

From Student to Practitioner
(Understand the Gap to Be Able to Build That Bridge)
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If you are a recent graduate, or supervising a recent graduate, I hope you find this discussion about the academe-practice gap useful. The gap refers to all the things that a new employee needs to understand and be able to do. Most cannot be taught in school. The doing environment of professional practice is much different from the learning environment of school. New hires have been programmed for 12 to 18 years in their student role, and it normally takes about 2 years of changing perspectives for a new employee to be able to cross the gap. Understanding the diverse reasons for the gap can accelerate crossing over. Here are some:

Students have been indoctrinated with school-days values, which include “learning for Learning’s sake”, “science/math perfection”, “thirst for knowledge”, and similar adages to keep them on task. And the ones best able to demonstrate that they memorized the prescribed knowledge are the ones that make the highest grades, and who enjoy the affirmation and awards for their intellectual prowess. The recent graduate has been programmed to memorize and to eagerly raise their hand in class to show that they can recall the facts. But the make-it-come-to-fruition values of the practice are not related to showing off how much you have learned. If you find yourself eager to reveal your intellectual ability to get the emotional high you have liked for being smart, you are probably still in your school-daze.

You need to continue to learn. I think that 95% of what I learned in school was useful. But school only accounted for about 5% of what I needed to know to be a professional, and as well, an adult partner. There is not enough time in school to prepare everyone for their own 40-year career and their 65-year adult life. Continue to learn, but learn only what is needed to be effective. Focus on training to generate ability, not on the intellectual appealing school-daze fundamentals of math and science. Balance perfection with sufficiency.

Students are unencumbered, free, independent individuals. They have peer-oriented values; and associated behaviors with dress, appearance, interpersonal transactions, punctuality, attraction, politics, etc. They behave in a way that generates approval by a youth-oriented culture. There is no need for them to temper disruptive viewpoints, statements, and behaviors. They can snub or disparage others who are lower in the social pecking order, and thereby enhance their stature in the “A”-group. By contrast, new employees are now within a company comprised of much older managers (perhaps representing their parents’ and grandparents’ values), who determine the employee’s future (affirmation, acceptance, salary, and promotion). Peers do not elevate you. Also, the new employee is now encumbered to make the workplace and teamwork effective. Appearance, opinions, and statements cannot be disruptive or distracting. They are now constrained for corporate success, and for acceptance by those who represent management. For 12-18 school years, the student developed a persona that led to social success

among students. A substantial change must happen. If you find yourself wanting to be true to your persona, consider that it was youth-developed. Consider that in High School, you did not behave like you did in kindergarten. As a professional partner, you cannot hold on to your privilege and entitlement that suited an unencumbered student.

There are no consequences to others if a student gets a wrong answer on a test, skips a class, or does not turn in an assignment. As an employee however, a wrong answer can have significant safety impact to the others in the company. And missing a due date can have substantial financial impact to the company. The new employee must also cross this transition from being unencumbered to accepting the grave responsibility for actions. In response to an error, shrugging it with, “My bad” is wholly unacceptable.

Students are novice learners. They are being taught fundamentals and concepts that they are seeing for the first time. For rapid understanding by the learner, for ease of grading, and for clear defense of the teacher-assigned grade, the concepts presented in the classroom are idealized and isolated from confounding context. By contrast, in practice, context is of paramount importance, and new employees need to understand how to work amid all the confounding complexity of reality. In school, students follow the teacher. But, a life-long learner must decide what is needed to learn, and how to self-assess sufficiency of learning. Context and self-guided learning are the reality across the gap.

Develop your potential. Pay attention to your habits. They are clues as to which side of the gap you are on. Find your way to cross the gap. Recognize when others have not crossed; and help them.

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