Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Harvard Business Review
May 17, 2011

Job Available: No Experience Preferred

Have you ever tried to get a job where you were told that you had all the right skills but lacked experience? It's a Catch-22: You can't get the job without experience, and you can't get experience without getting the job.

But how important is experience, and should it be such a critical asset for hiring managers?

Not long ago I was talking about this issue with Michael Dowling, the President and CEO of North Shore-LIJ Health System, one of the largest and most successful health systems in the U.S. NS-LIJ includes fifteen hospitals and a number of other health care businesses on Long Island and New York City. With 42,000 employees, it is the largest employer on Long Island and one of the largest in New York City. And despite being confronted with all of the same challenges as every other health care organization in the country, NS-LIJ is financially sound and achieves consistently high marks for quality of care.

Surprisingly, one of the reasons that Dowling cites for NS-LIJ's success is the fact that traditional "experience" is not a pre-condition for hiring new managers. In fact, in many cases it's a liability.

Dowling explains: "We're in an industry that needs to change and re-examine almost every facet of how we do business. So people who have been trained and reinforced in the traditional ways of running hospitals and health system departments often don't look at doing things in new and creative ways. They don't challenge everything and ask tough questions. Instead they're locked into the old paradigms. So the last thing we need is someone with that kind of 'experience.'"

Of course, this doesn't mean that anybody can walk in the door and get a job. Depending on the position, there are certainly technical knowledge requirements. But for managerial jobs, Dowling cares less about past experience and more about personal characteristics like passion for improving patient care, the ability to think outside the box, openness to learning, being a self-starter, and the capability to work as part of a team.

Having worked directly with patients in some capacity doesn't hurt either. For example, Kathy Gallo, North Shore's Chief Learning Officer — who is also responsible for HR — has a background in nursing, but didn't have any experience with HR or
training when she took the job. Similarly the Chief Administrative Officer doesn’t have an MBA — he began his career as an EMT. In fact, as Dowling pointed out, not a single one of NS-LIJ’s top leaders has a traditional health care administration background — and that includes Dowling himself, who was a social worker and then served as a health care policy adviser to former NY governor Mario Cuomo.

Naturally, it's impossible to draw a general conclusion about the usefulness of experience from one organization in one industry. But if you are looking to dramatically transform your organization — or if you are in an industry that is undergoing radical change — then you might want to consider the idea of bringing in managers who don’t fit the traditional mold, who can challenge the way things have been done, and who lack traditional "experience." Without injecting people like this into your organization, you may run the risk of recycling the same solutions and going down paths that used to work but may no longer be viable.

In the same vein, if you are a manager that is passionate about change, wants to make a difference, and is willing to take a risk, think about intentionally making a lateral move to an area where you have little or no experience, either within your own company or elsewhere. But instead of being anxious about, or apologizing for your lack of experience, make the case that "no experience" is an asset that the business can't do without. You'll see the organization through fresh eyes and be able to make contributions that would never come from a traditional candidate. And personally you'll be compelled to learn and grow in ways that wouldn't have happened in a comfortable and familiar setting. It could be a win-win — for you and for the organization.

What are your thoughts on the need for "experience" in a management job?

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http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2011/05/job-available-no-experience-pr.html