across all levels, experience and mindsets. Harnessing the differing talents, through improved listening and peripheral awareness skills.
- Increasing opportunities for **innovation** and collaboration by bringing different mindsets together within a trusted framework to create the space for disruption.
- **Accelerating** targeted learning opportunities around identified topics, such as technology and diversity and inclusion, and closing the knowledge gap for both parties.
- Improve personal development and increase **engagement** by harnessing the talents of both junior, middle and senior employees

This is not an activity that can be squeezed into the existing HR development framework. It is a programme that needs senior sponsorship, investment, engagement and time commitment. Supported effectively, the conversational skills that are nurtured and grown through a reverse mentoring programme can be applied in numerous situations across organisations.

Reverse mentoring can be the key differentiator enabling an organisation and its leaders to thrive throughout this revolution.

Without continuously evolving, learning and innovating, organisations and their leaders will be at risk of becoming paralysed, losing their talent and out-smarted by their competitors who are better equipped to adapt.

Are your creating the best learning environment possible for your organisation? **TJ**

***Sara Hope** is co-founder of The Conversation Space.*

***Chloe Walton** works with The Conversation Space, utilising her 20 years of corporate experience in retail, finance and customer to view people from multiple angles to understand their differing mindsets.*

The team at The Conversation Space uses a combination of data, business experience and coaching, to challenge organisations to put people and conversations back into the heart of the way they do business. To find out more, visit www.theconversationspace.com

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