

Technology & Ideas

How to Succeed in Business? Major in Liberal Arts

Resist the skills-gap panic; there are plenty of science grads. Forward-looking executives are investing in creativity and adaptability.

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How to succeed in business.

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The combatants in the U.S. [education wars](#) don't agree on much, but there's at least one concern that most reformers and educators across the political spectrum seem to share: fear that universities aren't producing enough science, technology, engineering and math majors. But just as [states](#) and school districts add new technology requirements and open STEM-oriented schools, leading technology companies are heading in the opposite direction, forming partnerships with liberal-arts colleges and seeking to hire their graduates.

It's a welcome development. [Recent research](#) suggests that contrary to the popular idea that majoring in art or literature is a route to personal penury and a contributor to industrial decline, there are actually plenty of science majors, except among low-income students. Moreover, while newly minted graduates with science and technical degrees enjoy a salary premium over their classmates in the humanities, that [premium fades](#) over time, in part because technological skills become obsolete faster. Liberal arts majors, by contrast, trained to be creative communicators and critical thinkers, are more adaptable.

Corporations have good business reasons to embrace history, philosophy and English majors. Companies need well-rounded employees conversant in both digital and creative skills. With some additional training and investments by the government, companies can leverage both the liberal arts and digital know-how that is needed for increasingly complex technological systems.

Leading business thinkers have long understood the importance of liberal arts. Works of [Shakespeare](#), [Tolstoy](#) and [Cervantes](#) were key texts in popular business school courses taught by [John Whitney](#), the former Pathmark president who taught at Columbia University in the 1990s, and the late [James March](#), Stanford University's polymath professor and co-author of the 1992 classic of business organization, "[Behavioral Theory of the Firm.](#)"

The late Sidney Harman, founder of the audio-technology company Harman Kardon, told his subordinates to "get me poets as managers." (Harman endowed a writer-in-residence program at Baruch College; I'm on the program's selection committee.)

"Poets are our original systems thinkers," Harman [said](#) more than a decade ago. "They look at our most complex environments and they reduce the complexity to something they begin to understand."

That view is reflected in recent hiring practices at some leading technology shops. At [Slack Technologies Inc.](#), the workplace-communication software company whose chief executive holds a master's degree in philosophy, about half the

leadership team majored in the humanities. In recent congressional testimony, a senior executive at McAfee Inc., the cybersecurity company, touted a demographically and intellectually diverse workforce that includes liberal-arts majors.

Infosys Ltd, the Indian technology and consulting firm that is aiming to hire [10,000 U.S. employees](#) by the end of this year, recently launched partnerships with U.S. universities. At least two of them — one with [Rhode Island School of Design](#) in Providence and the other with [Trinity College](#) in Hartford, Connecticut — are focused on harnessing the know-how of artists and liberal-arts majors.

The Infosys strategy reflects the reality that while liberal-arts graduates are entering the tech workforce at record rates, their ranks have [declined sharply](#), from 36 percent of undergraduate degrees in 1970 to just 23 percent in 2016, with most of the decrease occurring during the past decade. While some of the company's partnerships are aimed at recruiting graduates with both [STEM and liberal-arts degrees](#) and providing training in specialized areas like health-care and food services, it is the company's explicit focus on getting employees to bring a broader, interdisciplinary perspective to business challenges that is noteworthy.

The eight-week curriculum developed by the Rhode Island School of Design, for example, employs the same strategic design process it uses in its studio-design classes. One goal is to challenge the tendency of many employees, especially engineers, to look for a single answer to a problem. Instead, Infosys wants workers to become comfortable with uncertainty, complexity and the process of uncovering new problems.

In one exercise, trainees are given a restaurant menu and asked what they see. At first, they are likely to notice food, wine and perhaps some ingredients. With time and questioning, they will begin to see farms, irrigation and transportation systems, fertilizers and supply chains, farm workers and labor laws; only by understanding the social and economic network in which the restaurant operates can they begin to imagine an improved food-delivery system.

With its university training partnerships, Infosys also is addressing a shortage of corporate training programs. [Peter Cappelli](#), director of the Center for Human Resources at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton business school, argues that when companies talk about a "skills gap," what they really mean is that they don't want to invest in their own employee training. Technology companies, especially, he argues in ["Why Good People Can't Get Jobs."](#) prefer poaching employees from competitors to training them.

Companies can't do it alone, of course; building a more versatile work force also requires more government funding for colleges and universities. While the federal government spent \$150 million on higher education in 2015, three times more than it budgeted 20 years ago, state governments slashed spending by 28 percent over the same period. In 2018, [overall state funding](#) for both two- and four-year colleges remained below the 2008 level. Financing of [community colleges](#), a key to social mobility for minority students, needs special attention.

The corporate embrace of liberal-arts majors is no doubt fueled in part by record-low unemployment. Companies also have to grapple with a crackdown by the administration of President Donald Trump on H1-B white-collar work visas, which allowed companies like Infosys to bring employees to the U.S., often to replace higher-paid U.S. workers. Infosys has [settled claims](#) — most recently in 2017 — that it had abused the visa process.

Still, it's creativity even more than skills that has always set apart American ingenuity and business prowess. In a shrinking global world, it's good to see companies beginning to embrace the intellectually and demographically diverse workforce they'll need to maintain that edge.