

The #1 Competency for Today's Student?

A global thought leader answers the question.

As students return to school for the 07/08 school year, a culture wrought with new technology, global competition, and information bombardment has many teachers and parents wondering nowadays "what does my kid need to learn?"

I posed this question (and more) to Dr. Nick Bontis. Dr. Bontis is one of the world's leading voices for intellectual capital, a term that he defines as "the brain power of an organization". He is a professor of strategic management at McMaster University and has shared his expertise in the field of knowledge management with companies like Microsoft and IBM and has consulted for the United Nations and the U.S. Navy. Recently, he spoke for the Arizona Association of Economic Development and received rave reviews. I caught up with Nick via e-mail to ask him a few questions about what students of today should be focusing on.

LQ: What is the number one competency today's students should add to their skill sets?

NB: Speed Reading. By the time students graduate and enter the real workforce, they will need to absorb voluminous amounts of information. They will need to be able to read documents, analyze them, make decisions, derive implications, and act on them faster than ever before. Today's student is already good at multi-tasking (ever see a teenager's computer desktop?). What they need to work on now is absorbing more information, faster.

LQ: How do those skills translate into value for the work force of the future?

NB: The future is about speed and innovation. A slow knowledge worker will not survive. The most productive employees will be the ones that can translate data into information and information into knowledge faster than the competition. In addition to reading, I am concerned that students are not developing their writing and communication skills. There is no point in knowing a lot, if you can't convince others that what you know is worth knowing.

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LQ: What simple advice would you give to educators who are feeling obsolete in the communications age?

NB: Today's educator must embrace technology. Students need to be "edutained". It is important to use multimedia in the classroom. For example, I teach with the case method but I always leave students with a video clip of the main character of the case at the end of class telling them what actually happened. Students really respond to that. Also, I like to use simulations in the classroom as well to give students a quasi real-life experience. My two favorites are www.capsim.com and www.tangonow.net.

LQ: Your area of expertise can be complicated for "late adopter" educators, how have you made the topic of intellectual capital compelling enough to be awarded instructor of the year multiple times?

NB: Students respond to passion. If an instructor does not love or honestly believe in what they are teaching, students notice and lose interest themselves. For me it's simple, I calculate how much each student pays in tuition for each course. I then multiply that by the number of students in the class, and divide it by the number of classes per course. That total is the exact amount of economic added-value I have to surpass in that next few hours during my lecture in order for my students to experience a guaranteed return on investment. When you realize how much money is at stake, you have no choice but to get up there and perform, every single time, every single day!

LQ: How will leadership have to change to better manage a faster pace information driven society?

NB: The biggest challenge I see for leaders is that they tend to be extroverts as opposed to introverts. That's a good thing when it comes to communications and negotiations but not such a good thing when it comes to knowledge hoarding versus sharing. The reality is that most extroverted personality types hoard (more than share) information with their colleagues. This is a terrible waste because the overall intellectual capital of a firm will continue to grow only if people collaborate together.

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