

For Immediate Release

**The “Old Smart” Isn’t Good Enough:
Seven 21st Century Learning Skills Every Adult Should Learn Now!**

With the influx of technology into the way we work, traditionally accepted concepts of what “smart” is have become outdated. Edward D. Hess explains why you need to develop new 21st century learning skills.

New York, NY (January 2015)—Maybe you graduated top of your college class. Maybe you have an MBA and complete the Saturday edition of the *New York Times* crossword in one sitting. Maybe you pride yourself on your ability to correct your colleagues’ grammar and email typos. Unfortunately, says Professor Edward D. Hess, none of that will matter as we advance in an increasingly tech-driven world.

“You might consider yourself a great intellectual, but book smarts won’t be all that relevant as companies increase their use of robots and smart machines,” says Hess, a professor at the University of Virginia’s Darden Graduate School of Business and author of the new book *Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization* (Columbia Business School Publishing, 2014, ISBN: 978-0-231-17024-6, \$29.95, www.EDHLTD.com).

“What *will* matter is being an adaptive learner—someone who knows what you don’t know and how to learn it by asking the right questions, someone who can think critically and innovatively, someone who can really listen with an open mind and collaborate well with others. And more importantly, someone who is able to overcome the aspects of human nature that can make those accomplishments difficult to achieve.”

In order to stay competitive, it’s time to upgrade your skills and capabilities by embracing 21st century learning skills. The skill set Hess describes is so important because it will enable today’s professionals to stay relevant throughout their careers. No matter how rapidly knowledge advances (or how quickly a particular skill set becomes outdated), good adaptive learners have the best chance of winning.

Here, Hess examines the 21st century learning skills you will need to be successful in a tech-driven world:

Get comfortable with “not knowing.” None of us are as smart as we think we are. And smart people know this! To learn, we need to know what we don’t know, and not get defensive about it.

“In the technology-enabled world, how much you know will be irrelevant, because smart machines and the Internet will always know more than you,” says Hess. “What will be more important is knowing what you don’t know and knowing how to learn—in other words, the smartest people will be focused on continuously learning.

“And in order to learn well, you will need to accept that humans (yes, that includes you!) are not optimal learners,” he adds. “Cognitively we all are naturally fast, lazy, reflexive thinkers who seek to confirm what we know. It is important to learn how and when to make your thinking more intentional and deliberate. You must actively seek to develop your critical thinking and innovative thinking skills.”

Quiet your ego to embrace open-mindedness. Humans are naturally unwilling to listen to challenges to our thinking. But to become a more effective learner, you’ll have to train your brain to be emotionally non-defensive. You can no longer define yourself by what you know or by your ideas. Rather, Hess says, you should define yourself as a good learner who uses good thinking, listening, and collaborating processes.

“Today people must learn to stress-test their beliefs and preconceived notions, not constantly seek to confirm them,” he notes. “It takes courage to enter the world of the unknown and learn something new the first time. To make that process easier, people will have to learn to separate their ideas from their self-worth. Changing a previously held belief doesn’t mean you are a bad or stupid person. It simply means you’ve learned to adapt your thinking based on new information or facts that you’ve received.”

Be an “inner-directed” learner. Too often people are driven primarily by external rewards. Seeing learning as a way to obtain more money, respect, or love can result in your not accepting challenging learning opportunities because you want to avoid failures and making mistakes. In a business world where human contributions will come primarily through innovation—a process in which failure is a given—those motivated to avoid mistakes or failures will not be successful.

“In a tech-driven world, those who are able to be the most successful and fulfilled will be those who are driven by curiosity and a love of learning,” explains Hess. “You’ll need to see learning as its own reward. Develop a learning mindset. Then, whenever you’re learning, you’re successful. The speed and quality of one’s learning is what will keep one relevant and competitive.”

Don’t be afraid to make mistakes. Along with the fear of failure discussed above comes a fear of making mistakes. To proceed more courageously into the future, you need to adopt a different mindset about mistakes. Rather than look at them as something you’ve done wrong, it’s important to begin looking at them as learning opportunities.

“Learning is *not* an efficient 99 percent defect-free process,” explains Hess. “Far from it. So mistakes have to be valued as learning opportunities. In fact, as long as you aren’t making the same mistakes over and over again, mistakes can be good. The key is making sure you’re learning from them. And the faster and better you are at turning mistakes into learning, the less likely it is that some smart machine will replace you. Learning from mistakes, knowing and

working around one's weaknesses, and continuously stress-testing one's assumptions and beliefs are good strategies for 21st century success."

Be willing to try. People who are confident in their own ability to meet a challenge or take on the unknown (within reason) are more likely to try new things. They believe they will be okay dealing with newness or uncertainty. "This confidence is called 'self-efficacy,'" notes Hess. "To put it most simply, if we believe we can do something, we are more likely to try it. People can build self-efficacy by putting themselves in challenging situations that they have the ability to handle well. As their confidence grows, they'll be more willing and capable of taking on even more challenging tasks."

Develop your emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence, generally understood, is the ability to be aware of and manage one's emotions. It plays an important role in your ability to recognize and appraise verbal and nonverbal information, to access emotions in order to aid in creativity and problem solving, to process your own feelings and assess those of others, and to regulate your own emotions and manage those of others.

"Why is developing your EI so important?" asks Hess. "Because whether you're working with human clients or as part of a team inside a company, the ability to collaborate effectively will be an essential skill in years to come. The powerful work connections that will be needed to build successful organizations will result from relationships that are built by authentically relating to another person, recognizing their uniqueness, and doing so in a respectful way that builds trust. If you can't manage your own emotions, read those of others, or connect with the people around you on more than a superficial level, then you won't be a successful collaborator."

Seek out constructive feedback. In his book, Hess writes about "Mr. Feedback," one of his early mentors. Mr. Feedback taught Hess how essential negative feedback is if you want to become the best in your field and the importance of pausing and reflecting rather than automatically defending, deflecting, or denying when you receive negative feedback. Hess writes that as he moved forward in his career, he realized how difficult it can be to get this kind of constructive feedback.

"Rather than getting the kind of specific, constructive feedback that can help us improve our skills, most of us will receive guarded or politically correct feedback that is fairly useless in practice," notes Hess. "Thoughtful and constructive feedback is a valuable thing, especially when you can foster your mindset to absorb and not deflect it, and it will only become more valuable as our workplaces become dominated by technology. Of course, all of this ties back in to becoming more emotionally intelligent. When you develop those skills, you will become better at receiving constructive, productive feedback."

"We're entering a world in which companies can no longer rely on traditional competitive advantages like location, capital, lack of choices for customers, and lack of market transparency," says Hess. "They'll have to rely on their ability to learn and innovate in order to

compete. Today, the 21st century learning skills require one to be good at thinking critically and innovatively and listening, collaborating, and emotionally engaging with others.”

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About the Author:

Edward D. Hess is a professor of business administration and Batten Executive-in-Residence at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business and the author of 11 books, including *Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization*, by Columbia Business School Publishing (September 2014).

About the Book:

Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization (Columbia Business School Publishing, 2014, ISBN: 978-0-231-17024-6, \$29.95, www.EDHLTD.com) is available at Amazon.