

Why you should be a generalist and specialist

BY MARVIN J. HUBERMAN

“The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”
— Archilochus (c. 650 BCE)

A number of years ago, a young lawyer came to my office suffering from a dilemma. She wanted to know if she should be a generalist, a well-rounded professional lawyer, or a specialist, concentrating her practice on a certain area of law.

Her law firm offered dual career paths — one for those lawyers who wanted to become generalists and the other for those interested in developing special training, knowledge, and experience in certain niche fields of law.

After discussing the matter at length, we agreed that her question was complex and multi-layered. The answer depended on many factors, including her personal, professional, and financial interests, passions, resources, needs and objectives, the nature and scope of the available professional opportunities, her confidence in the future, and how she wanted to position herself and be recognized in her firm and her preferred fields of law. We had a pleasant conversation, explored options, and I recommended that she become both a generalist and a specialist.

When we spoke again several years later, she informed me that she was successful and thriving in her law firm, practicing civil litigation generally, and was recognized as having an enhanced level of knowledge, skills, attributes, and substantial involvement in her specialty areas of personal injury and statutory accident

benefits law.

This incident reflects a widely shared attitude and an age-old debate of whether to be a generalist or a specialist. Each has its own approach. In the time of the Greek poet Archilochus, there were — metaphorically speaking — generalists known as “foxes” and specialists known as “hedgehogs.”

It’s an idea that’s popped up throughout history. Philosopher Isaiah Berlin expounded this idea in his 1953 essay titled “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” and Vikram Mansaramani also explored the idea in his 2012 TEDXYale talk called “The Power of Foxy Thinking.”

For the last two millennia, the specialists have outweighed the generalists — viewed as “jacks of all trades, masters of none” — in academia, accounting, banking, corporate governance, engineering, finance, information technology, law, medicine, and many other professions.

The world has valued, preferred, trusted, and rewarded specialists and their expertise with top-tier, lucrative assignments, higher fees, fame, recognition, titles, and promotions to top management and high-ranking leadership positions.

Historically, generalists have had a more difficult time getting noticed and being remembered. They are often labelled as uncommitted, lacking passion, perfunctory, and being unable to bring concrete expertise and insights to the table in order to solve particular problems for specific client situations.

But the world has dramatically changed. The age of the specialist is rapidly declining. Today, we live in an

extremely complex, fast-paced, technologically advanced, and highly interconnected global economy that needs both the generalist and the specialist in order to perform our jobs efficiently, effectively, and competitively. Both types can deliver high-quality professional services in a timely fashion and within the constraints of the available resources.

In many fields like law, which is afflicted with much uncertainty, ambiguity, and vague or ill-defined circumstances, people who have a depth of skill and expertise in one field but the ability to collaborate across disciplines and apply knowledge in areas of expertise that is not their own are in great demand.

The traditional specialist-versus-generalist model is being replaced with one that synthesizes the depth of the specialist and the breadth of the generalist. Best-selling author Warren Bennis has acknowledged the need in today’s elaborate business scene for the “broad specialist,” the expert who adds breadth to his or her depth, and the “deep generalist,” one who has not only knowledge and skills breadth but also depth.

This new approach by Bennis posits that in the coming years two kinds of people will dominate the rest, generalizing-specialists and specializing-generalists. This emerging model recognizes that the work of specialists and generalists is done at multiple vertical levels and across broad categories.

As author Carter Phipps, a leading voice in articulating the emerging evolutionary world view, says, “It’s becoming increasingly valuable to know a little bit

about a lot.” It is significant that the talent managers at Google are now looking for generalists as opposed to specialists to solve problems in its dynamic industry where the conditions are fast-changing.

True experts have the ability to merge cutting-edge and core sets of skills in a vertical specialization but in the matrix of a broader base. Using their modern enterprise sets of skills, they operate at work in cross-functional roles, participate in rotational programs, and serve in multi-divisional projects and enterprise-wide activities.

These nouveau specialists and generalists are becoming jacks of all trades, masters of many. They possess a broad range of knowledge and skills and the ability to perceive interconnectedness, to innovate, collaborate, predict, orchestrate, and master complex communications. They are confident and have the ability to think critically, analyze patterns, discern trends, and to see the “big picture.” They understand the content and the context. They excel at identifying and solving problems, and making practical decisions.

Since these talented people are generally focused on the overall business objectives and have the requisite knowledge, skills, attributes, and attitudes, they are uniquely poised to succeed.

That’s what happens when you combine a fox (generalist) with a hedgehog (specialist). You get a winning team. **LT**

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