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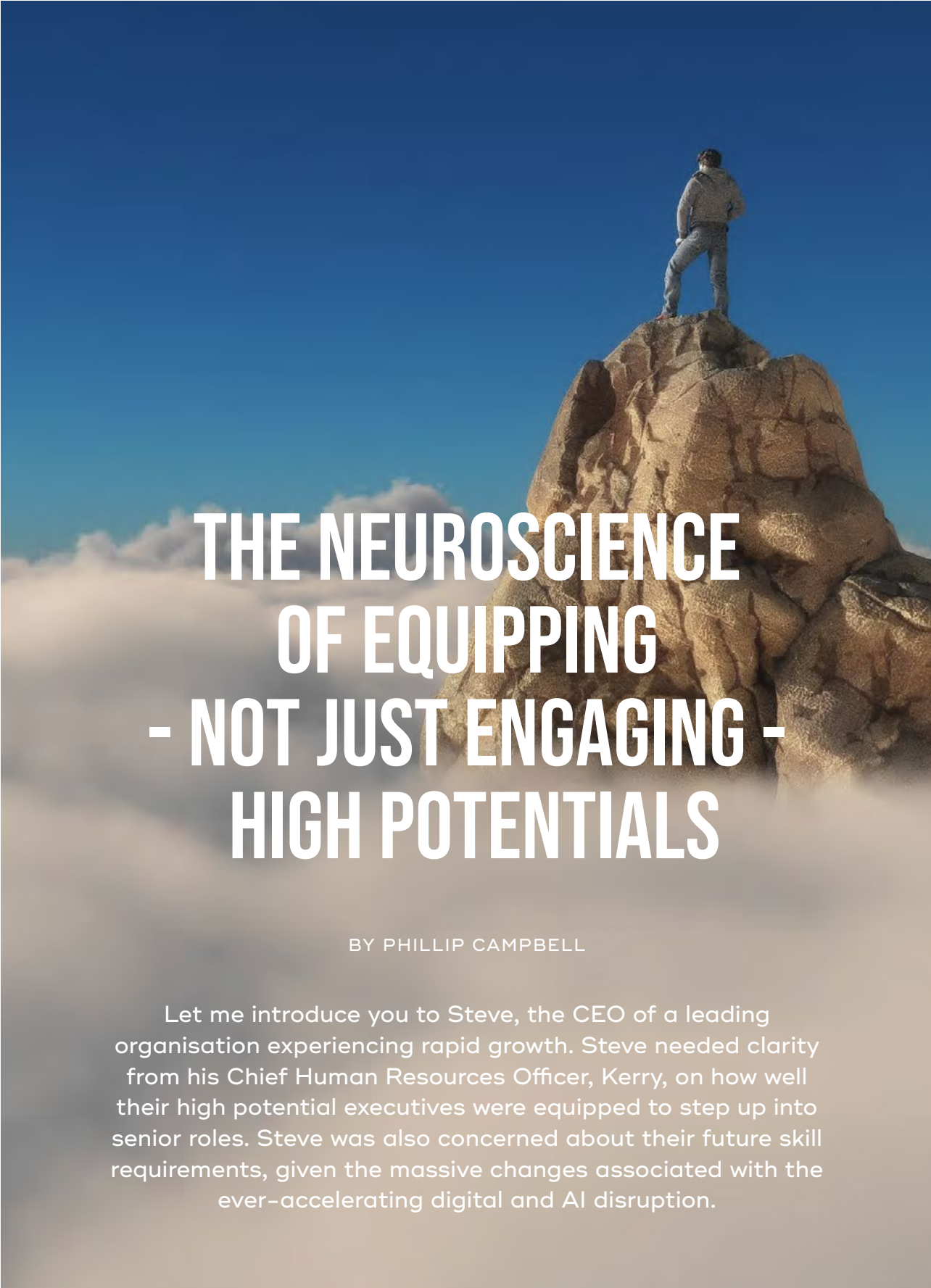
**THE DOUBLE-EDGED
SWORD OF DIGITAL
LEARNING**
ANDREW MIEDLER

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THE NEUROSCIENCE OF EQUIPPING - NOT JUST ENGAGING - HIGH POTENTIALS

BY PHILLIP CAMPBELL

Let me introduce you to Steve, the CEO of a leading organisation experiencing rapid growth. Steve needed clarity from his Chief Human Resources Officer, Kerry, on how well their high potential executives were equipped to step up into senior roles. Steve was also concerned about their future skill requirements, given the massive changes associated with the ever-accelerating digital and AI disruption.



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Steve shared with Kerry that the board was becoming increasingly concerned with succession planning, and ensuring that candidates were being developed and equipped to address today's issues, as well as the issues that were rapidly looming on the horizon. The board viewed this as not only a strategic opportunity if it was handled well, but also a strategic risk if it wasn't addressed proactively.

EQUIPPING SUCCESSOR EXECUTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

Kerry reviewed a recent SHRM article in which the authors did an excellent job of explaining the challenge associated with accurately identifying high potentials as part of the succession planning process. The authors defined potential as: "...how well you will perform in future jobs that you have never had and with demands that you have never experienced". Quite an ask, considering the definition!

Kerry also reflected that traditional methods of measuring potential are usually subjective. For example: a manager assessing an executive's future potential based on their current performance, without access to their cognitive capabilities that lay 'under the bonnet'. As with financial disclaimers like *past performance is not a reliable predictor of future performance*, this places managers assessing future potential in a challenging—if not impossible—position. Kerry concluded that they would need to be a clairvoyant to accurately assess an executive's future potential.

As also stated in the SHRM article, "*research indicates that a person's current performance rarely predicts their future performance in different, more complex, and*

bigger roles". That is why a different approach is needed to identify and develop high potential executives as part of the succession planning process.

SO, WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

Kerry thought that it has never been more critical to elevate the capability of succession executives. They need to pivot, have laser focus and run faster with more stamina than the competition. So developing succession executives must equip, not simply engage.

Organisations are navigating swift, dynamic and robust change. Curating exceptional executive development is imperative to continue to propel organisations to the next level of performance.

Succession executives need to be equipped to strategically navigate the demands of heavier workloads, while pioneering the organisational transformations that are taking place. They need upgraded leadership behaviours that create the capacity to lead more effectively, whilst also strengthening themselves and their teams to deliver higher quality work, in shorter time frames. In addition, they need to maintain their personal wellbeing and avoid burnout.

These skills are all underpinned by an individual's cognitive capability.

Intriguingly, the answer may lie in the CHC Theory of Human Cognitive Abilities (CHC Theory), which has been researched for over 70 years.

RADICALLY DEVELOPING COGNITIVE CAPABILITY

What can neuroscience and cognitive science bring to measuring potential, succession planning, and developing and equipping high potentials to undertake larger and more complex roles in an ever-changing business world?

Think of the brain as an iceberg, with the conscious mind above the waterline and the subconscious brain below. The CHC Theory is a model that analyses and categorises cognitive abilities. To make the theory more relatable, I have adapted some of its terms.

FLUID THINKING

Right hemisphere of the brain underpinning street smarts and future orientation

Fluid thinking abilities drive a person’s ability to think and act quickly, solve new problems and encode short term memories. John Horn described it as what a person uses when they don’t already know what to do—it’s below the conscious waterline and subconscious.

Fluid thinking supports a person’s adaptability, flexibility and leadership agility. It is a measure of *how* they think, particularly when dealing with new and unfamiliar situations – similar to SHRM’s definition of potential.

It’s underpinned by 10 subconscious thinking habits (or ‘mini-brain computing programs’), such as analytical, innovative, conceptual, strategic, abstract thinking, and so on. Fluid thinking is also used to address VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) situations, where a person cannot rely solely on past experience.

Fluid thinking peaks in young adulthood and then declines as the brain ages, but it can be enhanced as an adult by tapping into the brain’s neuroplasticity (Figure 1).

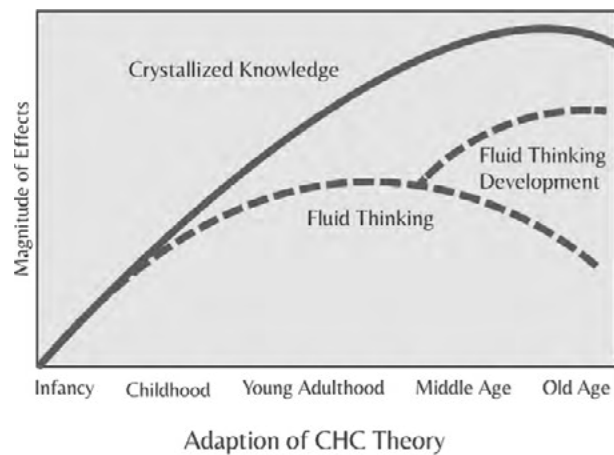


Figure 1: How fluid thinking and crystallised knowledge change with age



To understand how the CEO’s and board’s concerns could be addressed, see the framework of four key pillars of fluid thinking (Figure 2).

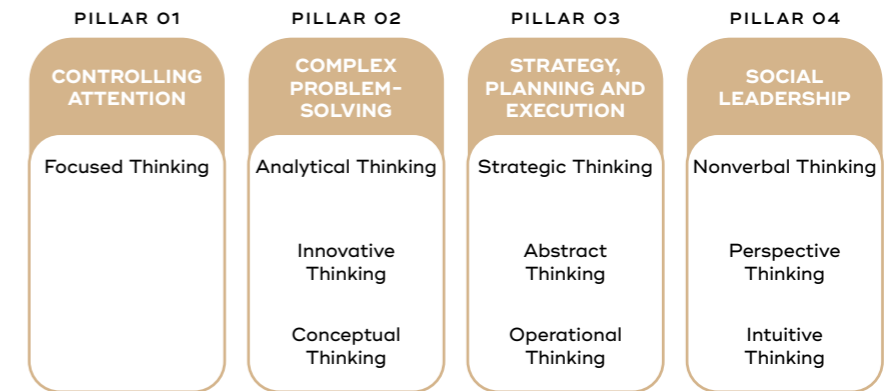


Figure 2: Fluid thinking pillars and associated subconscious thinking habits

The four fluid thinking pillars that are imperative for succession executives:

- 01.** Controlling attention: Having and maintaining a laser focus on strategic initiatives.
- 02.** Complex problem-solving: The ability to solve complex problems quickly and effectively by generating optimum solutions in new and uncharted business environments – a key component of the World Economic Forum (WEF) future skills (covered later in this article).
- 03.** Strategy, planning and execution: Creating a strategic approach to implementing an initiative, generating an appropriate plan, and delegating effectively.
- 04.** Social leadership: As identified by the WEF, strong soft leadership skills will be paramount in bringing people along on transformational journeys.

CRYSTALLISED KNOWLEDGE

Left hemisphere of the brain underpinning book smarts and past experience orientation

Crystallised knowledge is the knowledge a person has accumulated over their lifetime—it’s above the conscious waterline. It is *what* a person knows. It is language-based and includes:

- Subject matter expertise (domain knowledge)
- Routine expertise (the ability to leverage past experience).

Crystallised knowledge continues to increase with age as a person accumulates more knowledge. While knowledge used to equal power, it is no longer enough. In the AI age, leaders and high potentials will need to lift their game by being more adaptable and agile – the domain of fluid thinking.

SKILLS OF THE FUTURE

Kerry turned to the WEF *Future of Jobs Report* that highlights the top skills that businesses will require by 2025. Interestingly, only 20% of these skills are related to crystallised knowledge.

However, 80% of these skills are underpinned by, or related to, fluid thinking and the associated 10 subconscious thinking habits. So Kerry was able to become very clear on the cognitive skills that succession executives and people will require for the future.

The cognitive skills identified by the WEF are listed in the table shown in Figure 3. To illustrate the difference, the skills have been further categorised into the cognitive territories of fluid thinking and crystallised knowledge.

TYPE OF CREATIVE SKILL	* WEF CATEGORY OF SKILL	* WEF SKILL
Fluid Thinking	Problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analytical thinking and innovation Complex problem-solving Critical thinking and analysis Creativity, originality and initiative Reasoning, problem-solving, and ideation
Fluid Thinking	Self-management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active learning and learning strategies Resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility
Fluid Thinking	Working with people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership and social influence
Crystallized Knowledge	Technology use and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology use, monitoring, and control Technology design and programming

Figure 3: Adapted from WEF 2025 Skills Summary

When producing programs oriented toward crystallised knowledge development, the focus is on areas such as the training materials, the associated instructional design, and the delivery method. The trainer takes responsibility for the overall training approach.

In contrast, programs oriented toward fluid thinking focus on the learner’s existing learning capability and how it can be improved. It is necessary to shift the emphasis from the trainer to the learner, particularly when it comes to succession executives’ cognitive capabilities, such as adaptability and agility that are paramount.

ASSESSING POTENTIAL, SUCCESSION PLANNING AND EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

When managers assess a person’s potential, they mainly use the crystallised knowledge lens, focused on what the person has shown through their past and current performance. While this method of assessment is an important input to succession planning, it is not an effective way to predict future performance. Relying predominately on assessing crystallised knowledge to measure potential is like driving forward while looking in the rear-view mirror—a dangerous approach.

The business world is changing at an ever-increasing pace; the half-life of crystallised knowledge is rapidly decreasing, and AI and digital disruption will require faster and more agile leadership adaptation. Therefore, in this environment, taking a traditional approach to identifying high potentials can be fraught with danger and deliver ‘hit and miss’ outcomes. In contrast, taking an innovative approach of objectively measuring potential by assessing fluid thinking helps to identify succession executives more effectively.

Having improved the identification process, the next issue is how to significantly enhance the development of high potentials. This requires a more brain-balanced learning approach by L&D, rather than relying on the traditional approach improving an executive’s left hemisphere’s crystallised knowledge. It requires much more emphasis on developing right hemisphere fluid thinking – how well this is undertaken could very well decide the organisational winners and losers of tomorrow.

The figures presented in this article are from the author’s book and are provided for illustrative purposes within the context of the content.



PHILLIP CAMPBELL

Phillip Campbell is a cognitive scientist and the CEO of enigmaFIT, a global executive brain coaching and training company. He has dedicated his career to unlocking the power of the brain and developing leaders’ cognitive excellence, adaptability and learning agility. His clients include Fortune 500 executives and entrepreneurs from the USA, Europe, and Asia-Pacific. Phillip contributed to the USA Today and Wall Street Journal best-selling book, Habits of Success. He’s also recently released his latest book titled, Brain Habits: The Science of Subconscious Success. Phillip can be reached via phillip.campbell@enigmafit.com

Connected as ever, we work together

Nature is inspiring at the best of times. When things get tough, there’s a lot we can learn from the animal kingdom. In these moments, communities across Australia are coming together to help each other out in any way they can, and that is truly inspiring.

That’s why the AITD and Guild Insurance have teamed up to make sure you have the support you need right now, and aim towards creating a brighter future together. Visit guildinsurance.com.au to find out how we are working as one for a better tomorrow in your community.

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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

<https://www.shrm.org/executive/resources/people-strategy-journal/winter2018/pages/be-high-potential.aspx>

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/future-of-jobs-2023-skills/>

<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Habits-Science-Subconscious-Success-ebook/dp/BOBNXRMPJ/>