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Food For Thought Series

The Relative Importance of Education

ACCORDING to one of the biggest newspapers in Denmark, Børsen, the notion that all executives and chairmen in Denmark have built their careers on extensive university education is not entirely accurate. The bigger picture reveals significant variances, and includes a surprising number of executives without a university education. Is it always important for an executive to have a university degree, and exactly how important is it?

Extensive education from well-respected universities seldom hinders executives from taking on business-critical roles in big organizations. At the same time, the lack of such credentials does not necessarily make an executive less qualified. Often candidates with less, or even non-existent university education have invested in their professional development by taking courses or other types of training at highly regarded business schools, many located abroad.

In general, education is important because it provides candidates with a sound theoretical foundation that informs decision-making and gives a point of departure when entering new, unknown organizations with complex problems in challenging situations. Early in one's career, education affords access to better jobs, since those achievements are often the primary measure hiring managers have for assessing candidates. Later on, professional experience along with continuous skills development and training

takes a more prominent role in one's career, and the importance of university degrees diminish. The importance of education also varies between specific positions, levels of seniority and industry. Each industry and sector has its own tendencies and follow different patterns for hiring candidates.

Inevitably some jobs demand more specialised education than others. For example, a senior management role in the financial sector or within pharma/healthcare will likely require the deep technical expertise gained through formal university education. An equivalent role in a production company or within the construction industry may be less education-dependent.

Personality contributes to individual success

Apart from education, important factors to consider such as personality traits and mindset contribute to a candidate's professional development. A candidate's inclination to learn and develop new skills, capitalize on opportunities and make the right decisions over the course of one's career. These factors, combined with education and a career built on solid performance in the right jobs, are all fundamental to an individual's ability to achieve professional success and create a life that is meaningful.

University education, including undergraduate and graduate degrees, does not continue to be as important throughout a candidate's life as it is in the beginning. Many young professionals complete their education in their mid-twenties, and seldom have more than a couple of years' work experience. Thus education takes on more weight. The opposite is true when candidates have completed their degrees 15 or more years earlier, and have at least 15 years of work experience. At this stage the importance of education tends to decrease.

Education is important later in a candidate's professional life in another sense. Global conglomerates continuously seek professionals who wish to enhance their competencies and learn throughout their careers by pursuing further training, thereby staying competitive with younger, freshly educated candidates who possess the latest knowledge and skills. The desire to continue learning is an attractive attribute, which companies value and look for in new hires. It demonstrates an attitude toward education as a lifelong journey.

Executive education

While there are numerous options for executive education, an MBA is often perceived as the ultimate, and with good reason. Many universities offer very well thought-out, substantive and relevant MBA programs for executives who may not have participated in formal education for many years. Yet an MBA is not feasible for everyone, as attaining one is expensive and time-consuming. Also keep in-mind an MBA does not guarantee a CEO role – nor does the lack of an MBA necessarily bar a person from becoming a CEO.

An MBA increases one's market value and enables the creation of an outstanding international network. It also cultivates essential leadership competencies that can be vital to career advancement. This is not to say that valuable knowledge, an international network and out-standing leadership competencies cannot be acquired elsewhere. They can.

Many educational institutions offer continuing executive education and courses that ultimately serve the same purpose as getting an MBA: to grow professionally, acquire new skills and enhance existing competencies. Professional training and courses may be just as valuable as a traditional MBA, depending on the skills required, industry, and level of specialization.

Personal choice matters in the end

It comes down to the personal choices a candidate has made regarding his or her education, and the motives behind those choices. If the reasoning underlying an individual's choice of educational path is sound, an MBA may not necessarily be given preference.

The takeaways are that education is required for advancement in some industries, and less in others. Its importance also varies greatly with age, gradually decreasing later in life, as competence is more often measured in terms of results. Education is always important, however, in the sense that continuing to improve and develop as a professional is embraced as an on-going and continuous practice over the course of one's lifetime.



Food For Thought is a series highlighting discussions about candidates, organizations, assessments and boards. Kenneth V. Mortensen is Co-Founder and Managing Partner of Boyden Denmark. He developed a well-deserved reputation as being very client and candidate driven, with a passion for delivery and results. His success is grounded in his fundamental belief in the correlation between human behaviour and financial performance.

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