

**Learn While on the Job:
A High School Graduate Climbs into Top Management Heading IT and
Earns an MBA Degree to Make Further Career Progress**

Donald W. Mitchell

More people are limited by their beliefs than by the realities of the opportunities. Here are two questions to help you check on your beliefs:

1. Do you believe that only those with advanced degrees can gain and succeed in senior management positions at top-performing companies?

2. Do you think that leading a technical team isn't possible unless you graduated from a top college?

If you answered “yes” to either of these questions, you are mistaken. You may be confusing credentials that are helpful for getting job interviews with the knowledge and skill required to perform well as a leader in a successful organization. Let me explain.

Most people who are in senior management positions or who lead technical teams do have college or graduate degrees from excellent schools. All but a few of those leaders completed their educations before they started working at career-related jobs.

As new graduates, these people faced a substantial challenge: Everything learned in school had to be applied in a work environment they were just learning about. There's a problem with this approach to preparing for a career: New graduates may not understand how to connect their learning to what needs to be done at work.

For instance, unless someone says to you, “Apply the Pythagorean theorem (an understanding of geometric relationships that allows you to calculate the length of one side of a right triangle when you know the length of the other two sides) in this way,” you may not realize that you should be taking that aspect of your geometry training and using it to gain insight into the work-related questions you need to answer.

Many business leaders have recognized that it's difficult to properly apply theoretical knowledge to practical problems without a lot of practical experience, and many leaders have responded by providing task-specific training at work. Researchers have shown that this work-centered approach to learning is a good idea when learners have lots of chances to apply new learning right away. When that happens, the new knowledge and skills are much more often applied correctly. The lesson is that learning about a theory and practicing how to apply the theory should never be very far apart in time.

Learning through on-the-job training is fine if your company's leaders provide the opportunity, but today many organizational leaders prefer to hire people with proven skills and experience rather than upgrade the skills and experience of those who already work for their organizations. As a result, many employees run the risk of becoming stuck in low-level jobs because they have rusty skills that they aren't sure about when or how to apply to their work.

What can ambitious employees do then? Well, they had better take charge of their education and be sure that they can apply what they learn to their work and future career. I was recently reminded of this lesson while corresponding with Mr. Christian Jönsson, a 2004 MBA graduate from Rushmore University.

After playing executive roles in several international companies, in 2001 Mr. Jönsson joined Oriflame Cosmetics, a successful, fast-growing global company, to direct its information technology (IT) operations. In that position, he has played a major role in setting the company's direction and implementing new strategic plans.

If you have met many people who head IT operations, you know that they usually either have impressive academic backgrounds in software and hardware or in finance. By contrast, in 2001 Mr. Jönsson had neither kind of academic background: He had a high school degree and was mostly self-educated about computing as well as about finance. Asked to characterize his pre-MBA education, Mr. Jönsson described himself as "well-educated but not highly educated." He had simply learned on the job by doing and supplemented those successful experiences by attending appropriate management seminars and IT courses.

In 2003, Mr. Jönsson realized that he could be even more effective at work if he gained a better and deeper understanding of international management and strategy, entrepreneurship, and finance. An MBA degree seemed like an obvious solution to fill those learning needs, but there was a problem: It's not practical for a company to lose its IT director for two years while he's away studying theory.

Mr. Jönsson recognized that a better approach would be to continue working and study business during nights and on weekends. If the new knowledge could be directly applied to Oriflame Cosmetics, that would be ideal. Discovering that Rushmore offered such a program, he easily persuaded Oriflame to underwrite his tuition fees.

In addition to knowledge about the specific business subjects that he studied while earning an MBA degree, Mr. Jönsson's studies also helped him gain skill in learning new subjects and applying new knowledge to his daily work. These successful new experiences built on the sound foundation of his proven ability to learn new skills at work.

Since graduating from Rushmore, Mr. Jönsson has used his MBA studies to help him implement several new programs for Oriflame and to participate more in the company's business planning. As an example of these new programs, Oriflame established a new governance method that ensures that IT issues will be dealt with in a more coherent and structured way.

In the future, Mr. Jönsson intends to keep learning while on the job. He is also thinking about starting a doctoral program at Rushmore and writing a business book.

With his respect for learning and applying knowledge to work, Mr. Jönsson would be the last person to advocate that people who want to be in top management skip college and graduate school.

What advice does he offer? He strongly urges everyone to get as much practical training as possible. He is convinced that the abilities to learn and apply new learning on the job are what separate high performers from everyone else. He also advocates that you should be continually gaining knowledge and improving your ability to use what you know at work.

Here are some questions to help you assess how well you are learning on the job:

1. What disciplines (ways of approaching problems) did you learn in school that you use at least once a month in your work?
2. What disciplines did you learn after you graduated that you use at least once a month in your work?
3. What disciplines do your peers and those in higher positions regularly use well that you do not yet apply well?
4. What disciplines could you learn from seminars, discipline-related courses, and in-house training that would allow you to be outstanding in applying critical disciplines to your work?
5. What do you need to learn to do to be able to enter top management?
6. How can you better combine your learning with on-the-job experience in applying what you learn?

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Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your effectiveness, visit

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