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When social media grows up... it will change everything

*article by
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Article at a glance

Twitter recently hosted its billionth Tweet and Facebook had over 500 million users by the end of 2009, continuing its trend of doubling every nine months or so. It is difficult to continue to argue that social media is nothing more than a fad, and an increasing number of companies are starting to make use of these technologies.

But most of these companies are merely using social networks as a means to communicate (mainly with customers, but sometimes with staff as well) or to market their products and services. These are simple - and obvious - applications, and soon you'll just be another voice in cacophony of online noise. Unfortunately, most "social media experts" focus only on these aspects of online social networking, and are overhyping the benefits and underemphasising the cultural shifts required for companies to truly benefit. They are missing a really important trend with huge implications for every organisation in every industry and sector.

The reason that social media has taken off so quickly is that it is more than a fad. It is, in fact, merely the technological expression of a values shift that has been taking place for a number of years. It will therefore be a shaping force in the world over the next decade. It might not be the answer to all your problems as many social media pundits are predicting. But it will definitely change everything, and more and more companies are starting to see the benefits it offers. A revolution awaits us.

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When social media grows up... it will change everything

By Dr Graeme Codrington

You can hardly turn on a TV news channel or read a business magazine these days without being overwhelmed by requests to “follow my tweets”, “check out our blog” or “send us your videos”. Social media has gone mainstream. But most business users and organisations are treating it like a gimmick, and only gaining a fraction of the value they could. If they understood the true nature of what is happening, they’d know that social media is merely an expression of a deeper trend that has the potential to change everything. And they’d realise that the first companies to grasp this will have the opportunity to gain phenomenal competitive advantage in their industry. In fact, some companies have already started to do so.

Social Media 101

If you’ve missed this trend and are not sure what I’m talking about, here’s a quick primer: social media are the tools you can use to do social networking on the Internet. This involves connecting with other people, and sharing information with them digitally (yes, it’s just networking and connecting with others online). The most used tools are:



- *Facebook* - where people become your “friend” and can then see your status, photos, musings and anything else you want to upload about yourself; you can also create a farm, play Scrabble or take on the world in a Mafia vendetta if you really must.
- *Twitter* - a “microblog” that allows you to share anything you want to with your “followers”, as long as you use 140 characters or less.
- *LinkedIn* - a more business oriented networking site where you can link to other people and do pretty much the same thing as Facebook allows you to do, except there are no farms or Mafia wars.
- *YouTube* - where anyone can upload any video about anything, and share it with the world.

Although some large corporates are still a bit slow on the uptake, the use of social media for personal connections and business purposes is now well established. The Oxford international dictionary’s “word of the year” for 2009 was even “unfriend”. But this is not another in a pile of articles on how to use social media effectively. If you need

Many companies using social media are doing little more than the basics of communication and marketing. The potential is so much bigger than this - as social media reflects a significant shift in values and how we will live.

more information, or want to know “How To Get The Most Out Of Social Networking”, just Google “social networking expert” and choose one of the 45 million or so websites that are listed (I kid you not). Most of them will oversell you the benefits and present social media as a panacea to solve all your problems. Basic business sense seems to often go out of the window. Basic business thinking needs to be applied to successfully implement a social media policy and to use social media to enhance your business or organisational goals.

But my concern, beyond the misuse or non-use of social media, is that in all the hype, companies are not seeing the significant shifts taking place. They’re not looking beyond the obvious and immediate. And they’re liable to miss something much, much bigger than they can imagine.

Beyond the Basics

Most companies that are starting to embrace social media are using it simply for marketing purposes, or as a means to communicate internally with staff. No doubt, those are useful applications - but they’re obvious, and pretty soon everyone will be using them. A few minutes with a carefully selected team, including a well-seasoned marketing pro, a social media expert and an intelligent 22-year old should get you up to speed and ready to go.

The real revolution will come when companies truly grasp that social media is actually an expression of a profound change in the way we will live and work in the near future. We now have the potential to connect with anyone anywhere - but do so without obligation. We have the potential to democratise decision-making and collaborate to innovate with no boundaries to get in our way. We expect to be able to tap into a collective wisdom to help us make even the smallest decision. And we can now make instant, borderless connections - but without commitments.

Your organisation would do well to consider how the mindset shifts that embrace and drive social media forward might change your industry forever. They’re certainly changing how people work, how they make decisions, how they develop trust and relationships, how they see the world, and how they communicate. More importantly, you need to consider how your organisation can engage with these mindset shifts, so that you can gain a competitive advantage in the next decade.

Here, then, are some of those mindset shifts and examples of companies who are beginning to harness them.

The minds of many, working for you

One of the most obvious ways in which social media will change our lives is the ability it has to allow us to share information. Webpages and blogs were the starting point for this, as people could easily publish their thoughts without being filtered or edited. Social media takes this a step further by allowing easy distribution and aggregation of these thoughts, and much more immediate interactions between authors and users of the information.

patientslikeme®

One of the most powerful examples of this social media trend is **Patients Like Me** (www.patientslikeme.com). Jamie Heywood founded it because his younger brother was dying of ALS (an aggressive, incurable, degenerative motor neuron disease). The website allows people with a variety of incurable diseases to share and track data on their illnesses, including all their therapies, activities, what pills they're taking, their symptoms, aches and pains - in fact, almost everything they can think of. The combined data is used to create comprehensive maps of the progress and process of these diseases, and has enormous power to comfort, explain and predict. You can track your own progress against the aggregate of others who have the disease, and see the efficacy of various interventions and the life prognosis for someone in your situation.

The key to their success was to tap into a group of people who have a reason for seeking a shared solution, and creating a platform for them to contribute their information - without filtering.

The data on experimental drugs from Patients Like Me is proving equally as effective - and much faster by many years - than approvals or denials of licenses by the FDA. To see a short video on this amazing website, which has over 50,000 people already signed up, go to <http://tr.im/patientslikeme>

The key to their success was to tap into a group of people who have a reason for seeking a shared solution, and creating a platform for them to contribute their information - without filtering. The better the software that then aggregates this data and makes it visible, the better the wisdom that will flow out of it.

The concept behind Patients Like Me has the potential to revolutionise health care around the world. With the current debates about government vs private-run health care raging in the USA, it should be noted that (conceptually, at least) the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK has the best potential globally to implement something like this. They are the biggest employer in the world, with the most resources of any healthcare company on the planet. Imagine if they understood the power available in applying social media concepts to their customer base?



Putting the minds of many to work for you enables collaboration that can lead to innovation. No longer does innovation have to be confined to your current employees, your current locations and your current resources. **InnoCentive** (www.innocentive.com), for example, allows you to post a problem to a social media platform, requesting high-



level inputs and solutions. Of course, you need to pay for these, but that provides the incentive for the world's clever people to sign up to help you find your answers. InnoCentive was set up in 2001 as a marketplace where the world's brightest minds could tackle the planet's most difficult questions. **NASA** has its own channel on the site offering, for example, offering \$30,000 for a way to forecast solar activity and \$15,000 for a way to keep food fresh in space. Similarly, the **Rockefeller Foundation** is offering \$20,000 for the design of a low-cost tank to collect rainwater. Anyone can offer solutions, and collaborate with anyone else in finding answers. That's the power of social media - to collate distributed innovation capability.

There is no industry that need be excluded from tapping into the power of social media to reinvigorate their innovation efforts. The key is to tap into the motivations of people who might want to innovate for you. These can be purely financial motivations, but there are very often other incentives and motivators that are even more powerful. It does require you to think differently about your stakeholders and potential community.

Enable people to become invested



*where books are born

An industry which sorely needs to be dragged into the 21st century, and could benefit from social media mindset shifts, is publishing. **TenPages** (www.tenpages.com) is a Dutch company (unfortunately, the website is only in Dutch at the moment) providing opportunities for potential authors and readers to collaborate to select which books will be successful and should be published. Authors sign up for free and post the first 10 pages or more of their book. Others come onto the site and read these pages, and can buy shares in the book - up to 200 shares in any book for € 5 each. Widgets are provided to help them promote their favourites among their own social networks.

Books that don't sell at least 2,000 shares in four months are removed from the site and investors are refunded 80% of their investment. Books that do sell at least 2,000 shares go into production at one of TenPages' partner publishers (currently Pearson, The Workers Press and The House of Books). The author has 8 months to work with a professional editor to get the book written and ready for publication. Authors are paid € 1,000 from the initial funds raised, while the remainder is held over for publishing and promoting the final book. After publication, authors earn standard royalties of 10%, publishers earn 30% and the shareholders earn 10% for up to four years, divided according to the number of shares they bought (their names also appear in the back of the published books they helped discover).

Social media reminds us that when people collaborate, the outcome is often more than the sum of each of their individual contributions (this is known as Metcalfe's Law when applied specifically in the context of

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a growing network). When people feel invested in the process, they contribute and engage even more.

Companies like **Amazon** have been pioneering this “minds of many” concept almost since they began. When you sign into their website, you see recommendations based on your past purchases. Linked to every product is an item which gently prods you: “Other people who have bought this item have also bought...”. It’s very compelling. Amazon understand that the best form of promotion is not their own adverts, but the recommendations of third parties. They have just been clever enough to integrate this into their own shopfront. They are not as good as they could be in extending this into social media networks and discussions, but at least they’re heading in the right direction.

There is almost no industry in which “minds of many” could not be applied. The trick is to work out where your potential “mavens” might be, and what they’re interested in. Giving these people a space to voice their opinions, express their interest, rate your products and services, and benefit from any outcomes, will enable you to leverage social media for business growth.

Everything is local

The Internet has allowed us to remove geography as a factor in our work and lives. We talk of social media allowing relationship without investment. What we mean by this is that we are able to find people with whom we would like to have a relationship without going through the long, drawn out (and often painful) processes required in a world constrained by geography. We are no longer limited by the accident of our physical location. We can seek out people who share very specific traits and interests, and form groups of people spanning many countries and time zones. We can find people who have specific skills or qualities for very specific purposes and we can interact with them directly and immediately. And it is very easy to do. Social media allows us to connect with these people and engage in the early stages of relationship building, without huge investments of time, resource or emotion.

A great example of “relationship without investment” is **online dating** - or more accurately: online match making software. By providing a lot of detail about myself, I allow the system to match me with others who would be compatible with me. Based on their growing database of successful (and unsuccessful) matches, these systems are getting increasingly better at making matches between people.

Statistics about online dating are difficult to find. Most of the available stats come from online dating websites, which make bold claims for their industry (as they would). Some suggest that as many as a third of marriages in the USA last year started with an online

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match. Whatever the current reality, there is no doubt that this is becoming increasingly popular and increasingly successful. The stigma of online match making is rapidly fading, as people realise the potential.

The key to “relationship without investment” is not that you can actually have a relationship without any investment. Rather it is that you can find the people with whom you want to have a relationship with minimal wasted effort. And that must be a good thing for everyone - personally and professionally.



In the business world, this removal of geography is true for online shopping (it doesn't matter where you are, where the shop is, or where the warehouse is, as long as you're happy to pay the shipping costs). It also means that you compete with everyone, everywhere - and that they compete with you, in your market. This changes who you are able to collaborate with and where you can look for resources.



One example is the funding agency, **Kiva** (www.kiva.org), who use this same concept to match donors with funding recipients. They did not want to be an aid organization, handing out money to poor people around the world. Instead, they wanted to find a way to provide micro-financing to entrepreneurs, who would use donated money to fund a small business, ultimately paying the investment back so it could be used to assist someone else. Kiva also wanted to allow small donors to be linked directly to the people they invested in. Using a social media platform, they have been able to do just that. As of November 2009, Kiva has facilitated over \$100 million in loans around the world.

Crowdsourcing becomes Cloudsourcing

The easiest business example of this trend towards location-less and low-investment relationships is **eLance** (www.elance.com). This is a website where people can make their skills available and employers can contract out work that can easily be done virtually. This includes expertise such as programmers, designers, coders, writers, translators, marketers, researchers and administrative support. The key to the success of these systems is the many-to-many matching of suppliers and buyers, and good software to help them search, find and make appropriate matches. You also need the management software to help them maintain those relationships and deal easily with any transactions that may arise (e.g. payments for services rendered, or rating of services supplied).



I was recently introduced to a top insurance salesman in the city of London. The secret to his phenomenal success (outperforming other members of his sales team by at least double), was that he had taken the initiative to employ an administrative assistant on eLance.com.



Unilever



His employer company knew nothing of this arrangement, did not pay for his assistant or have a contract with her. It was a purely private arrangement, but one that was well worth it for him, given the commissions and bonuses he was able to earn given his outputs to his employer.

When *Unilever* wanted ideas for a new TV advertising campaign to sell its Peperami snack food, they decided to try and make use of the power of social media. They dropped their ad agency of 15 years and turned instead to *IdeaBounty.com*, an online marketplace filled with creative people trading in creative ideas. Companies or individuals post topics and requests to which creative suppliers respond with ideas and pitches. After a set time period, the client selects the best idea(s) and pays the winner(s). Unilever's challenge generated over 1,000 replies and in November 2009, they paid out \$15,000 for the two ideas they liked best. The new Peperami adverts are due to appear on British TV in 2010.

These are all examples of the new concept of the "cloud". Cloud computing is a new concept whereby all your software and data is stored in an offsite system and not in your local machine. The benefits are that you can access your data from any device, anywhere. True cloud computing will also make sure that it does not matter which platform you use, your data will always be accessible. This concept can now be applied to the sourcing of certain skills and services. We could call it "cloudsourcing", where a virtual workforce will undertake any task in the world of cyberspace for the best possible price.

A "Smarter Planet" with smarter objects



As with many other technology driven companies, **IBM** is currently focussed on trying to work out how we can use technology to solve real-world problems. IBM call this their quest for a "smarter planet". As they see it, this involves three steps: instrumentation (putting sensors on everything and measuring any data they can), interconnection (capturing, distributing and processing this data), and intelligence (using the data to make decisions and inform actions). This is an expansion of the concept of "augmented reality" - that we can actually make visible the data associated with the real world that we can see around us.

At a recent IBM partner conference, I heard a presentation from Andy Standford-Clark, an IBM Master Innovator. In explaining some of the innovations that come out of the "smarter planet" labs, he gave a wonderful example of how social media is having an impact on the types of innovations he is pursuing. In particular, he is interested in "tweetjects", or objects that tweet. If sensors can capture any information, then programs can be built to automatically share that

data via social media platforms, and this allows it to be broadcast to anyone interested in watching the data.

Andy lives on the Isle of Wight, and commutes nearly every other day to IBM's HQ in Hursley on the UK mainland. He was constantly frustrated by the lack of information on the ferries that transport him back and forth. But, being a tech innovator, he put his training and passion to work. He found out that every ferry had a device that broadcast its exact location. A simple piece of equipment allows you to pick up these broadcasts, and track the position of any boat anywhere. The **Redfunnel Ferries** (www.redfunnel.co.uk) he used had these devices, and each one had its own unique signature. It was a simple task to write some software that determined in which direction the ferries were travelling, and to convert this into tweets about when ferries were arriving or leaving various ports.

Initially, Redfunnel Ferries simply pointed their website to his Twitter feed, until (on 1 April 2009), he started messing with the feed, announcing that ferries were arriving at Milton Keynes, for example (that's a landlocked British city, many miles from the coast). They realised that they needed to take over the feed system that he had created and integrate it with their own computer systems, thus owning the information that their clients now found so valuable. For more information on the "twittering ferries" see <http://stanford-clark.com/ferries.html>



Every company needs to ask what could be measured and shared in their company or industry. What would your customers, clients, staff, business partners or anyone else really find valuable?

Every company needs to ask what could be measured and shared in their company or industry. What would your customers, clients, staff, business partners or anyone else really find valuable? If the process of providing this information can be automated and shared (whether via social media or a more closed system), this adds tremendous value. The reason for making the information public (rather than trying to protect it) is for the reasons already discussed - to collaborate in order to innovation, to democratise decision making, and get the minds of many working for you.



There is another trend here that will become more evident over the next decade. The early years of the Internet have changed the monetisation models for most industries. Most young people expect everything online to be free, and all information to be equally (and freely) accessible. However, this will change. **Apple's App store and iTunes** have proved that people will pay, when payment is made simple, in small units, and when the value one is paying for is clearly evident. Companies will need to start creating distinctions between freely available user generated content and their own company sanctioned information. They may or may not be able to charge for this information, but they will definitely need to budget to measure, analyse and distribute that information.

Making meetings meaningful

Increasingly, the idea of using social media to generate additional layers of data and meaning are being used at conferences and meetings. During an actual event, a separate data projector can show a Twitter feed of the hashtag linked to the event. Participants can be encouraged to interact in real-time with speakers and content at the event. I have been involved in such sessions, and it does require additional skills from a speaker to engage with these live streams of data - but, when done properly, adds a second layer of engagement and meaning. Younger people use IM (instant messaging) already in meetings to interact with each other silently while the meeting itself continues.

In addition to live interactions at an event or meeting, social media can be used both before and after an event to generate interest and excitement, engage with participants and even create shared content. To be honest, this is happening informally at many events anyway, so you might as well make the most of it.

Reclaiming the data stream

At present, there is a lot of user generated content freely available on the Internet. There may be a lot of information related to your company that is completely outside of your control or your systems. Working in an *Academy for Chief Executives* group last year, I met the owner of the company that supplies *photographers* to most of the world's cruise ships. They have a rigorous interview process, ensuring that successful candidates are both excellent photographers and capable of working in the stressful conditions aboard a cruise liner. They discovered that a Facebook page had been set up by current and past staff, giving details of how to get through the recruitment process, moaning about the systems - yet giving helpful tips on how to manage them, and providing moral support to each other. The message was "this is a dumb process and there are management issues here", but also "it's a great opportunity and it's worth sticking it out".

Instead of banning the page, or disciplining the participants, the company embraced the idea. It helps them prescreen candidates, and they've used the feedback to improve their systems and processes. Now they use the portal to enhance staff communication and talent acquisition all at the same time.

In March 2006, Melody, a teenager better known by her YouTube name, "Bowiechick", was feeling pretty depressed - she had just broken up with her boyfriend. So, she decided to record a vlog (a video blog entry). In order to cheer herself up, she experimented with some cool software that came with her webcam. By the end of the 75 second video, she had had a bit of fun and was feeling better.





She posted the result at YouTube (see it at <http://tr.im/bowiechick> - this clip has now been viewed over 2 million times!).

People watching her video were intrigued by the special effects her software allowed, and more and more asked her about it. So she created a little video to explain how her **Logitech** webcam and software worked. This 2 minute video has been viewed over 3 million times. Logitech's sales of webcams went crazy. Of course, this took the sales team by surprise as it wasn't linked to any of their promotional activities.

This is the new world of marketing and sales promotions - where anyone, anywhere can say anything about your products and services. It could help or harm you. And you need to keep an eye on the world of social media so that you know what's happening. If something good comes along, you need to be ready to support it and feed it.

Focus more on growing fans and less on retaining customers

It's so obvious that it's hardly worth saying: loyalty is dead these days. It may be a truism, but many companies still spend lots of money and effort trying to buy loyalty - with little lasting success. Social media provides alternative possibilities. Instead of trying to create a loyal customer base, you need to create a fan base. In fact, the more fanatical you can make your "fans" the better.



At its simplest level, you need to just provide information that will help customers make buying decisions. Around the corner from where I live there is a **Krispy Kreme** doughnut shop. They have a massive neon light in the shop window which they only switch on when they have new, fresh doughnuts coming out of the ovens. That light attracts my children like a porch light attracts insects. It's simple, but remarkably effective as a sales tool. So, why not link that to a Twitter feed. You could even get clever and make the ovens Tweet automatically. The genius here is that, using push technology, as many people as want to would be informed immediately.

But, as I have been saying, this level of customer connection is only the beginning. What about engaging with that doughnut-crazed customer base and asking them to help you improve your menu or business strategy? This can be done at a very local level (each Krispy Kreme shop acting on their own with local clients) and at an international level (every Krispy Kreme follower aggregated into a doughnut uber-conversation that can help shape their future strategy).

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One of the keys to leveraging a new social media mindset is to help your "fan base" become a self-sustaining "tribe". In other words, you need to go beyond listening *to* them and talking *with* them, and create an environment where they can engage *each other*. There are

a few companies that have found ways to create these fanatical fan bases. **Apple** and **Zappos** are probably the best of these examples right now (if you know of others, I'd love to hear from you about them).



Apple knows how to fire up that fan base in anticipation of new product releases, but could probably do a lot more to use social networking tools to tap the global Apple-nistas. They could do this to help improve their products, develop new features and find new markets. It is remarkable that 91% of Apple iPhone users would recommend the phone to others (*Jan 2010 AdMob Mobile Metrics report*). No other phone or telecoms device or operating system even comes close to this. And I am sure you all know at least one irritatingly smug Apple user. This is a fan base of note.



Zappos has lively Facebook and Twitter accounts. Zappos has its own Twitter account, but it also aggregates its employees' Twitter accounts on twitter.zappos.com. They allow you to meet Zappos' employees and build a connection with them. Their CEO, Tony Hsieh, has over a million followers. But one of the reasons they have been able to do this is that they have not just aimed to try and sell their product (it happens to be shoes) - their stated goal is to create a community of people who love shoes. There's an important distinction there, and Zappos seems to have got it just right.



It's not just the new upstarts that do this, though. **Coca-Cola** has a very large Facebook page with one of the highest number of fans to date. They tap into the "cult" of Coke, providing a wide variety of photos, products from all over the world, archive materials and Coke memorabilia. Cleverly, they allow most of the content to be driven by the fans - this is one of the keys to really unlocking social media value: you have to give control away to the "fans". Interestingly, the fan page was originally created by two fans (not Coca Cola employees) and rather than compete with a page that had already gained great popularity, Coke asked the creators to represent them.



Many other companies are starting to do the same. One of the best is **Vitamin Water 10** which is constantly engaging with its customers, and allows them to upload their own photos and videos of them drinking Vitamin Water. They also show previews of upcoming adverts on their website, exclusively for the "tribe" they're trying to develop.

Using **YouTube** and viral marketing is such a simple way to get your brand noticed, yet many marketing departments are still stuck in old mindsets about control and protection of their property. I do a lot of presentations, and am constantly looking for multimedia to support my humorous and fast paced style. I often write to companies asking for permission to show their adverts in my presentations. If the companies even bother to reply, they often deny my request. This makes no sense to me whatsoever - I am offering to provide a free channel of communication, with a targeted message that I will

reinforce, to an attentive audience. Surely they should even be *paying* me to show their adverts. I certainly shouldn't have to beg to show it. This demonstrates over and over again the lack of understanding of this new world of social media.

A whole new way to develop trust - a new way to succeed

Social networking technologies are simply that: technologies. Technically that means that they are "enablers" (there isn't a universally accepted definition of "technology" by the way, but most agree that it defines something that enables or provides a solution to a problem). What I mean by this is that they can be used to create community and to destroy community or relationships. The choice is ours.

If a boss chooses to use text messages to inform staff they've been fired, can you blame the technology, or is it just a horrid boss? If someone twitters constantly, telling the world what they're having for breakfast and where they are all the time, is that a problem with the technology, or just an egotist who finally found a stage? Relationship without investment has a negative aspect to it. But it also has significant positive potential, and I believe it is this that will dominate our usage and acceptance of social media in the next decade.

No industry, no company, no function or department will be left untouched or unchanged by these new trends.

The examples given above are only the starting points for how social media will invade and pervade our lives, shaping everything from how we communicate to how we relate, from how we learn to who we trust, and how we make decisions. No industry, no company, no function or department will be left untouched or unchanged by these new trends. But to get the most out of them, we need to grow up and get beyond the hype. The companies that do so will gain a formidable competitive advantage in the decade that lies ahead. The reason I am so confident about this is that these are not just technology trends - this is not just a fad, fuelled by the geeks and propeller heads of the world. Significant social changes and shifts in our expectations and values are now finding expression in technologies that are enabling us to engage with each other and with the world in very different ways. These are long-term trends that will shape the world for decades to come. Now is the time to act on these shifts and take your organisation into the future.

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*Graeme and the TomorrowToday team have developed a presentation and workshop that covers the issues raised in this article, and shows organisations how to apply these mindsets to their company and industry specifically. It's called "**Beyond the Hype**". More details can be found at <http://tr.im/beyondthehype>*



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Our core skill is our ability to track trends and map the world of tomorrow, especially trends related to people - their needs, desires and expectations, and how they will shape the new world of work. Our core business is to help our clients gain tomorrow's competitive advantage today, by understanding the drivers of people's behaviour and attitudes and showing them how to influence others.

Please contact us to request an appointment with us - we'd love to meet with you and tell you more about who we are and what we do.

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