

Understanding What's Defining the World Today

Let's explore the dominant trends underway that necessitate a change in the way we live, work and create. While some of these we'll all experience over our lifetime, others are more applicable to the world young people are entering. They all point to the need to develop creative skillsets to assist in navigating the new economy.

Information overload and attention deficient

What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.

Quote by renowned social scientist Herbert Simon¹⁵

Creativity is valuable and applicable across all industries, and while there's enormous diversity across professions, there is one constant: all professions say they have less time to think deeply about problems today.

So why is this?

The twenty-first century has experienced an explosion in the speed and volume of information consumed, as well as in the methods we access this information. Chris Lewis is an author and media specialist who believes we've come to rely on 24/7, multi-channel communication. But this could also be eroding our ability to think clearly, expansively and creatively.¹⁶

With so many ways to access information now, we're feeling busier, but this hasn't necessarily translated into higher productivity. With constant interruptions to our thinking, this information overload is changing behaviours and limiting our ability to manage our attention.¹⁷

It's the scale of the overload that is the problem, with email the most pervasive, with figures of there being 5.2 billion worldwide email accounts in 2018. Add social media, messaging apps, an increase in advertising exposure, and a typical adult's daily media consumption has almost doubled in recent years.¹⁸

This overwhelming amount of information also leads to stress, narrowing our

attention into more analytical and short-term thinking. To cope, we filter and narrow our information sources and this forces us to quickly summarise information to determine if something is good, bad or relevant. Chris Lewis believes this is changing behaviours, as more qualitative information can be missed in favour of reductionist, analytical and quantitative thinking, meaning we become less focused on the longer term impacts of decisions.¹⁹

And it's not just adults; today's children are also impacted by this new reality. With fewer hours spent with face-to-face interaction and more with screens, this can impact children's ability to 'read' nonverbal signs as well as their ability for conversation. University students are also changing their reading habits. A recent US report points to the decline across all age groups over the past 20 years, particularly in literary reading like novels, poetry and short stories.²⁰

This is important because reading books requires a degree of active attention and engagement. By contrast, most electronic media modes make fewer demands and require no more than passive participation. Interactive video games and the Internet foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification.²¹

Students are becoming less used to concentrating for long periods of time and working through the nuances of an argument, a skill that reading books builds.²² This has implications for anyone in the workforce because so much of what we do is screen-driven, and young people particularly will have shorter attention spans and may lose the impetus to stay engaged.

So, what's the impact on our ability to be creative?

Short-term distraction is a hindrance to sustained, long-term creative thinking. Imagine the brain bombarded by millions of bits of information. It copes by discarding information to enable it to focus on what's necessary at that moment. The information is registered, or possibility stored as a memory, ready to direct to future responses.

This "selective attention is a cognitive process where the brain attends to a small number of sensory inputs while filtering out what it deems unnecessary distractions".²³ The brain's selective attention works out what is and isn't important via the limbic system's 'thalamus'. This manages the brain's filtering system, acting like a road traffic officer, directing sensory information to the appropriate part of the brain.²⁴

We choose where we place our attention. When we stop, our thoughts have a chance

to come to the surface and to the attention of the conscious brain, to move from a distracted to an absorbed state. The absorbed focus and the ability to control our attention is fundamental to optimal performance, plus it feels good – and pleasure is the emotional marker for flow.²⁵

While the longer term implications are yet to be realised, we all need to become more selective about the information we consume. Education and management practices are evolving but not fast enough to cope with the changes we're experiencing. Now more than ever we need to ensure we spend time and energy cultivating creativity skills, creating environments and habits that enable us to incubate ideas.

The uncertainty of work

As well as death and taxes, the other thing we can be certain of in life ... is change. 'VUCA' is a managerial acronym to describe the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous nature of business.²⁶ This term emphasises:

- ◆ the volatile characteristics of instability and speed of change
- ◆ information gaps and unpredictability of the future, leading to uncertainty
- ◆ the overwhelming and complex nature of relationships and information
- ◆ the lack of clarity or the unknown unknowns leading to ambiguity.

It characterises the world of work. For young people they know they will no longer have a lifelong career in one role, job and even discipline; it's no longer realistic because of the nature and pace of this change. We can already see this with the growth of contract work in a gig economy, leading to the need for adaptive and flexible work approaches.²⁷

This changing environment is also asking workers to take greater responsibility for their employability through continuous learning, via informal approaches, stretch work, networking, mentoring and accumulating a portfolio of portable skills.²⁸

Employers expect young people to act as 'intrapreneurs' by taking ownership of their roles, working cooperatively and actively adding value to an organisation. An example is seen with the hiring procedure of Google, the world's most highly ranked innovation company. According to their director of talent, they look for intellectual curiosity, a bias towards action, and problem finders. They prize collaboration and the ability to recognise and learn from others around them who have different kinds of expertise.²⁹

Workplace trends

Are workplaces listening and responding to the creativity trends underway?

A 2016 study I undertook was particularly interested in how creativity was or wasn't understood in Australian business. As businesses strive to launch new products and services into the market, there's a growing understanding – particularly by large organisations – that creativity and the resulting innovation are vital to their success in today's competitive global environment.³⁰

Innovation is the hot topic in business. It's why leading magazines are full of such articles, conferences can command high-price tickets, and top-tier management consulting firms are building practices around it. Business author Geoff Colvin says, "In a world that forces that push toward the commoditisation of everything, creating something new and different is the only way to survive".³¹

Colvin believes creativity and innovation are the keys to the future economic prosperity of the world. For three hundred years the developed world's source of economic advancement has been dominance in the fields of science and technology. But as technology becomes more commoditised by countries like China and India, the economic power and value will shift towards those countries and corporations that invest in creativity, imagination, empathy and aesthetics.

Business leaders use 'creativity' to explain the need for core competencies in leadership and management. The rate of change in the world, the ever-increasing complexity of problems, and the highly competitive nature of business combined with the increase in technology-driven responses all point to the need for more creative solutions.³²

As consumers become less loyal, as competition from around the world intensifies, and as the Internet provides unlimited consumer choices, corporations are discovering that being creative and consistently delivering a product or service that delights customers in more novel ways is fast becoming their only sustainable advantage in the marketplace.

Alongside this is the need for creative thinkers and creative leadership. This was reinforced in an IBM report highlighting that CEOs are increasingly challenged by managing in a VUCA environment. This widely quoted study of 1500 CEOs from 33 different industries across 60 countries identified creativity as the most important leadership quality, along with the need for increased experimentation and innovation to achieve success.³³

Multinational corporations recognise the necessity of employee insights to enable their companies to thrive: “Tech stars like Google, Facebook and Twitter have unleashed their employees’ creativity to change the lives of billions of people. Today, in every department, from customer service to finance, people have opportunities to experiment with new solutions.”³⁴

There’s also a growing case that the world of work will be defined by people who are not only good at problem solving but who are adept at problem *finding*. These people are intensively curious and willing to apply their cognitive abilities to exploring the grey zone adjacent to existing opportunities until they identify a vein of gold.³⁵

The creative economy is shaping this century

“Human creativity is the ultimate economic resource ... and the industries of the twenty-first century will depend increasingly on the generation of knowledge through creativity and innovation.”³⁶ We’re already seeing the new model of the creative economy, with position descriptions for app developers, self-driving car designers and multimedia engineers – all roles that didn’t exist until just the last few years.

The term ‘creative economy’ describes an economy based on people’s use of their creative imagination to increase an idea’s value. Just as manufacturing typified the nineteenth century and information and knowledge the twentieth century, in the twenty-first century, economic systems value novel imaginative qualities rather than just traditional resources extracted from land, labour and capital.³⁷

The United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union are recognising the creative economy is a dominant force today and are seeking to build their economic competitive strength and resilience on this basis.³⁸ Traditional industrial manufacturing is on the wane, leading to a focus on innovation policy with action on developing creativity in the labour force across all sectors.³⁹

Like other transitional countries, Indonesia is also looking for economic growth through a creative reinvention. In 2018, Indonesia held the first World Conference on Creative Economy, with its government agency adopting a ‘creative economy’ focus in place of the long-standing ‘cultural economy’ focus.⁴⁰

We’re also seeing the growth of the creative industries, such as the arts, design and cultural sectors, architecture and the education industry. These creative industries are becoming increasingly important to economic prosperity, with more than 50% of consumer spending now on outputs from these industries.⁴¹

Future-proofing students

We often hear about future-proofing jobs in this age of automation and artificial intelligence. But the research indicates that factors like an aging population around the world and increased demand for housing and infrastructure will influence the sectors projected to grow. Industries that will experience employment growth over the next five years are:

- ◆ Healthcare and social assistance (14.9%)
- ◆ Professional scientific and technical services (10.2%)
- ◆ Construction (10%)
- ◆ Education and training (11.2%).⁴²

Australian researcher Mark McCrindle says: “When we think about jobs of the future, we tend to think about drone pilots and app developers, but it’s nurses, teachers and construction workers. The effect of automation has a longer-term time frame than many think. There is time to plan the next phase of one’s career path. I would look for a job that involves interaction with people. Jobs relying on people skills, creativity and which require advanced decision-making will be in demand.”⁴³

So let’s think about future-proofing students by developing their skills in complex problem solving directly related to creative thinking, as well as their social and emotional intelligence to help build relationships and to read and understand people.

A recent World Economic Forum report asked chief human resources and strategy officers from leading global employers about the current shifts across the workforce. How do these shifts impact how they would recruit for employment and skills across industries and geographies? They reinforced that creativity will become one of the top three skills workers will need. With the avalanche of new products, technologies and ways of working, workers are going to have to become more creative to benefit from these changes.⁴⁴

In terms of the top ten skills, creativity is projected to move from tenth to third by 2020. This is also mirrored in a report from the McKinsey Global Institute, showing the demand for higher cognitive skills, including creativity, will rise almost 10% by 2030 and will continue to hold the highest value.⁴⁵

Top ten skills⁴⁶

In 2020	In 2015
1. Complex problem solving	1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking	2. Coordinating with others
3. Creativity	3. People management
4. People management	4. Critical thinking
5. Coordinating with others	5. Negotiation
6. Emotional intelligence	6. Quality control
7. Judgement and decision making	7. Service orientation
8. Service orientation	8. Judgement and decision making
9. Negotiation	9. Active listening
10. Cognitive flexibility	10. Creativity

The growth of artificial intelligence

Developments in machine learning and robotics point to the role they play in jobs that allow computer-related technologies to substitute for labour in both routine and non-routine manual and cognitive tasks.

The most vulnerable occupations in the coming years are related to transport, logistics, manufacturing production, construction and office administration.⁴⁷ But occupations like artists, architects, web designers, IT specialists and public relations professionals will all rise in importance. Specific management roles like marketing, sales, advertising, as well as a range of computer, engineering and science occupations, are also considered highly creative.⁴⁸

Creative jobs are the least susceptible to automation and have a lower risk of being replaced by machine learning and mobile robotics. This isn't surprising, as creativity can't be easily replicated or programmed into a machine. Computers and robots are most successful when they emulate human labour once a problem has been specified and the environment is sufficiently simple to enable autonomous actions. Robots still struggle with tasks that are highly interpretative, where the response has not been fully specified in advance and where the task environment is complex and can't be simplified.⁴⁹

As technology progresses, our creative skills essential for problem solving, strategising and generating ideas will drive businesses forward and become even more important. Building our creative thinking skills and outputs that involve valued originality are an advantage now and into the future, providing you with a competitive edge.

What does this summary of the dominant trends tell us?

The most enduring advantage that will assist individuals and organisations to stay ahead is their ability to learn and stay curious. People will always be better at imagination and creativity than computers. Authors Chris Lewis and Pippa Malmgren in *The Leadership Lab* advise us to learn from the leadership lessons of the past, which all share a common denominator. They believe: “Leadership fails when there is a lack of imagination. Problems happen where there is an inability or unwillingness to envisage alternative possibilities.”⁵⁰

Thriving in a constantly changing world is assisted by understanding what facilitates creativity and innovation. With renewed learning strategies, building skills and imagination, and incorporating new tools that enable creativity, we can prepare ourselves and our children for the future that awaits. According to Lewis and Malmgren: “The future belongs to people who are curious. People who are inclined to set off on intellectual adventures will have more opportunities to do so than ever ... people who merely seek quick answers to someone else’s questions will fall out of the habit of asking their own or never ask them in the first place.”⁵¹

So, how do you set in motion a course of action that enables you to be creative, to do your best work, as well as utilising all the advantages available as you live your best life?

What follows is a deep dive into the creative mind that will enable us all to be consistently creative and fundamentally empowered and energised.