A Learning Science Company

An Interview with David Levin, President and Chief Executive Officer, McGraw-Hill Education

EDITORS' NOTE *Prior to his current position, David Levin spent nine years as the Chief Executive of UBM plc. Before that, he was Chief Executive of Symbian Software, which built the first OS for smartphones. He holds a bachelor's degree in politics, philosophy, and economics from Oxford University and an M.B.A. from Stanford University.*

David Levin

COMPANY BRIEF *McGraw-Hill Education (mheducation.com) is a learning science company that delivers personalized learning experiences that help students, parents, educators, and professionals drive results. McGraw-Hill Education has offices across North America, India, China, Europe, the Middle East, and South America, and makes its learning solutions available in nearly 60 languages.*

You joined McGraw-Hill Education in 2014. What excited you about the opportunity?

There were three things that made this a fit for me. One was the sector – I was genuinely interested in the mission in education and in making a difference both to people individually, as well as to the wider country and world.

The second was a deep feeling that the new owners of the business, Apollo, would give me a mandate to lead a process of change and that they would support that. They've delivered on that. We poured a lot of resources into software and development, and built a 500-person development team, and so many of the typical concerns that people would have had about being owned by private equity have, frankly, gone away.

The third was the most important in a sense when I did my due diligence about coming on board. I wanted to be confident that the building blocks around software would be sufficiently strong and those were not just technical architecture but, more importantly, the people.

I did a deep personal due diligence on the leadership of the technology group and I thought it was fantastic. I had seen great software leaders and teams, and I was quite excited by the quality of the leadership that I found on our team. It has been proven, and we have been able to build and enrich the team on great foundations.

With a long history and heritage, change can be difficult to accomplish. How did you communicate your vision early on and did your people understand it?

When you are sold by your parent, it comes as a shock. It was a scary time for the business. We had to communicate the need for real change and at the same time give hope and aspiration.

We have redefined and renewed the mission and vision of the business, which is important. This is a company that has the benefit of being purpose-driven, but we never really articulated that. When we say, our vision "is to unlock the potential of every learner," it motivates people across McGraw-Hill Education and reminds us that we're doing something really worthwhile.

How do you define the company today? Are you a technology company?

No. We certainly use technology, but we are in a deep way a company focused on learning. We are a learning science company. That's how we harness our historic skills in content and pedagogy, and tie that into software to make people's learning more efficient. We've moved beyond being a transactional textbook company, which is what we used to be, to providing a product or service that actually directly contributes to the learning.

We're supporting students with great materials and we're able to add support for teachers and instructors to deliver better education by providing them data around the learning. We're moving from selling a one-time book to providing to millions of students 24/7 in a 365-day a year real-time service. The educational material is decorated and instrumented with questions and software that supports faster and more personalized learning. All of this is available online and producing the data to help both student and teacher work as effectively as possible.

With that kind of technology, can you personalize the learning experience?

Yes, and that's the crucial part. If I think about what we're doing, it's that we each learn in a slightly different way and we come into a problem with a different base of knowledge. It's bizarre to think we would all progress identically. The software is good at making sure the student has an individualized path that is relevant to their base of knowledge and approach.

The software also tells the teacher where each of the individuals in that section or class is struggling, as well as where the collective is, so the teacher doesn't have to teach blindly. This allows individual attention or remediation that is appropriate and early. This all leads to better outcomes – and student success, and we are a key part of that.

Looking more broadly at education, why hasn't there been more fundamental reform?

The real question isn't about the amount of reform – it's about the impact of reform. K-12 isn't one system – it's many systems with provisions done at the state and local levels, and the levels of attainment vary widely across the country. There is no silver bullet or one single reform that works everywhere. The "reform cocktail" is a hard one to mix: make sure the change will work (nobody wants an experiment done on their kids), bring the community along (parents have strong but varied views), and ensure the teachers are confident in the change (they, after all, have to make it happen in the classroom). Of course, keep up with the wider changes in society (what we consider right and acceptable) as well as in technology (as everyone knows that technology is on a relentless upward path).

People do make sweeping statements about technology. The real questions are: How do we support teachers to do what they do best? How do we ensure the technology that is deployed works out of the box, is robust, and is not locked into any single provider or "walled garden"?

Is there a downside to the technology and could society be missing something in terms of preparing the next generation?

We sometimes seem to think that throwing technology at the problem makes it better and that is clearly wrong. I have been in so many classrooms where there is a fancy piece of equipment that is sitting unused in the corner. Schools have to make decisions around that for several years – and it is all too easy to either undershoot or overshoot. Far too much of the debate is about "hardware," the device, which is a waste. It really should be about the software, the content, the pedagogy – these can be seen across many devices and these continue to work long after each generation of hardware becomes redundant.

However, technology can be a real game-changer if we harness it. We should ensure that its potential contributes to supporting our natural human curiosity and the willingness of young people to experiment. We need to use software better to allow us to identify gaps and weaknesses in each student's knowledge so that the scarce resource, the teacher, can focus his or her effort on what is most relevant – helping each student overcome their individual challenges and improving outcomes for all. ●