



## INTERVIEW WITH HR.COM NOVEMBER 2000

*Gareth Morgan on E-Learning*  
David Creelman

Gareth Morgan achieved fame with his book *Images of Organization*. Now at York University's Schulich School of Business, Morgan has spent many years exploring ways to enhance managerial learning. David Creelman spoke to Dr. Morgan.

**DC: We've heard that you are doing some interesting work in e-Learning.**

GM: Yes, my passion these days is in my new company NewMindsets.com. We're creating a second-generation approach to e-Learning. We are applying the principals of self-organization to learning materials so that people can design their own learning systems.

**DC: What was the first generation of e-Learning and why do we need a second generation?**

GM: The first generation of e-Learning used computers as a new medium to deliver an old product. In essence, the first generation just put books and traditional courses on line.

**DC: Yes, we've seen lots of that.**

GM: We think this business is going to give learners access to resource materials where they're not trapped in one particular learning path created by an instructor. We think it's important that people can find their own paths to meet their learning needs in a just-on-time basis.

**DC: It's interesting that you've chosen to devote your attention to e-Learning because you're not really coming from a traditional training background.**

GM: My traditional business and academic focus has been on managing change, new forms of organization, and creative management. I've had a long interest in the fields of chaos, complexity, self-organization, and how learning can emerge in many different ways.



It struck me that the Internet offered a perfect way to re-invent our approach to developmental learning. So, I took myself out of the workshop, seminar, and keynote speech business and devoted myself full time to e-Learning.

**DC: Let me take a specific example. How would you create a second-generation e-Learning approach to diversity training?**

**GM:** In many traditional training programs you go on a course and sit around for 2 or 3 days waiting for a few jewels of insight. In a 3-day course you might only have about two hours of active learning where the material is relevant to what you want to do.

We are seeking to use technology so that you can get to those jewels of insight much more rapidly and in a focused way. We strive to make the learning resources available so that each learner can get what they individually need.

**DC: I'm curious about all this talk about chaos and complexity. I learned about it in chemistry, English professor Katherine Hayles talked about it, and now you, a management professor, are talking about it. How does it relate to learning?**

**GM:** Let's start by talking about the traditional model of training. It's all about setting goals for the training and working backwards to find the best structure to deliver that training experience. Now that works extremely well when you've got technical skills training—learning to operate a drill or learning safety procedures. However, when you move into training for the mindsets needed for the new knowledge economy, it's not possible to work backwards. You can't work backwards because you don't have clearly defined goals and objectives.

What the chaos and complexity perspective suggests is that if you can create a reservoir of opportunities for a person and then help them make connections with the resources relevant to them, they can actually find and create for themselves very good learning experiences.

The whole principal of chaos and complexity is that the future emerges in an unpredictable way. Instead of trying to rationally plan and tie down the future, the key is to equip people to deal with change as it unfolds. We need to equip managers with the mindsets that are necessary to deal with the new realities.



**DC: Let's take a day in the life of manager with access to second-generation e-Learning. At what point would they use this tool?**

GM: The manager would use the learning resource when they face a problem. For example, if there were a retention problem, they would go into the learning system and find resources that help them think creatively about that problem and the learning process, and which will also challenge them to apply the ideas to their own job.

**DC: What is actually in the learning resource?**

GM: Well you have the basic content area, articles for example. However, there are usually no answers to a question like, How do we improve retention here? The answers are not sitting on the Internet waiting for you and they're probably not in any training program.

What that problem requires is that you think creatively about the issue. You need to have different ways of approaching it, different frames that you can use to think about it. You need to think out of the box about what you could actually do with your particular people in your particular organization.

The e-Learning system should support this kind of thinking.

**DC: Maybe you can tell us more specifically how you support this kind of creative thinking?**

GM: Here at the Schulich Business School the whole theme of the MBA course is management skills for the new economy. We believe these skills are largely mindset skills. There is a whole team of professors engaged in this course under the leadership of Professor Pat Bradshaw. [Editor's note: HR.com will be interviewing Dr. Bradshaw next month]

One thing we do is to get students to take problems in their own work life and find novel solutions. The learning approach also encourages them to think about how they approach problems and their taken-for-granted styles of decision-making. When people reflect upon their previous styles of decision-making, they are able to stand back and understand how they think, how they see, and how they can approach problems in new ways.



**DC: And so we're moving beyond talking about e-Learning technology to a more general principle of what managers need to be learning for today's world.**

GM: Absolutely. The interesting thing is when people go to work they wear their professional hats and leave behind their natural skills and approaches. Managers are restricted by what they've been taught by the professional literature. They need to be able to step out of that mindset and to see things differently.

It's interesting that in daily life we're often a lot more flexible in our problem solving skills than we are as professionals and managers. When we're professionals and managers we feel that we should follow the "professional" approaches we've been taught.

We seek to connect learners with their creative abilities and to learn from their previous experiences of where they've been successful and where they've failed. They can then use this knowledge to tackle contemporary problems.

**DC: So I see your approach as much more a drawing out of someone's capabilities as opposed to a pouring of information into their head.**

GM: That's absolutely correct. It's the way we think, it's the way we see, it's the way we approach situations that matters. Information only becomes significant according to a frame in which you use it.

For example, you might frame a retention issue as a compensation problem or a morale problem or a selection problem. How you approach the problem depends on how you frame it in the first place.

It's the way you see the issues and the way you frame them that dictates what information is relevant. If you go looking for information without thinking about alternative frames then you are locking out many interesting opportunities.

**DC: Have you had any surprises as you developed this approach?**

GM: It's a constant surprise. We've worked for a long time on developing methodologies that can help people quickly begin to challenge their existing mindsets. What we're finding now is how natural the Internet is for delivering these messages and getting people to take control of their learning.

When you're not trapped by a classroom and by an instructor, you find there's a lot you can do by yourself if you can get at the right resources.

**DC: Are we taking out the human element here? What about the interaction between an instructor and student?**

GM: Internet technology will never eliminate instructors completely and it shouldn't. The point is there are times when you need instructors but there are times when you can learn most on your own as long as you have access to some kind of learning resource.

**DC: I've been reading Karl Weick and it sounds like his ideas are congruent with your own.**

GM: Karl Weick is all about the social construction of reality, that's the underlying principle of his work and that's been the underlying principle of my work.

His theoretical perspective appeals to people who are in the academic domain and are willing to put time into understanding the theory. Weick's work is a wonderful resource for academics but there's another step that has to be made to translate the ideas into practice. That's what we've been doing at Schulich.

**DC: When it comes to e-Learning are there any risks that people should be worrying about?**

GM: It's such a complex domain that there are many pitfalls. It's all emerged so rapidly and for the most part e-Learning got going with early technology. It's only now coming to grips with Internet technology and the potential that that offers. HR people need to work at understanding the different options available.

**DC: Moving beyond e-Learning, what can HR people be doing today to make their organizations more effective?**

GM: HR should be finding ways of contributing to the creativity of the work force while keeping them sane because the demands that people are facing at the moment are over the top in many respects.

Managers and professionals have to reinvent themselves every few years if they're to remain marketable. Very few people can rely on their degree or their professional qualifications or the skills that they've acquired over the last five years to remain current in the next five.



So I think human resource professionals have an enormous role to play in supporting the process of development of core organizational talent and supporting people by bringing in the right resources.

**DC: The focus on creativity is profound. Most big organizations are based on something, which is the opposite of creativity. Traditionally you define what people do in a job description, you have specific measurable objectives, and you have lots of policies and procedures. You don't want people being creative; you want people to do the job as designed.**

GM: I've always believed in contingency theory and there not being one style of organizing, no one style of management, and no one set of solutions. Those big machine bureaucracies can be effective if the tasks they're facing are quite stable. However, increasingly those organizations have been downsized, re-engineered, restructured, and flattened to create more flexible forms where people have to be much more entrepreneurial. This is where these mindset competencies come into play.

You've heard the old story that in the bureaucracy you could park your brain along with your car and still get by. In many organizations you can't do that now so the development of your mind is the key to being effective in your work.

**DC: It strikes me that HR people are going to be amongst the first to have to learn these new mindsets because it's their role to help other people become more innovative. To do that requires a lot of innovation and creativity from HR.**

GM: Absolutely. It's a wonderful time for the human resource manager because there are so many ways that you can now reinvent your role. The knowledge economy just opens up the opportunities enormously.

**DC: Many of our readers will remember you from that very famous book *Images of Organization* and it's still going strong after all these years. What is it about that book that has made it remain so current year after year?**

GM: I think it's because it taps into the core of the way that we think about organizations: how we have thought about them historically and continue to do so. The basic idea underlying that book is that all our theories and all our ways of approaching an organization are framed by implicit metaphor.

Mintzberg talked about the machine metaphor of the organization, I have used the organic metaphor of organizations. *Images of Organization* helps people see organizations in new ways and can have a profound effect on the way they think.



I often get comments from people that studied it ten years ago saying that from time to time they pull it off the shelf and flip through it because it renews the challenge that they had in the first encounter. That's why it has proved so enduring.

The management skills training at York is all about helping students get comfortable with dealing with multiple perspectives, multiple approaches and the possibility there may be multiple solutions to problems. We teach them that they'll never find the answer in a textbook or in a training manual, but ultimately it rests on their shoulders and in their brains as to what the possibilities are.

**DC: Thanks for taking the time to speak to us. We hope to talk to you again as your work develops.**

## Author



David Creelman is a *Knowledge Manager* at HR.com.

He has ten years of experience working for major international consultancies both in North America and Asia. He is a regular speaker at HR conferences and has published many articles on management issues.

Prior to working in HR, David worked in Finance and IT. He has a MBA and a Hons B.Sc. in Biochemistry and Chemistry.

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