

Autodidactic learning – a key skill for the future

Why we are often unaware of our greatest strengths is something I discussed in the article “What external perceptions are good for”. Among all the unconscious competencies I encounter in my advisory work, one stands out time and again: autodidactic learning. Many people who possess this strength are not even familiar with the term. A pity – because it will matter more in the future.

Peter Näf

That teaching oneself is by no means a given is something I learned over 20 years ago, as a dyed-in-the-wool autodidact and then personnel consultant. I had placed a university graduate with a bank. During her probation period, I met her for lunch to discuss how she was settling into the new role. She told me that her line manager was dissatisfied – because she asked too many questions.

I was astonished. I had never heard anything like it. So, I asked what kind of questions she was asking. As an example, she mentioned asking about the difference between a registered share and a bearer share. I almost dropped my fork in shock. I must have stared at her in disbelief.

Learning doesn't stop after university

Because she immediately apologised and explained that this topic had not been covered at university. I advised her to get hold of some specialist literature and bring her knowledge up to the level expected in the role. Now she looked at me in disbelief. She assumed that the company was obliged to train her for her position.

That was when it became clear to me: autodidactic learning is not a given. And it does not automatically come with a degree. What matters is the ability to learn without a syllabus.

A challenge for recruiting

Is the expected lack of autodidactic ability one reason why companies place so much weight on formal education when recruiting? Certificates provide security – and they make candidates easier to compare. In short: recruiting loves certificates – autodidacts often don't have them. That is precisely why they are quickly filtered out in the selection process.

Yet many of the most impressive candidates I have encountered in my advisory practice are self-learners. As practitioners, they gained little from formal schooling – and went on to acquire the knowledge they needed through self-study in their professional lives. The many university drop-outs who went on to build successful companies did not become legends by accident.

Technological change is faster than any training programme. Even more important, then, is the ability to acquire knowledge independently.

As was to be expected after my conversation with the university graduate, she was dismissed during her probation period. For her, it was bitter. For me, expensive: I had to repay half of the placement fee.

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