Unlocking the Potential of Every Learner

**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 operating system 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.*

Will you provide an overview of the history and heritage of McGraw-Hill Education and discuss how the company has evolved?

Next year is our 130th anniversary, so this is a company with deep traditions and a rich heritage, as well as a fabulous brand. It has undergone a massive transition, which began four years ago when a group of activist investors got involved and forced its then parent company to sell this division.

At that point, McGraw-Hill Education became a stand-alone company. It was a traumatic moment because it was like mom and dad selling the baby.

We were bought by a private equity group in 2013, for $2.4 billion – $1.4 billion in debt and $1 billion in equity. At that time, it was perceived that what Apollo had bought was an old, failing textbook company.

I was recruited from outside shortly after this happened, and we set about on a transformation that had two core elements: the first was recognizing and honoring the tradition and part of the DNA of McGraw-Hill Education. This was important to us, as it involves our roots in education, our deep understanding of the process of learning, and our access across the whole of the education system – all of the schools and the institutions of higher education in the country.

The second was our digital future. This evaluation of our digital processes has involved us spending just north of $700 million on creating a digital footprint that is vastly different than what we had before.

With the deep heritage of McGraw-Hill Education, how difficult was it to get your people to adapt to these changes?

There are always areas where one can make progress by building new teams. For instance, we built an engineering team of more than 500 people with two massive development centers created since the spinout.

One part of our culture is we have had to build brand new things, but that is the easy part.

The second part is transitioning out of activities that aren't significant to us anymore, which we've had to shut down or transfer.

We had a huge global network of warehouses around the world, which is almost now completely gone.

The slowest bit, in a sense, is explaining to people that our products, service, and value proposition have changed. This is the most complex piece, because we still sell textbooks. However, in higher ed, textbooks account for only 31 percent of what we sold in the first quarter of the year.

Sixty-nine percent was essentially software, and it's not just a piece of digital content – this is a piece of software that is thoughtful and purposeful in how it interacts with the learner. It's learning software that produces incredible outputs of data that allow educators to intervene in the learning process. We deeply believe that teaching is a very human skill, but the output of data provides insight into what the learner has actually learned, which can radically affect what the teacher does.

How is the curriculum keeping up with a changing world?

It is less about changing curriculum than about supporting people who are learning. When we look at the challenges of higher ed, the first crucial issue isn't that the graduates aren't fully prepared; the challenge is that students aren't graduating.

Even with the massive student debt problem, a college degree is still the most important investment a person can make. The knockout blow is, if a student has entered college but didn't make it through, he or she has no way to pay back the debt.

The first step in learning is to learn how to learn, which means literacy and numeracy. The single fastest intervention we can make as a country, and that we are purposefully focused on at McGraw-Hill, is to harness AI-based math and learning systems to help people get through that first killer semester of introductory math. Once they have mastered that, the curriculum can go in many different ways because they're equipped with foundational skills.

In doing that, can you provide a broad range of ways for them to learn?

Things will continue to evolve and improve, but everybody in a room has a different knowledge base. The wonderful thing about software is it's able to personalize the process.

Does that come back to the skill set of the teacher or to how adaptable the materials are?

All of these things are related. The first thing we can control is to ensure the content is being personalized to the learner. The AI finds the best path for the student to get through the content.

The second bit plays to the interventions by the teacher. With some of these foundation courses, if one is lucky, there may be just a few people in the course, but there could also be 500 students, so the instructor's insight is fragmentary. If we can intervene early, we can radically change the outcome for students who might be struggling.

Will the textbook side of the business remain relevant?

In areas such as science and business, we're seeing that the transition to digital has been very fast. Even so, some students still like to have a reference book on their shelves.

Two years ago, we decided to separate our content from the software, which is against the culture of publishing. However, by separating those things, we can instrument anybody's content.

Are you happy with the overall progress you have made in this evolution?

We have made huge progress, and we have been able to create a vision that people relate to, which is, "unlocking the potential of every learner." It plays to the history of being rooted in how people learn, but suddenly we're very relevant and people feel that sense of purpose. ●