

Recently there has been some discussion over robots and technology automating significant numbers of jobs in the future. But you don't agree. Why?

Dessau: There have been some alarmist studies that say nearly half the jobs in America could be done by robots. But my focus has always been on what you need to do to build a career in the 21st century. If you go about that the right way, you will avoid getting yourself into a career that could be done by a machine. People who are successful in the 21st century need two sets of skills: communication skills and problem-solving skills. Robots don't do either one of those very well. What robots do very well is something they've done before and they can do a million times again.

Can you specifically address manufacturing jobs?

Dessau: The basis of manufacturing is repeatable jobs that you do multiple times. Manufacturing jobs like that have mostly gone from the U.S. But there are places that proximity to customers, quality of work, and the ability to personalize the service to the specific needs of the customer will mean manufacturing has to be more local. But what we've done a poor job of in this country is tailoring our manufacturing to the future of the country.

You believe that the new world of work won't require robots as much as "content." Please explain.

Dessau: Robots are very good at repetitive tasks. They are very left brain in their thinking. The jobs of the 21st century use the right brain, where it's about context, industry knowledge, customers, and communicating with people. So as people go to build 21st century careers, they have to think about that kind of context. I hire people who say, 'Here's a different way of thinking about it. Here's a different perspective.' So the people who will be most attractive won't be the ones who can do repetitive tasks, but those who can bring content to a conversation. They are able to place the work in context of the world around them.

How can executives better manage their own content, become experts, and stand out?

Dessau: There are many ways to expand your content knowledge, but they all require a desire to learn. The most obvious ways are talking to your people, reading more, and attending more industry or specialist events. The reality is that the best learning comes when you leave your office, or your comfort zone, and talk to your peers.

Where do you see technology falling on the spectrum of leadership?

Dessau: For a leader, technology is a tool; it's never an answer. If you use it as an answer, then it becomes a crutch and can be harmful. Technology expresses emotions poorly and it's often misinterpreted. I think technology is about enabling us to be more effective, but it doesn't replace the skills we need. Sometimes we just have to pick up the phone or walk down the corridor and go see the person. When you use technology as a replacement for leadership skills, you become ineffective.

In your book, *Become a 21st Century Executive*, you talk about executives getting known for their approach. What do you mean?

Dessau: In my book we talk about the three critical foundation skills: content, approach, and network. If content is what you know, approach is how you use what you know to complete your objectives. For instance, can you solve problems, work with other people, or manage teams? How do you get work done? You might be the smartest person in the world, but if you can't work with other people, you can't lead them, and you are going to be ineffective. At some point in your career, your success will be as defined by your ability to work with others as by what you know.

You believe that even executives need mentors. Why?

Dessau: I have never met a successful person who doesn't have one or even multiple mentors. I think everybody needs



multiple mentors. But we have confused coach and mentor. The coach is the person that runs up and down the sidelines shouting instructions, but that doesn't really help you think. What the mentor does is train your brain to be more effective. It's less about giving you answers and more about giving you the right questions. All of us need this. It helps us expand our brain, and it increases our diversity of thinking.

How is entrepreneurial thinking affected by all of this?

Dessau: Entrepreneurial skill is as essential to large companies as it is to startups. This ability to think laterally, analyze situations, and communicate is at the heart of the entrepreneur, but it's also at the heart of a good leader in a large company. Those are two of the foundations of being a 21st century executive. Entrepreneurialism is thinking about resources you have and taking your vision and combining them to achieve success.

In your book you also discuss the "paradox of leadership." Can you explain that?

Dessau: We know that a paradox is a statement that leads to

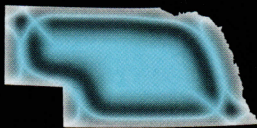
a contradiction. It defies logic, but it's still true. Business is nothing but paradoxes. We need to move faster, but we don't have more time. We need more money, but we don't have more budget. We need more people, but we can't have them. Any good leader learns to live with those paradoxes, but more importantly, manages through them. They don't let these paradoxes get in their way. They think beyond the restrictions. They fix what they can fix, and they manage through the rest. Where people derail is they get into these paradoxes and it freezes them. Learning to understand that there will be these paradoxes and then being willing to manage through them is a really important skill for a 21st century executive to have.

THE ASSIGNMENT

One of *Area Development's* staff editors recently interviewed Nigel Dessau, author of *Become a 21st Century Executive: Breaking Away From the Pack*. Dessau has more than 25 years experience in marketing and sales support in both the U.S. and Europe, having previously held positions at ADCLARO, AMD, and Sun Microsystems.

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