Let's Talk About The Future – An Interview With Gerd Leonhard

We caught up with futurist Gerd Leonhard, CEO of The Futures Agency, to discuss the shape of learning and technology in years to come.

What will be the most powerful shift in the future of learning?

For many years we have been an information society, but now we are entering the age of what I call the experience society, and this will have a big influence on our work. It will be less about acting on information like a computer does, and more about doing the things that only a human being can do: interaction, creativity, or storytelling, for example – right brain activities. The future of learning will be heavily influenced by this, because we will have to learn things that are not standardised and have nothing to do with transferable skills that can be copied.

Think of it as a pyramid. At the bottom of the pyramid you have data, then at the next level you have information, then knowledge, and then at the very top you have wisdom, or intelligence. We are moving into the top of that pyramid now. We have to learn how to be intelligent, not just memorise information.

Learning and training will become one of the cornerstones of society, because in this environment it's important that we always invent and create new things, and that's what learning is all about. Ultimately, learning will become an essential part of generating the minds we need in the future.

How could current L&D models be improved?

There's not necessarily anything wrong with the current assumption that we have to learn certain skills and information, but the emphasis should be placed upon generating intelligence rather than stuffing ourselves with information. We need to figure out how we get people to discover and invent while learning other things.

Part of it is 'learning how to learn' so we can quickly get up to speed with new things. The future will be about people inventing what they do rather than filling a slot that other people say they should be doing. You may be joining a company that does not have a job description, but your skill will be to analyse, look at the patterns, and create a job around that. These skills are much more valuable but much less tangible.

The other part is discovering how we learn with other people. Many things can be learnt remotely, but when it's about chewing on stuff and building a culture, most of that requires human interaction. We should not confuse information with intelligence, and that's a very common problem with learning.

You talk about 'disruptive technological change.' How will this impact the future of learning?

Technology is clearly disrupting everything, from music, to television, advertising, or how we learn. Not all technology should be adopted just because it exists, though. There is value in human functions such as accidental discovery, mystery, or storytelling. These are human parts of our life that we don't want to eradicate just because technology dictates it. We are at a junction where so much is possible, but in the end we have to decide what that means for us and the future and whether we want it or not.

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What learning and development has to do is prepare people for the ultimate job: finding their task rather than fitting themselves to an existing task. That is going to be a huge challenge. At the moment, we look at work as something that has to be productive and efficient, but productivity and efficiency are the aims of computers, and eventually they will be good enough to do those things for us. We need to figure out how we are going to develop the right brain and help people achieve skills which are not necessarily tangible, but intuitive. The 19th century mathematician Henri Poincaré once said, 'It is by logic that we prove, but by intuition that we discover.' We need logic, but logic is something machines can do. It's up to people to be intuitive and discover things. We want future employees to ask the right questions, not just provide answers.

We live in an increasingly networked world. How is this going to impact on the meaning of knowledge and learning?

You can access education and training in all sorts of ways, but how much of it is relevant and how much is just noise? Information and knowledge is, in a way, like a higher ranking form of noise. It can be useful to have lots of it freely available, but we should not be under the illusion that this is a big deal in itself. Just because there are 60 million songs on Spotify, does that mean all music is suddenly extremely valuable to everyone? The value is in translating what it means and the relevance to an individual. When it comes to information and knowledge, we have solved the distribution problem, and that is a good thing. But we should not be under the illusion that just because we've solved the distribution problem we have solved the problem of meaning and relevance. In other words: the bigger problem is working out what we do with everything we have learnt. What is the outcome?

I don't believe educational institutions will suffer, because they've always looked at what's between the information, and the experience. You can't take learning out of context and say, for example, that the information about how to be a nurse can be conveyed through text or videos or games online in the same way as hanging out with other student nurses. One is not a substitute for the other. The concept of saying a year of online study gives you the same result as a five-year graduate programme is flawed.

Institutions need to be able to serve learning in multiple different formats, but in the end the experience economy will prevail.

How will leaders need to adapt in atechnological world?

One of the key challenges is that the world is becoming increasingly like a giant, interdependent eco system, so it will become difficult to have a brilliant, lone idea. People like Steve Jobs, for example, will become much rarer, as you will not be able to control the environment as much as he did.

As a leader, you will want to generate other leaders rather than followers, and your leadership will be based more on having a larger vision and being able to recognise patterns. There's a famous saying that if Henry Ford has asked people what they wanted, they would have said 'faster horses.' As a leader you don't make more horses, you make the next thing. So you have to have foresight and study the future.

Another skill for a leader will be dealing with a huge amount of information and still seeing a clear path forward – listening, analysing, observing, and recognising opportunities in an environment where everything is changing all the time, and surviving in a world that is exponentially changing.

They will also need to exist in a very flat structure – it is very difficult to build a hierarchy when information is everywhere. But if you don't have free-flowing information you will hinder your employees.

What excites you most about the future?

Technology has the potential to solve most of our global problems of a scientific nature – energy, food, and water, for example. But the biggest danger is that we use it to solve our social, cultural or political problems instead. We ultimately need to figure out the balance between machines and humans and what that means for us.