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The Chronicle Review

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March 18, 2012

Wanted: Dedicated Deep Thinkers

By Peter A. Coclanis

For the better part of two decades now, businesses the world over have preached the importance of innovation. In recent years, many have moved from talk to walk, a transition signaled in part by the appointment of a high-level CINO, or chief innovation officer, a new type of corporate position first described in detail by William L. Miller and Langdon Morris in *Fourth Generation R&D* (John Wiley, 1999). Although the roles of innovation officers differ in practice, generally speaking, they are charged with generating and nourishing new ideas, and transforming those ideas into profitable products.

Fair enough. I'm not here to bury CINO's, but to praise them—and to try to help them out a bit.

On the whole, innovation officers have proved their worth. The problem is that they are usually techies or lapsed techies, people with, as the executive-search company Heidrick & Struggles puts it, "the mind-set of an inventor" or backgrounds in business, often originating in areas such as marketing, R&D, and strategy.

I'd like to propose the creation of a new position called the CIAO, or chief intellectual-arbitrage officer: Someone to work with the CINO not only to generate new ideas but also to ask new questions, identify new trends, explore new niches, expand geocultural boundaries, project forward, and remember the past. The CIAO would not necessarily have a science/tech or business background—in fact, such a background might detract from his or her effectiveness. Rather, I visualize the perfect CIAO as a liberal-arts type, someone who reads broadly and voraciously, is articulate, knows how to do research, can count a little, has backbone, and likes to argue.

Sounds like at least a few brilliant Ph.D. students in the humanities and social sciences you've met over the years, doesn't it?

If you've been following those disciplines, you know about the worsening job market facing recent Ph.D.'s, especially in the humanities. And you've heard the pleas from the scholarly

associations, asking departments to train graduate students for alternative careers. So far, most of the focus has been on what we call "the public humanities" and alerting students to work on projects with a variety of "publics," such as local fine-arts communities, prisons, schools, museums, and the like. Far less attention has been given to a role in business, although a few programs like Stanford University's BiblioTech are bringing humanities Ph.D.'s together with technology industries.

I'm proposing taking that a step further—to the benefit of both humanists and industry. What a successful intellectual-arbitrage officer would bring to the table are questions, ideas, connections, and possibilities from other intellectual, disciplinary, geographic, and cultural "worlds." Lots of "what ifs," "why nots," "did you ever think abouts," "X seems a lot like Y's." Most of those questions would not hold up to strategic scrutiny and market discipline, but a small number might. And for what it would cost a company to fill such a position, one home run—or even a single or a double—would pay handsomely. Believe me, humanists come cheap. As Calvin Trillin famously put it years ago: "*The Nation* pays in the high two figures."

After almost 30 years in academe straddling the worlds of economics/business and the humanities, I've become convinced that there are undervalued assets and undervalued ideas and insights readily available in the humanities (as well as in the arts and social sciences) that are not being made use of. I began thinking about this in the mid-1980s, when co-teaching a course in the M.B.A. program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. One year we assigned, among other readings, Ken Auletta's *The Art of Corporate Success: The Story of Schlumberger* (Putnam, 1984), an outgrowth of Auletta's famous *New Yorker* profile on Schlumberger and its legendary chief executive, Jean Riboud.

Although I enjoyed the entire book, the main take-away for me related to a brief section on a high-level adviser and close confidant of Riboud's at Schlumberger: a man named Claude Baks. Baks was an engineer by training who began working for the company in 1946 but had no official duties. Baks had broad interests, though—film and filmmaking, most notably—and basically served as an adviser and transmitter of ideas to Riboud. Many of the ideas came from Schlumberger employees who felt comfortable bouncing them off Baks, who could attend any meeting he wanted and ask questions. He never had a title, never had a secretary, and never wrote a letter in his entire career at Schlumberger (he retired in September 1982). What he did for the company, according to Riboud, was force people

to think.

Reading about Baks got me thinking as well, and several years later, while on a Fulbright fellowship in Southeast Asia doing research on the history of globalization, I met a number of very smart academics who were interested in the same questions I was, but who approached them in entirely different ways.

A case in point: In an article on two important business figures in Southeast Asia in the early 20th century—the "rubber king" Tan Kah Kee and Aw Boon Haw (creator of the Tiger Balm empire)—I pointed out similarities, in terms of strategy and structure, between the business entities that they established and those coming into existence in the United States at about the same time. I saw such similarities because I was familiar with the seminal work of the historian Alfred D. Chandler Jr. on the rise of big business. At the time I wrote, no one working on business history in Southeast Asia was employing the insights of Chandler (or of the Nobel-winning economist whose research has been key to business management, Oliver E. Williamson, for that matter); nor considering market forces or technological developments. Instead they explained most everything about Tan's and Aw's business strategies and structures by invoking Chinese culture and cultural considerations. My answers were not "better" than theirs, but they were different, and augmented them.

I suspect that somewhat the same arbitrage possibilities—to force people to think in different ways—played a role in the decision by GE Global Research to set up multidisciplinary labs all over the world to develop new innovations. Despite the relatively borderless world of science, things are still done differently in Niskayuna, N.Y., than they are in Bangalore, Munich, Rio de Janeiro, or Shanghai.

What's good for the GE scientific goose is arguably good for the entire corporate gander. Even in a world increasingly flat, there are major opportunities out there, and it's high time that intellectual arbitrage became commonplace in the corporate world. CEO's and CINO's need to be able to ask smart outsiders: What are you reading? What are you thinking about these days? And they need to hear answers like: "You know, the vultures are dying off in India. That might pose a huge problem to public health there." Or, "It's remarkable how similar the Great Recession is to the economic crisis of the 1870s." Or, "I was rereading Douglas Hofstadter, and he argues that Bach's music, Escher's graphic art, and Gödel's mathematical theorems are all linked. If so, what does that say about the mind and the way we think?" What indeed?

Although it is unlikely that anyone can explicitly train to be a CIAO, the qualities needed do have a tendency to surface over time. As individual academic departments—and professional associations such as the American Historical Association and the Modern Language Association—strategize about adjusting to the changing job markets, they might consider developing means (and venues) that would facilitate what economists call "signaling." That is to say, they might begin to create ways for people to indicate their CIAO-ish attributes to potential employers. How about inviting corporate recruiters to graduate-student forums and conferences, or soliciting corporate recruiters to set up shop at the annual meetings of the AHA or MLA? Not the whole answer, obviously, but a start.

I'm agnostic about where a chief intellectual-arbitrage officer might fit on a corporate chart. Some businesses, of course, have always had DDT's—designated deep thinkers—around: People like Nathan Myhrvold during his Microsoft days, Steve Jobs whenever and wherever. It's now time to make this function regular and routine, just as we did the CINO function a little over a decade ago. To be sure, the Myhrvolds and Jobses are few and far between. But there are more-mortal intellectual arbitrageurs out there who can nonetheless add value to corporations while at the same time enjoying meaningful careers.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037