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LEADERSHIP

IS AN MFA THE NEW MBA?

COMPANIES ALL ACROSS AMERICA ARE STARTING TO SEE A CRITICAL TALENT GAP AS OLDER EMPLOYEES RETIRE. ARTS STUDENTS MAY NOT HAVE ALL THE TRADITIONAL SKILLS, BUT THEY HAVE THE MOST IMPORTANT ONE: CREATIVITY.

BY STEVEN TEPPER

An estimated 10,000 Baby Boomers will turn 65 every day for at least the next 17 years, according to [data from the Pew Research Center](#). And while many of them might choose to work beyond the traditional retirement age of 65, leaders everywhere are facing the same daunting issue: A great tsunami of Baby Boomer retirement is coming.

Though it's likely to reshape the workplace for years to come, many organizations [say they aren't prepared](#) for such an unprecedented brain drain. The projections of younger workers entering the workforce are even more shocking.

In fact, [according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), for the 10 years between 2010 to 2020, the number of workers between the ages of 16 to 54 will decrease by about 1 million--while the number of

workers over the age of 54 will increase by more than 11 million.

Statistics as bracing as those have many organizations redoubling their efforts at retaining older workers.

But as a leader, your biggest human capital challenge is this: Where will you find enough next-generation workers with the skills required for success? This challenge is even greater when you factor in the nature of today's flexible and contingent labor market.

Consider this: Today's contingent economy has people moving constantly from one job to another, one type of work to another, one industry to a different industry. In fact, on average, a person between the ages of 25 and 45 will hold 11 different jobs in their lifetime. Thirty percent of us will work in more than 15 different jobs over the course of our careers.

Organizations far and wide--perhaps even yours--will compete intensely for workers who are adaptable, resourceful, and can quickly learn and apply new skills to a variety of challenges. Where can you find such workers?

One answer runs counter to much conventional wisdom: Ask an artist.

Artists know the world of adaptability and resourcefulness very well. In fact, according to an annual survey tracking the career trajectories of more than 65,000 artists from hundreds of arts schools, the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), close to 60 percent of arts graduates hold more than two jobs at once, and approximately 20 percent have more than three.

What's more, regardless of whether they work in the arts or in other businesses, more than three-quarters of arts graduates say that critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to work with others are skills they both learned in school and use on a regular basis in their current work. Arts graduates are plucky and understand how to use their creative skills in a variety of settings.

It's common today to debate the comparative merits and economic value of various college majors, but those of us who

track issues and trends around the nation's creative economy contend that much of the comparisons miss the mark in important and fundamental ways.

But don't just take me at my word: No less a force in global business than IBM found, in a [global study of more than 1,500 CEOs](#) from 60 countries and 33 industries, that the most important skill for successfully navigating our increasingly complex, volatile, and uncertain world is none other than *creativity*.

Is art school the next B-school? Hardly, though artists often possess the skills and temperament that business leaders regularly say are in short supply: creativity, resiliency, flexibility, high tolerance for risk and ambiguity, as well as the courage to fail.

Here's what business leaders might consider in tapping talent from the creative economy:

Integrate arts on the job

The arts are not just a hobby. Employees trained in the arts can draw on their creative talents and apply what they might do naturally in the studio or while recording music or making a film to the types of puzzles they deal with every day.

Arts-trained employees won't leave their creativity at the doorstep when they join our firms or organizations. Ask them to explicitly think about puzzles using their artistic hat/lens. Invite a local theater group to work with employees on improvisation exercises to free up their creative juices. Research has shown that when people engage in improv they later generate more creative ideas to a range of issues and challenges.

Fail more often

Encourage employees and students to take more risks and to stretch their creativity. Give them space and permission to fail. Figure out how to incorporate critical feedback into an ongoing process of improvement and innovation. Ask an artist to come in and run a "critical feedback" workshop for employees. Or someone with design experience to help people think about "rapid prototyping" as a way to audition new ideas. Artists understand that you need to fail often in order to succeed.

Sit with ambiguity

Employees in a lot of settings should become more comfortable with ambiguity. In my classes, students writhe in pain when I give them an ambiguous assignment. They naturally want to know exactly what they need to do to get the desired grade. Not only do we as teachers and employers need to be comfortable giving work assignments where we build in ambiguity, but we need to help those we mentor learn how to begin a process or a task without knowing what the outcome will be. Again, having an artist facilitate a workshop where a creative task is emergent, shifting, and where new information requires adjustments and negotiation, would be a great first step.

The U.S. graduates more than 130,000 visual and performing arts graduates every year. Like virtually every other college major, close to one-half of all these graduates will end up working in professions largely unrelated to their degree. These arts graduates walk among us; many find their way into our businesses; some are sitting next to us in board meetings. And many others have started their own businesses to rave reviews.

More often than not, arts graduates are invisible to us when we search for new talent. But based on the SNAAP research findings, one of the largest surveys ever conducted of college graduates, these former art students have many of the skills and habits necessary to navigate a circuitous career--including the constant reinvention and "retooling" necessary for any environment that values innovation.

Many people see artists as shamans, dreamers, outsiders, and rebels. In reality, the artist is a builder, an engineer, a research analyst, a human relations expert, a project manager, a communications specialist, and a salesman. The artist is all of those and more--combined with the imagination of an inventor and the courage of an explorer. Not a bad set of talents for any business challenged to innovate in a world of volatility, uncertainty, and change.

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