

Experience eats degrees for breakfast

"I have a university degree and an AZEK qualification!" That was how a client responded many years ago during a job interview training session when I asked him: "Why should we hire you for this position?" What do you think - how old was this client, and what kind of professional background did he have?

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Were you thinking of a recent university graduate? Not even close. The client had come to me for outplacement support after losing a highly qualified position at a bank. At the time, he was 50 years old and a recognised expert in his field.

This is a good example of how even top professionals often begin with their education when asked about their professional background.

Habits that have outlived their purpose

Why don't they start with their strongest argument - the very thing that sets them apart from others: their extensive practical experience? One explanation lies in the blind spots of self-perception. The more routine something becomes, the less consciously aware of it we are. Practical experience is not as easy to communicate as a degree or qualification.

Perhaps the reason does not lie solely with the candidates. Job advertisements may reinforce this behaviour. Have you ever noticed that most job ads list educational requirements first? I suspect this is simply a convention that is no longer questioned. On closer inspection, however, it is illogical - at least when it comes to senior-level profiles.

That would be like inviting Meryl Streep to an audition and asking her to bring along her acting diploma - and, while she is at it, her academic transcripts as well.

Why education still comes first

As professional seniority increases, education gradually loses importance relative to practical experience. Formal education is, after all, only one way of acquiring the knowledge needed for a role.

Job profiles are often structured internally according to categories: education, experience, personality, and so on. When these profiles are turned into job advertisements, education frequently ends up at the top of the list by default. As readers, we unconsciously assume that the most important information comes first - and we structure our own arguments accordingly.

That said, I am beginning to see occasional job advertisements that describe the required professional experience before mentioning educational qualifications. A shift in thinking seems to be underway.

After our training, my client presented the reasons for hiring him very differently: "I have been working as a financial analyst for 25 years." He then described his practical experience and achievements. Only at the very end did he mention his academic background.

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