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Build Your Skills Toolbox

Instead of titles and money, consider career moves that allow you to build a set of bankable, transferrable skills that will supercharge your prospects.

BY ROBIN FARMER

As new MBA holders head into the workforce and more-experienced business professionals consider new positions, Anthony R. Howard of Atlanta offers this advice: control your success by seeking jobs that hone an MBA's transferable skills.

These transferable skills, which are gained in and out of business school, empower individuals to adapt to new environments regardless of industry or function, says Howard, a consultant and technology advisor who provides enterprise technology solutions for the U.S. Defense Sector, Department of Justice, and the Department of Homeland Security.

The transferable skills of an MBA include problem solving, analytical thinking, self-discipline, initiative, project management and the ability to write and speak effectively and to make decisions based on data.

The only guarantee in any industry is that conditions will change, so MBA professionals need to acquire skills they can take anywhere, says Howard, who earned his MBA from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in 2002. “Applying the transferable skills you have learned to applicable use will strengthen them, so no matter what happens, you will be ready to take on new challenges.”

“Many [professionals with MBAs] are not judged by their potential. They are going to be judged by their achievements. Those who choose not to apply their transferable skills will find themselves at a disadvantage compared to other favored candidates and peers, and those who seamlessly integrate into the unwritten rules of the chosen organization,” Howard says.

Howard, who is also published author in addition to his consulting and day jobs, has joined other African-Americans with MBAs who say they control their success in the corporate arena and as entrepreneurs by con-

stantly improving and expanding the transferable abilities in their skills toolbox.

Transferable skills are by far the most important part of an MBA, says Steve Langerud, a workplace consultant and director of professional opportunities at DePauw University. “While there is certainly some important technical and content knowledge, when I speak with my clients about finding talent, they speak about transferable skills first, and assume they can teach them the content. Clearly, some roles require specific accounting, computer or other technical skills. But typically, candidates who do not have the transferable skills to support them are less attractive and effective,” says Langerud, who has worked with more than 15,000 people on career and workplace issues.

CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNICATION

Eric Allen, founder and president of Admit Advantage, an admissions consulting com-

pany, says from his experience in corporate America, confidence and communication can sometimes “play a role in flattening African-Americans careers.”

Allen, a 2004 Wharton School of Business graduate, says African-Americans tend to believe “if we have technical skills we will be successful. That’s a fallacy. We kind of believe if we go to the right schools and do the right things, success will happen. Technical competency is a given. From what I’ve seen in corporate America, a lot of it centers on the confidence to go out there and share those technical skills with others and promote yourself. That confidence leads to promotion. And people tend to promote people they like.”

While working at GE Healthcare Financial Services, a mentor convinced him of the importance of building his strongest skills so he could position himself for other opportunities. “Get really good at something so people know and you can then apply that exper-

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tise for other people," his mentor suggested. These skills are not automatically tied to a promotion, title or raise. Instead, only take a new position when it is challenging and only leave it when you have a built a transferrable skill set and have an opportunity to build more skills in the new position, his mentor advised. That's sound advice, "especially in this environment where everyone wants to work and move on," Allen says.


Stacey A. Gordon, a recruiter and career strategist who started her own recruiting company, went to business school knowing she needed more transferable skills. She earned her MBA with a focus on entrepreneurial management from Pepperdine University in 2007. Gordon wanted to obtain a deep understanding of company operations and management. She knew she was not interested in seeking a corporate position. "I really believe an MBA helps you with charting a business because it makes you look at all the different aspects of a business, from marketing, finance and accounting

to operations and strategy. That's what you really need. You have to have an understanding of all those different facets. Once you have that understanding, you can work in any industry," Gordon says.

Quincy Washington, a financial representative with Northwestern Mutual in Atlanta, agrees. He left his career in corporate financial services in 2009 and joined Northwestern Mutual to stay closer to his son. "I was able to take the skills that I had from my previous position working with corporate clients and translate them to working with individuals. It has also allowed me to utilize my MBA," he says. Strategic planning, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning and risk management comprehension are some "skills I use every day [when talking to my clients] that I got from my MBA experiences," he says. Washington also says his MBA "gives me an opportunity to help people I normally wouldn't be able to help had I not had these transferable skills."

For newly-minted MBA professionals, especially individuals wanting to switch careers, be clear about the transferable skills you have acquired, says Langerud, the work consultant. Transferable skills are developed both in the classroom and through experience. However, they are meaningless if you can't identify, articulate and use them, says Langerud, who finds that students seeking an MBA and job seekers frequently confuse skills and content.

"Employers hire skills, not content or experiences. So, candidates who can clearly identify, articulate, and put into context the skills they developed and demonstrated is critical. One of the skills employers value is the ability to learn and implement new content. But for the most part, content is fluid. So demonstrating that you can easily move between industries, clients, situations, products, etc. is more important than coming to a job with deep content knowledge," Langerud says.




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Anthony R. Howard



Aaron Fraser

“Get really good at something so people know and you can then apply that expertise for other people.”

“As one CEO says, ‘I assume you have good fundamentals in business. I need to know you will learn how we do business, get along with the other employees I’ve spent thousands of dollars training, engage my customers and not embarrass me in the community. I will teach you the rest!’”

YOU HAVE MORE SKILLS THAN YOU THINK

Most MBA students have skills from their MBA curriculum that they take for granted or are not aware of, such as communication, organizing, planning and management skills, says

Aaron Fraser, who earned a MBA in media management and finance from Metropolitan College of New York in 2009. An entrepreneur before he earned his MBA, Fraser went to business school to deepen his skillset.

“What the MBA did was taught me to be more analytical and to follow the process leading to starting a business. Prior to the MBA, I started businesses before, but I did not go through doing analysis, my strengths and weaknesses, my objectives and my threats or surveying the market. Now, along with these new skills, before I start a business I can calculate and project what I will accomplish in three years and whether I have a viable business plan given the market,” says Fraser, who is currently working on a start-up focused on social media.

A paradigm shift has occurred because of technology and entrepreneurs can go out and build a business from scratch and change the way business is done. He advises new business grads to do just that and sharpen their skills by following his path. “It is difficult for MBA students because they come a dime a dozen and they are coming a dime a dozen from stellar schools. My advice to new MBAs coming into the workforce is to get involved with innovators. Take a job with a startup and build your way up as opposed to trying to secure a job with an already established company, because you are fighting against people with stellar backgrounds from Yale and Harvard. When people are out of the workforce for a long period of time, they get depressed and they begin to think the MBA is invaluable. But the value is in what they make out of it,” Fraser says.

Howard, the solutions consultant and technology advisor from Atlanta, concurs. Knowing his strengths, and when to develop new ones, has paid off as he has worked with the world’s most prominent firms such as Black and Decker, Google and Ask.com. “In my role, and as a bestselling author, the transferable skills are what have kept me above water versus the technical skills,” he says. “Many of the technical skills and specific job-related skills can be learned over time or in classes.”

END

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