



Electrifying results

By Jay Cross, *Internet Time Group*

Transformation, not training

Eight years ago, when I coined the term, everyone thought of *eLearning* as a less expensive and less cumbersome alternative to training. Proposals described the benefits of eliminating travel expenses, cutting time away from the job, shifting to instructor-free self-study, and closing the IT skills gap. Some people still think of eLearning as something the training department administers. It's time to think bigger, for eLearning should not be confined to typical training roles. This white paper explores how eLearning technology can be re-purposed to support strategic transformation.

Keeping up with change in the business world is increasingly a high-stakes game. As recently as ten years ago, firms competed on the basis of faster, better, cheaper products; companies that once introduced new products every other year began to bring them out several times a year. As surviving firms mastered the time-to-market race, competition shifted to the speed of releasing new *generations* of products.

As the pace of business continues to accelerate, competition is shifting to how rapidly and how well companies can reconfigure their organizations and alliances to enter entirely new lines of business. The coming battlefield of business is time-to-transformation.

CEOs are already on the lookout for ways to continuously reinvent their organizations although most admit they feel ill-prepared to do so. They recognize that people can be their most valuable asset—or their most formidable roadblock. They see organizational transformation as the only way to grow and prosper in the face of:

- Need for rapid responsiveness and agility
- Increased competition and changing market dynamics
- New distribution channels and regulatory barriers
- Economic volatility and integrated global markets
- Impact of new technologies
- Need to reduce cycle time¹

Requirements for transformation

Training feeds the brain; transformation requires winning hearts and minds. All stakeholders must take part in order to “own” the changes being made. Transformation is a shock to the system; absent reinforcement, it runs off the rails. Obviously neither courses nor plain-vanilla eLearning have ever transformed an organization.

¹ IBM Global CEO Survey, 2005



You can assemble an informal learnscape piecemeal: a wiki here, a blog there, supplemented with web feeds and social networks, but transformation is holistic. It's all-encompassing. The process must take place simultaneously throughout the organization.

Transformation requires a backbone. A game plan. A roadmap. A simple process everyone can believe in.

Appreciative Inquiry

The U.S. Navy, the United Nations, a summit of world religious leaders, Blue Cross, BBC, Boeing, Bristol Myers Squibb, British Airways, BP, British Telecom, Cap Gemini, GE Capital, GlaxoSmithKline, John Deere, GTE, and Roadway Express have successfully reinvented themselves using an approach called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI organizational learning projects are being implemented in 57 organizations in 100 countries.

In the Navy's program to delegate leadership to all, Appreciative Inquiry ("AI") brought sailors and admirals to the same table to talk about how to make a better navy. Top corporate, labor, and NGO leaders initiated a vigorous campaign to align business and society at an AI program kicked off by Kofi Anan at the U.N. Numerous companies have turned decline into record profits. AI racks up amazing results wherever it is implemented.

David Cooperrider, a professor of management at Case Western Reserve University, developed Appreciative Inquiry. I was fortunate to attend a one-day seminar with David in New York last week. A group of us went through an accelerated AI exercise, and I had the opportunity to talk with David about potential applications in the U.K.

I'm going to provide you with an overview of Appreciate Inquiry and describe how eLearning techniques might support and accelerate organizational transformation.

Positive change

Traditional psychology is problem-focused. Psychiatrists look for what's wrong with you. They look for trouble, and they find it. This does not help one excel.

The positive psychology movement focuses on helping well people be happy rather than making sick people functional.

AI is positive psychology for organizations. Successful transformation comes from leveraging strengths, not from solving problems. As with the psychiatrists, framing goals in terms of problem-solutions closes the door on seeking opportunities to excel.

David talked with Peter Drucker six months before he passed away. He told David, "The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant."



The core message of AI is to lead from positive emotions and strengths, not negativity and problems. We must learn to ask what's possible rather than what's wrong, and to move from systems thinking to systems living.

AI builds on achievements, opportunities, innovations, tacit wisdom, vital traditions, social capital and business strengths. David contends that organizations move in the direction of what they study. Focus on problems and that's what you'll get.

Before reading David's work for the first time six or seven years ago, I told people I was a problem-solver. Now I'm an opportunity-seeker. It's a more practical stance, like being an optimist rather than a pessimist.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

To **appreciate** something is to value it. Appreciation is a conscious attempt to see the good, the great, the strengths, the things worth valuing. Bond traders and bankers think of appreciation as growth in the value of assets. Synonyms are prizing, esteeming, and honoring.

Inquiry is deliberate exploration and discovery. It's seeking new potentials and possibilities.

David and his colleague Diane Whitney have written²:

Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.

AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the "unconditional positive question" often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.

In AI the arduous task of intervention gives way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. AI seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: *achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul-- and visions of valued and possible futures.*

² David Cooperrider and Diane Whitney, A Positive Revolution in Change, unpublished white paper, 1999.



Taking all of these together as a gestalt, AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this “positive change core”—and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.

The AI process

AI consists of four basic steps:

Discovery	What gives life? (The best of what is)	Appreciating
Dream	What might be? (What is the world calling for?)	Envisioning Results
Design	What should be the ideal?	Co-constructing
Destiny	How to empower, learn & adjust?	Sustaining

The Appreciative Inquiry process begins with choosing an affirmative topic, **discovering** what gives the organization life, **dreaming** what might be — stories, **designing** what might be — the ideal, and **destiny** — keeping it alive.

The process begins with all stakeholders participating in one-on-one interviews to unearth organizational strengths and values. This story-telling invites contributions from everyone. The questions that initiate individual dialog are, of course, positive.

Telling stories begins the change journey. The thrill of discovery becomes the thrill of creating. As people engage in inquiry about the organization’s positive core, hope grows and their community expands.

Unfortunately, face-to-face interaction does not scale. In the past, David has brought hundreds of people together under one roof, but this is not practical if you want to involve tens of thousands of employees spread around the globe.

Enter eLearning

Distance learning technology enables far-flung organizations to conduct the Discovery phase of AI remotely. “Cascading” invitations to participate from the president on down encourage full participation. Steaming video presentations by David, organizational leadership, and employee representatives introduce the process. A team is trained in how to conduct AI interviews.

Everyone in the organization is interviewed. Web cams capture the interviews and stories. People conduct interviews when convenient and in their own language. Regional groups view the recordings, cherry-picking highlights and conveying them to other parts of the organization. Excerpts are sent forward. Stakeholders vote for the best qualities for the organization to build upon.





Interviews can take place in parallel, compressing the process into a few days. This is comparable to IBM's Idea Jams, where a hundred thousand people participate in brainstorming and sharing sessions in three or four days. It is immediate, fresh, and more hard-hitting than physical interviews which would require months.

After the first round of interviews, people swap partners as if this were a square dance and explore "What is the world asking us to do?" Participants build on what they discover and what gives them joy. Groups intermingle.

People use the positive stories from the interviews as springboards to their dreams. They ask themselves, "If these are our dreams, how do we shape our organization to fulfill them?" While still half in dreamland, it is okay to explore stretch goals and off-the-wall proposals. "What would our organization look like if it were designed in every way possible to maximize the qualities of the positive core and enable the accelerated realization of our dreams?"

Stories are shared; patterns emerge. At this point, many organizations create a report of successes constructed from narrative stories, not sterile one-liners. Once the dream is articulated, the group turns to design. Many organizations write descriptions of their future state in a newspaper format. David challenges participants to answer, "What would our organization look like if it were designed in every way possible to maximize the qualities of the positive core and enable the accelerated realization of our dreams?"

Destiny means maintaining the momentum for change. David has found that sustainability increases the more traditional implementation strategies, action plans, and monitoring are abandoned. Positive feelings have more impact than engineered approaches. David recommends creating a positive change network to keep the flame burning. I think of this as a large community of practice: a group of self-governing professionals setting the standards, keeping the profession vibrant, and socializing new members into the system.

Making the ideal real

David challenges people to answer the question, "What would our organization look like if it were designed in every way possible to maximize the qualities of the positive core and enable the accelerated realization of our dreams?"

My ideal organization would live and breathe the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy every day, not solely during a campaign for self-renewal. The spirit of AI would pervade every nook and cranny of the organization. AI would make our values and beliefs transparent: available for sharing with customers and partners. Interviews would generate inspirational stories continuously.

Everyone we touch could be involved in helping us become what we should be. Many previously formal procedures could be eliminated when everyone on board understands "the big picture." Our AI would play a leading role in recruiting talent, orienting new hires, maintaining top-notch customer service, and positioning the firm in its markets.





The greatest threat to the health of most organizations is hardening of the corporate arteries. We continue to do what we did in the past, even as we pass into a significantly different future. First we make our habits; then they make us. Today's strengths evolve into tomorrow weakness.

In the Discovery stage, imagine perpetual AI, where stories and ideas for improvement are always percolating up through the organization. Stakeholders would continue to assess the merit and appropriateness of stories, permitting the cream to rise to the top. Perhaps an electronic newsletter would share new thoughts and changes to the corporate ecosystem.

In a traditional AI set-up, everyone participates in the Discovery stage, but participation in the Dream, Design, and Destiny stages is limited. Virtual meetings would enable universal participation and continuous availability, and AI would become the foundation of organizational culture rather than a one-time event.

In the Dream stage, people in my organization would no longer need to rally physically to envision results, assess what the world is asking for, and agree on what we want to become. Virtual meetings would be ongoing, perhaps spotlighting one region or new opportunity at a time. When hundreds of people come together physically for a few days, many ideas are generated but many are also lost. Complementing virtual meetings with a wiki can create a complete record of events and keep discussion open.

When it comes to figuring out what we're going to do, the Design stage, we can involve subject matter experts to insure that our recommendations are safe, sound, and in alignment with the future direction of the industry or field.

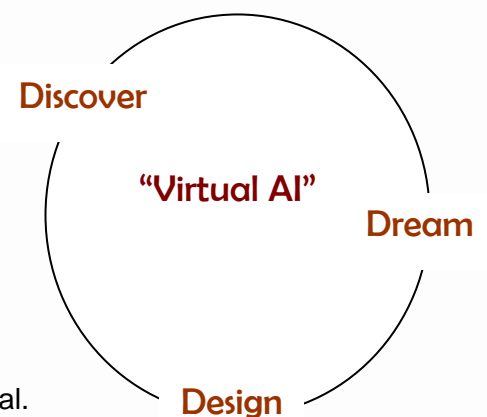
I imagine the Destiny stage is the most likely spot for AI to break down. No matter how well-intentioned, even the most enthusiastic face-to-face group loses momentum when they depart. David recommends formation of a network to keep AI alive, but this grafts an entirely new process onto the group sessions. When AI is always supported electronically, the Destiny stage may no longer be necessary. When a process is on-going, reinforcement is embedded, not something that comes afterward.

History repeats itself

When eLearning came on the scene in the late nineties, it was commonplace to ask, "But how do I know it works as well as classroom training?" Now we know the power of eLearning when it's applied in the right setting and on an appropriate topic.

Perhaps the time has come in the life of AI to assess whether the live version is as effective as the electronic form. AI may prove most effective as a blend of virtual and real.

I suspect we will discover many more organizational processes that benefit from eLearning support. It's not just learning any more.





About the author

Jay Cross has challenged the conventional wisdom about how adults learn since designing the first business degree program offered by the University of Phoenix thirty years ago. "I am dedicated to making people more effective in their work and happy in their lives," says Jay. "My calling is to change the world by helping people learn to learn."

Jay coined the term eLearning. He co-authored *Implementing eLearning*, founded Internet Time Group, served as CEO of eLearning Forum for its first five years, and writes a column on effectiveness for CLO magazine.

He is the author of *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways that Inspire Innovation and Performance* (Pfeiffer, November 2006). An internationally acclaimed strategist, speaker, and designer of corporate learning and performance systems, Jay is a graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Business School.

Jay and his wife Uta live with two miniature longhaired dachshunds in the hills of Berkeley, California.

