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Why There's Nothing Wrong With Being Underqualified For a Job

COMMENTARY by Kon Leong MARCH 14, 2016, 8:00 PM EDT



Photograph by Jon Schulte via Getty Images

It's actually better for business

The Leadership Insider network is an online community where the most thoughtful and influential people in business contribute answers to timely questions about careers and leadership. Today's answer to the question: What's the best way to keep your company successful? is written by Kon Leong, CEO and founder of ZL Technologies.

Is more experience always better? Not necessarily. In fact, it might be hindering innovation. Yet in business, the concept of a great candidate has become nearly inextricable from the concept of having a lot of experience in the industry of choice. The rationale is that experienced individuals require less training, less guidance, and are less prone to mistakes. That mindset, however, might be ultimately counterproductive and destructive.

I've personally interviewed hundreds of candidates, and even today – with offices across the globe – I still interview each individual that applies to the business end of our headquarter office. Why? Because I've found that innate character and intelligence determines success in most business roles much better than experience does. Character isn't a simple checkbox quality like experience, and it can't be gathered directly from a resume. The best way to determine it is through personal interaction.

Generally, I've observed that people with extensive past experience in a single vertical tend to be more rigid in their roles and less open-minded to change. It makes sense; every industry becomes its own echo chamber. Same buzzwords, same mannerisms, same analogies to describe abstract concepts. Individuals with less experience in an industry tend to be more flexible, and eager to solve problems in novel ways. To remain truly innovative as a business, it is essential to value general intelligence, creativity, openness, and flexibility — even if that means somewhat sacrificing experience.

See also: [The One Question Every Successful Leader Can Answer](#)

This isn't to say that you can realistically run a highly-successful business without any experienced staff. What you can do, however, is architect an environment that includes experts but also fosters a general environment of inquisitiveness and open discussion. With the right mix of individuals, you can help secluded specialists blossom into cross-communicating thinkers, prompt assertive extroverts to introspect, and encourage pensive introverts to speak up with big ideas. Building a successful business isn't about finding an archetype “perfect” employee and then populating the firm with clones; it's about finding a harmonious blend of personalities that helps everyone amplify their best qualities. A business should resemble a diversified, long-term portfolio rather than haphazard day-trading.



Part of this requires identifying individuals who act as “catalysts” for others. Increasingly, recruitment focuses on technical skills rather than softer, communicative skills. However, much can be gained from finding individuals that possess a tranquil

affability regardless of background; in my experience, these are the people that help others open up and work more proactively together. It's a unique and extremely valuable trait distinct from outgoingness, and it's difficult to quantify or pin down. Catalyst-type individuals have a knack for putting others at ease and mitigating aggression, thus helping create a communicative, open atmosphere where politics melt away and productive creativity is fostered.



Creative people, additionally, challenge the norm. As business roles become more specialized and complex, the critical questions to ask inversely become simpler. The most valuable vocabulary word for a business leader is “why.” Yet paradoxically, those with the most experience are often the least likely to ask it. The status quo has a gravitational pull. Phrases such as “we always do it this way” can become a death sentence for innovation, spreading cultural complacency like wildfire.

The antidote is employee variety and empowerment. Find creative and intelligent people to begin with, cyclically hire less-experienced individuals, and offer ongoing training and personal development opportunities for all levels of staff. Allow employees to rotate between departments and explore different roles. Give structure for people to set their own quarterly metrics and goals, based on individual interests. Having a bright and curious pool of individuals fosters a culture of lifelong learning, which in turn creates high levels of personal investment in outcomes. In essence, “experience” isn’t the most important “E” word in business: it’s “engagement.” Do everything in your power as a leader to foster the latter, even at the expense of the former.

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