



# Cognitive Athleticism: A Disruptive Perspective of the Future of Talent

Discover how to nurture cognitive ability and change how you  
view your talent strategy.



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# Executive Summary

The idea of the knowledge economy is changing the way we look at skills, and it's something we've embraced at Grayce since day one. Organisations are sometimes hard wired to develop hard skills when looking at their talent strategy, but we know the inherent abilities of an individual are somewhat nuanced and should be viewed as such.

Yes, we've heard much of the skills gap and the issues it poses to ongoing development and innovation, but we think it's just as important that we take a holistic view on skills as well so that an individual can develop the competencies and attributes they will need to thrive today and in the future.

At Grayce, we balance our Development Programme, where people learn skills in change management, data analysis, and software development, with traits such as communication, and situational awareness, that are needed to succeed in large companies. Our Programme follows a 70:20:10 principle which involves micro-learning coupled with real-world and peer-to-peer experience.

We know it's actually pretty straightforward to develop technical skills, but what organisations want is a combination of skills that allow individuals to assimilate themselves into the workforce and communicate with multiple stakeholders in a flexible and adaptable way.

In this paper, Futurist, Ade McCormack introduces the idea of cognitive athletes, we take a look at the demographic of people we're supporting here at Grayce, and we share a blueprint for talent that will shape industry for years to come.





# Introduction

Grayce believes that hard skills aren't the whole answer to the skills gap and hiring for competencies and attributes that demonstrate cognitive athleticism should be considered part of any talent strategy. It's never been more relevant, particularly for the next generation of talent entering the workforce right now.

The journey into the working world for young people who have graduated in the pandemic era has been anything but traditional, forgoing the cap and gown to be in government-enforced isolation at home, and job hunting in an entirely digital environment.

This swift shedding of the traditional is indicative of what Gen Z, and the future generations to follow, can expect from their careers. As they witness the factory model breaking before their eyes, how can we embrace the emerging workforce and set them up for success?



In a world where the future is increasingly unstable and unknowable, with no one path to success, we must subvert our notions of skills development, career progression, and organisational structure in order to succeed.

**Enter the Cognitive Athlete.**



# The Case for Change

## **Futurist, Ade McCormack says...**

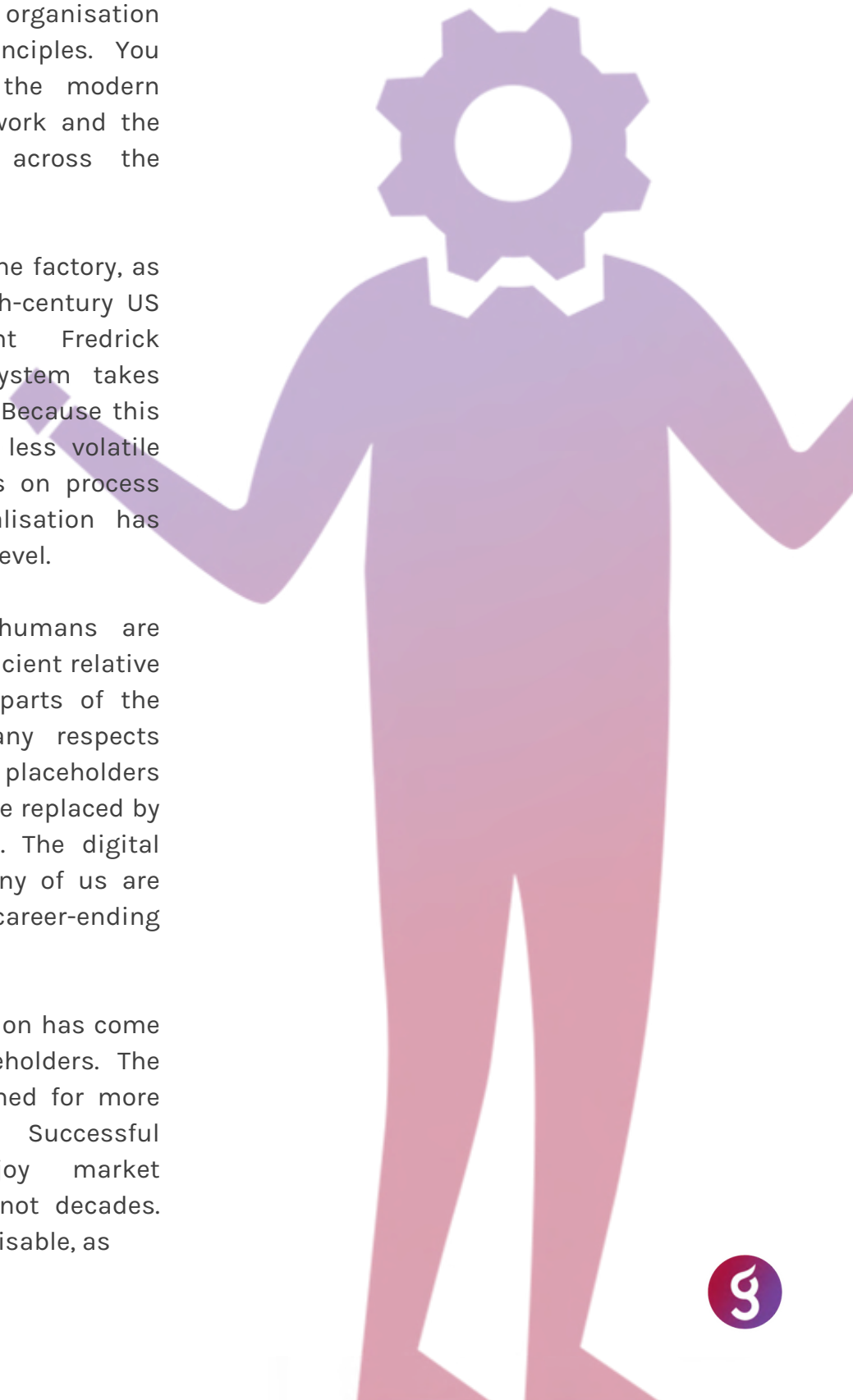
Despite the increasing use of glass, steel, and soft furnishings, most organisations today are essentially factories. Whilst hardhats, boiler suits, and conveyor belts are nowhere to be seen, the typical modern organisation operates on factory principles. You might say that today the modern conveyor belt is the network and the material it transports across the organisation is data.

One of the key tenets of the factory, as defined by early twentieth-century US management consultant Fredrick Taylor, was that the system takes priority over the workers. Because this model was developed in less volatile times, the emphasis was on process efficiency. Latterly digitalisation has taken this to a whole new level.

It is very clear that humans are generally considered inefficient relative to the other inanimate parts of the system. Humans in many respects were/are technology placeholders waiting for the day they are replaced by an algorithm or a robot. The digital tsunami is here and many of us are feeling the impact of career-ending automation.

In many respects, disruption has come to save the wider stakeholders. The factory model was designed for more predictable times. Successful companies could enjoy market dominance for years, if not decades. Opportunities were recognisable, as

were threats. Thus, the process-oriented model could be extended to embrace how the organisation engaged with the market.



But today, courtesy of an array of conflating and compounding macro-environmental forces, threats and opportunities are emerging in unrecognisable forms, popping up from nowhere, and thus presenting organisations today with a stream of new scenarios. The company playbook/operations manual provides no guidance for such novel scenarios and that is leading to missed opportunities and fumbled management of threats.



**...an array of conflating and compounding macro-environmental forces, threats and opportunities are emerging in unrecognisable forms, popping up from nowhere, and thus presenting organisations today with a stream of new scenarios...**

Novel scenarios require innovative responses. Process engineering, with its emphasis on risk management and failure elimination, is ill-suited to a world where situational awareness and innovative responses are key organisational survival attributes. Whilst many of us felt the disruptive influence of digital, all of us experienced disruption first-hand thanks to biological disruption in the form of COVID-19. In many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic might be considered the unofficial closing ceremony to the industrial era.

The disintegration of the industrial era factory model is great news for the workers. 'Turning the handle' on mindless processes led to many of us being able to do our job without any cognitive demand, once we had mastered the associated skills. Industrial era leaders paid little attention to this squandered asset. Disruption is making leaders reconsider their perspectives in respect of cognitive capital.



# The Case for Cognitive Athleticism

## Futurist, Ade McCormack says...

The pace at which organisations are being confronted by novel scenarios is accelerating. The good news here is that technology does not currently do innovation very well. AI is still in an embryonic state in respect of matching human cognition. The field of modern AI has not yet reached its centenary, whereas the human brain has had millions of years of programming.

The human brain has faced the harshest of conditions and responded innovatively each time. There was no choice, innovate or die.

Unfortunately for many of us, the relative stability and predictability of the last few centuries, with notable exceptions, coupled with mindless process work has numbed our creative capacity.

However, for those of us who can reboot our brains, the future is bright. One might say that 'the new definition of talent is being able to do something of value that cannot be replicated by an algorithm or a robot. Such people might be referred to as cognitive athletes'.

These people are not the compliant corporate suits of the industrial era but individuals whose thoughts and innovations give rise to differentiated customer experiences that command a high margin, large market share or both. These people are not dissimilar to the likes of Salvador Dali or Pablo Picasso. Brilliant at what they do but going against the model of what was acceptable at the time.

Talent management is undergoing a transformation. People are becoming less so cogs in the machine and more cognitive athletes. There are already many organisations that realise that they are primarily in the cognitive management business.

High profile companies such as Google, Apple, and Microsoft come to mind. Whilst I am not an anthropologist, I have studied the work of anthropologists and have used this to infer what it is that these companies are doing that is different to the industrial era factory players.

Well firstly, they recognise that the workers are more important than the system. The system must be designed around the people and not the other way round.

What I don't think these organisations recognise is that they have developed organisations that not only turn human cognition into value, but they have also, to some extent, inadvertently created the conditions to maximise the harvest.

To become a cognitive athlete requires us to reclaim our humanity. It requires us to reactivate our brains. It requires the organisation to create conditions where we can do great work with other cognitive athletes. With this model, leaders transform from bosses to cognitive coaches.

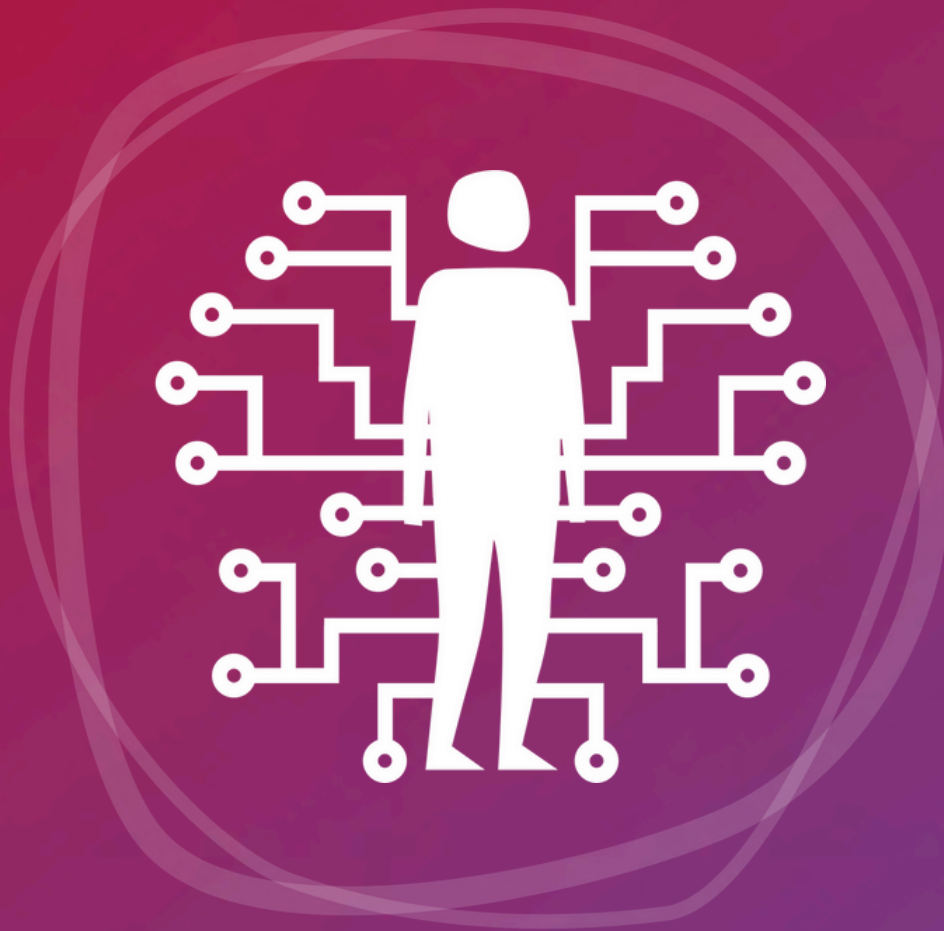




# What Defines a Cognitive Athlete?

Skills of course are important. They get the job done. But the skills your organisation needs today will not necessarily be the skills it requires in 6 months or 6 years. One option is to simply swap freelancers in and out as required. But what you save in skills requirements precision, you lose in organisational knowledge and cultural capital.

A better approach would be to hire people for their potential or capability. They can learn the skills as and when they are needed, training at the point of need.



Cognitive athletes are very comfortable learning new skills. Rather than taking the view that their career involves two steps a) Learn followed by b) Work, they are constantly learning. In doing so they are continually rearchitecting their brains. They recognise that deliberate practice is part and parcel of staying commercially relevant. Like the virtuoso violinist, they don't just perform, they learn, and they practise. They practise with such neuronal intensity that it hurts. High performance does not come easy.

Cognitive athletes do not entwine their identities with their skills, as in "Hi, I'm Juan and I'm a lawyer." They see work as less a race to some imaginary career peak and more an exercise in personal self-development. Perhaps even a path to self-mastery? They get a buzz from working alongside other cognitive athletes, each pushing the other to higher performance.





# Building a Workforce Equipped for the Future

According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report, half of all employees around the world will need reskilling by 2025 (Randstad). A shift in how we train employees and the function of HR/L&D is urgently needed.

According to Gartner's 2022 HR Report, 40% of HR leaders say they can't build skill development solutions fast enough to meet evolving skill needs. And almost 50% of HR leaders are significantly concerned about rising turnover increasing competition for talent.

Traditionally, HR Teams would supply a training and development programme for employees to tick off and complete. This imagines learning and personal development as a linear process. We complete a training intervention, gradually moving up the career ladder, towards a pre-determined peak. The dream job we've had our eye on for years.

According to a survey of executives conducted by McKinsey last year, the digital products of these businesses were accelerated by seven years as a result of the pandemic (Randstad).

A key factor in Grayce's ongoing success as an emerging talent management consultancy is being able to hire potential and develop cognitive athletes. It's something we look for in candidates, recruiting those with the Grayce DNA (We delve into details on how we do this on page 21).

The Grayce DNA is comprised of competencies and attributes we know people need to face this unknown future. We identify these in our people and hone them over the course of three years through our Development Programme. Together, these skills and attributes can be understood as cognitive athleticism.



**We're losing the skills development race. But we believe there's a bigger prize to be chasing. A way for organisations to truly set their people up for success for an unknowable future.**

We need to prime our people to understand the environments they find themselves in and adjust accordingly. This requires us to draw on a tool honed through millions of years of evolution – our brains.

The human brain is our best asset. But in the traditional factory model, they're running on autopilot. Carrying out tasks the way they've always been done. It's time to wake up, switch on our brains, and reset what we think we know about how we work and learn.



Athletes are training, every day, to be better than yesterday. Alert, active, and adaptable, athletes seek constant, incremental improvements to continue to be on top of their game. They adjust their course. They navigate obstacles. Each time, understanding themselves better and becoming stronger, delivering better results.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already kickstarted some of this thinking. 75% of workers aged 25 to 34 say they have more clarity about their professional goals since the pandemic began (Randstad). Living through this global disaster has woken up a primal drive in thousands all over the world to do work that means something to them. Employees are primed for a seismic shift in how they work. Cognitive athleticism provides the mental foundation from which they can learn, adapt and grow.





# Top 10 Competencies and Attributes to Activate Cognitive Capability

Activating our cognitive capability, we can undertake mental training to become better cognitive athletes. Employers can coach their people to success by sharpening these skills that make up our Grayce DNA.

## #1 Collaboration

As we continue to ride the wave of rapid digital transformation, collaboration is more important than ever. But 86% of employees in leadership positions blame lack of collaboration as the top reason for workplace failures. This may be due, in part, to the way we collaborate changing significantly thanks to remote working, promoted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Successful collaboration in this environment then echoes the synergy of a winning sports team. Connection and communication form the two core pillars of collaboration. For a team to perform well, there is genuine respect, understanding, and care for your teammates. Employees must become adept at quickly building meaningful connections with their colleagues. Understanding others' strengths and weaknesses to solve problems quickly and deliver excellent work.

Creating these trusted connections requires moments of openness and genuine vulnerability. This was clearly demonstrated during 2020's global shift to mass remote working. This authenticity helped to build trusted connections and strong communication channels between

employees. Consequently, colleagues fostered meaningful bonds with each other and felt a shared motivation to support each other to succeed.

Furthermore, with our workforce currently being home to five different generations, it's vital to be able to collaborate with individuals from different backgrounds, whether that's education, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation or religious beliefs. Indeed, as job roles and professional development become more fluid - alongside the ways we work becoming more flexible - the ability to collaborate with everyone becomes even more important.

The diversity of thought available in our current workforce is unparalleled. Diversity of thought recognises the power organisations can harness when embracing each person's unique perspectives. When people from a variety of backgrounds, with different ways of thinking, collaborate, they're better equipped to imagine new ways of working, creatively problem solve, and drive efficiencies. But to reap these benefits, they must first unlock successful collaboration. Indeed, there really is no 'I' in team.





## #2 Purpose-driven

According to Randstad's Workmonitor 2021 Report, as a consequence of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, people are more introspective and purpose-driven about their career choices, their ability to make changes and, most of all, their personal and professional lives.

The global disruption and loss that we've experienced has 'activated' employees to make bold choices about their careers. This period has been referred to as the 'Great Resignation' as many leave their jobs, and even industries, for work that is more connected to their personal values and ambitions. Perhaps a more accurate way to describe this era is the 'Great Enlightenment', a phrase coined by Randstad.

Whilst it's caused immediate disruption for many organisations, the long-term impacts look positive. Our work and personal identities are no longer separated. A core aspect of a job search today is employers and employees coming together to identify genuine alignment between candidates' personal values, career ambitions and the organisation's mission.

### Did you know?

75% of workers aged 25-34 year said that they have more clarity about their professional goals since the pandemic began.



75% of workers aged 25-34 years said that they have more clarity about their professional goals since the pandemic began. And having 'meaningful work' is an important area to consider when looking for employment for this group. This self-awareness and the need for their work to have a positive impact on the world is a huge motivator, particularly for Gen Z and Millennials.

Making hiring choices and promotion decisions makes this alignment of deeper purpose a key way to hire and retain employees. In this way, work can be understood as a route to self-discovery and self-mastery.

Building a team of cognitive athletes, connected and driven by a deeper purpose, has the potential to provide a powerful, transformative impact for organisations.



# #3 Adaptability

Disruption in today's working world takes on many forms. We can't predict it, and we certainly can't control it.

From millennia of evolution, the human brain knows that it must adapt or die. Just as humans have done throughout history, today's employees must also sharpen their cognitive senses to become masters of adaptability.

Adaptability can be understood as the capability to manage change. Adapting to different individuals, their style of working and varied environments you may work in. It encompasses being determined, resourceful and ready to let go of ideas and processes which no longer serve you or the organisation.

This adaptability is essential as employees move through different roles within an organisation or across industries, as well as the organisation at large as markets evolve and new tech and trends appear. The more adaptable you are, the more comfortable you'll be embracing new ways of doing things, and the more you stay relevant.



The thousands of students that graduated during the pandemic, including the hundreds hired by Grayce, have been well-versed in adaptability from day one of their careers. Starting their first professional jobs from their bedrooms, with no face-to-face guidance, they adapted a little each day, becoming stronger cognitive athletes, developing an ever-changing tool kit with which to make their mark on the corporate world.

They had to take an active role in their development. Rather than becoming a carbon copy of their line manager from closely shadowing them in the office, employees now pull from a global sphere of influence: colleagues and friends, books and e-guides, online communities, YouTube tutorials, TikTok videos, and entrepreneur influencers.

When you anticipate experiencing challenges and roadblocks as a normal part of working life, you adopt a development or growth mindset which welcomes changing your understanding of yourself, your role, and the way you work. This allows you to take a positive approach to change and feel genuine excitement about innovation, driven by adaptability.



## #4 Resilience

Often referenced as the number one skill employees worldwide have had to cultivate through the COVID-19 pandemic, resilience plays a huge role in how we overcome the challenges we will inevitably face in today's uncertain world.

Overlapping with adaptability, resilience can be defined as how psychologically robust you are when faced with problems. As we work in new ways, in new locations, using new tech, and operating across global time zones, the environment is ripe for resilient people.

Cultivating resilience allows us to experience difficulties in a positive way and develop high-stress tolerance, all whilst remaining motivated. However, according to Aon's 'The Rising Resilient Report', nearly half of employees surveyed (42%) reported feeling insecure. It's important to remember that alongside the cognitive tools mentioned above, employers should create an environment of psychological safety for their people to succeed.

The ADP Research Institute's Global Workplace Study 2020 identified that highly resilient employees are: able to demonstrate agency and the ability to compartmentalize, feel psychologically safe, and demonstrate trust in their leaders' abilities to anticipate the future, communicate, and follow through on commitments.

Resilience is predicated upon a clear social contract between employees and employers. A person is highly unlikely



to jump out of a plane with no parachute. So, when asking their employees to display resilience, employers can provide this 'safety net' in the form of strategies to promote wellbeing, inclusion, and work-life balance. By creating a sense of security, care, and belonging, employees are given the organisational support to bolster their cognitive capability, shaping a resilient workforce, companywide.





## #5 Intellectually Curious

Identifying curiosity is identifying potential. Curiosity is essential to becoming an agile learner. And it is the fuel of innovation. We can understand curiosity as an insatiable hunger for cognitive exploration. Intellectual curiosity encompasses an inquisitive attitude and exploratory behaviour, like freely asking questions and thinking and acting beyond one's own job requirements. It frames learning as a natural process that's happening all the time, rather than a chore.

Unsurprisingly, curiosity is a predictor of academic performance. Researchers performed a meta-analysis, gathering the data from 200 studies with a total of about 50,000 students. They found that curiosity had a large impact on academic performance – and when combined with conscientiousness, as big an effect on performance as intelligence.

In addition to this, according to Merck's Curiosity Report, a curious person is more likely to: seek out new experiences at work, bring an idea to life at work, have a unique talent at work, have lots of friends at work, be promoted at work, and earn a high salary. Curiosity is then a clear predictor of future leaders – exactly what we build at Grayce.

It's clear that intellectual curiosity must be practised throughout our careers. It's a muscle we must continue to exercise and strengthen. Never satisfied with the status quo, as an intellectually curious employee, you will take an active approach to your development, rather than a passive mind that's waiting for the learning opportunities to be presented to you.

By always asking questions about the world around you, you create moments of learning, consciously building them into your working style. As a result, these employees have better problem-solving skills as they're able to ask relevant questions and extract insights to quickly unearth the root of a problem.



## #6 Emotional Intelligence

For their pace, precision and progress, you'd be forgiven for thinking of the cognitive athlete as some kind of machine. But in the age of automation, emotional intelligence (EQ) is humanity's superpower.

The response to a challenge faced by two colleagues of equal experience can be separated by their level of emotional intelligence. Over 80% of the skills and abilities that set top performers apart from their peers fall under the umbrella of emotional intelligence. Through the pandemic, the value of high EQ was brought into sharp focus as emotional, social, and cultural intelligence was demanded of everyone, in particular, organisational leaders.

Self-awareness and self-regulation form the heart of EQ. Understanding one's own behaviours and motivations, strengths, and triggers is an important foundation before understanding that of others. Alongside this, you can regulate your own emotions and impulses, allowing you to make measured, logical decisions.

Using these skills, you can detect colleagues' emotional states and recognise social cues to understand what they need at that moment. From recognising vocal tones, to paraphrasing what someone has said to check for understanding. This allows you to build positive working relationships in order to inspire others with a strong presence and influence a group to get the most out of them.

All of this underpins a people-before-profits approach where leadership builds trusted relationships with employees and knows when it's appropriate to challenge and push, as well as when it's appropriate to empathise and support. A Gallup study of 2 million employees at 700 companies, found that employees who had managers with high EQ were four times less likely to leave than those who had managers with low EQ.

Engaged teams have less turnover, higher customer ratings, greater profitability, higher productivity, and less absenteeism. When EQ runs throughout a business, work feels more like a seamless collaboration that allows you to get to know yourself and your colleagues better to achieve outstanding performance.



# #7 Creative Innovation

Together, creativity and innovation are a powerful combination. But why do we need both? Creativity can be understood as the imaginative aspect of change, and innovation is the action to put the ideas into practice.

Creativity is often misunderstood as being reserved for the likes of writers and painters. But with complex, new challenges appearing in the business world, all the time, there's real value in all employees being able to harness their imagination to think of new approaches. Indeed, the GE Global Innovation Barometer found that, globally, business executives say that 40 percent of innovations over the last five years have had a positive impact on their business's bottom line.

To think of and implement solutions to solve business problems not only requires creative innovation but an environment that's ripe for it. Just as coaches must be open their athletes experimenting with new techniques, today's business leaders must instil a positive view of failure. Creating a culture that embraces failure generates the psychological safety needed to experiment and take risks which is needed for employees and the organisation to grow.

Studies suggest that workplace innovation leads to significant and sustainable improvements in both organisations' performance and employee engagement and wellbeing. At Grayce, we refer to our people as 'changemakers'. By embedding this into the company culture and making it an identifying trait of our employees, we promote the idea that creative innovation is welcomed from everybody across the business, regardless of seniority or experience. This is another key way for cognitive athletes to 'switch on' their brains and take an active role in shaping the transformation of their organisations.





## #8 Courage

In the sports world, athletes are continually putting themselves into challenging situations in the pursuit of their personal best and accolades like gold medals. Courage can be understood as the emotional and cognitive process behind overcoming situations that challenge or frighten us. Translating this to the working world might mean suggesting a new way of undertaking a task, communicating with clients or implementing tech.

It can be thought of as a 'cognitive coin toss' – combining critical thinking with risk. Putting bold ideas out there, despite the risk of failure. Research has identified a 'courage calculation': six discrete decision-making processes that make success, including setting attainable goals, weighing risks against benefits, and developing contingency plans. When courageous leadership becomes a mental muscle that all employees implement, they are regularly taking calculated risks, refining their understanding all the time.

Whether we're in the sports or business arena though, before achieving new heights, we must enter a space of vulnerability. This involves facing our fears, confronting reality head-on, and having difficult conversations. In short, getting comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Returning to the idea that strong collaborations are built on authentic connections, today's leaders must show vulnerability and admit when something makes them uncomfortable. Shedding a light on these vulnerable moments allows room for courageousness to follow. When leaders model this behaviour, it builds trust between employees by revealing a humbleness and evidencing that continuous learning and risk taking will be needed throughout your career.

Courageousness encompasses decisiveness, ownership, and laser focus on achieving goals. Courageous leaders will stand organisations in good stead when facing periods of uncertainty. Following a strong example from leadership, employees will be empowered to make bold business moves which progress their career and drive organisational transformation.



## #9 Critical Thinking

As organisations and the global market become more complex, and fake news abounds, today's employees must be extremely discerning to cut through the noise and reach the facts. The power of critical thinking is evidenced in a study by Heather Butler. Butler found that certain successes in life can be attributed to high IQ, but this doesn't correlate to future wellbeing. In fact, Butler's study suggests that critical thinking skills are a stronger predictor of making positive life decisions than IQ.

Beyond quickly digesting large volumes of information, critical thinkers apply an analytical lens to determine if information is reliable and accurate, as well as deducing key facts. By examining and evaluating arguments, critical thinkers can spot inconsistencies and formulate rational conclusions. This fosters independent thought and confidence in their own arguments and decision-making skills.

A key element of critical thinking is being reflective. It's crucial to be open to new ideas and opinions, especially ones which challenge your own. One study found that 25% of respondents rarely or never seek out people who have different views than their own.

Whilst many people claim to solicit the views of others, they don't actively seek to 'stress test' their opinions. However, understanding opposing views are proven to form richer critical thinking. Practising critical thinking helps employees to become keen problem solvers and strategists, making decisions from an accurate, holistic view. Drawing upon intellectual curiosity – another of our 10 future skills – seeking out new and varied viewpoints shapes stronger critical thinkers, ready to apply advanced decision-making to their work.



# #10 Autonomy/Drive

Most employees and organisations have benefitted from the flexibility afforded to them by remote working. However, this notion of flexibility is about much more than working from home. A [study by Harvard Business Review](#) found that rather than having varied working locations, employees want autonomy to choose where, when, and how they work.

The psychological theory of self-determination states that our internal motivation for psychological growth is a more compelling driver for success and fulfilment than external rewards, such as money or praise. Autonomy is then a central component of motivation and a key driver of performance and wellbeing.

With remote working here to stay, being able to connect with a deep sense of personal drive and self-discipline is crucial to success. Combine remote working with job roles becoming more flexible and business structures becoming flatter, we're all learning how valuable it is to lead oneself.

Operating with honesty, employees who embrace their autonomy can hold themselves and others accountable in a respectful manner. They can self-organise, prioritise, adapt, and remain calm, enabling them to deliver excellent outcomes and, in turn, inspire their colleagues.

Combining high autonomy with high flexibility promotes a 'can-do' attitude amongst employees where they know they are trusted and empowered to make a meaningful impact through their work. Indeed, engaged employees have been found to result in a 22% increase in productivity. When employers and employees come together based on shared values, layered with a working environment which provides flexibility and trust, results in engaged employees with a natural drive to self-manage and succeed.





# How to Embed Cognitive Athleticism into your Talent Strategy

The so-called 'war for talent' is becoming more competitive. We're in what's been dubbed the 'Great Resignation' with 4.5m quits at the end of November 2021. Attracting and retaining top talent is more challenging for employers than ever before. So, let's explore the steps to be taken to create an organisation that turns cognitive capital into market-pleasing value:

## Step 1:

### Brief the Top Team

For many organisations, the notion of a cognitive athlete will sound fanciful and so may well be dismissed by the senior executive team. Thus, they need to understand the link between disruption, innovation, and the cognitive athlete. That is to say, they need to put people at the heart of their business and create the conditions for them to innovatively respond to what disruption throws at the organisation. They should know that the war for talent is becoming more acute and throwing money at these problems is not going to cut it.

If your leadership teams doesn't get this, then no need to move to step 2. In fact, I would encourage you to find an organisation that does unless you have a penchant for disasters.

## Step 2:

### Prioritise Trust

This is where most initiatives fail. The factory model prioritises the contractual small print over trust. Better to exercise a robust command and control model with little room for

discussion than to create the conditions whereby the workers can push back and suggest alternative approaches.

Trust takes time to build and it requires more than inspirational posters located in public areas. Trust means delivering on promises. It embraces credibility ("Do I believe what the leaders say?"), reliability ("Do they deliver, as promised?"), intimacy ("Do they know me as a person?"), and selflessness ("Do they act in ways that are not self-serving?").

Leaders need to create opportunities to demonstrate trust. Of course, the workers need to reciprocate. This can go wrong in old school organisations, where 'trust olive branches' are taken as management weakness.

**So, tread with caution...  
but tread.**



## Step 3:

### Develop your Deeper Purpose

Trust will accelerate if the organisation migrates from a shareholder to a stakeholder approach. Vision and mission statements can go a long way to articulating this shift in focus.

This will be more difficult for some organisations, where their implicit mission statement might be, “imagine a world where every child is overweight, and well on their way to type 2 diabetes...”, or “Imagine a world where soil is replaced by sand and humans have the planet to themselves...”

Creating a compelling story that implies that your organisation is on a noble quest will help you acquire and retain the best people.



## Step 4:

### Create the Coaching Team

A centralised leadership model makes for a very unresponsive organisation. Thus, a more decentralised or even ubiquitous model of leadership is required. So, whether you influence a intern, a supplier or a large team of people, you are technically a leader.

Thus, practically everyone needs to think of being both a cognitive athlete and a cognitive coach. Like track coaches, having a good understanding of human psychology and performance management is key. A finely tuned sense of emotional intelligence is required to gauge when and when not to throttle up performance demands.



## Step 5: Build the Gym

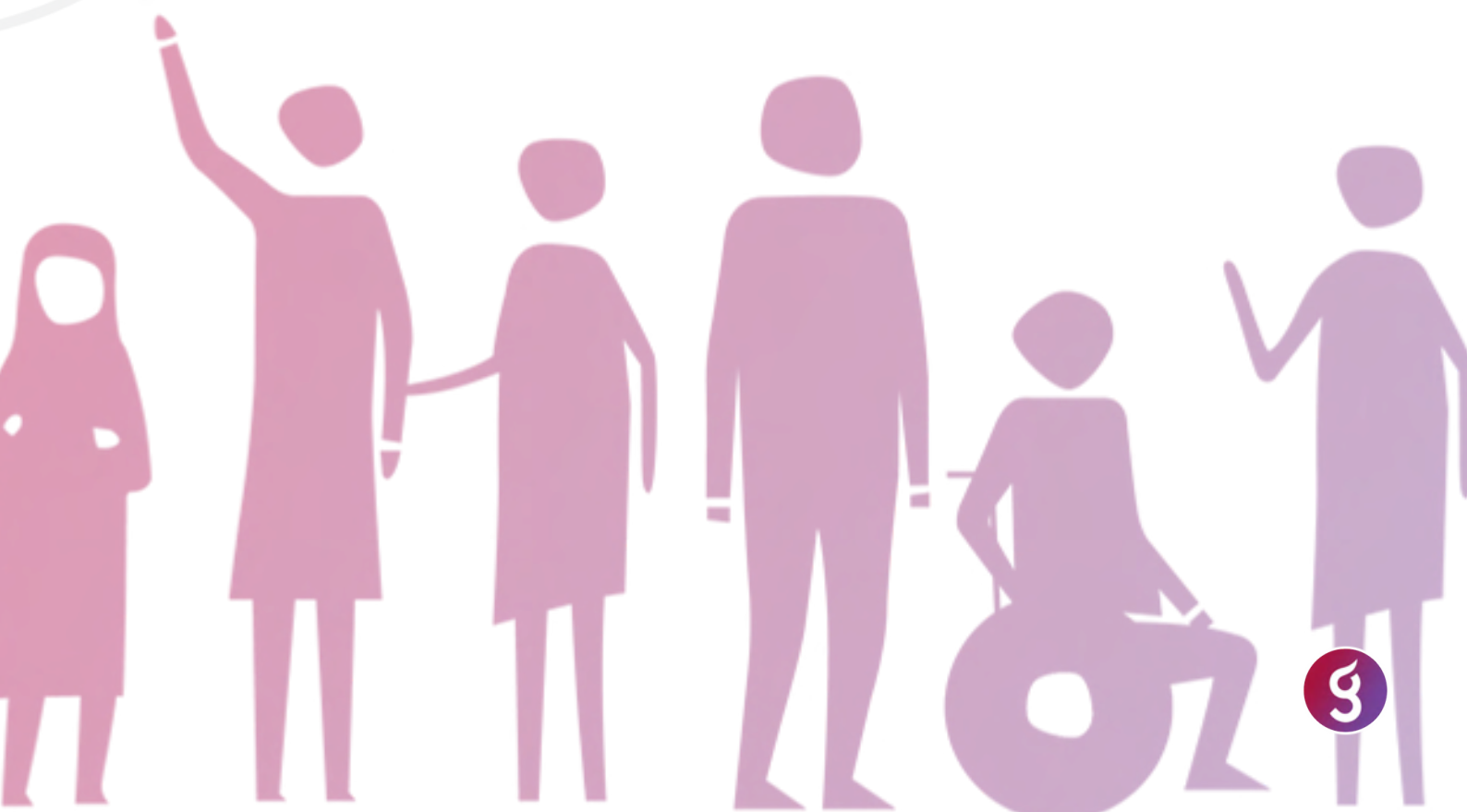
Consider how you create the conditions in your organisation to meet the aforementioned anthropological drivers. Perhaps encourage meetings to take place on the move or set performance goals around the number of steps taken. Design the office with dedicated social spaces. Consider how to architect the environment so that chance encounters are maximised.

The challenge will be in how this cognitive gym model is replicated when people work from home or in public spaces, such as coffee shops. Empower your people by having them come up with innovative ways in which they can build their anthropological needs into their work life.

## Step 6: Acquire the Coaching Tools

So, what is the equivalent of the coach's stopwatch? This is where trust is critical. Top coaches do not take an annual review approach to performance management. Great coaches provide real-time feedback. Consider how technology can be utilised to create what might be called deep talent analytics.

This is potentially a controversial area, particularly if the trust is not in place. As an athlete, I am happy for my coach to comment on my sleeping or movement patterns throughout the day. As a distrusting employee, I might find this too invasive.





## Step 7:

### Focus on EX

The traditional view is that the customer is king and thus if you were down to your last million dollars, you would naturally spend it on the customer. That would have been a wise move in the industrial era. But today, the customer experience (CX) is totally determined by your talent and so employee experience (EX) needs to be the priority.

**Today, the customer experience (CX) is totally determined by your talent and so employee experience (EX) needs to be the priority.**

## Step 8:

### Monitor Metrics Carefully

This is not solely an exercise in making workers happier. Organisations thrive when they create value for which the market is willing to pay. So of course, we must not lose sight of the financials. But again, the financials are dependent on the organisation's ability to innovate, so it will be useful to monitor the number of experiments in progress and failure velocity. The goal will be to push both of these higher and higher each reporting period.

Consider what metrics are important for measuring talent engagement and performance. In some instances, you can form a link between the individual and financial performance, e.g., sales generated. Or you can measure employees against the number of experiments they have initiated, including their failure rate.

Whilst these steps are sequential there is no reason that your organisation cannot address them in parallel, keeping in mind the dependencies, e.g., deep talent analytics will not go down well if the athletes do not trust the coaches.



# Conclusion

The only thing we can be certain of is uncertainty. From increasing costs to staff shortages and cancellations of products and services, disruption is not receding, and the future is still unknowable. According to the [ONS](#), over 40% of businesses have less than three months cash reserve - or no reserves at all - and almost a third said they had seen turnover fall below normal levels for the time of year.

[Research](#) suggests that despite the unprecedented disruption and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic, workers around the world appear more assured of what they want in their lives and careers. It's been a wake-up call for employees around the world. This kind of global activation has caused employees to strive for more in every aspect of their lives. Organisations then have a great opportunity to capitalise on this growing desire of employees to make a meaningful impact on the world and carry out work which connects to them on a deeper level.



No longer creating cogs for a machine, organisations should produce cognitive athletes if they want to attract, develop, and retain the best talent. We must reboot our brains to revitalise our workforce and transform our industries for the better. In an increasingly tech-driven world, we must remember the importance of people. Top talent is now those who are able to do something of value in a way that an algorithm or machine can't recreate.

Our cognitive capabilities are our biggest asset and one which should be managed carefully. That means utilising vulnerability and empathy to build trust. We are no longer cogs in the factory model, but driven individuals, bringing our whole selves to work and forming an active, deep connection network - much like the brain - to transform organisations and have a positive impact on the wider world.



# Bios

## About Ade

Ade McCormack is a former technologist who today is focused on helping organisations and societies thrive in the digital age, with a particular focus on leadership.

He has worked in around 40 countries across many sectors and with many of the world's leading brands. Ade has lectured at MIT Sloan School of Management on digital leadership and currently works with Cambridge University on their executive education programmes.

He has a background in astrophysics and software engineering and has worked for the European Space Agency. He has also written a book for the European Commission on the future of talent, along with five other books on digital matters.

## About Grayce

Grayce partners with some of the world's most ambitious organisations to help deliver change and transformation.

With over a decade's experience developing and deploying high-performing talent, Grayce delivers a low-risk and scalable solution and enables long-term capability build.

Our Accelerated Development Programme has enabled thousands of talented individuals to launch successful careers and, coupled with our proven delivery model, has seen Grayce support over 2000 projects across more than 100 organisations.







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