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Pink's Reply: Is the MBA a Cookie-Cutter Degree?

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	Editor's Preface	2
PAPERS	A Long-Term Study of Sex Differences in Attitudes towards Women's Roles in the Military and in Combat Edward F. Murphy, Regina A. Greenwood, Terrell G. Manyak, and Bahaudin G. Mujtaba	3
	Unemployment and Absenteeism Pension Effects for Low Income Workers Ronald M. Faust	16
	Abusive Supervision: Observer Perceptions of Causes and Consequences Richard J. Sebastian, Dennis Bristow, and Caitly Longfield	27
	Critical Spirituality, Moral Philosophy, and Business Ethics Michael Whitty and Jerry Biberman	34
	Educating Business Professionals for 2010 and Beyond: Six Critical Management Themes and Skills to Emphasize Hamid Akbari	45
	Book Review of Pink's Reply: Is the MBA a Cookie-Cutter Degree? James Paradiso	50
END NOTES	Guidelines for Contributors	53



Book Review

Pink's Reply: Is the MBA a Cookie-Cutter Degree?

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During a panel discussion, "Is the MBA a Cookie-Cutter Degree?," at the NAMS/MBAA 2007 Conference in March at Chicago's Drake Hotel, panelists presented diverse perspectives regarding preferred skills, courses, majors, schools, and contacts among other important factors for securing meaningful entry-level positions in management.

All panelists agreed, explicitly or implicitly, that soft skills, like the influence of Herzberg's hygiene factors on motivation, were necessary, although perhaps insufficient, for landing first jobs. And, according to a testimonial by Tom Peters, the author of *In Search of Excellence* and *Re-Imagine!*, no where is the argument for soft skills or right-brain aptitudes made more "originally, profoundly, and practically" than in David Pink's book, *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age* (Riverhead Books, 2005, 260 pages, \$24.95).

Following a brief introduction, Pink, a contributing editor at "Wired" magazine and former White House speechwriter, organizes his argument in two parts. Part One, The Conceptual Age, distinguishes right from left brain abilities, explains the impact of accelerating socio-economic forces, and makes a compelling case for the escalating value of right-brain abilities in our topsy-turvy environment. Part Two, The Six Senses, includes a chapter for each of the six essential abilities to navigate and succeed in our emerging landscape: Design, Story, Sympathy, Empathy, Play, and Meaning. How each sense is being put to use in business and everyday life is also described in each chapter. Chapters end with a collection of tools, exercises, and readings to sharpen the senses. Finishing the book are an Afterword, Index, and Notes including references to the works of John Naisbitt, Peter Drucker, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Viktor Frankl, and Daniel Goleman.

While recognizing that both left-side and right-side skills are necessary "to craft fulfilling lives and build productive societies," Pink grounds his argument for a shift from left-side to right-side utility on three factors: Abundance, Asia, and Automation. In short, "your future," he says, "will depend on your answers to three questions: 1) Can someone overseas do it cheaper?, 2) Can a computer do it faster?, and 3) Am I offering something that satisfies the nonmaterial, transcendent desires of an abundant age?"

"These three questions," Pink says, "will mark the fault line between who gets ahead and who gets left behind. Individuals and organizations that focus their efforts on doing what foreign knowledge workers can't do cheaper and computers can't do faster, as well as on meeting the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual demands of a prosperous time, will thrive. Those who ignore these three questions will struggle."

One of Pink's claims, the provocative notion that "the MFA is the new MBA," sparked a lively discussion among panelists and participants during Friday's meeting. The reasons for this claim, Pink argues, go back to two forces: Asia and Abundance. Because of Asia, many MBA graduates are becoming this century's blue-collar workers: people who entered the work-force full of promise, only to see their jobs move overseas. Concurrently, because of Abundance, businesses are realizing that the only way to

differentiate their goods and services in today's overstocked marketplace is to make their offerings physically beautiful and emotionally compelling.

Finally, in the Afterword, Pink optimistically invites readers to share their stories and exercises for his book's future editions, sending their e-mail to *dhp@danpink.com*.

P.S. When this book's reviewer, who was also one of the panelists, entered the meeting room before discussing, "Is the MBA a Cookie-Cutter Degree?," he encountered a group of management students, sitting in the back of the room. "Are you here for the panel discussion?," he asked. "We would stay," one student replied, "but where are the cookies?"

The question remains.