

Learning the *Gestalt* Way

Book Review

**Daniel H Pink: A Whole New Mind : Why The Right Brainers Will Rule the World.
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Reviewed By

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Introduction

Daniel Pink, the author of the book, penetrates the contours of the human brain to explain the socio-economic changes that are sweeping the world in a fairly violent manner. His trigger might have been the American anxiety and angst at the loss of jobs of a large segment of its population consequent upon the avalanche of outsourcing sweeping across the continents of the developed North. Based on the socio-economic changes taking place, he argues that the process of outsourcing is inevitable in the context of globalisation and the intellectual awakening of the less developed continents of the South; the developed North with its acquired affluence is on the lookout for meaning in life than eking out a survival. It is in this context that he probes deeper into the human brain and its functioning; he, quoting scientific discoveries, puts forth the idea that the left hemisphere of the human brain is responsible for logical thinking which aspect is easier to automate and outsource whereas the right hemisphere of the brain is responsible for creativity and holistic thinking which are not yet amenable for automation and consequently not feasible for outsourcing.

This fundamental fact forms the basis of a new strategy for the anguished Americans: focus on the right hemisphere of the brain; this is going to be basis of power in the coming era. Major part of the book is devoted to understanding the functions relevant to the right hemisphere of the brain and how skills relevant in this direction can be developed. That becomes the tool-kit for survival in the new era.

From Information Age to the Conceptual Age

Anatomically speaking, human brain is divided into left and right hemispheres by the Mason-Dixon Line. Till the middle of the 20th century scientists believed that the left hemisphere was the critical one as it was responsible for rational, logical thinking of man. The relevance of the right hemisphere of the brain was not yet discovered. In early 1950s Roger W Sperry initiated research that led to his postulating that each hemisphere was responsible for different aspects of brain functioning and that none was inferior in any

manner. This research led to a new understanding of brain functioning and also to Roger Sperry winning the Nobel Prize for medicine. This and subsequent research led to the following conclusions:

- a. Left hemisphere was responsible for the right side of the body; the right hemisphere was responsible for the left side of the body.
- b. The left hemisphere is sequential; the right hemisphere is simultaneous.
- c. The left hemisphere specialises on text; the right hemisphere specialises on context.
- d. The left hemisphere analyses the details; the right synthesises the big picture.

Some individuals are more comfortable with logical and sequential thinking; they tend to have a computer like reasoning. Lawyers, accountants and engineers are in this category. This is left-brain directed thinking; Daniel Pink calls this L-Directed thinking. Some individuals are characterised by intuitive thinking; they tend to see the big picture easily which cannot be explained logically; their thinking process is more non-linear. It is possible that their right hemisphere is more active. Daniel Pink calls this R-Directed thinking.

With the advent of the industrial age, many jobs required logical and analytical thinking skills. On these jobs individuals were rewarded for their learning and analytical skills. Examples are lawyers, accountants, engineers and even software engineers. They formed the knowledge workers that Peter Drucker described in his writings. In the second half of the 20th century, when computerisation and automation came in, all repetitive and logical work got computerised; these were the ones that were most suitable[or the Americans may say most vulnerable] for outsourcing. With the emergence of internet technology distance was no more a barrier; this prompted the outsourcing of repetitive and logical jobs to Asian countries where the wage-rates were far lower. All L-Directed activities are bound to be automated and eventually outsourced.

Industrial revolution has created large number of jobs in the developed North. This ushered in certain amount of abundance. Increasing volumes and capacity expansions were the only way to make the products cheaper. This process enhanced jobs and abundance further. With globalisation, spread of education and the technological innovations, countries from the underdeveloped South with their wage advantages, became the natural choice for all L-Directed activities. The net result has been the diminishing significance of the L-Directed activities. R-Directed activities are slowly gaining in significance; those who are adept at such activities are bound to command a premium.

The emerging social evolution can be described in the table below:

Agricultural Age	Industrial Age	Information Age	Conceptual Age
Upto 18 th century	19 th century	20 th century	21 st century
Farmer	Factory Worker	Knowledge worker	Creator, Empathizer

In the 21st century, man has entered the Conceptual Age. This is an age where L-Directed activities are losing their significance and R-Directed activities are gaining in significance. L-Directed thinking is necessary but not sufficient. R-Directed thinking are becoming increasingly necessary: of being emotional, of being empathetic, of being able to perceive the big picture etc. These skills cannot be automated and hence cannot be outsourced.

Daniel Pink describes the critical skills of the conceptual age as High Concept [thinking oriented] and High Touch [empathy and emotion oriented]. Some of the examples of this emerging change are quite illustrative. American Medical Schools are resorting to narrative medicine in a big way. Despite the sophisticated diagnostic facilities they are giving lot of importance to the narration by the patient; it is increasingly felt that the narration is more apt to explain the context of the illness and the patient becomes a participant in the process of diagnosis and treatment. Robert Lutz, CEO of General Motors claimed he was in the business of art and that automobile was only a mobile sculpture. This is a reflection of his understanding that automobile is not just a utility-product; the customers attach a much higher meaning and aesthetic value to it.

Some salient trends of the Conceptual Age are:

- There is increasing interest in programs like MFA [Master of Fine Arts] because more and more people and organisations are getting tuned to fine arts.
- The emphasis on EQ [Emotional Quotient] is increasing vis-a-vis IQ [Intelligent Quotient]; tests like SAT are being re-invented on these lines.
- As people and social organisations mature, their cognitive patterns become less abstract [L-Directed] and more concrete [R-Directed] resulting in sharpened sense of reality, emotion and totality. For the new generation wealth is less alluring, while meaning is. The paradigm shift is from money to meaning.

Tool-kit for Survival in the Conceptual Age

Daniel Pink has identified “Six Senses” that are characteristic of the R-Directed thinking. These are Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play and Meaning. Major part of the book is devoted to describe how these can be nurtured.

Design: With increasing affluence and purchasing power people look at products and services not for their functionality alone; they need more value in each of them. In this context design is a critical aspect. For the supplier it is essential to pack more value into the product through better design; basis of competitive advantage also shifts to design. For the consumer looks, aesthetics, increased convenience etc have become increasingly important which demands increasing significance of design. The author prescribes the need for ability to spot design and to enhance the design sense; he has described a series of exercises in this direction.

Story: According to the author narration is more effective than cold facts; it facilitates better understanding, assimilation and retrieval because it creates a context, certain

association and appeals on an emotional level. Narration or story telling is an R-Directed activity and in the Conceptual Age its importance is only likely to increase. Case method of teaching employed in management education is one instance; relevance of mythology to convey certain moral instructions is another example. Introduction of narrative medicine in American Medical Schools is based on this principle. The author has suggested a set of action plans to develop individual sensitivity in this direction.

Symphony: It is the ability to have an overall perspective of things and situations. It is also described as *gestalt view* or the big picture. Most of the situations that we face today require multi-disciplinary skills; so it is necessary that multi-disciplinary skills and approaches are honed in as a pre-requisite for success. Today's entrepreneurs and executives have to be beyond borders. The author has suggested a set of exercises to develop the feel for symphony; prominent of these are based on searching for metaphors.

Empathy: This is about getting into someone else's shoes and feeling his comfort, joy, anguish and sorrow; about knowing another's emotions and experiencing them as one's own. Empathy is about emotions and emotions are not expressed through words; facial expressions reveal emotions to a large extent. Ability to understand facial expressions [face-reading] will have great significance in this age. For instance this skill has application in criminology. Another application of empathy is in medical treatment. Research has shown that nurses are better in empathy than doctors. Through narration and empathic observation medical practitioners can arrive at better diagnosis and help the patient recuperate faster. Research has also shown that females have better empathy than males. The author has listed a whole range of references on related topics and a set of websites where one can have his Empathy Quotient assessed.

Play: Traditionally work and play were considered separate and were not allowed to mix. Today there is increasing awareness that play enhances the quality of work. According to the author, play brings in symphony, empathy, collectivism, team-working and leadership. He cites research findings to support his argument. There is the famous statement of Winston Churchill that the battles of Burma and Egypt were fought and won on the playgrounds of Eaton and Harrow. This concept is gaining increasing acceptance in the corporate world and efforts are made to fill work with fun; to make the work-place a fun-place. West Point, where US Army officers are groomed, realised the relevance of videogames in attracting youngsters to the Army. Games are emerging as a powerful tool in teaching in management schools and in corporate training. The author has studied the relevance of the Laughing Clubs prevailing in India as a powerful tool in stress-busting.

Meaning: Daniel Pink quotes the psychiatrist Victor Frankl to say, "man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see meaning in his life." This search has become the main drive for man. Robert William Fogel, the Nobel Prize winning economist says, "People have enough to live, but nothing to live for; they have the means, but no meaning." Major part of the world has banished poverty and technology is enabling rapid progress of human society; but meaning in life eludes like a mirage for most people. This is prompting many people to seek solace in things like spirituality, religion, yoga, meditation etc. Citing the theme of the book, "Who moved my Cheese?"

the author says, “Change is inevitable; when it happens do not wail or whine, but deal with it.”

The human society is in the twilight zone between the information age and the conceptual age. The transition requires a paradigm shift from the L-Directed thinking to the R-Directed thinking; the paradigm shift from a landscape of logic and analysis to a landscape of art and heart. The transition is not going to be easy. They say the process of knowledge is a journey from the unknown to the known. This journey is endless. But then the purpose of the journey is the journey itself. This is true for the transition from the information age to the conceptual age too.

Relevance of the Book

This is the second book of the author Daniel Pink, the first being Free Agent Nation. The book, A Whole New Mind is written in a very lucid manner and it is replete with an abundant inventory of exercises on each of the six essential attitudes required for success in the conceptual age. As part of the exercises the author has suggested references of large number of related books and websites. These make the book a complete storehouse of knowledge on the emerging era. The author has addressed the challenges of globalisation and technological changes by preparing the individuals from within in terms of transformation of the L-Directed thinking and R-Directed thinking; the book is a complete and effective guide to this transformation. Though this book is designed for the Americans, it gives insight to others also as to the shape of things to come in the coming era and it is up to them to take the necessary cues and prepare to face the future effectively.
