



SHARPEST SKILL SETS; Strategic planning, communication abilities are the executive qualities in demand now

KEVIN MCKEOUGH

493 words

31 January 2011

[Crain's Chicago Business](#)

CCHI

19

Volume 34; Number 5

English

(c) 2011 Crain Communications, Inc. All rights reserved.

From the financial crisis to emerging markets to rapid technological advances, the massive changes in business in recent years have left many executives wondering what new knowledge and capabilities they need to stay competitive. Executive recruiters, academics and other experts say what's most in demand now aren't specific abilities so much as enduring traits, such as foresight, nimble thinking and an ability to express oneself well.

Of course, it's still critical for executives to be up to date with the latest developments in their areas of expertise, whether it's new rules in finance or new techniques in management.

Beyond that, employers increasingly are seeking out people with the strategic thinking abilities needed to analyze the flow of new developments and prepare for what's next.

"The world is moving so fast, we can't afford not to anticipate what changes are coming down the pike and how we can modify and enhance the services we provide, the goods we manufacture and the ways we provide them," says Erika Hayes James, associate professor at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business and co-author of the book "Leading Under Pressure."

In addition, executives need to have what's been termed learning agility, the ability to innovate by thinking about business problems from different angles.

"The pace of change in business has accelerated, and with that comes the need for us to accelerate our learning," says Camille Mirshokrai, director of leadership development at Chicago-based consulting giant Accenture Ltd. "Agility is this ability to learn quickly and reinvent in order to stay ahead of the curve."

FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE?

One thing that hasn't changed but still remains a challenge for many is the ability to communicate clearly. Paul Zellner, managing director of New York-based executive search firm Russell Reynolds Associates, suggests executives receive personal coaching regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their communication styles and interpersonal skills.

"The ability to be a good listener, to be succinct, to be able to judge an audience quickly and to be positive are attributes that all the more successful senior-level executives seem to have, but it's a hard capability to develop unless people seek out feedback someplace," he says.

Businesses are putting priority on finding leaders who are genuine in their interactions, according to Peter Crist, chairman of Hinsdale executive search firm Crist Kolder Associates. "They don't want a Donald Trump CEO. They want a real person who engages people," he says.

Because all these in-demand capabilities are so personal, individualized coaching may be more effective in honing them than a classroom executive education course, the University of Virginia's Ms. James says. She also stresses the importance of being able to take lessons from both professional and personal experiences. "The real skill," she says, "is being a learning person."