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Future-Focused Leadership: Three Mega-Trends Influencing Distance Learning

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Introduction

While many continue to question the skyrocketing costs and value of a college education, future-focused leaders are recreating learning experiences by blending technology with the human experience. What does the future of distance learning look like, taste like and feel like? It can be difficult to predict the future of education as the world continues to evolve at an increasingly rapid pace; however, distance learning administrators can use a future-focused leadership approach, which includes examining megatrends, to plan for the future. Megatrends are global shifts that influence society, the economy and the environment. The purpose of this paper is to touch on three megatrends shaping the future of distance learning: 1) The Rise of the #GigEconomy, 2) Living with Purpose and Meaning and 3) The Decentralized Marketplace.

Megatrend 1: The Rise of the #GigEconomy

The rise of the entrepreneurial individual, and what is currently referred to as the Gig Economy, will create new challenges and opportunities for distance learning administrators. How can institutions of education help learners create value for traditional employers and for their individual brands? If not as many people are investing in education to land a full-time job, what does this mean for higher education?

An emerging trend, the rise of global joblessness (International Labour Office, 2014), is supporting the growth of the Gig Economy while creating a need for the marketing of talents and skills in new and meaningful ways. The number of large employers is predicted to shrink in the future causing people to find new and inventive ways to make a living. The ability to sell, purchase and promote goods and services as well as individual brands on the Web has created a need for education to add value to the lives of learners in innovative ways. People are increasingly defining success for themselves, which does not always include a college degree and a 9-5 job. In many ways, it is now much cooler to be a successful start-up entrepreneur, famous blogger or YouTube sensation than a person working in a full-time job.

One common denominator will remain the same: People need to be found on the already crowded World Wide Web. They have to build their brands and levels of influence to strengthen both credibility and success. Educational institutions should keep a close eye on the rise of businesses like Fiverr.com and the use of Twesumes (Twitter + Resume = Twesume = a resume in 140 characters or less) to land jobs or gigs (thus, the #GigEconomy).

Leaders should also consider building their brands, as well as those of students, faculty and alumni. The rise of social networks and technology has enabled people to both learn and teach at anytime from any place. These same tools have helped people create their own businesses and design their lives in ways that best suit them, which supports the Living with Purpose and Meaning megatrend. Life purpose is shaping everything from healthcare to education.

Megatrend 2: Living with Purpose and Meaning

Our society is quickly evolving into an era characterized by shared purpose and meaning. Leaders must be willing to create an atmosphere of sustainable innovation designed to continuously move organizations forward while

connecting employees and clientele to meaningful experiences and their definitions of personal fulfillment. How many distance-learning leaders are adding value to the lives of learners, faculty and staff from a holistic perspective?

Personal fulfillment is a growing trend and may be a growing trend in distance education as well. Research on the “entrepreneurial learner” in the distance learning environment demonstrated an increase in credit hour completion as learner motivation associated with personal fulfillment strengthened (Reimers-Hild & King, 2006). People are looking to decrease their levels of stress and strengthen their healthy habits while finding greater fulfillment. Minimalism is one of the trends shaping the Living with Purpose and Meaning megatrend because people are seeking less stuff and more life. At first glance this may seem like an odd topic for administrators in the distance learning arena to consider; however, minimalism is gaining popularity in trend-setting places like Silicon Valley and is influencing everything from living spaces, to workplaces and web design. The Living with Purpose and Meaning megatrend will continue to grow as the global population increases and places more demands on the planet’s limited natural resources. How can future-focused distance leaders create a better experience for learners and employees alike? Leaders can connect with individuals’ beliefs while helping them find purpose and meaning in their educational endeavors and careers while living fuller lives with less clutter and greater health and well-being.

Technology may help distance learning administrators holistically add more purpose and meaning to the lives of both learners and employees. For example, a forecast by Carbone and Nauth (2012) describes the evolution of the “cloud.” They discuss the cloud evolving from a place to store data to an intelligent resource that will actively help people improve their lives:

Virtual agents will migrate from being an automated form of phone-based customer service to a personalized form of support and assistance that provides information and—more importantly—performs useful tasks. For example, such agents might design a weekly menu based on a family’s health profile, fitness goals, and eating preferences, and automatically order ingredients.

This forecast provides an example of how distance leaders can use technology to help their organizations innovate with a focus on the future. A transition from cloud-based computing to cloud-based living and learning might help institutions focus on both learners and employees in a more holistic manner.

Two trends supporting the Living with Purpose and Meaning megatrend include: 1) life increasingly flowing together instead of being compartmentalized into work, family, recreation, etc., and 2) the quest for greater well-being, health and vitality. People are increasingly learning and living on the go in both the virtual and physical senses, which blurs the lines between family, self-care, work and play.

How do these trends influence distance learning? As more people want to connect with their purpose, find meaning in their lives, and increase their vitality, educational institutions should take a more people-centered approach focused on meaning, well-being and the mind-body connection supported by the right social networks, experiences and technologies. A few ideas might include:

- Integrating holistic, healthy living and self-care principles into distance learning programs in an effort to create better learner experiences and to create more value in courses, programs and the lives of learners (including the lives of their families).
- Providing coaching for learners and employees to help them uncover their purpose and create strategies and structures to support meaningful actions designed to improve their educational endeavors and lives.
- Adding physical activity and fun to courses or programs in an effort to stimulate creativity, decrease stress, build camaraderie and strengthen overall wellness (perhaps an App or the intelligent cloud can help).

It’s time to move beyond the traditional grading scales, discussion boards and homework assignments and focus on the whole person and what life means to them. Helping people find their fulfillment, purpose and definition of success may provide distance-learning administrators with tools to innovate their institutions. Competition for learners, along with their precious time and dollars, will continue to increase. Distance-learning institutions will have to find new ways to add increased value to the lives of learners, employees and their families. Not only can

people choose to learn anytime from anyplace, people can choose what they want to learn and from whom they want to learn it. Institutions that add the most value will have the competitive advantage.

Megatrend 3: Decentralized Global Marketplace

Distance learning is in the age of the “Empowered Consumer-Learner” who has a buffet of educational choices. The empowered consumer-learner decides what educational experiences and knowledge they need, when they need it and how they want to experience it. The wide-array of non-credit and for credit choices makes for a very competitive marketplace but also a field of new opportunities.

Venture capitalists continue to invest in distance education because of the return on investment potential. Big Data is being used to develop marketing campaigns, study human behaviors and determine patterns. It is also being used to examine various areas of teaching and learning. Data can help create bite-sized, customized courses and programs that are both personalized and interactive (Koller, 2012). Technology enables the delivery of information and education anytime, anywhere and from anyone in a way that makes sense to the learner while adding value to their lives.

It’s no longer necessary for people to enroll in college, formal classes or workshops to learn. They are learning what they want to know from their networks and resources they find on the Web, through Apps or in iTunes. People will increasingly be able to create and print their ideas from wherever they choose with 3D printing. Technology, combined with the continued growth of self-expression and meaning, will continue to change education at a rapid pace.

Value is becoming less about college credit and more about meaningful outcomes and self-expression through enhanced skills and evolving abilities. The world is fast-becoming an “Add to Cart” society for anything and everything, including educational experiences. Individuals are creating local, national and global communities of meaning and change that are self-selected and self-formed. Many of these same individuals are transforming distance learning in new and innovative ways. Technology, combined with the need for meaning, self-expression and self-actualization, has created an increasingly decentralized marketplace.

People are choosing how to meet virtually, when, where and whether-or-not to meet face-to-face and connecting over common causes. Education, along with so many other areas of life, is becoming increasingly decentralized. Savvy consumers seek and create the value they crave to transform their lives. They are choosing whether or not they want a badge, certificate, credit hour or degree, and their demands are shaping the marketplace and future trends. The Empowered Consumer-Learner wants a unique experience that adds value to their life. Future-focused leaders who ask and answer not, “What is the lifetime value of a customer?” but rather, “What value can we add to a lifetime?” will be in a better position to compete in the increasingly decentralized marketplace.

Future-Focused Leadership: Cooperation, Creativity and Purpose

Interestingly enough, the hottest jobs at Facebook require a “human touch.” Why? They are looking for people who can close sales because their revenue relies heavily on ads (Anders, 2014). Perhaps the most future-focused distance learning administrators should consider blending “high-human touch” with “high-tech” in new and interesting ways that holistically add value to the lives of learners.

Future-focused leaders in distance learning are using technology to change the game of education and life. One person cannot do it alone in a world that continues to change at an increasingly rapid pace; rather, distance administrators should innovate in teams with a spirit of cooperation and creativity. Together, with a common purpose, distance leaders can examine megatrends, utilize emerging technologies, develop content, streamline design and monitor analytics while creating meaningful educational experiences and innovating the world of distance education in ways not yet imagined.

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