

Degrees of Absurdity

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As unemployment continues to increase, more and more talented people are turning to the classified sections of their newspapers. At ISI® this fact was impressively demonstrated a few weeks ago, when a single advertisement brought more than 300 responses from all over the United States—and a few from as far away as Germany and the Netherlands.

With so much interest focused on the *Help Wanted* columns, I'd like to comment on two words often included in job advertisements: *Degree Required*.

The frequent absurdity of these two words first struck me when, not long ago, I paused in front of a company bulletin board at ISI. One notice announced an opening within ISI. I saw that the hiring supervisor had specified *Degree Required*. I could not understand from the job description why a degree was required. It irritated me, in any case, that the hiring supervisor had not allowed the option of *equivalent experience acceptable*.

I don't underestimate what a degree may signify; in fact, I've worked for several myself. But far too often the requirement is used as a crutch in the screening process. The academic accomplishment to which a degree testifies frequently has nothing at all to do with potential for performance in the job advertised.

Many creative, dynamic people are stifled in academic environments, but flourish in jobs where their creativity and dynamism can be channeled towards tangible accomplishment. On the other

hand, people who 'breeze' through college and graduate school may be unequipped to cope with the practical necessities of the workaday world.

"Requiring" a degree is not the same as asking for ability, talent, honesty, knowledge, skill, or creativity. Asking for a degree may simply be asking for a label. The degree indicates one may have been suitably "processed by" some educational institution for the job in question. But we should remember that labels are often highly undependable approximations of reality, and often obscure as much as they explain.

Unfortunately, too many employers do specify *irrelevant* formal educational requirements, and thus eliminate and lose a large percentage of their potential applicants. Actually, both lose; neither employer nor potential employee benefits.

Given its dubious value, why is the degree requirement so commonplace?

Perhaps it is used as a subtle, even unconscious method of discrimination. With discrimination by race, nationality, sex, and age now illegal (or otherwise hazardous), discrimination by certification may be a last resort. After all, the words *Degree Required* still rule out more women than men, more blacks than whites, more oldsters than youngsters.

Or perhaps the job description is just sloppy, bearing little relation to the actual work to be performed, with the "Degree Required" thrown in to make up for the ad writer's laziness or inability to get specific information about the job.

Inaccurate or incomplete job descriptions often lead to "overhiring"—hiring someone whose education far exceeds that required to do the job. It's easy for employers to succumb to overhiring during times of high unemployment. They do not realize that overhiring constitutes an additional form of discrimination, because it excludes those who have been unable to get (or pay for) a higher education. It also makes for bored, restless employees.

I can sympathize with the plight of so many recent college graduates now looking for jobs. They were often led to believe that the skills and certifying degrees they were getting would guarantee job opportunities. Today their expectations are exceeded only by their

disillusionment when they fail not only to find a job in their field, but any job at all.

Like any employer, we at ISI want to hire people with a combination of training, experience, attitude, talent, ability, and potential appropriate to the job. I stress *potential*. Too many talented people are ignored solely on the basis of inexperience, while in many cases inexperience is exactly what you're looking for—a lack of the kind of experience that dulls insight, inhibits creative suggestions, discourages innovation, or breeds arrogance.

"Degree Required" is a lazy, sloppy way of describing what we want of an employee. Perhaps ads should instead read, "Evidence of Potential Required."