Next-Generation L&D:

How to Build a Transformation-Ready Organization

BIG THINK +

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Introduction

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Imagine the future ten years from today. What is the state of your industry? What kinds of jobs do people do? How do they do them? How did your organization transform to meet the challenges of the intervening decade?

If you're like most people, you envision a future driven by technological advancements. Technology reshaped the 20th century — everything from offices to global economics — and the trend promises to accelerate exponentially.

What is often missing from these forecasts is how much technology has simultaneously humanized work. We rely on computers to crunch our numbers and machines to operate our assembly lines, but code and circuitry have yet to replicate those uniquely human capabilities such as empathy, critical thinking, and nonverbal communication.

Although the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2020 estimates that technology will displace roughly 85 million jobs by 2025, it also notes that "97 million new roles may emerge that are more adapted to the new division of labor between humans, machines, and algorithms."
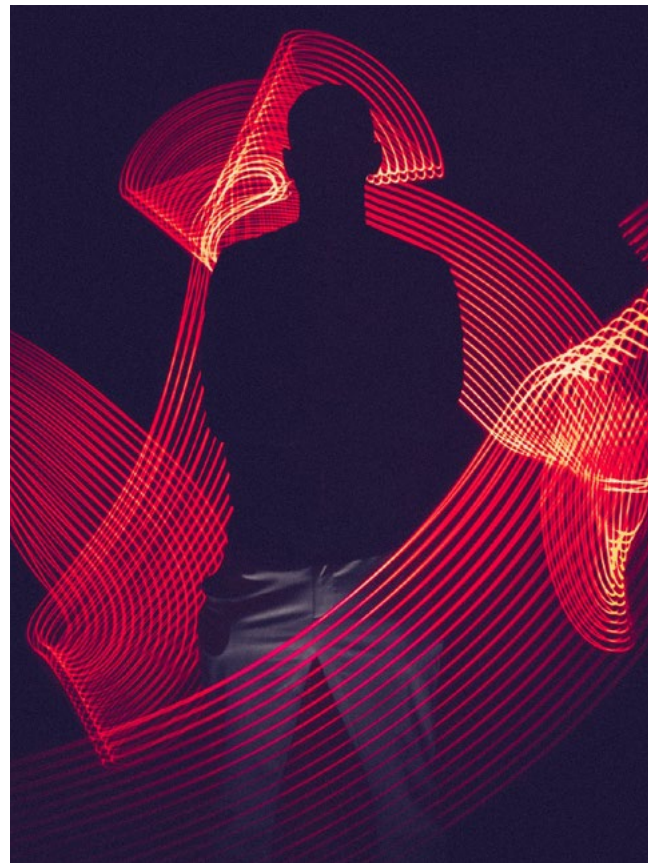

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This surge in demand has created a skills gap. Organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to hire employees with the skills necessary to navigate the new division of labor.

"On average, companies estimate that around 40% of workers will require reskilling of six months or less and 94% of business leaders report that they expect employees to pick up new skills on the job, a sharp uptake from 65% in 2018," the report states. It adds that the window for reskilling is becoming shorter.

This is where you come in. As a learning leader, your role is to equip your workforce with the capabilities needed to stay competitive in the face of an unpredictable future. In other words, your role is to build **a transformation-ready organization**.

Being transformation-ready doesn't mean adopting the latest technology or rewriting your mission statement to keep up with current trends. Instead, it's about developing a culture of deliberate learning that positions an organization to adapt to the inevitable unknowns the future will bring.

Image by **ThisIsEngineering** from Pexels

...technology will displace roughly 85 million jobs by 2025...

Capabilities for the
21st Century

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According to LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends, HR professionals view knowledge and hard skills — once the coin of the realm — as a given now. Today, they aim to hire or develop workers with advanced capabilities, such as the emotional intelligence to build diverse and collaborative teams, or the ability to reveal hidden insights by asking the right questions.

Data from our digital learning platform, Big Think+, provides an inside perspective on the skills that are of most pressing importance to large organizations today. Namely, those that are human-centric.

Big Think+ offers lessons from the world's brightest thought leaders on 21 in-demand capabilities. Our leadership channel is the most viewed channel on the platform. Other capabilities such as innovation, self-knowledge, and conflict resolution also lead the pack.

This data points to a need that higher education and professional training programs aren't meeting sufficiently — a need for precise, expert-led education in the kind of thinking and collaborating humans do best.

In the same vein, Rich Lesser of Boston Consulting Group — Glassdoor's top CEO in 2021 — argues that learning programs should look beyond the knowledge employees have to offer and focus on advancing their insightfulness.

"An insight worker is someone who is not just accountable for accumulating knowledge and synthesizing it, but for real problem solving," Lesser describes in a Big Think+ lesson. He goes on to say that an insight worker is someone who possesses "the ability to work laterally across boundaries, either alone or in collaboration with others, to drive change, and to be able to adapt very quickly to new information."

These complex problem-solving abilities are the tools needed to stay ahead of a rapidly accelerating world. The following challenges and disruptions are driving this need further by the minute.

> **"An insight worker is someone who is not just accountable for accumulating knowledge and synthesizing it, but for real problem solving... "**
>
> **– Rich Lesser**

VUCA

The Great Recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing social norms helped create today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world of work. Organizations have responded to these challenges differently, some getting left behind. Oftentimes, a fear of VUCA manifests in a culture that seeks safety in established practices and norms, rather than preparing workers for the unexpected.

But a culture that is committed to **lifelong learning** keeps employees at the forefront of their fields, where they're most likely to see inflection points coming. It requires employees to have the **self-motivation** to focus on growth, and the **emotional intelligence** to be receptive during the learning process.

When all levels of an organization invest in these capabilities, it's ultimately a win-win. Organizations can trust employees to pivot to meet unforeseen circumstances, while employees appreciate that leaders are deeply invested in their personal development.

The Digital Paradigm

The last two decades have taken digital offerings from niche gratuity to business essential. Faster internet speeds let organizations share data and products at unprecedented rates. Social media platforms have created a whole new marketing landscape, and new digital marketplaces have expanded customer bases worldwide.

A focus on building employees' **digital fluency** is the first step in navigating this new paradigm. Organizations must also standardize online **communication** for remote employees and rethink **health and wellness** in the presence of a work-life that no longer neatly divides the office from home.

Technological Disruption

The Future of Jobs Report 2020 estimates that by 2025, "the time spent on current tasks at work by humans and machines will be equal." But integrating technology is never a one-to-one exchange, where a human worker is substituted with a compatible machine. Roles will gradually shift until the work of humans and machines is complementary.

For instance, human **creativity** and **innovation** can reveal ways to integrate technology for a more competitive edge, or to create new solutions for clients. Additionally, employees with strong **critical thinking** skills will remain vital for challenging assumptions that may hinder a new technology from achieving its potential.

Evolving Organizational Architectures

Organizational architectures are becoming less rigid and more lateral. This trend is partly in response to generational differences — millennials value autonomy and when they entered the workforce en masse, many organizations adjusted.

The digital paradigm played a role, too. The exodus to remote work in 2020, for example, left many leaders reevaluating how their teams could function cohesively.

Such challenges require pioneering **leadership** with skills like **executive presence** to help team members remain accountable and motivated, no matter where they're located — on the org chart and geographically. Leaders will also need to stay current with best **management** practices, such as how to keep alignment on goals strong in a remote working environment.

Globalization

Though the subject of much debate and political strife, globalization represents unprecedented opportunities for organizations to reach across increasingly porous national and cultural barriers. However, expansions are not without pitfalls. Many organizations have launched into other countries only to discover that their homegrown strategies were ineffective or unwelcome. Such lessons are costly — depleting resources along with regional goodwill — but avoidable.

> **"...the time spent on current tasks at work by humans and machines will be equal."**

With a focus on **diversity, equity,** and **inclusion**, L&D can help build teams that understand how to navigate other cultures respectfully. **Sales, marketing,** and **customer experience** strategies can be modified to better suit new markets. And if necessary, employees can use **design thinking** to create entirely unique experiences for the new markets.

At Big Think+, we've compiled a rich catalog of expert-led lessons on the 21 aforementioned capabilities. Together, these human-centric skill sets can help organizations prepare for the challenges the 21st century will continue to bring.

OUR FRAMEWORK

21 Capabilities *for the* 21st Century

Critical Thinking	Problem Solving	Creativity	Leadership	Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion	Design Thinking	Sales
Communication	Emotional Intelligence	Self-Motivation	Management	Digital Fluency	Risk Mitigation	Marketing
Lifelong Learning	Career Development	Health & Wellness	Executive Presence	Innovation	Customer Experience	Human Resources

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT — ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Transformative Power of Learning Cultures

To empower transformation-ready employees, an organization must foster a learning culture. A learning culture develops employees' habits of mind so they can recognize outdated practices and drive necessary changes quickly and efficiently.

In other words, a learning culture is the energy that powers transformation. As an L&D leader at your organization, ask whether the environment you're creating embodies the following characteristics that make up a learning culture.

Does the culture produce and support insightful workers?

There's no guarantee that today's knowledge will solve tomorrow's problems or that contemporary skills will remain evergreen. But going back to Lesser's idea of the insightful worker, this sort of employee can recognize when the nature of a problem shifts. They then use that apprehension to hone their skills and seek out fresh knowledge.

These characteristics allow insight workers to face novel challenges, which allows the entire organization to transform as well. Insight isn't an innate quality, though. Cultures must nurture insightfulness by creating opportunities for employees to acquire new knowledge, explore promising ideas, and experiment with new solutions. They must also encourage the pursuit of lifelong learning.

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Does it extol growth mindsets?

In his studies, psychologist and professional development consultant Robert Keagan found that people in most organizations expended copious effort trying to hide their weaknesses and learning needs. So much effort, that Keagan considered it the equivalent of a second job.

Such playacting had serious consequences for the organization and employees alike. For employees, it depleted time and energy that could've gone into true development. All the while, organizations paid for their unproductive efforts.

For these reasons, <u>Keagan recommends</u> that learning cultures foster growth mindsets. Learning shouldn't be seen as a sign of weakness, but of character. In this type of organization, **failure is not the antonym of success**, but part of the growth process.

Is it collaborative and matrixed?

Even the most insightful worker can't do it all. Sometimes the time required to hone a new skill will be too great. In these instances, insightful workers need to connect with those whose complementary skills can be an asset.

Far too often, the help they need is right next door but siloed in another department. And within the hyper-specialized architecture of many modern organizations, that can be a difficult barrier to cross.

Conversely, organizations energized by a learning culture work to break such barriers down. They do this by creating learning experiences that span departments, opportunities for **peer-to-peer knowledge flow**, and interdepartmental skill-sharing mentorships.
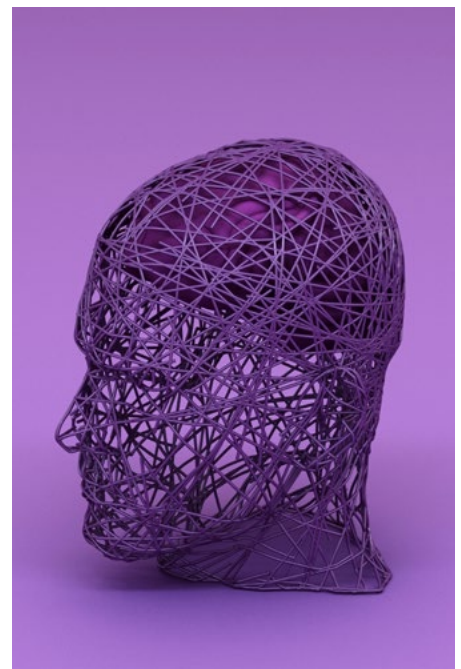

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Is it adaptable?

Throughout this eBook, a consistent theme has emerged: transformation is the default condition of today's business world. There will inevitably come a day when the tried-and-true no longer works. When this happens, reactionary organizations panic and falter.

Transformation-ready organizations evolve, and this begins at the employee level. A culture of learning provides time and resources for employees to hone the skills needed to adapt to changing market conditions and demands, skills like resilience and agility.

Is it cultivated by leaders at the organization?

Leaders have an outsized influence on everyone else at an organization. Directors who want their managers to learn and grow must model

a willingness to do so. The same holds true for managers who want to see their team members improve.

Kelly Palmer, the chief learning officer at Degreed, puts it another way: leadership culture must shift from a group of "know-it-alls" to one of "learn-it-alls." Learn-it-alls grant permission to admit fallibility and desire to grow.

This requires developing leaders with intellectual humility — they must be open to learning, commit to improving, and never use their intellect or position to discourage others. Teaching those skills will mean having open, honest conversations with key leaders as well as embodying intellectual humility yourself.

> **...leadership culture must shift from a group of "know-it-alls" to one of "learn-it-alls."**
>
> **– Kelly Palmer**

Developing Your People on Purpose

A learning culture isn't built overnight. Organizations must commit to intentionally developing employees, and that requires being strategic about how investments of time and money are made.

To more purposefully develop your people, consider the following factors when crafting your learning strategy.

Budget

When the time comes for budget cuts, learning budgets often get slashed first. "I've talked to companies that have rationed learning to the degree that if you're not rated high in the performance management process, you don't get to go to learning," says Josh Bersin, the founder of Bersin by Deloitte — a leading provider of advisory services in enterprise learning.

Decisions like these unfortunately result in piece-meal efforts that aren't conducive to continuous learning. They also send a negative message about the value education holds throughout the entire organization.

One way to maintain a consistent budget is to make the value of learning explicitly clear. Write a mission statement that aligns your vision with organizational objectives, then choose and design programs with ROI in mind.

Every organization will have unique training needs, although a common denominator is often the leadership gap. Leadership development programs are in high demand to meet this gap, and research shows they're getting the job done — such programs have been found to increase team engagement, improve retention, and cut the costs of hiring externally.

Set well-defined goals for programs like these, and keep a regular pulse on their effectiveness. Plan ongoing initiatives to measure their impact, such as the use of qualitative feedback from employee surveys, and always be prepared to communicate on progress to goal.

Write an L&D mission statement that aligns your vision with organizational objectives...

Time

In his [lesson on cutting edge learning and development](#), Josh Bersin points out that leaders often schedule time to provide employees with feedback, but not for them to work on their areas for improvement. Leaders must **allocate time for learning** if they are to expect growth to occur. And time for learning should be protected against the myriad other tasks that encroach upon it.

It doesn't matter how effective a learning program promises to be if employees don't have the time to participate. For this reason, Google and others have instituted the 80/20 rule. They offer employees 20% of their time to learn, develop, and experiment on new ideas. This ratio can vary, but having a formal rule serves to convey the importance of learning.

Additionally, small doses of microlearning sprinkled throughout an employee's week can have a big impact. L&D departments are using existing tools in creative ways to facilitate this, such as devoting a channel on the company's digital communication platform to share daily insights. Weekly emails that feature new learning content can also be effective at reaching employees when they have a few minutes to spare.

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Expertise

A focus on expertise is another powerful way to make learning more purposeful. Adults learn best from instructors who are experts in their fields. Thankfully, the digital paradigm makes connecting with that expertise easier than ever.

There is a wealth of online resources available to learning departments, Big Think+ being one that is known for its diverse catalog of thought leaders.

Expert-led lessons make learning more significant and relevant, two key components that keep adult learners engaged and motivated. The Big Think+ catalog includes:

Simon Sinek
Ethnographer and Author
on humanity in leadership

Erica Dhawan
Founder and CEO of Cotential
on supercharging collaboration

Dorie Clark
Marketing Strategy Consultant
on digital fluency and marketing

Michael Bush
CEO of Great Place to Work
on diversity, equity, and inclusion

Alan Alda
Author and Actor
on empathy, relating to others, and effective communication

Rita McGrath
Professor at Columbia Business School
on spotting market shifts

Nilofer Merchant
Management Thinker
on harnessing the power of individual contributors

Tony Saldanha
Former VP of Global Shared Services and IT at Procter & Gamble
on digitally transforming your organization

Front of the Class:
An IBM Case Study

One organization developing its people on purpose is IBM. Inspired by the advances made in online universities and MOOCs (massive, open online courses), leaders at IBM sought to build a similar structure in-house.

"We've always been huge investors in the skill development and the learning of our people," Jon Iwata, IBM's chief brand officer, says. "We're always trying to modernize how we do that."

The result of IBM's efforts was Think Academy, an e-learning platform that educates the company's roughly 375,000 employees.

Learning as a Business Imperative

IBM's leaders knew that culture couldn't be built by their new technology alone. For this reason, they didn't just hand out logins and say, "Go!" They cultivated an atmosphere of support through a ritual called "**Think Friday.**"

> ## "...every company is increasingly an intellectual capital intensive company."
> **– Jon Iwata**

Every Friday, IBM uploads a new course to Think Academy. Iwata and other IBM leaders participate in the course alongside employees, demonstrating the importance of development. In the group learning environment, employees learn about the topics that will be critical for IBM's success in the technology sector, such as big data, the cloud, and cybersecurity.

The courses help employees understand new changes in tech, the potential knock-on effects of changes, and how to best incorporate emerging technologies into their work. Leaders also have the chance to discuss how to apply the tech in service of business objectives.

"Arguably every company is increasingly an intellectual capital intensive company. The value they create and the assets they own are more about what they know," Iwata explains in his Big Think+ lesson.

As employees interacted on Think Academy, a picture began to emerge of their learning habits. The data revealed things like when employees were most productive in their learning, which subjects interested them, and whether they preferred watching videos, reading, or viewing infographics.

Seeing where their interests lay, IBM came to understand their salespeople, engineers, and marketing people better — learning what makes each group tick and, in the process, how to improve future learning experiences.

IBM serves as just one example of how to build a learning culture that evolves with a business and its talent. By collecting data to learn more about their people and iterate on learning programs, IBM has created a continuously improving culture that's transforming the organization at scale.
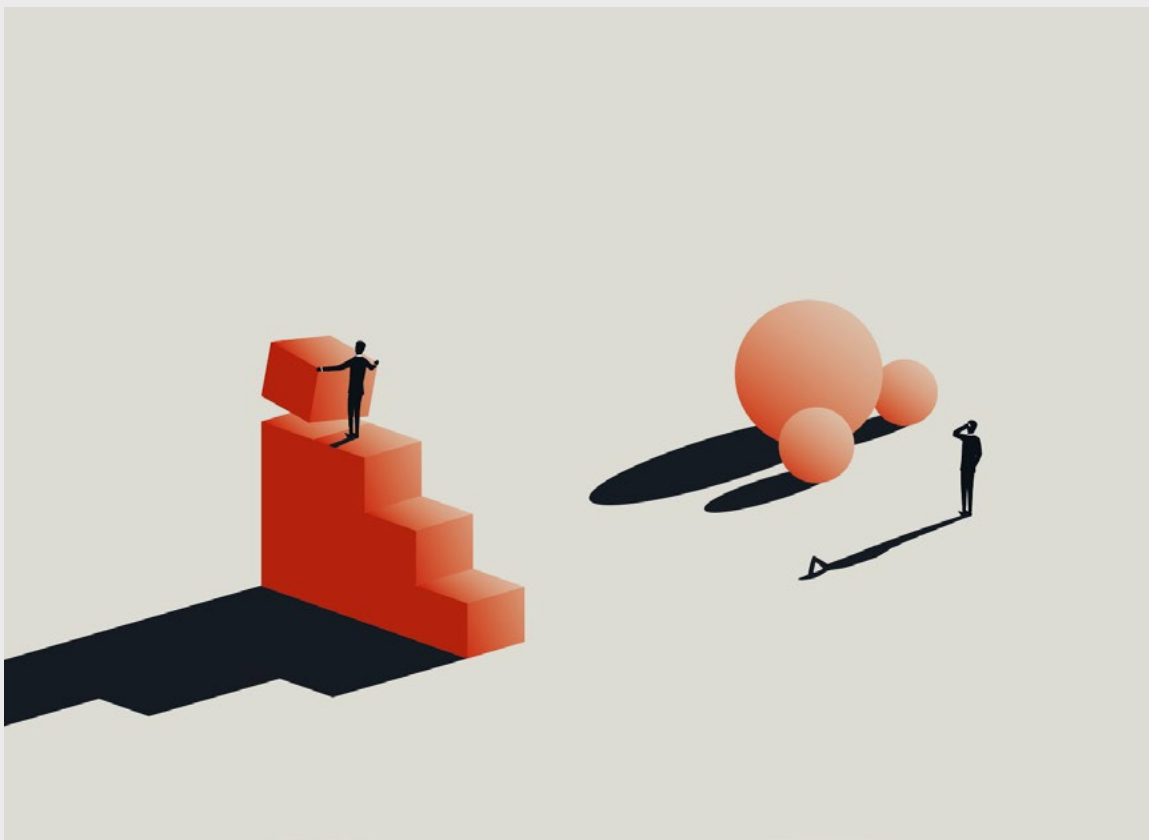

Image by **jozefmicic** from Adobe Stock

What's a Learning Leader to Do?

As we've discussed, learning leaders are the drivers of organizational culture. In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world of work, the culture of learning you create will be the energy that powers transformation. That's an expansive mandate, but the good news is you don't have to go it alone.

A learning culture isn't built from the top-down, where leaders mandate the necessary conditions and workers follow the piper's tune to compliance. It requires a bottom-up approach where everyone is on board.

Hiring managers look for applicants with qualities such as insightfulness and a growth mindset. Senior leaders allocate time for their direct reports to participate in training. The executive team becomes L&D's biggest advocate and understands the value of keeping the learning culture alive and strong.

Gone are the days when being a leader meant having all the power at hand. Today, leadership is about what Bersin calls "**followership**" — the ability to inspire people and get them to follow your lead so they can collectively build something greater.

By building a followership of learners, L&D leaders can become a catalyst for change, equipping their organizations to adapt to a business world that is transforming before our eyes.

Photo by **Nguyen Thanh Ngoc** from Adobe Stock

A learning culture isn't built from the top-down...

About
Big Think+

Big Think+ is a digital learning solution that helps organizations get smarter, faster. Our diverse library houses more than 1,000 lessons, each short-form, mobile-friendly, and designed to build the capabilities necessary for success in the 21st century.

From leadership with Simon Sinek to design thinking with Sara Blakely, our lessons are taught by world-renowned thought leaders and use the best in adult learning practices and human-centric design.

To begin unlocking potential and enabling transformation at your organization, request a demo today.
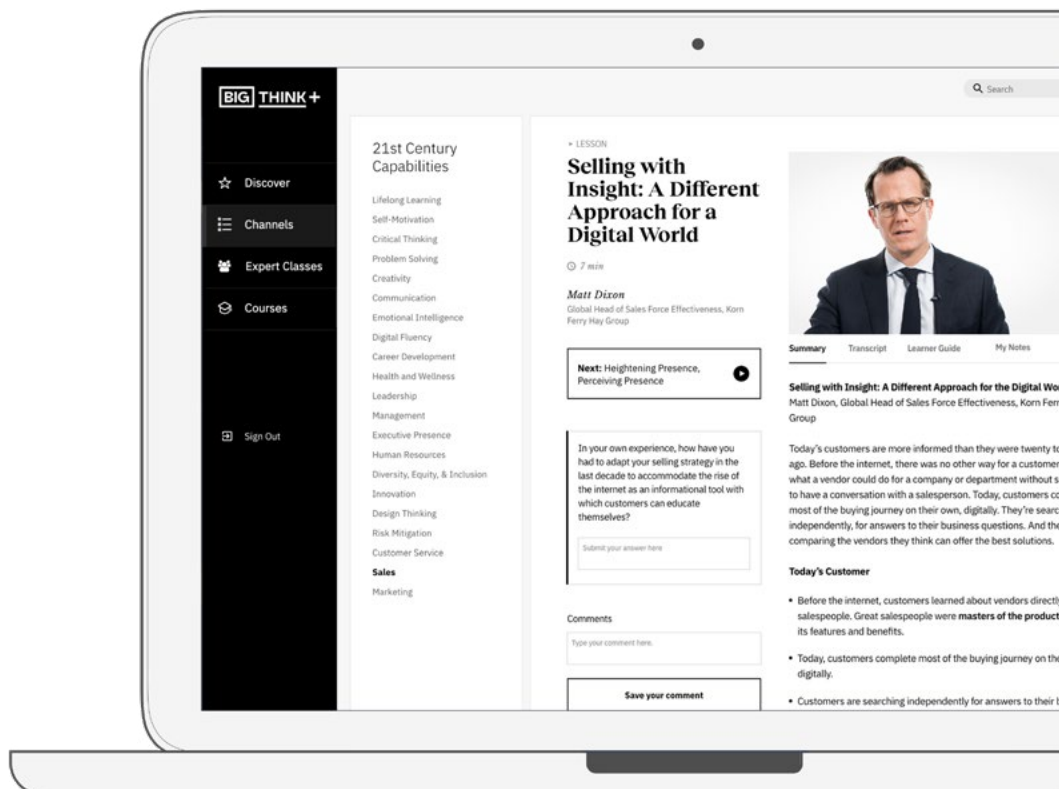
* Unless otherwise cited, all quotes have been taken from Big Think+ interviews and lessons. They have been lightly edited for length and readability.

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