

## DON'T WORRY -- YOUR INEXPERIENCE MIGHT BE A GOOD THING!



If you're looking for work in this disastrous economic environment, there's a good chance you're looking to change fields. But with so many people unemployed, are there any opportunities for inexperienced workers? Won't a firm try to hire the most experienced person that can find? Not necessarily. A study of telephone call center employees conducted by Ohio State University suggests that previous work experience isn't always a positive for new employees. Workers may have old, ingrained habits that go against the way their new employer wants to do things -- and it's easier to train people new to a field, rather than retrain an old hand. "Organizations pay a premium for workers with job experience that will allow them to just step in and start contributing immediately," said Steffanie Wilk, co-author of the study. "But what employers don't realize is that some of what their employees learned in previous jobs will end up being a negative." The researchers examined data from 771 employees and job applicants of two call centers for a major US insurance firm. They examined the employees' job performance evaluations, and separate ratings of the employees' work-related skills and knowledge. The researchers compared these performance and skills evaluations with the employees' prior work histories and experience at the current firm, to find any relationships. As expected, the results showed that prior work experience at other firms did lead to higher levels of skill and knowledge, which led to better performance reviews at the insurance company. But -- when researchers took into account the higher levels of skill and knowledge brought from former jobs, previous experience actually led to lower performance. In other words, the positive effects of knowledge and skill brought by experienced employees were being at least somewhat balanced by negative factors. The researchers believe that workers brought old habits and ways of doing things from their previous jobs that didn't necessarily work at their new jobs. Employees need to adapt to their new surroundings by accepting new ways of doing things and shedding their old, ineffective habits. Workers without such habits might find this easier to do. To measure this, the researchers surveyed supervisors at the insurance company, asking them to rate their subordinates on measures of adaptability. They found that workers who scored high on adaptability were less likely to suffer from the negative effects of prior work experience. In other words, don't worry if you're new to a career field. Sell yourself as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* ready to learn to do things your new company's way. And if you're a veteran in your field, be prepared to adapt and learn new ways of doing things -- and make this willingness to change clear to potential employers. The best possible employee is one with experience, but who is willing to adapt to a new work environment.