

By Degrees

STAFF SMARTS: YOU SHOW HIGHLY EDUCATED EMPLOYEES THE CORPORATE ROPES—BUT YOU'D BETTER DO IT STEP BY STEP.

EVERY EMPLOYER WANTS TO HIRE SMART people, and now there may be even more from which to choose. It's projected that from 2000 to 2010, the number of jobs filled by people with Ph.D.s will increase nearly 25 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Ph.D.s are valued in jobs requiring a high degree of specialization. Computer science, health care and biotech are just a few areas where Ph.D.s are making their mark.

By Chris Penttila

But when Ph.D.s meet MBAs, watch out. "You have the action-oriented MBA [saying] 'What's the bottom line?' Then you have your Ph.D. who's the think tank," says Joshua Estrin, president of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, business consulting firm Concepts in Success. "It's a wonderful mix. But when it doesn't work, it's like oil and water."

Analyze This

Laura Schoppe understands the challenge of managing the highly educated. Schoppe is president of Fuentek, an intellectual property and technology management firm in Apex, North Carolina, with annual sales of more than \$1 million. At any given time, she oversees seven to 12 freelancers with advanced degrees working on projects for clients including NASA. Putting an MBA and a Ph.D. in the same room can be like watching two people speaking different languages. "In business school, we're trained to find the answer," says Schoppe, 41, who once worked for GE Aerospace and has an MBA and a master's in mechanical and aerospace engineering. "Ph.D.s are trained to think there could be more than one answer."

Schoppe remembers going back and forth with a Ph.D. when she worked at GE Aerospace. She wanted to wrap up a project while the Ph.D. wanted time for more analysis—and around and around they went. "Ph.D.s can postpone the need to finish things because they want to study it. But there are diminishing returns to this in a business environment," Schoppe says. "You need to reign them in."

Schoppe has learned to focus Ph.D.s on pieces of a project instead of the big picture. "The level of acceptable risk is different between MBAs and Ph.D.s," she says. "The more I break things down, the more comfortable they are."

Robbie Blinkoff straddles both sides as an entrepreneur with a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology. Blinkoff, 39, is co-founder of Context-Based Research Group, a company in Baltimore that hires Ph.D.s on a contract basis to design, research and analyze anthropologically based consumer research studies for Fortune 500 firms. Ph.D.s and marketing types throw around ideas in a room Blinkoff calls the "thinkuator." Keeping meetings productive "takes a good facilitator, someone who can take everyone's point of view, put it together and make a product out of it," Blinkoff says. His company's sales exceed \$1 million annually.

The challenge for the MBA is lighting a fire under the researcher, says John Baldoni, president of Baldoni Consulting, a leadership and communication consulting firm in Ann Arbor, Michigan. MBAs have to be aware of what they do and don't know when dealing with Ph.D.s. "Be deferential to their expertise," he says, "but keep a firm hand on the direction of the enterprise."

Live and Learn

Ph.D.s who have spent years in academia—an ultracompetitive environment where they are left to sink or swim on a project by professors—tend to have a negative view of management. "Their introduction to management is horrible," Baldoni says. "In [academia,] people are treated poorly."

Many Ph.D.s feel liberated making the switch to private industry, but going from working solo to collaborating with others can be tough. "The irony with Ph.D.s is we believe we're not control freaks. [But] in reality we are," Blinkoff says, adding that things work out well if managers are able to handle the energy Ph.D.s bring and funnel their abstract, theorizing core skill set into the business. Otherwise, their thinking style could create barriers. "If you're not a person who lives in the abstract, it can be pretty uncomfortable," Blinkoff says.

A business etiquette class that outlines how people in the company communicate and how projects are managed is a great way to introduce Ph.D.s to the world of quarterly goals, deadlines and budgets. "Provide them with training about what it's like to work in a corporate environment," says Carl Robinson, principal of Advanced Leadership Consulting, a Seattle-based executive coaching firm.

Finally, take advantage of a low-key event, such as a company lunch, to start casual conversations between MBAs and Ph.D.s on staff. What does it take to get an MBA vs. a Ph.D.? How do both sides approach projects differently? The answers could help you run your business even smarter.

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