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It used to be that if you transitioned into financial planning as a second career, your ideal experience base had something to do with numbers. A first career in engineering was good, computer science could have a double payoff if you also wanted to create your own planning software, and mathematics were obviously useful.

We now know that a successful advisor has a high level of comfort with both numbers and people. People, or relationship, skills are prized, so we look approvingly upon psychologists, teachers, and family finance counselors entering the profession. But, without number or people skills, is the financial advisor wannabe doomed to failure?

Not necessarily. There are many relevant occupations or training regimens one can come from that have little surface relationship to financial planning and yet afford a valuable foundation. Transferring this experience is not unlike sorting through our existing knowledge base to figure out what knowledge can be applied to our new career. Some of us enter the planning field with investment knowledge, and others with estate planning specialties or insurance product education. We have to fill in the knowledge gaps. The CFP curriculum is good for that.

Filling in the experience gaps is a similar process. If we literally have no past experience relevant to financial planning, then we may be in the wrong second career. But, if we have just one or two of the requisite skills, we have something to build on.

This was true for Steve Thalheimer of Thalheimer Financial Planning in Silver Spring, Md. A Peace Corp employee before he became a financial planner, Thalheimer's work experience doesn't suggest any particular relevance until one digs down into the duties of his former job.

"I do sometimes feel at a slight disadvantage on the technical side of things," he says, "but on the other hand, my past work gives me experience in thinking holistically,

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teaching, training, motivating, and empowering clients to take action to improve their lives."

Thalheimer makes an important distinction between analytical skills and technical knowledge. "It's the technical knowledge surrounding financial planning that my previous career work lacked--for example, how various types of investments and insurance work, tax laws, etc. , but I think my previous career did give me good analytical and research skills."

How does he compensate for his technical shortfalls? "I take continuing education fairly seriously and refer to my CFP-study and other reference books often."

Perhaps a strength in human relationships and a weakness in the technical side of planning is easier to overcome than the reverse. Ben Utley of Utley & Associates Inc. in Eugene, Ore., has two chemistry degrees. While many of his analytical skills transferred, just as Thalheimer's did, Utley says, "I had to develop people skills." It's how he acquired those skills that's impressive. Utley turned to professional counseling and also received what he calls "severe coaching" from his wife, Brenda, who Utley calls a "people genius."

Pressed for details, Utley says, "I had to acquire my skills the hard way--try to land a client, lose a client, bear the pain, modify my behavior, and try again."

He's philosophical about what he considers his weaknesses. "I had the usual baggage growing up. I think most of us have it and don't deal with it. I would get in front of a prospect and wouldn't understand why things weren't going well. So Brenda, who is a vocational rehabilitation counselor, suggested I get some counseling, and a lot of self awareness came out of it. Now I know what my hot buttons are so when someone pushes them, I can disconnect," Utley says.

A few of us are fortunate enough to have the seemingly perfect skill set for this job--some combination of analytical and people skills. During his college career, Bill Starnes of Mallard Advisors in Newark, Del., majored in psychology and minored in business, but this presented a problem until he discovered financial planning as an occupation.

"I liked both people and numbers," he says. "I worked for years as a financial analyst for a large bank and also for years as a career counselor. All of my career choices seemed to be one-sided, either numbers only or people only," Starnes says.

Starnes really enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of number-crunching and financial analysis and the satisfaction he got from helping people achieve their career goals. His challenge was to find both in the same occupation.

"I considered many things such as real estate, coaching, being a professor, the sales side of financial planning," he says, "and I almost gave up until I found something called fee-only financial planning. This now provides a challenge, allows me to use my skills, do the tasks I enjoy, all while helping people."

But what do you do if you've somehow found your way to financial planning as a career and have little or no experience in prior positions requiring *either* analytical or people skills? Chances are, you've still got a lot to offer. Rebecca Preston, a Cambridge Advisor in Providence, R.I., came to planning from a small-business background that had nothing to do with finance. The most useful experience she brought to planning, she says, was parenting.

"Early on, dire necessity led me and my husband to PET-- Parent Effectiveness Training," she says. "And in that model, they taught us many techniques that have served me well in life and in this job. The one that I use most often is 'active listening,' which involves repeating what you are hearing but putting it in your own words. It is extremely helpful in flushing out what a client is getting at. I find that active listening almost always ferrets out issues or wrinkles that the client did not put on the table at first."

As an example, she cites the recently widowed woman who came into her office distressed about the family finances for which she would now need to take all of the responsibility. After careful listening and gentle prodding by Preston, her client cried and expressed great anger at her husband for dying--in other words, child-like emotions Preston's PET training taught her to look for and encourage in order help her children (or a client) get past a trauma and take action.

So we might conclude that most of us bring some relevant experience to this career, but will every prospective client see it that way?

Robert Bubnovich of Rio Financial Advisors in Irvine, Calif., has a most impressive background as an internal auditor for more than 25 years in U.S. corporations, as well as having a teaching background. Says Bubnovich, "The two processes, conducting an audit and preparing a financial plan, are virtually identical. Nevertheless, in the eyes of many

potential clients, I'm a rookie again. Basically, the question and obstacle remains: 'How much experience do you have as a financial planner?' "

Bubnovich's dilemma, not uncommon for someone just one year into planning, shows that at some point in our career, neither analytical nor relationship skills are paramount. Marketing is perhaps more the key--the ability to convince your prospect that your background is perfectly suited to the job of understanding and managing their financial, and sometimes personal, lives.

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