

Transferable Skills

Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW

Our traditional method of defining skills and position fit no longer meet today's needs. New college graduates can expect to work in as many as six different occupations between graduation and retirement, many of which do not currently exist. What skills must HR professionals recruit to meet needs yet to be discovered?

While academic training and work experience still have their place, as in professions licensed to protect public safety, companies will need creativity and flexibility, what I am calling "transferable skills." Too many individuals are promoted until they reach their "Peter Point," where they no longer feel successful and are unhappy with their work. We need people who have the ability to grow successfully with every new position.

Successful performance depends upon two variables: subject-matter knowledge and skills.

Knowledge is the technical information associated with a field of practice. It is a necessary component, but people must be able to successfully apply that knowledge.

Skill reflects one's ability to apply knowledge.

In our current economy, new products and services are often invented by business people whose academic credentials did not prepare them for their accomplishments. Please also note: Transferable skills are not gender specific and are possessed equally by both genders. The glass ceiling overweighs my examples with males.

1. The founder of Microsoft was a college drop out. He used his wealth to establish the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Their goal: address root causes of poverty and poor health. This couple consulted numerous experts and read hundreds of books to prepare them for this new endeavor. Their process for assessing the cost/benefit of proposals is so thorough that Warren Buffet turned his foundation funds over to them for management.
2. A chemical engineer took a sales position with an international materials company after completing his B.S.E. degree. His job was to understand customer needs and propose products that would meet those needs. The company soon discovered his many other skills and promoted him into increasingly responsible positions. He retired as corporate vice president for Asian operations. To his credit, he began retirement preparation long before announcing his retirement. He mentored a highly talented female colleague whom he recommended as his replacement. A year following his retirement, this colleague became the company's CEO.
3. A Ph.D. chemist started in the laboratory at Dow Chemical. The company quickly recognized his broader skills and gave him increasingly responsible assignments. He became the company's director of Asian operations where he studied human resource management. He became recognized for his proficiency in this area and was promoted to Vice President for HR. During his tenure as VP for HR, he completely overhauled the company's promotional practices.
4. An individual with a master's degree in English joined his father, the CEO of Kansas City Southern Industries. He was mentored by his father and became the CEO. He was widely respected for his business savvy and skill. He attributed his success to his degree in English because it taught him creativity and versatility.

There are important common denominators among these individuals. I will highlight the more obvious skills and traits, giving HR professionals a feel of the kinds of skills they must recruit to meet tomorrow's needs.

1. High Energy None of these individuals settled for status quo. They thrived on adventure and took on challenges with gusto.
2. Life-long learning They had a voracious appetite for acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to perform well in their new assignment.

3. Curiosity – They were not satisfied with: “That’s the way things are.” They always looked for better mousetraps and more effective approaches.
4. Intellectual Honesty They were committed to learning and dealing with the facts, convenient or not. They welcomed ideas that were better than their own.
5. Integrity They had a inner moral sense and strong need to respect what they saw in the mirror each morning. That attitude earned and kept the trust of their staff.
6. Leadership They saw it as their obligation to inspire personnel to become their very best. They saw hiring someone more skilled than they as a feather in their cap.
7. Tenacity They found glee in surmounting challenges, the same glee one finds in mountain climbers and marathon runners.
8. Can Do Attitude They asked themselves not if, but **how** they will do their new assignment well.
9. Pragmatic They saw making mistakes as inevitable and looked past the mistake to assess what it had taught them.
10. Risk Tolerance They knew no choice is perfect. They took risks and accepted full responsibility for the outcome.
11. Conceptual Thinking They were big picture thinkers. They saw every element as related and considered it necessary to know how and why.

Our new economy requires collaboration among individuals with wide ranging skills.

With that given, I close this article with the most important skill of all: the ability to listen well, understand what others are saying, find common ground, and reach informed decisions.

Assimilating new knowledge and skills and merging them into workable solutions is what the brave new world is all about.

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