Our Inexpert Judgment of Expertise

Catherine Lombardozzi
A recently published study designed to measure expertise, found that subjective factors play a large role in the degree to which individuals are perceived to be experts in a given domain. The study, authored by Marie-Line Germain and Manuel Tejeda, appears in the Summer 2012 issue of the HRD Quarterly.

The generalized measure of expertise being developed includes a mix of objective and subjective items. The data provide a window of insight into how people judge others’ expertise. In the study, participants named far more subjective than objective descriptors of expertise; deeper analysis showed that the ability to “project self-assurance and charisma” has much to do with whether one is perceived as an expert. “About half of someone’s perception of you as an expert is related to how you carry yourself and convey your message,” says Germain.

Also of interest is that the judgment capabilities we believe are so integral to expertise ranked lower than projecting a sense of assurance and confidence. The kind of judgment described in items such as “the ability to deduce things” and “assess importance” are generally thought of as hallmarks separating novices and experts. However, those attributes don’t rise to the top of the list (see sidebar).

“Another key finding is that what we term objective expertise also has a raters’ subjective understanding of the objective items,” says Germain. For instance, when judging whether someone “has qualifications” a rater might use a subjective understanding of the objective qualifications. For example, “I think you are an expert because you wear a lab coat.”

The research followed a standard protocol for developing a psychometric measure. Two small panels were recruited to generate and refine a list of factors that are used to judge expertise. In the next phase, a sample of 307 people across a wide range of fields provided preliminary validation of the factors. Germain is currently working on further validation of the measure, across fields (medicine, business, and education) and across nations (France, China, and the Netherlands).

With awareness of the role that subjective factors play, learning practitioners can ensure that they not only have the expertise, but also are able to project the self-confidence that underscores the perception of expertise. Learning decision makers also might check their assessments of the expertise of their suppliers and employees to be sure they are validated by objective measures. It might be possible for self-assured people to give the impression they have more expertise than they do. The same self-check might be important when making selection decisions or assessing performance.

For more information about this study, contact Germain at mgermain@wcu.edu.

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The BIG Number

Total number of determinants of expertise—six objective factors and 12 subjective factors.

Determinants of Assessment of Expertise
(Listed in order of importance)
Objective descriptors:
1. Has the qualifications required
2. Has the education necessary
3. Has been trained in his area of expertise
4. Has knowledge about her field
5. Has knowledge specific to his field
6. Conducts research related to her field
Subjective descriptors:
1. Is self-assured
2. Is charismatic
3. Has self-confidence
4. Can deduce things easily from work-related situations
5. Can assess whether a work-related situation is important
6. Is intuitive in her job
7. Is an expert who is outgoing
8. Is capable of improving herself
9. Is able to judge what things are important
10. Has the drive to become what she is capable of becoming in her field
11. Is ambitious about her work
12. Can talk her way through any work-related situation
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