Jack of All Trades vs Master of One

Why Mastering One Area While Knowing a Bit of Everything Will Carry You Far

Mastery of one trade can be converted into a catalyst for learning from other fields.

By LOUISA DEVADASON

The phrase “Jack of all trades, master of none” has taken on several forms—with both negative and positive connotations. In fact, in its initial appearances during the early 1600s the phrase was just “Jack of all trades” and flip-flopped between being a form of praise and a dig.

This term was popularly used by Robert Greene in 1592 to dismiss William Shakespeare—an actor turned playwright. However, by the 17th century, the phrase was generally a term of praise—at least until the phrase “master of none” was tacked on, making its meaning less positive.

An alternate version of the phrase now goes: “Jack of all trades, master of none is sometimes better than master of one.” Yes, this phrase goes in circles. And so does the debate. Which is superior at work, being a jack-of-all-trades or a master of one? Generalisation or specialisation?

The Pros of Being Jack

There are a few obvious benefits to having developed skills in several fields; you are adaptable and have significantly more transferable skills than the average Joe. Maybe you can do a little bit of programming, a little bit of social media management, and you know copywriting and how to make lattes well enough to get a job in any of these areas.

You can definitely use your other skills in whichever job you go for to be more effective at your role or you could use them just to bond and network with peers (a good cup of coffee is always welcome!).

Furthermore, a common driver of the jack-of-all-trades is the thirst to expand one’s skills, and learn, and an insatiable curiosity for the things in one’s surrounds—whether you realise it or not, these qualities have made you a skilled learner.

You are adept at learning and have developed shortcuts to consume as much knowledge in that area as possible. This passion for knowledge and curiosity was undoubtedly what drove the genius that was Leonardo da Vinci to invent, paint, and write, as well as explore science, medicine and music. Entrepreneur and author of the popular 4-hour themed self-help books, Timothy Ferriss, had this to say about the generalist approach: “In a world of dogmatic specialists, it’s the generalist who ends up running the show. Is the CEO a better accountant than the CFO or CIO? Was Steve Jobs a better programmer than top coders at Apple? No, but he had a broad range of skills and saw the unseen interconnectedness. As technology becomes a commodity with the democratisation of information, it’s the big-picture generalists who will predict, innovate, and be power fastest. There is a reason military ‘generals’ are called such.”

Particularly in this day and age when most industries are becoming increasingly

by intersectional, the need for people who can bring together skills from multiple areas to address these complex issues, is on the rise. Whether you realise it or not, these skills, and learn, and an insatiable curiosity for the things in one’s surroundings, are common drivers of the jack-of-all-trades is the thirst to expand one’s skills, and learn, and an insatiable curiosity for the things in one’s surroundings. Whether you realise it or not, these qualities have made you a skilled learner.

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