

The Job Market Potential Depends On Qualities of New Employees

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It is a pleasure and honour for me to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to visit with old friends and I am flattered to be asked to share my thoughts with such a distinguished group. My teenage and slightly older kids are amazed that anyone should or would be influenced by anything I might have to say. So, I come here a little in awe but still happy to have the chance to philosophize, and I am hopeful that someone will listen.

Jim indicated in his introduction that I have held a number of positions, the relationships among which may appear vague to you. However, I have been able to rationalize all of the moves; I like to think of myself as an opportunist. My inlaws think that anyone my age who has had seven different jobs in twenty-one years is a gypsy.

I don't really want to get off track here and have us devote a great deal of time to an analysis of my career. Furthermore, I am not trying to blow my own horn by focusing on some of the jobs I have had over the last few years. What I would really like to do today is to draw on the perspectives I have gained by working in different environments and share some of my thoughts with you concerning the topic at hand.

I will take the liberty to address the second part of the topic first because I believe the job market potential for anyone is completely dependent upon the qualities that person brings to the market place. So, I will attempt to deal with qualities first and the market later because I believe that is the more logical sequence.

Qualities of a New Employee

Just to prove my point about the importance of the qualities a person brings to the market place I will ask a question. I would be very surprised if you can't honestly answer yes to it. The question is — do you know of any jobs which have been created by a company or organization solely for the purpose of getting a particular individual on staff? Two or three examples come quickly to my mind. Just because a certain person with certain qualities was available a position was created. I am just as confident in saying that positions are destroyed or workloads distributed among people because a certain individual becomes unavailable.

There are many qualities, including knowledge and skills which may be provided by formal education. But, as a famous U.S. philosopher, George Santayana stated, "the great difficulty in education is to get ex-

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perience out of ideas." Many colleges and universities are, quite successfully, combining work experience with classroom and laboratory study to combat the age-old experience problem. Unfortunately, the lack of continuity of candidates throughout the year or wrong-season timing makes it impossible for some employers to participate effectively in the co-op programs.

I know that employers harp on about experience and I expect they always will. But, I think attitude, ability to learn, talent for applying solutions, and a balanced life are just as important in selecting candidates for jobs as is education level and experience. I suppose my conclusion in this area was developed when I was working in public accounting. There I saw people with nearly equal education and experience levels thrown together in the student "bullpen." Some survived, some did not. Of those who survived the training period and examinations, some were promoted, some were let go while others looked for greener pastures. The people who made it were not those with the most experience going in — nobody had any.

Obviously, experience will be needed in order to fill many positions in many organizations. However, experience comes with a price tag which may be too costly. In those cases, on the job experience and training must be provided by the employer. All too often, this is subsequently neglected, and the employee is blamed for not performing properly even though the employer recognized the deficiencies at the time of hire or placement into the position.

I guess what I am really trying to get to here is that as a hiring decision maker, I am often faced with having to hire or place people who do not have all of the qualities we may be looking for in the ideal candidate. Sometimes I have to or I elect to pick candidates with less experience in favour of candidates who exhibit strong qualities in other areas.

It seems clear in some recent bestseller books on the subject of organizational strategies for the future that retention of top employees is going to be the key to success. The authors point out that only the companies prepared to provide exceptional service and high quality products are going to thrive. They also point out that in order to retain the best employees, who will be in high demand, it will be necessary to establish and maintain the right working environment. This right working environment will include a combination of adequate remuneration packages, a team approach to doing business and recognition of the individual's performance and personal life.

These projections about the future suggest to me that the qualities we should be looking for in new

employees are the ones I mentioned earlier — a proper attitude, an ability to learn, a talent for applying solutions to problems and a balanced life-style.

It is clear to me that attitude has more to do with job performance than almost anything. Those employees who don't get along well with the other members of the team are disruptive and unproductive. Those employees who don't care whether the customer gets the right product at the right time destroy sales. Those employees who take the company for everything they can get out of it are a source of inefficiency. Those employees who are not team players dilute everyone's effort. Those employees who plan to quit before they have made a contribution waste energies. Those employees who refuse to accept change hamper progress.

Let's turn now to ability to learn and problem solving talents. I am fully aware that you spend much of your time trying to determine and cope with abilities to learn and the differences which exist among individuals. I'm also aware that some students have a great ability to learn but never use that ability in school, at least. But, I'm sure you will agree with me that ability to learn is important in most jobs. (I hate to disappoint you; but, I must tell you everything one needs to know about a job is not taught in the classroom — the learning process must continue after graduation.) Employees must try to hire people who can and will continue to learn. Determining who can learn is no easier for us than it is for educators.

Ability to use knowledge and resources to solve problems, create ideas, improve efficiency, sell products or offer a new service is what every employer looks for in the people in the organization. Creative problem solving and idea innovation are street lights along the path of success.

The last quality I want to spend some time discussing is a balanced life. It has taken me a long time to really come to appreciate the need to keep things in proper perspectives in my own life. Even though I recognize that need, I still don't always do it well — the result of letting things get out of balance for me is stress, strained relationships, inefficiency, deteriorating health and a bad attitude. Consequently, I think it is important for an employee team that the individuals on it should have balance in their lives. They should recognize there is more to life than an unhealthy preoccupation with either work or play and they must realize family does count.

I suppose Helen Keller had some of the qualities I have been talking about in mind when she wrote — "I have four things to learn in life:

- To think clearly without hurry or confusion;
- To love everybody sincerely;
- To act in everything with the highest motives;
- To trust God unhesitatingly."

I hope you are not getting the impression that I think education and scholastic achievement is unimportant when it comes to considering the qualities

of new employees. What I really had intended to convey was the notion that for every position there is an assumed minimum education and/or experience level requirement. Once that level is satisfied by a candidate, then the other qualities I have been discussing are considered. Successful completion of a particular course or program provides a reference for the amount and type of knowledge a candidate brings to the job. The grades provide an indication of ability to learn and solve problems. References, both personal and work related, provide an indication of attitude and balance in life.

Interviewing is the primary method used by employers to discover the qualities of a candidate. Most of the time I find interviewing for positions to be a fascinating experience. But at times it can be downright frustrating. This is particularly true when you know two minutes into an interview that the candidate is unsuitable and you feel obligated to spend at least twenty minutes with the person who has driven 250 miles to get there. Interviewing is downright maddening when the candidate adopts a know-it-all attitude and tries to overpower the interviewers. Interviewing is downright painful when the candidate is unable to put together an answer of more than three words or provides vague answers which appear to be cover-ups for something. However it is a real pleasure to sit down with someone who is enthusiastic about our company, knows what he or she is trying to accomplish, has some idea how to help this new employer and asks intelligent questions about things other than remuneration.

The one quality I have not yet mentioned, but the one I am sure all employers look for in most candidates is management ability potential. Although management ability potential for positions beyond the one for which the candidate is being considered is not important in the short-term, it could be important in the long-term. It is much more effective and efficient to promote from within the organization than to parachute in middle or upper management people in most cases. Therefore, when hiring, management potential should be considered — it could be the one resource which will be in short supply in the future.

It is unfortunate that it is very difficult to determine when hiring new college graduates who will and who will not be a good manager. Management seems to be a skill which is developed not knowledge which is learned; it can't be tested for except in the fire of the work environment. It is also unfortunate that managers have to be taken from the ranks of the successful "do-ers" to take on the role of the "be-ers" — sometimes this is counterproductive, but it seems to be the only acceptable way to reward those who are doing a good job. Perhaps I would make my point better if I said I think it's wrong to take some teachers out of the classroom to make them administrators just because they are good teachers. Perhaps they should be left in the classroom and given an opportunity to earn just as

much as if they were administrators and hire other people to do the management work.

I suppose the conclusion to what I have been saying is yes, employers are really interested in the things you always thought were of interest to us. Yes, we want bright, hard working, dedicated, committed, honest, effective, flexible, stable, sensitive people who communicate well and are looking for long-term career opportunities. I am also saying we employers are interested in people with management skills and proper background knowledge. But, we recognize the difficulty teachers have in motivating students to concentrate on management concerns when those students have not been exposed to the environment where those skills will be required.

Let me now turn my attention to the other part of the topic — job opportunities in agriculture. Quite honestly, I'm not sure how to approach this topic because as the old saying goes — "the pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; the optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

Perhaps I can travel the middle road by saying, I think much of the current job market potential for agriculture graduates is in areas where many of the graduates prefer not to look. However, it also appears clear to me that the absolute number of job openings has decreased and the number of people pursuing those fewer positions has increased.

I believe that the decrease in graduates returning directly to the farm as a result of the financial problems at that level has increased the number of new graduates seeking employment. At the same time, those graduates of a few years ago who had anticipated going to the farm after a few years work are holding onto their jobs for dear life. The result is fewer jobs are available to new graduates. Further complications to the situation include the reduction of employees by farm equipment suppliers to match the direction of sales and the rationalization of other agri-businesses to improve efficiency.

I don't mean to brag, but when I look around our organization, I am excited by the fact that over the last year we have added people to our sales, production, research and administration staffs. Besides additions we have also replaced people who have resigned. New graduates hired included people with degrees as well as diplomas depending upon the area of work. Sales people for our Canadian seed and agricultural chemicals distribution business included both men and women; some held agriculture degrees, others agriculture diplomas. In the U.S. we hired six new people to help us market seed there — five were college graduates — the exception was our top salesman who gained experience in sales by selling truck tires. The appointments to our research staff included people with agriculture degrees and diplomas, and we sent one of our research women back to school for a master's degree. Almost all of our administrative staff additions were either college graduates or are

working on diplomas. We also have the luxury of having some part-time staff with agriculture diplomas driving trucks for us.

We in the Kingroup of companies will continue to need agriculture graduates at all levels from technicians in our labs and fields, to salespersons, to office staff, to plant breeders, to grain traders and to computer programmers. It is essential that these people have up-to-date technical agriculture knowledge and be comfortable enough with computers to use the systems we have available on our mainframe and PC's.

I strongly suspect our needs are very much like the needs of many other agri-businesses who supply crop inputs, feed, veterinary supplies, equipment and machinery. Our needs are also similar to those who purchase products from farmers or process commodities for food production.

The one area of potential employment for agriculture graduates which has not been vigorously pursued is the financial and management services areas. It seems to me that with the improvements in financial management which are taking place at the farm level, a number of opportunities exist for agriculture graduates who might pursue banking or accounting careers. Of course, in many cases formal studies beyond the diploma or undergraduate level will be required.

I think it is encouraging to witness the introduction of the new agriculture business administration program at the masters level at the University of Guelph. In the long-term I see this having a significant impact on agri-business management in this province. With the predicted shortage of business managers which is supposed to develop, this particular program and others like it in North America will improve the opportunities for agriculture graduates — particularly those who majored in production areas of study.

The opportunities at the farm owner level for graduates will continue to decrease for those who will not be able to return to substantial family holdings. But, those who will be able to follow their dream and manage the farm will have to do just that — manage the farm. For that reason, those returning to farming will have to accept the realities of having to deal with as much paperwork as their city cousin faces in managing a business of a similar size.

Where do other opportunities and challenges lie for those interested in agriculture careers? Perhaps a goodly number can be employed to solve the international problems of the world and once and for all find a way to feed the hungry, eliminate the surpluses, wipe out persecution and bring peace among nations. Others will be required to carry out the very important job of developing new and better ways to produce food and improve lifestyle and returns for our primary producers — the exotica of biotechnology is in its infancy. Still others will be required to carry out your duties — to teach those who will have to carry on.