



## **The recruitment of knowledgeable people**

**Patrick Onions, The Knowledge Studio discussion forum, 30 April 2011**

Over the last two years I have spoken to many graduates and prospective graduates about the problems they have encountered in finding work. We've all been puzzled by the number of Masters and PhD students, including those with extensive work experience, who feel they have had to disguise their qualifications in order to find work. Even online postgraduate forums confirm this phenomenon is widespread, so what does this say about recruitment of highly qualified people in the UK today?

Is there a poor perception of the value of postgraduate degrees? Are degrees from 'new' UK universities doing more damage to one's work prospects than good? Why would a candidate consider the part-time work experience they gained whilst studying, such as serving in a pizza shop or driving a taxi, more important to their CV than reporting an advanced degree from a UK university? Why would an intelligent motivated person be concerned about being perceived as 'over-qualified'?

Arguments that I have encountered in industry and academia against employing a candidate with an advanced degree include: their feeling entitled to more money, being too abstract or too theoretical, having not enough 'real-life' experience, being less likely to fit in with unqualified people, likely to have a patronising attitude, being a challenge to the boss, being over-qualified, and being likely to move on when a 'better' job presents itself.

Perhaps a brief examination of each of these objections will clarify matters somewhat...

An **ambitious** employee sooner or later will want more, and that promotion or increase could come as a result of doing a better job. Someone with the motivation and intelligence to study at an advanced level is arguably able to reach that position sooner. Is it the policy of the organisation to keep talented individuals in their place, or to assist or allow them in their upward career (to mutual benefit)?

A [theoretical](#) background should be useful. Curricula are usually designed to expose the student to the breadth of the subject and to its high level mechanisms through published theory. Theory should be up to date and gathered from many sources, tested in journals, and even applied to many case studies. And as Kurt Lewin said, “there is nothing as practical as a good theory.” Practitioners on the other hand are immersed in detail and limited in their time to read and access wider experience. Unless the employer requires programmable robots, if they wish to remain competitive in the knowledge economy they should actively seek theoretical knowledge that expands and complements their practice. Or is business telling universities that their advanced degrees are out of touch?

Are graduates an [elite minority](#)? Enormous effort was expended by the UK government over the last decade to increase the percentage of school leavers going on to tertiary education. With a published target of 50%, and achieving around 40%, it is strange then that university educated people should be regarded (or even think of themselves) as patronising and out of place with unqualified people. Do universities engender ‘wrong’ attitudes in graduates, are work colleagues experiencing this attitude from graduates, or is this an old prejudice lingering from a class-based society?

Turning to the nature of [experience](#), it takes any new employee time to start being productive. Various numbers are quoted, with three months typically being regarded as the time it takes to settle into a job. Would a person who has no advanced degree and who has worked with a competitor firm be more efficient and settle down quicker than someone who has more general experience and an advanced degree? That would presumably depend on the nature of the work and on what the individuals had learnt prior to joining, but I suspect that the degreed person would be able to learn quicker and come with fewer ‘bad’ habits than someone with 10 years of sitting in the same job day-in-day-out at another firm. Experience as defined by the number of years on a job is not a good measure of ability.

An educated person may be more able or more motivated to [move on](#), but does this not say as much about the organisation’s inability to manage and promote talented people as it does about the cost of recruitment and disruption?

Notwithstanding the above, I would have expected that any [unexplained gaps](#) on a CV would be obvious to experienced recruitment agents and Human Resource departments, especially four or five year PhDs and two-year Masters. Attempts to disguise such gaps would surely be unravelled during a proper interview, and then raise questions about the candidates’ honesty and attitudes?

Recruiters who turn highly educated people away on the grounds of being ‘over-qualified’ may want to consider whether their reasons are sound or whether they are acting as ‘box-tickers’ who are doing their clients a disservice. Firms that filter out educated people should properly evaluate the role that knowledge and knowledgeable people can or should play in their future. And highly educated jobseekers should think long and hard whether they want to work for any organisation that regards them as ‘over-qualified’. There are alternatives, and smaller firms in particular can be more dynamic, more nurturing, need knowledge to remain competitive and are more receptive to bright people who can help them.