

# Welcome to the Conceptual Age

## WHY DESIGN THINKING WILL DRIVE BUSINESS IN THE 21st CENTURY

**Success in the complex landscape of the 21st century will require skills such as empathy, imagination, intuition and design. So argued an impressive line-up of thought leaders, including Jim Collins (by satellite) and Malcom Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, at the 2007 Global Leaders Summit in Sydney. Deborah Kneeshaw reports.**

Former Whitehouse speech writer Dan Pink whipped out a brain (no, not a real one), from the podium. His point: we must develop our right hemisphere capabilities to obtain the balanced brain approach needed to thrive in the years ahead.

Pink's **A Whole New Mind** outlines the three **A's** propelling us from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age. **Automation:** if a computer can do your routine job faster, it soon will be. Outsourcing to **Asia** has killed cost as a point of competitive advantage: a superior version of your prototype can be reproduced cheaper in China within three days. Workers who applied theoretical and analytical knowledge to build these industries, must now use imagination and people skills to explore ways to manage the growing trend of outsourcing to developing nations.

The third A, **Abundance**, has created a new class of very discerning consumer. Faced with a multitude of choice, and armed with a fistful of dollars, today's consumer demands a product that not only does the job, but enriches her life in the process. Which of the 1000 bottled waters on the Australian market shall she choose? Which superannuation policy? Why? The future will belong to those with the vision to create products, services and strategies that offer a clear and relevant point of difference.

Enter **design**. Former Sony chairman Ohga observes: "Design is the only thing that differentiates one thing from another in the marketplace." Designers explore the world of their stakeholders in order to create products that delight and engage them. Apple transformed the personal computer from an object of utility to an object d'art: one with which its users promptly fell in love. iTunes re-invented the music industry.

The design approach is now being widely embraced across the globe, from rethinking the penal system in the UK, to BMW's shift to make "moving works of art that express the driver's love of quality". Stanford has invested \$US37 million in dschool, where public and private sector alike will learn to innovate using design thinking.

Pink cites **design** along with story, play, meaning, empathy and symphony as the six right brain senses that will increasingly shape our world. Tomorrow's leaders will be those who both nurture these qualities in themselves, and liberate them in others.

These six senses are skills we already have, or can easily learn. Senses we enjoy using. Dust off that right brain and get to it! Word is, it will serve you well.

*Deborah helps organisations harness design thinking to create remarkable products, services and strategies.*