

Previous work experience not always a positive for a new job

February 23 2009

Employees with previous work experience bring valuable knowledge and skills to their new jobs - but some of what they learned may actually hurt their work performance.

A study of telephone call center employees is one of the first to suggest that previous work experience isn't all positive for new employees. Workers may keep some old habits and ways of doing things that hurt performance in their new roles.

"Organizations pay a premium for workers with job experience that will allow them to just step in and start contributing immediately," said Steffanie Wilk, co-author of the study and associate professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"But what employers don't realize is that some of what their employees learned in previous jobs will end up being a negative."

While employers have always assumed that it is good for new employees to have prior experience, previous research has not always found such a clear advantage, Wilk said. This study is one of the first that has been able to explain why, by separating the positive and negative effects of prior employment experience on a current job.

Wilk conducted the study with Gina Dokko of the Stern School of Business at New York University and Nancy Rothbard from The

Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Their research appears in the current issue of the journal *Organization Science*.

The researchers conducted the study with data from 771 employees and job applicants of two call centers for a major U.S. insurance firm. They examined the employees' job performance evaluations and separate ratings of the employees' work-related skills and knowledge.

The researchers compared these performance and skills evaluations with the employees' prior work histories and experience at the current firm, to find any relationships.

As expected, the results showed that prior work experience at other firms did lead to higher levels of skill and knowledge, which led to better performance reviews at the insurance company.

However, once the researchers took into account the higher levels of skill and knowledge brought from former jobs, previous experience actually led to lower performance at the insurance company.

In other words, the positive effects of knowledge and skill brought by experienced employees were being at least somewhat balanced by negative factors.

"We found evidence suggesting that experience brings unforeseen costs and well as benefits," Wilk said. "That's one reason why previous studies haven't found prior experience to be the positive that everyone assumed it would be."

In this particular study, Wilk said the positives that came from previous work experience did outweigh the negatives. However, that may not be true in every workplace, and more research needs to be done to better understand that balance.

So what are the costs that could come with previous experience? Wilk and her colleagues believe that workers brought old habits and ways of doing things from their previous jobs that didn't necessarily work at their new jobs. The key to success, then, would be for employees to adapt to their new surroundings by accepting new ways of doing things and shedding their old, ineffective habits. Workers without such habits might find this easier to do.

To measure this, the researchers surveyed supervisors at the insurance company, asking them to rate their subordinates on measures of adaptability. They found that workers who scored high on adaptability were less likely to suffer from the negative effects of prior work experience.

Another factor in how well employees do at their new jobs has to do with cultural fit: does their new company have a culture consistent with what workers knew from previous jobs? If so, they will probably have a more positive experience, Wilk said.

The researchers surveyed a subset of employees, asking them how well they fit in with the insurance company's culture.

Again, employees who said they fit in with the current company's culture didn't suffer as much from the downside that generally came from previous work experience.

"If the norms of your new company fit in with your expectations from previous jobs, it will be much easier to become a part of the company and perform well," she said.

Results also showed that the longer employees were with the insurance company, the less that experience from previous jobs helped with their performance. However, the negative effects from previous experience

lingered much longer, according to the findings.

"That was surprising to us," she said. "That suggests that the rigidities found in some workers are very stable, and that bad habits from previous jobs don't die easily."

The results indicate that individual differences in workers' personality traits - particularly adaptability - may be key in determining how successful they will be in a new job. More research needs to be done to explore these individual differences, she said.

"Employees need to realize that not everything they learned in previous jobs is going to help them in a new job," Wilk said. "They need to be sensitive to the context of their new organization and be willing and able to adapt to their new surroundings, even if that means unlearning techniques or ways of doing things they have developed in prior jobs."

As for employers, they may need to re-think how they socialize and train new employees and how much of a premium they are willing to pay for prior experience.

"Managers tend to assume that employees with previous experience don't need as much guidance and hand-holding as inexperienced workers," she said. "But experienced workers may actually need more help, because they have to shake off the ineffective habits from old jobs and learn how to best serve their new employer."

Source: Ohio State University

Citation: Previous work experience not always a positive for a new job (2009, February 23)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-02-previous-positive-job.html>

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