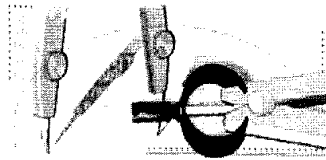


Transferable Skills are Key to Success



The Buzz

What do a baker and a concrete mixer have in common? That might sound like a riddle, but these two jobs are very similar if you know about transferable skills.

A 59-year-old concrete mixer became a baker when he lost his job, although he had never baked before in his life. As a concrete mixer, the man was a great worker. With 22 years of experience he knew all the concrete applications inside out and backwards, but when they were computerized he lost his job. He was able to succeed by transferring the skills he used as a concrete mixer to a new job in a production bakery.

But what on earth does baking have to do with mixing concrete? "These people essentially do the same thing -- they mix, weigh and proportion material," says Steve Gallison, the director of Professional Services Group, a firm in Maryland that connects people and jobs. He worked with the concrete mixer to help him identify his skill set and find a new job where his skills were needed.

"He [the concrete mixer] was blown away. He said, 'I've never compared what I do to what a baker does,'" Gallison says. When the concrete mixer started looking into baking he said to Gallison, "Well, I'd smell a lot better at the end of the day."

So he went for it. He found production bakeries in his area, filled out applications, and got an interview. Although he had no baking experience, he got a job and was able to negotiate for a better salary because of his skills.

Gallison says, "He's just as happy as can be" in the new job. "Transferable skills are really important to be looked at....It's up to the individual -- the candidate -- to tell them [the employer] the obvious, because the obvious isn't so obvious sometimes."

The concrete mixer was able to transfer his skills because he was able to recognize them, and then to mobilize them in a new situation at a bakery. This is what Nancy Johnston, and other academics, would call a "far transfer."

Johnston is a program manager in the co-op education department of a university. She has done a lot of research on transferable skills and teaches students how they can use these skills to their advantage.

There are two kinds of transfers that take place. A "near transfer" occurs between two situations that are similar. For example, if the concrete mixer who lost his job at company A got a new job as a concrete mixer at company B, he would make a near skill transfer. He would be doing the same job, but making a few adjustments to fit into the new company.

A "far transfer" is when two situations appear to be very far apart, like baking and concrete mixing. Far transfers are not as common. "If the learner, or person in possession of those skills does not recognize the second environment as being similar enough, people will not transfer in a far context," Johnston says.

"That's frightening, because most of our students see what they learn in school versus what's needed in the workplace as far," she says. "The longer that you see that it's far, the less likely -- in fact very unlikely -- it is that you will mobilize those skills that are potentially transferable."

So how do you take the leap from recognizing what skills you have to mobilizing those skills in a new and different situation? Johnston says the cornerstone is "developing meta-cognitive thinking." What that means is that you have to step back and think, debate, discuss, and review something you have thought, experienced or learned.

To increase your "meta-cognition," you can reflect, question yourself, and try to see things as more near than far. Ask yourself:

- where did I learn that skill?
- how did I learn that skill?
- where have I transferred that skill?
- how did I use it when I transferred it?
- was it a conscious transfer, or did I just do it?
- where else could I use that same skill?

"If you don't reflect, you probably won't learn half as much as you could have, or your learning is trapped – stuck in the context it was learned," Johnston says. "Awareness is only the first step. You must also have the self confidence to bring skills to a new situation and apply them."

Damir Joseph Stimac, author of *Winning Career Strategies*, agrees that transferable skills are important. He suggests you shouldn't panic if you are out of a job.

"Approximately 80 percent of the skills required to do any job are skills we've already acquired," he says, "either through past jobs, volunteer work, organizing a fund-raiser, planning an event or leading a team."

Talents like managing, negotiating, organizing and persuading are known as transferable skills. And they're not limited to one academic discipline, but are transferable to many occupations. Everyone has them to some degree. The trick is to identify them and find where you're lacking.

According to Stimac, the top skills that many managers look for in prospective employees revolve around today's team-based environments. "Individuals need to possess decision-making, leadership and interpersonal skills in order to interact with others on all levels," he says.

For instance, can you respond to situations quickly and demonstrate flexibility? Direct group activities? Express ideas well, written and verbally, in a logical fashion? If you can, you're ahead of the game. If you can't, don't worry just yet. These are skills you can learn.

Janet McDougall is the president of McDougall Scientific, Ltd., a company that provides statistical and data support to its clients. She has a slightly different take on what she looks for in a new worker.

"Prospective employees need to be able to set priorities and deadlines. They do this by understanding the goals and objectives of the company and how their day-to-day work helps the company achieve these goals," she says. "They also need to have the ability to learn new things, with little or no encouragement, through books, journals, personal contacts, courses or experience."

She says that each employee is responsible for his or her own career development. This is not only to keep current, but to grow within the company and take on new responsibilities.

McDougall also requires that new employees have a service-oriented attitude. They've got to learn the best way of doing their job and how to get it done efficiently. Additionally, they need to know their clients' needs and how to satisfy them.

"This includes internal as well as external customers. The most valued employees are team members who know and understand their role and how they can work with others to help not only meet, but exceed the external clients' needs," McDougall says.

"It is impossible to shut down and not react to any situation because life is stressful and there's always going to be some things that give us stress"

McDougall's not alone. According to a report prepared by Pamela Kidder and Bobbie Ryan for the U.S. Navy, people need some marketable skills just to get a foot in the door. As budgets are slashed, there are fewer resources to train unskilled people. Preference is always given to someone who can walk in the door and "hit the floor running."

So remember, you don't have to start over and learn a whole new set of skills to begin a different career. Changing careers isn't about radical change. It's about translating your experience and your expertise into transferable, marketable skills.

If you need formal training, many of the skills necessary to advance your career can be learned in a semester or less by taking the right course. Community colleges, local universities and business schools are the most obvious places to look. But don't discount specialty classes offered by career consultants, online organizations or correspondence schools.

After some soul searching you'll most likely realize you're far more marketable than you ever imagined. And you'll also probably identify some areas in which you need to improve. But you will finally have a blueprint, a course of action. You can start to take command and responsibility of your own career.

Links

Career Talk

A comprehensive site – check out Career Talk with Damir Joseph Stimac
<http://www.careertalk.com/>

Transferable Skill Survey

Take an online transferable skills survey
<http://www.d.umn.edu/student/loon/car/self/>

Transferable Skills

Some related articles can be found at Quintessential Careers
http://www.quintcareers.com/transferable_skills.html

Sometimes job candidates think that **technical or school related skills are the only one's that are required to do a job**, which is the minimum, but employers are looking for **transferable skills or "soft skills."** These are important to identify, as they can help you acquire and keep a job. Look for examples to talk about in your interview that resemble these skills.....

- *Communication* - Communicating effectively requires one to interact with a variety of individuals and groups to gather, integrate, plan and convey information. This means that one is **good one-on-one, in groups, interpersonally, in writing business documents, conveying research and even preparing e-mails, lotus notes and memos.** In this fast paced environment it is important to not just be task oriented, but relationships sensitive. Those who understand **cultural diversity** and respect other's viewpoints will be highly appreciated, as well as those who convey good communication through their actions and appearance.
- *Management Skills with People and Tasks* - Workers must be able to **coordinate the work of peers, make decisions, motivate and influence** with recognition of **political and ethical considerations.** More and more accountability is stringent so planning to meet objectives and constantly evaluate progress and handle conflict along the way is important. Learn the **art of negotiation to handle situations with flexibility and quickness.** The most popular way of managing people and tasks today are in a team environment. **Learn to be a team player.** The bottom line of knowing how to manage people is knowing how to help others. Keeping a **caring attitude** with you when working with others is just as important as going the extra mile.
- *Leadership Skills* - Everyone needs to know how to **coordinate, guide, and facilitate project goals,** in a leadership role. Know how to work with the appropriate people and see that outcomes are measurable. Management today does not tend to instruct as much as it engages in a collaborative team. **Leading could also mean to mentor, coach, guide,** or direct. Today it is less likely that you will be promoted to a manager and to be a leader of team projects. Leading is complicated because tasks are complicated. **Put yourself in a leadership role when you can.** You never know when a co-worker will be ill - even if no emergency exists, decisions today are acted upon more quickly.
- *Decision Making and Problem Solving Skills* - Decision-making and problem solving are skills that employers are very concerned about. **Poor choices cost companies tremendous amounts of money.** Corporate America says that people are shying away from decision making and turning to others for the answer. **A decision isn't simply a scientific or logical analysis of pros and cons. Be aware of your emotions,** what value the problem plays in your work, the present circumstances and the

level of commitment. **So make an informed decision.** It requires a careful weighing of all sides of an issue and time, thorough knowledge, and even defining the problem properly. It also requires commitment and responsibility, because we may not be familiar with the problem we are working on and need to follow it through. Everyone comes from different value systems, circumstances and social influences and we have to be **careful to evaluate other people's perspectives.** In today's work environment the currency and quality of the information we use to make the decision is vital. Sometimes **certainty of the outcome of a decision is not absolute.** At the least we have to determine how far we have narrowed the risks.

- *Conflict Management Skills* - When you are coordinating work tasks, **conflicts can arise from different information, pressures, beliefs and motivations.** Know how to **handle conflicts with confidence,** utilizing the ethics and politics needed to find appropriate solutions, evaluate and monitor progress.
- *Innovative and Change Oriented Skills* -Business and industry require **constant change.** Don't be afraid to be **creative, innovative and adapt and re-develop your role.** **Learn to take risks and deal with potential negative consequences. Step out of your safety zone and challenge ideas.** Show initiative and volunteer. Have the faith and confidence to experiment and risk change. Have vision because it is important to the future.