

## The Perils of Being Special

15<sup>th</sup> century Florence, which is commonly considered the birthplace of the Renaissance even if historians might disagree, was a rigidly stratified society. People were born into one of four classes – nobles, merchants, tradesmen and labourers – and there was little social mobility. This hierarchy began to weaken in the latter half of the century, as a philosophy later known as humanism chipped away at established social norms, structures and ways of thinking. Humanism, as the name suggests, was anchored by the centrality of humans as agents of their own self-determination.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than kings, or God, or fate it was individual human beings, through rational thinking backed up by evidence, who were responsible for creating their own destinies. This philosophical shift created an opening for a more egalitarian society with greater social mobility. A person might be born a tradesman, but that didn't preclude them from using their wits to acquire diverse skills and then using that knowledge to contribute productively to society in ways that exceeded the narrow circumstances of their birth. Thus was born the ideal archetype of the "Renaissance Man" – someone who broke down artificial barriers in the quest to acquire as much collective knowledge as possible about the world and humanity's place in it.

Leonardo da Vinci is often held up as the prototypical Renaissance Man, a Florentine polymath born out of wedlock to a peasant mother who nevertheless mastered a dizzying array of skills – painting, architecture, engineering. He is well-known not only for his classic artwork, but for designing a number of contraptions that were so convoluted no one could build them or really even knew what they were. Da Vinci's contemporary, Michelangelo, was a similarly distinguished multitasker who created some of the finest and most famous works of art, sculpture and architecture in the world.

During the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment, this was the normative ideal toward which people of means or status aspired – to acquire a broad education in a multitude of subjects like art, law, music and literature. As society became more complex, and as the base of human knowledge became broader, the archetype of the Renaissance Man who could do a little bit of everything became less practical. For instance, as surgical procedures became more complicated you would want your surgeon to have spent most of their time studying and training in the specialized skills required to successfully perform a surgery rather than, say, designing speculative flying machines.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* by Charles G. Nauert, Cambridge University Press, 2006

This trend toward ever greater specialization accelerated with the Industrial Revolution. Factory owners found that economies of scale could be greatly increased if one person was responsible for a single input on a production line, rather than having one person assemble the entire product from end-to-end. In modern service or knowledge-based economies, specialization sometimes reaches absurd levels, to the point where you can read someone's job description and have no idea what they do, such as Corporate Communications Specialist which pulls off the neat trick of being both very specific and also rather meaningless.

This trend is becoming pronounced in academia as well, reflected in the way universities prepare students for life after school. Liberal arts majors, which draw on a broad sampling of the humanities such as art, literature and history, are on the decline. Just 100 years ago a solid liberal arts education used to be the bread and butter of the British ruling class, but nowadays telling someone about your time at Eton training in rhetoric is likely to get you laughed at.

This is because once you've graduated from university, prospective employers are unlikely to be impressed with your well-rounded knowledge of the human condition derived from reading classical Greek texts. They are more likely to be interested in how well you can do fairly specific and specialized tasks like build a model in Excel, read an income statement or code an invoice. Employers tend to want specialized skills and knowledge in modern economies, and this lowers the incentive for students to pursue degrees that sample from a wide range of disciplines.

In many ways this is a shame, and something Peter Drucker was also wary of. In a 2004 interview with *Fortune* magazine, Drucker pointed out that American managers typically enjoy a high degree of mobility within and between organizations, and thus are able to accumulate a depth of knowledge and experience absent in European executives. "Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of GE, worked in about half a dozen different categories," Drucker noted in the interview. "In sales, in design, in different product groups. In contrast, the head of Siemens never held a job outside Germany until he became CEO."<sup>2</sup> This, Drucker argued, was one of American industry's great advantages.

It is a point well worth making, as the perils of over-specialization are subtle but significant. As people increasingly view the world through the shrinking prism of a particular specialization, they begin to lose sight of the bigger picture and their place in it. This can be a negative in terms of having a well-balanced outlook on life, but it can also make you less efficient at work or in any number of pursuits. Two examples from my own experience will

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<sup>2</sup>Brent Schlender. "Peter Drucker Sets Us Straight." *Fortune*. January 12, 2014.

help illustrate this point: one from the world of commercial real estate, and one from the world of academia.

### **Losing the Forest (and the Dance Floor) For the Trees**

Most big real estate firms are siloed into operations, leasing, construction and accounting departments. There are obviously many variations on this organizational structure, but this is pretty typical and each department tends to focus narrowly on its own specific mandate, sometimes without reference to the other departments. Leasing wants to rent out as much space as possible, operations wants to make tenants happy, construction wants to bring projects in on time and on budget, and accounting wants to make sure everything is budgeted and booked correctly. When each department just focuses narrowly on the ground right in front of it, without contemplating how these parts work together as a whole, it creates the potential for dysfunction, inefficiencies and can cost money. Take this example from a firm I worked at where the employees were particularly specialized.

Leasing signed a tenant who wanted to take a full-floor at the top of a high-rise and turn it into a rooftop lounge. The leasing agent negotiated and signed the lease with little or no input from the other departments and with a tight move-in schedule. The construction department delivered the space on time and built to spec, only to find out when the fire inspector showed up that the enormous dance floor they had installed was made out of real (and highly flammable) wood which violated the fire code. Somehow not a single person involved in this chain of events had noticed this, presumably because they assumed someone else who specialized in that particular detail was responsible for it.

The leasing agent then had to get approval from the tenant for a redesign, and the contractor tore out the floor and re-installed it, all of which cost time and money. Once the lounge opened, it turned out the leasing agent had neglected to impose restrictions on their operating hours and they were pulling in big crowds in the early evening which caused the tenants on the floor below to complain, forcing the building manager to try and mediate between tenants who now hated one another and for which there was no obvious solution. Meanwhile everyone was fielding calls from the accountants demanding explanations for variances in the construction budget.

Good management (and perhaps a better hiring process in the above example) is essential for avoiding these kinds of bonfires. And the best way for management to anticipate these problems before they happen, to facilitate smooth and complementary interactions between different departments, is to understand what each department does,

but also how that specialized contribution feeds into and shapes the larger corporate mission.

A good manager would have created a formalized process that compelled the leasing agent to work closely with building management and the project manager to find out whether the tenant would be a good fit for the building, and whether there were any flaws in the construction plan. They would have looped the accountants in on the budgeting process, so everyone knew how much of a contingency there was. And they would have troubleshot the process from end-to-end, ensuring that everyone hit their individual goals while also achieving the larger task of generating rental income for the company.

Of course, being able to effectively carry out the managerial functions I have just described requires drawing on a diverse knowledge base. You need to know how to budget, you need to be familiar with the fire and building codes as well as the construction, planning and permitting process, and you need to have the experience and judgement to know what trade-offs are worth making in order to get a lease signed quickly.

To determine if a tenant is worth the fuss requires knowledge of the company's overall financial position and strategy. It requires having previous experience with tricky situations and demanding tenants. These are diverse skills and knowledge sets, but without understanding each one both individually and as part of a grander vision, you create the potential for an embarrassing and costly management failure. Would Leonardo da Vinci have made the same blunder as the management at my old work place? One can only speculate, but probably not.

### **Academic Squabbles**

I have also found the problem of excessive specialization to be prominent in academia, where PhD students spend years investigating a narrowly defined and niche research problem often without trying to place it in a larger context or derive any meaningful real-world application from it. To me the erosion of the Renaissance ideal in academia is most acutely felt in a wonkish cleavage between proponents of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

The field of economics is a perfect example. In the 1950s and 60s developmental economists tended to favour inductive, qualitative field work. They would go and visit or sometimes live in the countries they were studying to observe how institutions, norms and people intermingled to produce particular outcomes. Economics in those days was often a kind of hodgepodge of sociology, mathematical models and political theory. Economists like

Albert Hirschman and sociologists like Benedict Andersen understood that they were studying different sides of the same coin, and the way to arrive at the most complete understanding of it was to borrow ideas and methods from a broad range of disciplines.

That began to change in the 1980s and 90s, when the pendulum swung toward quantitative methods rooted in rational-positivist epistemology. Increasingly, if you wanted to crack the pages of a top journal in the US you needed to lean into technically complicated, large-n econometric analysis. The field of economics became much more abstract, theory-based and mathy. Inductive fieldwork is starting to make a bit of a comeback these days, but the erection of this artificial divide between quantitative and qualitative has set the study of economics back in my estimation.

It is yet another example of ever-increasing specialization forcing people to choose a narrow path and ignore the potential for crossing over. As in business, this leads to a myopic field of vision at the expense of the big picture. In fact, the best social scientific research is that which embraces the Renaissance ideal and combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative methodology, drawing on a broad range of subjects and analytical tools to see which ones best fit the puzzle you are trying to solve. Sometimes that is econometric modelling. Sometimes it involves going out in the field and talking to people. Sometimes it involves a deep dive into historical documents. But if you are only equipped with one set of tools, and are uninterested in acquiring additional ones, it limits and inhibits what kinds of questions you can even interrogate in the first place.

All of which just underscores the value of the Renaissance archetype. Whether in business or in scientific inquiry, the acquisition of a diverse range of knowledge and skills maximizes human agency and opens a lot of doors. Instead of committing to one side of a particular debate and then trying to delegitimize the other, the best research is done by people who are well-versed in both and who don't limit themselves to a dogmatic belief in the superiority of one over the other. In true humanist tradition, truly excellent scholarship is done by people willing to broaden their horizons and synthesize the best of both worlds.

### **The Return of the Renaissance?**

The irony of all this is that 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal democracies have more freedoms and social mobility than 15<sup>th</sup> century Florentines ever dreamt of. And yet, when it comes to acquiring the skills and knowledge we feel are necessary to be successful or employable in modern society, we have in many ways boxed ourselves in while the famous Florentines of the Renaissance were doing just the opposite – pushing through barriers to diversify their

knowledge base and in doing so reach a fuller understanding of the world and their place in it.

Polymaths have since fallen out of fashion somewhat. Corporations, focused narrowly on profits and shareholder dividends, have perhaps placed too much emphasis on maximizing efficiency, structuring their workforce in a way that turns human labour into efficient inputs without a sense of the bigger picture. Many universities are likewise turning out social scientists who have spent their entire training mastering a narrow set of skills, but often leaving them unequipped to grapple with the truly weighty questions of our time. This is producing PhDs who can whip up a rigorous model that measures the impact of FDI on gross capital formation in Gujarat Province, but can't explain why that is important in the grand sweep of India's socio-economic history.

This drives home the necessity of breathing life back into the aspirational figure of the Renaissance Man (or Woman). We should return to that ethos where we strive to acquire a broad set of skills and explore subjects that are unfamiliar to us, to tinker with ideas and concepts until they come into clearer focus. We shouldn't feel like getting a liberal arts or humanities or English degree is a waste of time and a one-way ticket to unemployment. Rather, we should take back our agency and return to valuing the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and as an intrinsic good.

Managers who understand the importance of this and see beyond the limited vision of the silo they've been put in are the ones most likely to leave the biggest mark on their companies. And academics who aren't limited by methodological or philosophical divides, who are willing to embrace the complexity of the world in order to better understand it, they are the ones who will be doing the best research in the near future.

It is incumbent upon managers and faculty and students and employees to do these things and revive the use of critical thinking, in the best humanist tradition, to restore their agency. If not, then one day we may find ourselves adrift in a society of mediocrity where that most amorphous of all titles – Corporate Communications Specialist – is the thing that defines us all.