



PRERANA WALDORF SCHOOL

February 2024

Adaptability Quotient: Educating for an Uncertain Future.

What is an adaptability quotient (AQ). AQ is a person's ability to adapt to new challenges with flexibility, curiosity, problem-solving, courage, and resilience. AQ, a subjective set of qualities loosely defined as the ability to pivot and flourish in an environment of fast and frequent change.

With increasingly rapid changes in technology and the nature of work, employers are interested not just in intelligence and social skills, but in an employee's adaptability quotient.

To prepare for the future, educational pursuits should aim to deepen academics through the integration of art, outdoor education, music, theatre, practical work, movement, and hands-on learning, as done in Waldorf schools. The depth and breadth of Waldorf curriculum challenges our students and develops crucial capacities that help them adapt and thrive throughout their lives. Through the example provided by the teachers, students learn how to experience the present time with grace and flexibility — skills that will be critical in future environments of fast and frequent change.

As situations change, is it enough to be smart?

For years, it was thought that the intelligence quotient (IQ) test – which measures memory, analytical thinking and mathematical ability – was one of the best ways to predict our future job prospects.

And more recently, there has been increased attention on emotional intelligence (EQ), broadly characterised as a set of interpersonal, self-regulation and communication skills. EQ is now widely seen as a tool kit that plays an important role in helping us succeed in multiple aspects of life.

Both IQ and EQ are considered important to our career success. But today, as technology redefines how we work, the skills we need to thrive in the job market are evolving too.

“IQ is the minimum you need to get a job, but AQ is how you will be successful over time,” says Natalie Fratto, a New York-based vice-president at Goldman Sachs who became interested in AQ when she was investing in tech start-ups.

Fratto says AQ is not just the capacity to absorb new information, but the ability to work out what is relevant, to unlearn obsolete knowledge, overcome challenges, and to make a conscious effort to change. AQ involves flexibility, curiosity, courage, resilience and problem-solving skills too.

As society changes, could AQ be more crucial to career success than IQ? If so, how do you identify it – and is there a way to hone AQ to future-proof your career?

Technology has vastly changed how many jobs are done, and the disruption will continue – over the next three years, 120 million people in the world’s 12 largest economies may need to be re-skilled because of automation, according to an IBM study.

Any roles that involve spotting patterns in data –lawyers reviewing legal documents or doctors making a patient diagnosis, for example – are easy to automate. This is because an algorithm(algo) can do these tasks faster and more accurately than a human, a study says.

To avoid obsolescence, workers doing these jobs need to develop new skills like creativity to solve new problems, empathy to communicate better and accountability, using human intuition to supplement insight from machines. “If an algo can do 30% of the tasks that I used to do, what can I do with that spare capacity? The winners are those who choose to do things that algos can’t.”

Every profession will require adaptability and flexibility, from banking to the arts. Say you are an accountant. Your IQ gets you through the examinations to become qualified, then your EQ helps you connect with an interviewer, land a job and develop relationships with clients and colleagues. Then, when systems change or aspects of work are automated, you need AQ to accommodate this innovation and adapt to new ways of performing your role.

All three quotients are somewhat complementary, since they all help you to solve problems and therefore adapt. An ideal candidate possesses all three, but not everyone does. There are rigid geniuses. Having IQ, but no AQ would leave you struggling to embrace new ways of working using your existing skills – and low AQ makes it harder to acquire new ones.

The IBM study found “willingness to be flexible and adaptable to change” was the most critical skill for workers in the present times.

Asking ‘what if’ AQ is now increasingly being sought at the hiring level. According to the IBM study, 5,670 executives globally rated behavioural skills as most critical for the workforce today, and chief among them was the “willingness to be flexible, agile and adaptable to change”. Many companies are changing their recruitment processes to help identify people who may be high in it.

Companies have started using immersive online simulations where job candidates are assessed on how well they adapt to potential workplace challenges; one assessment involves choosing how you would encourage reluctant colleagues to join a company triathlon team. They also look to hire people who have shown they can perform in different functions, industries or geographies. This proves they are agile and a fast learner.

Fratto of Goldman Sachs, meanwhile, suggests three ways AQ might manifest in potential candidates: if they can picture possible versions of the future by asking “what if” questions, if they can unlearn information to challenge presumptions and if they enjoy exploration or seeking out new experiences.

Fratto continues, “Start-ups go through evolutions, It’s not like the founder has a written job description; they need some of a fluctuating list of 30 or 50 skills to be successful.” A study published in June by analysis firm Oxford Economics estimated up to 20 million manufacturing jobs globally could be replaced by robots by 2030.

One good thing about AQ is that – even if you can’t measure it – experts say you can work to develop it. Some people have more curious or courageous personalities, which may explain why they are naturally better at adapting than others.

However, if one does not continue to surf the edge of their discomfort, the adaptability you are born with could decrease over time.

Ways to boost your adaptability: first, limit distractions and learn to focus so you can determine what adaptations to make. Second, ask uncomfortable questions, like for a pay rise, to develop courage and normalise fear. Third, be curious about things that fascinate you by having more conversations rather than googling the answer, something “which wires our brains to be lazy” and diminishes our ability to solve difficult challenges.

Otto Scharmer, a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, recommends remaining open to new possibilities, trying to see a situation through someone else’s eyes and reducing your ego so that you can feel comfortable with the unknown.

One thing we do know is that the workplaces of the future will operate differently. We may not all be comfortable with the pace of change – but we can prepare. Learning to learn is mission critical. The ability to learn, change, grow, experiment will become far more important than subject expertise.