

# Square Pegs, Round Holes

## How to cultivate the skills and qualifications employers want

**AS THE QUALITY** manager of single and multiplant operations for the past 15 years, I've read (or more typically scanned) hundreds of résumés from aspiring quality and engineering professionals, and interviewed dozens of people behind those résumés.

Recently, I had the opportunity to hire a quality supervisor after a long-time member of our team retired. Our organization's HR manager and I worked together throughout the selection process.

Given the status of our region's economy, I wasn't surprised when my inbox became flooded with résumés in response to ads posted on online job boards and local newspapers. The typical applicant was a mid-career professional with more than 10 years of relevant manufacturing

experience who had been a casualty of downsizing.

Despite interest from a pool of experienced professionals, I had difficulty finding a qualified candidate; someone whose skills would readily transfer to a new industry and organization. Many of the unqualified candidates thoroughly understood the scope of their last position, but they demonstrated little evidence of being prepared to step into a new role. After reviewing stacks of résumés and interviewing every viable candidate during a two-month search, we eventually found and hired the right person for the job.

Since then, I've reflected on the characteristics that separated the ideal candidate from the rest, and identified a few strategies for today's quality professional to prepare for tomorrow's uncertain job market.

### Dig deeper

A quality professional's job is technical. Auditing, inspection, calibration and testing involve technical skills that are fundamental to those positions. Continually sharpening your technical aptitude improves your readiness for new challenges. Enhancing your technical skills can be as simple as reading trade journals or studying books on industry-related topics. More in depth endeavors

include obtaining a certification from ASQ or a similar professional society, such as the Society of Manufacturing Engineers or the American Production and Inventory Control Society; or taking an online course in statistics.

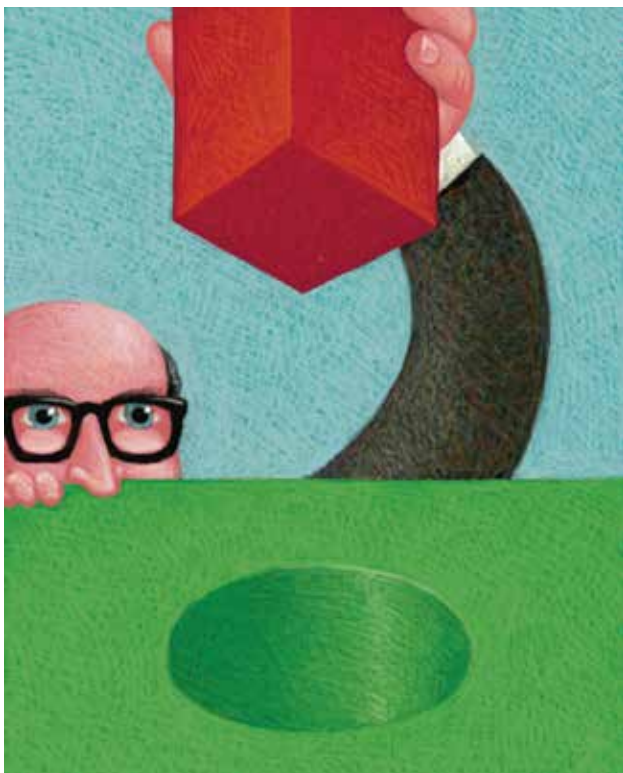
### Reach higher

According to Donald Asher in his book *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't and Why*, "Employers are not rewarding their strong performers for their past contributions; they are investing in their future contributions."<sup>1</sup> Managers are looking for employees who not only are capable of performing the task at hand but also have the potential to fill future roles. By learning the skills needed to solve problems at a higher level of responsibility and applying them whenever possible in your current position, you automatically engage yourself in the promotion process.

Although your current position may not require a working knowledge of the Toyota Production System and eliminating the seven types of *muda* (waste in Japanese), your understanding of these concepts may prepare you for your next opportunity. Finance is also an excellent area of study for those hoping to advance into management. An engineer who can understand a profit and loss or return on investment statement can effectively interact with managers who use these tools to steer businesses.

### Build supporting skills

Regardless of your role in the quality profession, complementary skills, especially computer skills, increase your value to your current employer and give you an



# Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

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edge in the job market. A calibration technician who edits fixture designs in computer aided design software is a tremendous asset. A quality engineer who troubleshoots programmable logic controller programs or develops Access databases is a rarity. A seasoned auditor who generates run charts and histograms in Excel or visually appealing presentations in PowerPoint would be a valuable contributor on almost any quality team.

Selecting which computer programs to learn is as simple as looking for what's needed the most in your industry. Computer aided design or engineering programs, statistical analysis packages, and Microsoft Office are almost always good starting points for quality professionals to expand their knowledge base. Learning new computer skills is as simple as opening the help file of any software program or taking a free introductory class from an online educational resource such as Open University or Khan Academy.

### Expand your horizons

Look around your factory, office or neighborhood for opportunities to expand your experiences in related and far-reaching disciplines. Learn about your customers' suppliers' and competitors' histories, product lines and plans for growth. Study economic and technological trends.

You also can develop your career in your free time. A rich collection of personal interests and hobbies is the

hallmark of a well-rounded professional. Develop hobbies and plan projects that provide an environment to learn new skills. Home repair projects, artistic endeavors and volunteering in your community can generate ideas that often connect to form a wider view of the world around you. As Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel wrote in his classic children's book *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!* "The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go."<sup>2</sup>

Managers facing a hiring decision ask themselves the same basic question: "How well will this person fit into the organization?" A candidate's demonstrated accomplishments, personality and skills help answer this question. And in a market in which volatility is always possible, it pays to continually improve your own capabilities. By broadening your field of understanding deeper, higher and wider, you will not only find more good fits in the employment market, but also in the world around you. **QP**

### REFERENCES

1. Donald Asher, *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why: 10 Things You'd Better Do If You Want to Get Ahead*, Ten Speed Press, 2007.
2. Dr. Seuss, *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!* Random House Books for Young Readers, 1978.



RAY HARKINS is the quality manager of Ohio Star Forge in Warren, OH. He holds a bachelor's degree in engineering technology from the University of Akron. A senior member of ASQ, Harkins is an ASQ-certified quality engineer, auditor and calibration technician.

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