

Do academics really matter?

The debate on what academic success means will never end. But do better grades indicate a better employee?

Ramesh Shah was my high school math teacher who managed to inspire, teach and tyrannize us. I recently re-connected with him and asked him if he believed that academic success in school has any connection with workplace success.



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His honest answer was "absolutely not." He said to get ahead in school you need to do everything alone but in the workplace you need to get everything done through other people.

Grades, exams, report cards can give nightmares and anxiety for children and parents. I really wonder what do they actually represent. I work for a people supply chain firm that suffers because India's skill deficit leads to continuous pressure from clients to find better ways to identify high performers before they are hired. Last year we hired over a lakh of people, against the requirement of 10 lakh.

In our quest to effectively filter candidates, sometimes our clients and my recruiters use the easy proxy of academics to filter candidates. But data seems to suggest that this laziness confuses correlation with causation.

When I talk about academic success I mean grades. When I talk about success I mean workplace success and not success in life because happiness, kindness, peace of mind and love have nothing to do with workplace success. But now I do believe that academics may be a poor predictor for workplace success. This hardly implies that good academics are a guarantee for workplace failure.

Einstein once said that Education is what is left behind after you have forgotten what you learnt in the classroom. I will argue that this applies ferociously to

the workplace particularly as you climb higher in the organisation since leadership, entrepreneurship and strategy are more art than science.

I would propose three hypotheses about non-academic skills that are key to workplace success: a) a strong education is more important than training, b) Chemistry is more important than Biology and, c) Synthesis is more important than Analysis.

The first point came up at a recent education reform conference where my comment that our system was overly focused on grades and did not teach our kids learning for earning invoked a violent response from an educationist who said education taught learning to live. But both of us were right; trainers cannot teach youth in six months what they should have learnt in 12 years. We can train them to be a salesman, handle customers, be an electrician or bar bender but we need and cannot teach is them to be confident, curious, creative, risk takers, and team players.

Early in my career I would look for biology in candidates; well spoken, cerebral, high academics, good looking, smart, raw intelligence and much else. Now I realise chemistry is more important; the ability to get along with people, the realisation that for you to win the other person does not have to lose, and the ability to get things done through people who do not or will not take your orders.

Finally, when I came out of business school I believed that the key skill was analysis; taking a problem and breaking it into smaller pieces. As I grow older,

I realise the key skill is synthesis (just another word for creativity and imagination) and dealing with uncertainty. There is never perfect information. In fact if there is perfect information even a clerk can make the decisions a CEO does.

I hope this did not sound like an argument against hard work. Academic success, for all its weaknesses, is surely an indicator of hard work, stress management and working with deadlines. All of these are valuable qualities in any workplace. But they are neither necessary nor sufficient for workplace success.

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