

How History-Trained Employees Add Value to a Company

Patryk Babiracki and James (Jim) W. Cortada
patrykjb@gmail.com and jcortada@umn.edu

The bulk of work done by any enterprise involves the collection, storage, analysis, and application of information. Walk into any factory, for example, and only perhaps 10 percent of the workforce “bends metal,” makes stuff. With a few minor exceptions—and they are exceptions—government employees do the same, from gathering intelligence to forecasting the weather and economic trends. Cyber warfare, carried out by governments with the help of private contractors, is an information contest. It is no accident that about 30 percent of the adult workforce has gone to college, an even higher percentage if one adds vocational training beyond high school. What does it have to do with the value of history and the humanities more generally?

Skills and Lessons Learned by History and Social Science Students

Workers trained in the collection, storage, analysis, and application of information are, thus, the most needed and employed workers in today’s economy. They will be even more needed in the future. The most skilled in performing those four functions are routinely trained in what is variously called the humanities or social sciences, such as history, sociology, economics, political science, anthropology, English, law, business administration, and information sciences. So too, are students in the hard sciences, such as physics, biology and engineering, although these tend to be more narrowly specialized than the humanities or social sciences.

Humanities and social sciences share three characteristics directly relevant to the successful performance of a corporation.

All require:

- Working with fuzzy, ambiguous, and various types of information;
- Integrating those various collections into a logical understanding of what it means to answer such questions as “So What?” “What do you want me to do?”
- Communicating the context and meaning of a collection of information in such a way that makes it possible to make decisions and take actions based on these facts.

Every business leader encounters these three requirements necessary for their organization to be successful. To deal effectively with these three activities, the social sciences teach their students and their professors, and society-wide

experts five fundamental skills that have proven effective over the past three centuries, regardless of which branch of the social sciences one trained in.

They are:

- Asking well-crafted open-ended questions about the circumstances of a situation; to understand the history and context of an issue, problem, or opportunity;
- Linking prior experiences with a situation to current issues—the idea of thinking about the past, present, and potential future of a situation with hard facts to back up a point of view;
- Knowing how to dig deeply into an issue to understand its core components and appreciating when one has enough, or not yet enough, before forming conclusions;
- Communicating a point of view in multiple ways: conversations, standup presentations (e.g., PowerPoint), well constructed tightly written narratives (e.g., white papers), pithy emails, well-rehearsed telephone conversations, interviews, and quick turnaround in these activities. In each instance, knowing the circumstances and interests of the audience to whom one is communicating is a fundamental skill;
- Operating in a multi-faceted information ecosystem in which one has to be facile in using PowerPoint, spreadsheets, blogs and email, online databases, videoconferencing apps, creative tools, and an evolving suite of social media platforms, while also using the intellectual tools of the social scientist: documents and archival materials, paper and electronic social and news media, citations to sources (e.g., footnotes), scholarly papers (e.g., through Google Scholar), graphical representations, charts, and tables, among various tools.

Much of how these types of activities evolved into tools and methods used today across all industries were developed in the field of history. Lawyers often major in history, and political scientists frequently minor in it too. Most well-known political leaders and generals of the past two centuries have read a great deal of history to be able to do what history majors are trained in doing. Although each discipline has a different emphasis, historians think of sociologists and cultural anthropologists as intellectual brothers and sisters raised in the same family, pursuing similar goals and applying similar methods and tools.

Students who study history are being taught the skills and purposes of information handling by using history as their source of learning experiences. Think of history as a collection of case studies by which one learns about research, communications, and making sense of the world around us. Knowing the causes of the American Civil War is not as important *per se* as the skills students of American history learned: How to learn about that or any other conflict, how to make sense of this terrible event, and to understand the consequences for the nation, even for today's businesses.

The value proposition that students of history offer is straightforward: They have critical thinking skills, adapt quickly to new environments and types of information, and unlike AI, for example, navigate ambiguity, manage complicated, sensitive projects, form judgments based on understanding layered contexts and multiple perspectives. They learn to “read the room” to communicate in a fashion relevant to their audiences. These skills are learned at the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. levels.

In summary, history students are taught specifically six types of skills:

- Chronological Thinking, (thinking about change over time);
- Historical Comprehension ("reading creatively, so that you can imagine yourself in the roles of the men and women you study," empathy);
- Historical Analysis and Interpretation ("following and evaluating arguments and arriving at usable conclusions based on what evidence you have);"
- Historical Research Skills (finding, evaluating, and contextualizing different kinds of data);
- Historical Issues: Analysis and Decision-Making (being "able to identify issues and problems in the past and to analyze the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of all of those involved" to understand and evaluate causes and effects of decisions, as well as alternatives to the decisions that people have made in the past);
- Students learn to communicate their ideas, hypotheses, findings, and critical feedback to different kinds of audiences (professors, classmates, and over time experts and the general public), and to do so orally, in writing, and increasingly through an array of other mediums such as blogs, podcasts, images, films and social media posts.

How History Students Prove Useful to Companies

Business relies on human relationships, even more so as customers demand broader support from multiple stakeholders in all industries and economies. Executives in finance, retail, and service companies are turning to human-centric research, as they're trying to understand changing company values, customer preferences, stock market shifts, and stories behind brands. Consulting firms doing qualitative research on cultural strategy thrive and multiply. People with history degrees are well-positioned to address challenges that companies are facing in such areas as growth strategy, business management, intercultural communication, consumer behavior, sales, and human resources. Many are already doing such work; some mention their history backgrounds in their social media profiles, but many do not, perhaps because the full value of a history degree outside of universities isn't always clear.

Historians are well-placed to excel in other roles. Some become corporate historians. They apply their skills to maintain company archives, write company histories, select and evaluate marketing content, organize anniversaries, consult in crafting corporate messaging, curate company museums, and help shape the corporate brand. Others go into historical consulting and work with governments and private clients on diverse projects that span issues such as cultural heritage, ecological preservation, and water rights to organizational management, brand strategy, corporate exhibitions, company histories, and family histories. Others still become diplomats or work for international agencies, such as the UN, IMF, OECD, EU, and World Bank, among others.

History-trained employees can be successful in most jobs, unless a highly specific set of skills are required, such as those of lawyers, accountants, doctors, scientists, IT, and other technical support. Otherwise, they can work in research, writing, sales, public relations, marketing, personnel management, line management, and executive management once they have gained experience with the internal operations of an organization. They are effective in all manner of management and operational consultancies, administration, political leaders, military personnel at all ranks, journalism, publishing, and many jobs that have no formal titles or missions but which require problem-solving skills. Why are historians effective in such roles? Because they think and arrive at conclusions differently than, say, MBAs, engineers, and many consultants, even economists. They ask diverse questions of situations and avoid relying on one simple set of hypotheses or case studies; they avoid the sin of deductive reasoning. Even MBAs are now routinely taught historical perspectives by way of the case study method.

Employers deploy history-trained employees to help tackle a range of pain points requiring insights into:

- Previous attempts by a company to do something specific;
- Industry track records;
- Previous experience with government regulators (for example, antitrust or environmental considerations);
- Patterns of customer responses to specific issues;
- Key adversaries and how they might react to a proposal (crucial in merger talks);
- Cultural and political trends in another market, which is particularly useful to those who sell products and services in another nation or region.

Companies would benefit greatly by hiring historians to do the following:

- As staff members, participate in key staff meetings, providing feedback on previous patterns of behavior;
- Research the history of specific issues that a company is facing

- Collaborate with strategy teams to define new markets, identify which strategies work in a particular industry, and help prepare the financial business case for a proposed initiative;
- Research other issues than history and report results;
- Publicize key corporate messages.

Most often, once a history-trained employee has been working in a company or agency for over a year, colleagues will not even know that the individual had majored in history—they judge them on their work practices and knowledge of the organization’s current realities.

How Can Business Collaborate with Historians and History Majors?

History-trained individuals make natural allies of companies. But, companies must reach out to them to engage in conversations and to consider them through normal job interviewing processes, largely because history majors do not know how to reach out to businesses. These individuals represent a largely untapped pool of smart, educated individuals that can be reached in the same way as one does business school graduates; just add history and other social science departments to the mix. Corporations know how to do this.

Company managers can easily learn first-hand about the value of history-trained graduates! Validate the statements made in this white paper by consulting chairpersons of history departments, deans of arts & sciences / liberal arts, and history graduates already working in your enterprise, and by compelling job recruiters to reach out to these individuals.

If still concerned about such candidates, then hire some (students, history professors, and teachers) on a project basis to “test drive” their competencies and “fit” for one’s organization (e.g., summer interns). Consider creating industry mentorship programs for rising talent in history and the humanities, get to know them, and help them learn about the industry-specific language and types of available roles. In return, you will gain access to skilled workers who can think critically, carry out sophisticated research, manage diverse projects, communicate with others, and are curious and always eager to learn.

Remember the fundamental problem to overcome: historians and company leaders know relatively little about what the other group does. Historians and company management often do not speak each other’s languages and don’t realize the potential to solve each other’s pressing challenges. Business history teaches us that historians make good employees. Samuel Palmisano was an undergraduate history major that ran IBM for ten years, the largest computer company of the twentieth century. Among global change-makers, President Woodrow Wilson was a historian who went on to help win World War I and to establish the League of Nations which became the United Nations. And so it

goes on and on; examples of successful history-trained leaders and employees can be found in every modern economy. Why not tap into that pool for your organization too? They are just as hungry for success as anyone in the private sector.

James W. Cortada completed a PhD in Modern European History in 1973 then immediately went to work for IBM—the largest information technology firm of the twentieth century, where he worked for nearly 4 decades in sales, consulting, management, and executive ranks. He also continued to practice history, publishing books on business and computing history with such publishers as Princeton, Oxford, MIT, and Columbia, and books on business management, with such presses as McGraw-Hill, Wiley, and the Financial Times. He has served on history and business journal editorial boards and foundations, and in community organizations. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities.

Patryk Babiracki is an associate professor of history and MA advisor at the University of Texas at Arlington. He earned his PhD at Johns Hopkins University in 2008 and published widely on Russian, European, and global histories and contemporary affairs. Interested in the applications of historical methods and perspectives to contemporary issues, he is starting (in September 2023) a monthly audio podcast titled "ChronoLab: Conversations about the Value of Historical Thinking in Business, Tech, and Beyond."

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