

TECHNOLOGY IS CREATING A LEADERSHIP VACUUM, HERE'S HOW TO INNOVATE OUT OF IT

SUMMARY

The current demand on knowledge workers is to become hyper-specialized in technical skills, which is creating a more myopic, technology-focused view of the world. In the process, technology innovators and users are not taking the time to develop soft skills needed to be an effective leader of people. This focus on technology over people is creating a leadership vacuum that is putting humanity at risk. To combat this, people must intentionally seek diverse experiences that help them develop skills – like empathy, communication, and collaboration – that balance technology usage with a human-centered view. Luckily, the same forces driving technology adoption also provide us the ability to connect to growth experiences and a “collective brain”, which provide the platform to innovate out of this leadership crisis.

We do not know what exactly will make you a better leader in the digital age, but we do know this: You have access to resources to help you become a better leader than those before you, and you’ll need to learn quickly in order to do so.

In the coming years, teams will be more diverse than ever before based on culture, age, nationality, and gender¹. In addition, the pace of technology innovation means that the tools and processes your team uses will evolve at a faster rate². This acceleration in diversification of team structures and innovation is the result of our “digital age”.

The wide-spread adoption of new technology helps us innovate new technologies more frequently, and new technology also connects people to more people and information. This, in turn, leads to more networks and more diverse creations happening at an ever-increasing pace. There are two important accelerators here: (1) Technological advancements enable more advancements at a faster pace, AND (2) technology increases the size and access to the “collective brain”³, which allows humans to create more innovations with that technology.

In order to manage oneself – and others – in the digital age of tomorrow, you must tap into this collective brain today to increase your abilities to innovate faster tomorrow. As Drucker shared *“We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.”* In the digital age, managers must learn how to learn faster, and must teach their teams to do the same, faster.

1 “The State of Diversity in Today’s Workforce” <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/labor/report/2012/07/12/11938/the-state-of-diversity-in-todays-workforce/>

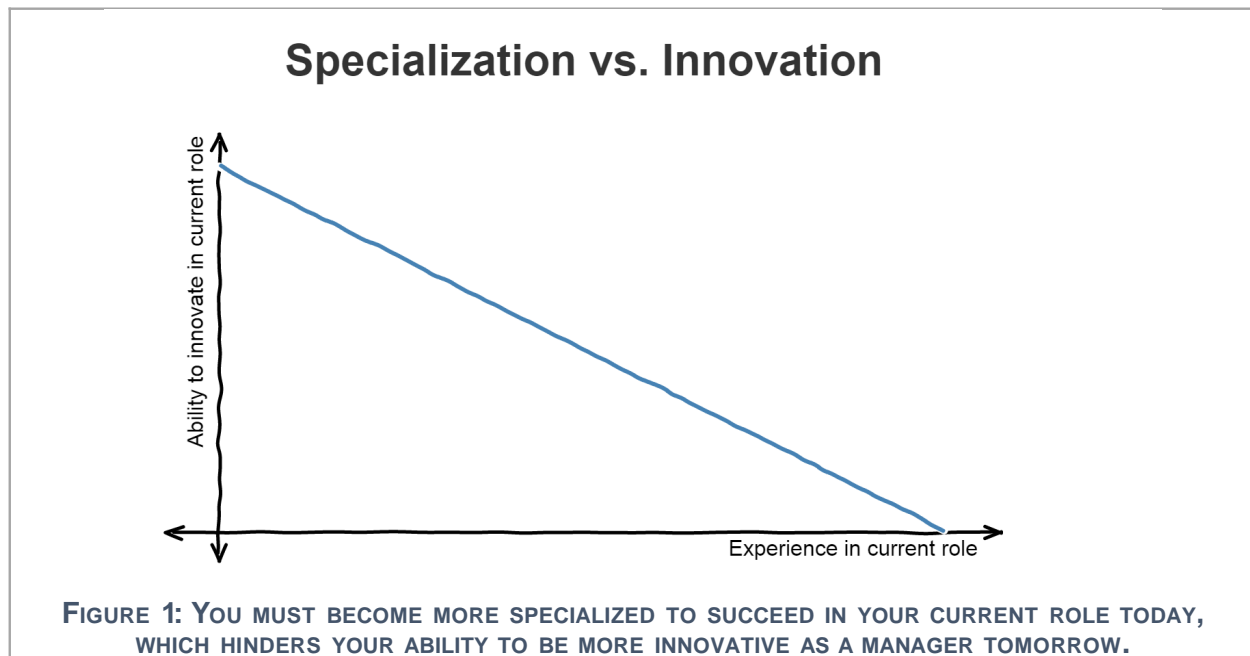
2 “The Pace of Technology Adoption is Speeding” <https://hbr.org/2013/11/the-pace-of-technology-adoption-is-speeding-up/>

3 “Innovation: tapping into the online collective brain” <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0262407910624566>

The Challenge: The need to go deep in your role limits your ability to go broad, hindering your ability to grow as a leader.

Unfortunately for aspiring managers, gaining the experience to be more innovative is becoming harder. The current demands in the workplace are for knowledge workers to become “hyper-specialists”⁴ – learning more about an increasingly technical skill area required for execution. As a few examples, it’s easy to understand why a tax accountant with a focus on international taxation must specialize on a specific country (i.e. Brazil) instead of a region (i.e. South America). It’s also easy to understand why a lawyer working on mergers and acquisition needs to focus on a specific sector (i.e. tech startups vs overseas manufacturers), or a software engineer has to focus on a smaller and smaller part of a web application as it continues to grow (i.e. the payment processing system).

While this hyper-specialization makes you more valuable in the short-term, it makes you less-valuable in the long-term. The more time you spend keeping up with technical skills, the fewer opportunities you have to tap into the collective brain outside of your current role. If you’re not careful, this will hinder your ability to innovate and succeed as a manager in the future.



While corporations need hyper-specialists in order to continue their growth, they have also recognized a major challenge: A lack of qualified leaders. In a recent report by the Conference Board, CXOs reported that this lack of leaders is one of their most major concerns, and yet funding, systems, and programs to solve this challenge remain under-resourced⁵. According to Drucker, “*knowledge has to be improved, challenged, and increased constantly, or it vanishes*”. Currently, we’re focusing on short-term knowledge while leadership skills are slowly vanishing away.

4 “The Age of Hyperspecialization” <https://hbr.org/2011/07/the-big-idea-the-age-of-hyperspecialization/ar/1>

5 The Global Leadership Forecast by the Conference Board http://www.ddiworld.com/DDI/media/trend-research/global-leadership-forecast-2014-2015_tr_ddi.pdf?ext=.pdf

The Opportunity: Out-of-office experiences can connect you to authentic experiences that will develop your leadership potential.

Luckily for today's leaders responsible for developing the leaders of the future, the same forces driving hyper-specialization provide ample opportunities to connect to diverse people and experiences. These can enable today's workers to become well-rounded in their soft-skills while specializing in their technical skills. However, a spirit of innovation is required to find these experiences. After all "*results are obtained by exploiting opportunities, not by solving problems.*" (Drucker).

Since hyper-specialization is needed in today's workplaces, people have to look beyond traditional team borders to diversify their skills and maintain a more empathic world-view. They also have to embrace that learning happens through three main actions:

1. Goal setting: Establish learning objectives that focus on breadth of experience and soft skill development
2. Authentic experiences: Connect to real-world project with diverse groups of people
3. Purposeful reflection: Use a mentor to reflect on how the experiences can help in their current and future roles

Increasingly, people are becoming more fluid in seeking purposeful experiences for this very reason. Technology makes it easier than ever to find and consume more relevant content, connect to learning opportunities, and/or find work projects beyond your current team.

A couple examples include taking a certificate program, engaging in skills-based volunteer programs at home and abroad, and/or even volunteering with other teams within your current company.

In conducting interviews for this essay, the author found a few relevant stories:

1. An associate professor took an emotional intelligence certificate while on a trip through Europe to build skills so that he could launch an international service learning course.
2. A vice president at a nonprofit used an international Experteering trip to gain exposure to startups, small businesses, and large foundations. She used this experience to earn a senior consulting position at a mission-drive consulting company supporting some of the world's largest global health nonprofits and foundations.
3. A junior UX designer at a large tech company eager to start managing teams provided in-person and virtual skills-based volunteering support to a nonprofit in Guatemala while simultaneously volunteering at the mission-driven part of her company. She used both of these to earn a management position in this new mission-driven business unit within a year's time.

The increasing demand to hyper-specialize means that you must not only proactively seek these opportunities, but you must also engage your managers and mentor(s) in helping leverage these experiences as a platform for growth so that you can wrap every experience with meaningful goal setting and reflection.

The Imperative: In addition to becoming a faster learner of skills needed to lead in the digital age, you must also be able to better answer the question “Where do I belong?”

When leading others, it is as important to have the proper skills as it is to have the proper passion. As Peter Drucker writes in the chapter ‘Where Do I Belong?’ in *Management Challenges of the 21st Century* (pg. 179), “*The answers to three questions: ‘What are my strengths? How do I perform? What are my values?’ should enable the individual, and especially the individual knowledge worker, to decide where he or she belong. This is not a decision that most people can or should make at the beginning of their careers.*”

Drucker goes on to state that “*Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong. People know what they are not good at more often-and even there people are most often wrong than right.*”

In other words, as people learn to manage themselves in the digital age, they must not only learn skills to do so, but they also must continue to explore where they belong as teams and companies evolve faster and faster.

Recommendation: Workers and leaders must focus on developing themselves and others as people-leaders while allowing hyper-specialization.

For today’s knowledge worker there is no shortage of learning opportunities to deepen your skill set and help you become hyper-specialized – continuing education, online guides, co-workers, and corporate training programs to name a few. These activities should be pursued as necessary to fulfill your current duties. However, to have a future as a leader of people, you must seek experiential opportunities that stretch the skills you are not specializing in, like communication, collaboration, team work, and problem-solving. There is no shortage of opportunities to do so:

- [Volunteer in your free time on a local board, at a startup, or with a nonprofit
- [Experteer your real skills overseas for a vacation or sabbatical to fully immerse in other cultures and challenges
- [Join cross-industry and/or cross-skill networking groups
- [Find mentors operating in other sectors and in other professional lines of work
- [Volunteer within your company on cutting-edge or mission based teams with less resources and/or diverse teams

These experiences should be sought in a way that exposes you to different user groups, industries, and environments to expand your world-view. In addition, each experience should be designed with intention, and include the opportunity for goal setting and reflection. To hold yourself accountable, you should:

1. Include these experiences in your annual goal setting and commitments, thereby gaining your manager’s support.
2. Find a mentor to help you find and engage in an out-of-office experience that will help you develop the proper skills.

3. Reflect on your experience with your mentor and manager to instill the things you learn, and share those with your team members.

Today's business leaders must also be more proactive in seeking non-specializing growth opportunities for their future leaders by:

1. Creating a culture of collaboration: Encouraging teams and individuals from different business units to interact, engage, and share experiences.
2. Encouraging out-of-office engagements: Motivating individuals to seek learning opportunities, volunteer their skills, and spend more time overseas.
3. Rewarding formal and informal rotations: Incentivize employees to rotate (in a full-time or volunteer basis) with teams across the company
4. Sharing more global information: Publish internal memos about other industries, competitors, organizations, customers, and countries that are up and down the entire supply chain of the company that does not relate to specializing. Using social media tools to foster conversations on these topics will make the information stickier.

Luckily, the same technology forcing specializing can easily be used to connect to diverse experiences and people. By connecting to new opportunities – digitally and in-person – you can learn new skills and explore your passions, strengths, and weaknesses. In the process, you'll not only increase your breadth and depth of skills, but you'll also become a faster learner and equip yourself to become an effective leader capable of building a better world, not just better technology.

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