

The Information Age is Dead. Long live the Imagination Age.

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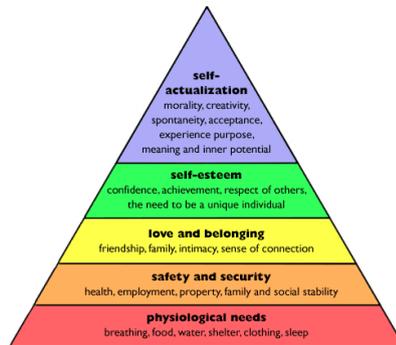


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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Summary

'If you can imagine it, you can achieve it; if you can dream it; you can become it' (William Arthur Ward). These words were said decades ago but now more than ever they have particular significance. Ideas and imagination will be the driving force over the next phases of human development. While we have all been told that we live in the Information Age, many commentators believe it is already over. What is the next Age and how will we live and thrive in it? This think piece takes a look at some of these ideas and their implications for New Zealand.

BACKGROUND

Over time the human race has passed through several distinct Ages. The first significant Age was the Agricultural Age, which gave rise to an agrarian society and lasted about 10,000 years. The Industrial Age heralded another break-through and lasted approximately 200 years. Then came the Information Age with the development of computers. It has been around for about 20–40 years depending on where you measure the starting point. Despite its seeming infancy, many commentators are stating that it is already coming to a close. What is replacing it? There are several terms being used – the most popular being the Imagination Age.

The Information Age was dubbed the 'Third Wave' in the 1970s by author and futurist Alvin Toffler. Dr Michael Cox, Chief Economist for the Federal Reserve in Dallas, predicts forces are already at work that will propel society toward the fourth wave. 'In fact, we are already in the Imagination Age,' Cox says. 'Think of the people who are getting rich: Jeff Bezos (Amazon.com), Michael Dell (Dell Computers) and the guys behind Google. They are not providing information – Ted Turner does that. These people are using their imagination to create something that didn't exist before.'¹ This comment can be extended also to Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Joe Dorsey (Twitter); again people who have used their imagination to capture ours. This importance of the imagination and ideas cannot be over-stated. In a recent interview on Radio New Zealand, Sir Martin Evans, recipient of the Nobel Prize for stem-cell research summed it up simply by saying: 'I think ideas power things more than anything else. If you haven't got the idea you can't do it. If you've got the idea, so much work can come out.'²

'TOO MUCH INFORMATION'

The pace of technology and the means of delivering information have, for the last twenty years, been moving at a previously unimagined rate. This emphasis on the collection and technological delivery of information has moved to the point where many people are suffering from information overload. The infrastructure and superstructure of information is here to stay and will continue to accelerate, but what is changing is what we will do with the information and how we will relate to it. Malcolm Gladwell (author of *Outliers* and *Blink*) states that there is 'an enormous frustration with the unexpected costs of knowing too much, of being inundated with information. We have come to confuse information with understanding.'³ Accumulating vast stores of information is not enough. It needs to be used to gain meaningful and sustainable ways of living, working and playing.

Daniel Pink, in *A Whole New Mind*, describes this new emphasis on ideas, inventiveness and meaning as the rise of right-brain thinking. He states that the Information Age has been powered by left-brain thinking – linear processes, logic, efficiency, and analysis have been vaunted without taking into account many of the things that make us complete human beings – ethics, empathy, narrative, creativity, and intuition to name but a few. According to Pink being dependent on left-brain thinking, and the resulting information-based society, has led to three challenges, all of which are relevant to New Zealand and where we are heading:

- Can someone overseas do it cheaper? Outsourcing is becoming more and more prevalent in a wide range of areas.
- Can a computer do it faster and/or more efficiently? Computers are taking over more and more routine jobs – from the dreaded automated phone systems to sophisticated medical diagnostic tools.
- Is what I'm offering in demand in an age of abundance? Even in the global recession we have access to abundance when compared to the rest of human history. 'Abundance has bought many beautiful things to our lives, but that bevy of material goods has not necessarily made us much happier.'⁴

The idea of abundance deserves closer examination. Economist Robert William Fogel claims that abundance and technological advancement have 'made it possible to extend the quest for self-realisation from a minute fraction of the population to almost the whole of it.'⁵ This desire for self-realisation comes from the

right, not left side of our brain. In Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs it encompasses the characteristics at the top of the pyramid (see Figure 1). Usually applied to individuals, it can also apply to groups, even societies.

When large numbers of individuals are all looking for meaning in their lives it will change how their society looks and what its goals are. It affects every area of society. Some examples might be adding aesthetics to a product, crafting a narrative that resonates with a buyer, or most importantly, as we struggle with learning how to live carefully on this planet, offer a sustainable and ethical option that sets a business apart from its competitors. Research shows (perhaps surprisingly) that following ethical and sustainable paths and being socially responsible does not negatively impact the profit margins of a business but usually increases it.⁶

This search for meaning is high on many people's priorities, perhaps even more so after the global credit crunch has encouraged people to think about what is truly of value. Businesses and consumers alike are looking for a new paradigm that emphasizes right-brain attributes – empathy, ethics, narrative, relationship.

THE CREATIVE CLASSES

An important trend related to the rise of the Imagination Age is that of the 'creative class'. A term coined by Richard Florida, it describes the fastest growing group in America comprising some 38.3 million Americans, roughly 30% of the entire US workforce – up from just 10% at the turn of the twentieth century and less than 20% as recently as 1980.⁷ Who are these people? Florida describes a super-creative core – scientists, engineers, novelists, designers, actors, architects, think tank researchers, analysts, entertainers. Members of this super-creative core are producers of new forms or designs. Then there is a group of creative, highly-qualified professionals working in knowledge intensive industries – hi-tech, finance, legal, health, business management. People who do this kind of work may sometimes come up with methods or products that turn out to be widely useful, but this is not the most important part of how they function. What they are required to do regularly is think on their own. It is important to note that these are all occupations which require a mix of left and right-brained thinking. These are the people who will thrive and add value in the Imagination Age.

The main advantage of a strong creative class is that it can create outcomes in new ideas, high-tech industry and regional growth. One of the challenges New Zealand will face (and to a large extent already does) is how to keep our own creative class heading off to the lure of overseas opportunity. We need to have a community that appeals to them and their values if we want to retain their talent (and also encourage creatives from other countries to move here). In *Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida points out the fact that members of the creative class value meritocracy, diversity and individuality and look for these characteristics when they relocate.⁸ New Zealand is already well suited to appeal to these values. In a more recent book Florida explores the growing fight for talent, starting in the very first chapter with the success of Peter Jackson in creating an enticing creative environment in Wellington, attracting some of the world's best to work there, many of whom have relocated permanently.⁹ Other earlier research has also seen the importance of cities in attracting skilled and creative people.¹⁰

A look at both the Immigration Department's immediate skill shortage report and long-term skill shortage reports show that we still have shortages in many of the occupations that fall into Florida's creative class.¹¹ Any strategy for New Zealand going forward needs to address these skill gaps.

There will be increased demand for more highly skilled occupations (e.g. managers and professional occupations) and associated skill sets. These include skills such as abstract reasoning, problem solving, communication and collaboration. The first two types of skill involve use of the left side of the brain; the second two, the right. Personal traits such as communication skills and attitude will become increasingly important as jobs become less physically demanding and repetitive but more knowledge-intensive (in the sense of applying and synthesizing it). From 1994 to 2004 the jobs that increased most dramatically in America were those that had high levels of inter-personal skills.¹² It would be useful to analyse employment data for New Zealand to see if we are seeing the same trends.

The rise of the Imagination Age presents challenges for New Zealand. Here are a few:

- We need to be aware of the global fight for talent and take positive steps to make sure that New Zealand is competitive. We already have a head start with the lifestyle and natural environment that we offer.
- Innovation will become increasingly important. On a number of innovation indicators such as business R&D spending, rates of information and communications technologies (ICT) investment, broadband uptake and international patenting rates, New Zealand is below the OECD average (although improving).¹³ One challenge will be to find ways to increase innovative practices in New Zealand, both in terms of providing funding and support.
- Our current schooling system tends to focus on developing left brain skills in content, delivery method and assessment styles. Creativity needs to be encouraged across the curriculum. Young New Zealanders need to be taught the skills that enable them to become independent thinkers rather than passive consumers of information.

While there are challenges, the opportunities are immense. We are no longer an isolated island at the bottom of the world. Technological advances have lessened the tyranny of distance as ideas can now travel almost instantaneously around the planet. Add to this the fact that we have always been a resourceful and inventive nation, and this new Age should suit us. The idea of our society full of people who are utilising both sides of their brain is exciting. Any national strategy needs to take into account these trends and look at how best to harness them to our advantage to create a New Zealand that provides its citizens with ample opportunity for meaningful lives.

For complete references and to find out more, visit our website:
www.mcguinnessinstitute.org.

This think piece was prepared by Leanne Silver to accompany a presentation made by Wendy McGuinness at TEDx Auckland, 1 October 2009.



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