We use the term, “Social Cyborg,” to describe people who have integrated social networks and information technology into the way they think, learn, and solve problems. It’s helpful to think of these people as a distinct species, one that has evolved unique capabilities to take advantage of networked people and information systems.

Think of the Social Cyborg as a human-computer hybrid that belongs to a socially networked hive. They are permanently wired to information networks, walk around with hundreds of gigabytes of “outboard memory,” have access to hundreds of applications to aid their thinking, and are in constant communication with a global network of other Social Cyborgs. In other words, picture your typical teenager.

What are the implications for talent development of this new species in the workforce? By Joe Campbell and William Finegan
workforce, one that has evolved new skills that are different—and in some ways more advanced—than those of many people in the existing workforce? To gain perspective on the implications, we should take a history lesson from the disappearance of one of our species’ closest cousins: the Neanderthal.

Step Back in Time 30,000 Years...
Imagine you are a Neanderthal, sitting on the floor of a cave, near a fire with your father, Bernie. You are polishing off the last of the woolly mammoth steaks you had stored in the family glacier.

The Neanderthal life is no walk in the park. It’s freezing; there is no long underwear; saber tooth tigers think you’re good snack material; and recently, many scrawny, hairless tribes have invaded your hunting grounds, making it harder to hunt food.

You and your species have survived for millennia because you’ve developed ways to pass knowledge from one generation to the next. This essential survival knowledge and social values have been preserved and passed down in the form of legends and stories. You learn skills directly from your elders and through daily experiences.

In a generation, your entire species disappears forever from the face of the Earth. The learning strategies you had relied on for survival and the tribal wisdom passed from one generation to the next did not prepare you for the disruptions you faced in your environment nor the competition from a species that adapted more quickly. That failure to adapt and evolve led to your extinction.

What Can We Learn from the Cavemen?
Training organizations could end up in the same unfortunate situation as the Neanderthals in a few years. We are already in a challenging environment that has been under increasing pressure to adapt to economic changes with cuts in training and travel budgets and the growth of information technologies. Those pressures will increase significantly as Social Cyborgs grow as a percentage of the corporate population.

To survive, training organizations must evolve our learning strategies or face extinction. In this case, extinction means irrelevance to our corporations and our learners. Understanding the learning needs of Social Cyborgs is the first step toward adapting our development strategies.

Looking Back
Imagine you are an alien who has observed the human race for the last 20 years. You would have noticed that, during this time, a relatively rapid spread of some new technologies has led to some significant changes in behavior.

In the 1990s came the rapid spread of networked desktop computers and the World Wide Web. E-mail became the dominant form of organizational communication. During this time, information stored on the Internet exploded and has continued to grow exponentially. The Internet became a shared global information base.

In the late ’90s, many children in industrialized countries were born into homes with computers, and a generation who never knew a world without the Internet was born—digital natives.

In the second half of the ’00s, smart phones—essentially miniature supercomputers with integrated communications and Internet access—proliferated. People now had accessorized supercomputers with 24x7 access to global networks of people and information.

In 2004, Facebook launched. It grew from 0 to 100 million users in four years. An additional 500 million users joined by January 2011.

As these technologies spread, people with access to them started spending increasing amounts of their time on computers and online—playing games, doing work, communicating with friends and colleagues via e-mail and text, and surfing the Internet. Experience of the world increasingly was mediated through technology. People with access to this technology, in particular those who grew up using it, were adapting their behavior to take advantage of the new technologies and networks.

It’s naïve to think that people without these technologies are the same as people with them. It’s also naïve to assume that people who have grown up using these technologies have not adapted new ways of learning, thinking, and problem solving.

To survive, training organizations must evolve our learning strategies or face extinction. In this case, extinction means irrelevance to our corporations and our learners. Understanding the learning needs of Social Cyborgs is the first step toward adapting our development strategies.
Social Cyborgs have adapted their learning to take advantage of this rich environment. They research problems by leveraging the social networks and information resources available to them in the network. They review and filter information through open knowledge systems such as Wikipedia. They rely on their social networks to determine the value of information. They solve problems by seeking out help from their social contacts. This is distributed learning that leverages technology and people.

**Change Isn’t Just Imminent, It’s Imperative**

How have corporate learning organizations evolved their strategies to support these changes? We would wager for the most part that we haven’t fundamentally evolved our approach to design and development for the last 30 years. We continue to operate under old assumptions about how people learn, where the

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4 Steps to Best Leverage the Social Cyborg in the Workplace

**STEP 1: Engage your staff.** Appoint a taskforce consisting of both seasoned team members and new hires to draft a technology plan that maps the technological goals of your organization. Open and regular communication between the taskforce and the rest of the organization can help build a consensus for initiatives being considered or underway, as well as help increase job satisfaction. Workers are more likely to embrace the tools and technologies put in place if they have a say in the selection and rollout of the tools. By engaging the staff early in their careers, your social strategy will stay fresh, as will the outlook of your employees.

> **QUICK TIP:** Regularly rotate people onto the taskforce to help feed the creativity of the group and allow others to participate.

**STEP 2: Establish a virtual office strategy.** Younger workers—the Millennial generation and those still at school—will embrace the virtual work environment and reject the traditional office. With increases in gas prices and more demands at home, the flexibility of a home or virtual office is a deciding factor for many as the job market improves. The combined forces of culture, people, and technology are converging to allow companies and their people to fundamentally reevaluate the proposition of work and, in turn, challenge the nature of work and the workplace. Being cognizant of that by providing a defined virtual office strategy is key for success.

> **QUICK TIP:** A good instant messenger program is critical. Standardize on tools such as Microsoft Communicator to enable productivity, and be sure to consider video tools such as Skype and networking tools such as Yammer to complement the employee experience.

**STEP 3: Embrace Facebook and Twitter.** Attempts to control employees’ use of such software could damage firms in the long run by limiting the way staff will communicate. Using technology to build closer links with former employees and potential customers also could boost productivity and innovation, and create a more democratic working environment. For many, social media tools such as Twitter are replacing, or at least heavily supplementing, traditional information sources. Twitter can be a resource for your business, allowing you to broadcast company news, interact with clients and customers, enable group communication, and link potential customers to your Website.

> **QUICK TIP:** Tie the use of social media to a business goal, such as solving a problem or enticing collaboration, and educate your employees on the dos and don’ts of social media.

**STEP 4: Support the use of tablets and mobile devices.** The tablet computer is becoming a crucial business and productivity tool for individuals and organizations everywhere. Devices such as the iPad are being embraced by companies of all sizes by finding innovative uses for them in office suites, on factory floors, and in the field. Social users embrace them, and they have found their home in the workplace.

> **QUICK TIP:** Develop security and governance plans for mobile content.
How corporate training organizations adapt to the dawn of the Social Cyborg in the next five years will determine our future. We are relying on old learning strategies that have served us well, but that are increasingly irrelevant to the new generation of learners we support.

predominant training process model remains ADDIE. We continue to rely on design and development strategies that target individual learners who learn independently and isolated from technology. We are not adapting. We still rely on learning management systems that are designed to support individualized formal learning.

How corporate training organizations adapt to the dawn of the Social Cyborg in the next five years will determine our future (see p. 23 and below for sidebars on recruiting and leveraging Social

**3 Keys to Recruiting the Social Cyborg**

1. Offer a creative work environment. Creative and inspiring work environments were once the domain of ad agencies. Now more and more businesses are adopting this innovative spirit to imprint their corporate culture on their offices and to attract the “wireless” individual. Concepts such as “hoteling” of cubes are becoming the norm in more digitally centered organizations.

   > **QUICK TIP:** START SMALL. Create an interactive space in your office that allows for easy wireless connection, comfortable seating, and other inviting features to show potential recruits that you understand the fluid needs of today’s workplace.

2. Have a defined social media policy and presence. Organizations have different levels of users, some who will have greater knowledge of and exposure to social media than others. Things that may be obvious to you may not be so clear to everyone. By defining and sharing your policies on social media, as well as creating your social media presence, be it through a Facebook site or Twitter, you will show recruits you understand the world in which they live and thrive. Establishing guidelines for how your company manages social media will allow you to establish credibility.

   > **QUICK TIP:** START SMALL. Define a short list of dos and don’ts that reflect corporate policy but also show flexibility. Follow these guidelines and establish a basic presence in social media to gain momentum.

3. Make mobile a part of the recruiting. Each day, more and more people turn to mobile devices to access the Internet. It’s a trend that shows no signs of slowing. Mobile technologies will continue to grow in popularity and sophistication, and the more you implement mobile recruiting into your current strategy, the better you’ll be positioned to take advantage of it in the future.

   > **QUICK TIP:** TEXT. Make sure the recruiting technology you use enables you to send and track the performance of short message service (SMS) job campaigns to your contacts. Your recruits will check their texts more than their e-mails, and more frequently.
Like with the Neanderthal, we need to be more nimble and adaptable to the disruptions that also hold the key to our survival. Leveraging social networks, collaboration, and new technologies as the Social Cyborgs do is essential to our continued evolution.

Cyborgs in the workplace. We are, in a sense, the last generation of Neanderthals, living in a world that relies on old learning strategies that have served us well, but that are increasingly irrelevant to the new generation of learners we support.

We must embrace the new mindset as though our survival depends on it. We need to evolve a new set of learning strategies, along with the tool sets, skill sets, and mindset to serve the Social Cyborg.

**New tool sets:** Create learning environments that incorporate social learning technologies, online mentoring systems, and collaborative learning platforms that encourage learners to share content.

**New skill sets:** Create new instructional design models that actively leverage the use of social and information networks by design. Thiagi’s 4-door methodology is an example of this. Develop instructional design strategies and methods that target collaborative development, rather than individual development.

**New mindsets:** Assume that all learners are Social Cyborgs—connected to an extensive network of people and information that will be continuously leveraged as a learning and problem-solving resource. Assume that the primary role of talent development is to catalyze learning, not to design and deliver content.

While the new generation of learners could trump the relevance of corporate learning environments, it’s just as true that it could lead to our triumph. The choice is ours. Like with the Neanderthal, we need to be more nimble and adaptable to the disruptions that also hold the key to our survival. Leveraging social networks, collaboration, and new technologies as the Social Cyborgs do is essential to our continued evolution.

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This article was written exclusively for Training magazine by Joe Campbell and William Finegan.

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