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Retrain your brain from 'left' to 'right' to fit into new economy

By Marco R. della Cava, USA TODAY

As stars of the Old Economy go, Shu Kim and Khanh Pham sparkled. Working for a storied finance firm — Kim, 40, as in-house counsel and Pham, 33, as a real estate investment banker — the two women deployed classic analytical left-brain skills to keep a seemingly well-oiled machine humming. A machine called [Lehman Brothers](#).

Lehman is dead, but the two [New Yorkers](#) are alive and optimistic, thanks to a simple yet significant shift. They embraced their right brains, the bold, creative lobe that in the New Economy can make the difference between reinvention and extinction.

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"Those old jobs are just not there anymore, so to survive you have to think outside the box," says Pham, who along with her former colleague recently launched [Shustir.com](#), a marketing website for small businesses. Now, instead of parsing legal and financial documents, the two brainstorm innovative ways to bring their new brand to the masses, relying on flights of creative fancy rather than rote skills.

"It's funny — our parents were entrepreneurs," Kim says. "So we're going back to right-brain thinking."

And not a moment too soon. As companies continue to triage their way through this economic war, a growing chorus of cultural observers argue that recovery is contingent on the marriage of right-brain innovations with left-brain skill sets.

Put bluntly: The economic engine needs more iPods (a talisman no one really knew to miss until it arrived) and fewer data-crunchers (tasks that can be shipped overseas or tackled with software such as TurboTax).

"There's an acceptance that as a century ago machines replaced muscle, today computers are turning traditional left-brain work, jobs where a series of steps leads to one answer, into a commodity that can be outsourced," says Daniel Pink, whose 2005 book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, recently was turned into the [PBS](#) special *Living on the Right Side of the Brain*. "Our children will no more be doing routine white-collar work than we were likely to inherit the blue-collar jobs of our grandfathers."

Pink says the shift to right-brain thinking already can be found in companies that welcome well-rounded employees, medical schools that push art studies and classrooms that encourage collaborative problem-solving. "We're realizing that our economy is not about standardization," he says.

It's also no longer about job security, which makes taking the leap away from once-stable left-brain jobs less daunting, says Pamela Skillings, a New York-based career coach and author of *Escape From Corporate America: A Practical Guide to Creating the Career of Your Dreams*.

"Most of us are innately creative in some way," says Skillings, who herself left a job in the financial sector to start her consulting business. "Many big companies are still about following rules and doing what's been done in the past. But we want to be in situations where our free-thinking sides are being put to use."

From lawyer to designer

Gordon Chin never thought he'd be able to do just that. As someone who wanted to be an attorney since he was a child, the Washington, D.C., resident was happily working for a large law firm when the company ran into the economic iceberg. With his billable hours shrinking, he opted to leave in February as layoffs loomed. Now he's juggling clients as an interior designer.

"I always had a passion for decorating but just did it for friends," Chin says. "This was a daunting leap of faith. But where I was a happy cog in a large firm, now I get to use my creativity with immediate, gratifying results."

Chin kick-started his small business in a decidedly creative way. He made an audition tape for [Design Star](#), the HGTV reality show that seeks the next great designer. He didn't get the call from the cable channel, but those who saw his video on his [Facebook](#) page got in touch.

"If it hadn't been for the slowdown in the economy, I wouldn't have done this," he says. "But now that I have, I'd absolutely love to pursue this full time. It really blends my organizational strengths with my creative side."

In fact, fusing left-brain skills with right-brain insights is considered the killer app in a new economy that will put a premium on creative breakthroughs, says Laszlo Bock, vice president of people operations at [Google](#). "We're convinced true innovation comes at the intersection of different fields," he says.

When Bock and his team look to hire new talent, they assess a candidate's "Googliness" — the ability to solve problems in unique ways, lead co-workers and thrive in a loose organizational structure. "If you have those skills, you can learn any job we give you," he says.

In Cambridge, Mass., Joel Katz has spent the past six years proving that doctors will be better at their left-brain craft if they're well-versed in art. First- and second-year Harvard Med students now vie to get into Katz's 10-week course that uses Boston's Museum of Fine Arts to teach future physicians how to critically analyze famous paintings.

Those who take the art course typically show "a 50% improvement" in assessing a patient's symptoms, says Katz, himself an internist. "Usually doctors are not trained in humanism. Students usually say this has expanded their way of thinking, which benefits the patient."

But that doesn't mean those steeped in quantitative skills need an arts-major makeover.

Unique solutions often come from pairing people with complementary skills, says Darrell Rigby, Boston-based head of global innovation practices for management consulting firm Bain & Company, citing fashion as a prime example of how right-brain types can thrive within a financially driven matrix. "Brain transplants are not as successful as simple teamwork," he jokes.

Seeking out creative solutions is now the prime directive for many companies, says Ross DeVol, director of regional economics at the [Milken](#) Institute, a Los Angeles-based non-profit think tank. "If the U.S. is going to remain an economic powerhouse, it will be due to value-added ideas. That means employees have to think more broadly about their job than ever before."

A new way of thinking

Many such folks are meeting with career advisers such as Rebecca Zucker of Next Step Partners, an executive coaching firm with offices in [New York](#) and San Francisco. Zucker says many of her left-brain clients in finance and law "can't believe that simply thinking harder won't give them the answers they want."

Instead, she urges them to treat the transition to a new way of thinking as if they're at a buffet. "They need to try different things, whether it's reading a book about something that intrigues them or taking a class. People are asking, 'What else can I do, or learn to do?'"

A health-food-focused vacation to [Brazil](#) is what planted a right-brain seed in Allison Jagtiani's head. The longtime equity research analyst had been watching her pay decrease and workload increase over the past year, and in March decided to make her move. The Des Moines native quit her [Wall Street](#) job and started baking cookies laced with antioxidant-rich goji berries.

"This is the most exciting, challenging thing I've ever done," she says of her nascent venture, Goji Gourmet. "It'd be hard to go back to a cube and crunch numbers."

That sentiment resonates with Chris Halloran of Phoenix. In his heyday as an investment baker, he pulled a seven-figure salary. But since giving that up last year to start his photo studio, Halloran says the first \$85 he made for being creative — shooting a friend's website photo — thrilled him more than any money he made poring through spreadsheets.

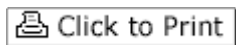
"My old job was about valuing a company's worth, which is all about quantitative skills and very little about personal contact. Now I get to do something that deals in beauty and makes people happy," Halloran says.

For ex-Lehman employees Kim and Pham, their ability to tack away from their left-brain comfort zone into uncharted right-brain waters has resulted in not just employment, but innovative work that could prove the backbone of a resurgent economy.

"I liked putting people together ever since I was a little girl, but just went ahead and became a lawyer," says Kim, whose website connects local entrepreneurs with a national marketplace. "Who knew that what I loved doing as a kid could be a job?"

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