



Specialist or Generalist

Which are you, and how will it affect your career track?

by Elizabeth J. Agnew, MS

I used to wonder if I would ever be that good at anything. It seemed like anything I tried – be it biking, skiing, or swing dancing – I would get good enough to enjoy it, and maybe be competitive, but never any better than that. My improvement seemed to plateau. I would see my friends getting better and better at what they did, and envy their unyielding devotion.

I also saw something similar in allegiance with objects. In elementary school I had friends who were crazy about New Kids on the Block or the LA Lakers, and I have an aunt who owns everything Mickey Mouse. That kind of devotion to one specific thing always felt arbitrary to me – I never desired to tie my identity to something external.

It took me until college to realize that I just didn't have the attention span that was required to become an expert. Even though I am naturally better at some things than others, and maybe could be an expert at, say, knitting, I just don't care about any one thing in particular enough to devote my full self to it. Spending all my time doing one thing means that I would miss out on the wealth of other things the world has to offer.

I am not meant to be an expert at anything. I am meant to be a jack-of-all-trades, and I aspire to know a little bit about a lot of things by the time I'm an old woman. I am a generalist.

If you're a specialist, you may be wondering right now what my problem is! Specialists are focused, like narrow and complicated subject matter and have no problem fully devoting themselves to two or three things.

One of my best friends in college spent all of his time on his bike (I never saw him walking). He would do wheelies, ride down stairs and drop off cliffs. Then he moved to California. He was introduced to surfing, surfed every day before work and all day on the weekends, and now hangs with the best surfers in the area. Needless to say, when surfing started, his biking got moved to the back burner.

Another friend was an amazing saxophone player. He was also a physics genius. Then he learned to swing dance, and that took a spot near the other two things he was top-notch at. From what I hear, he now travels the country to meet and dance with other swing dancers. Doesn't surprise me.

Meet the specialists. They find something they like and are good at, and become one of the best at it. They will excel in their fields, and when they find a job they like will be more likely to stick with it and excel.

To summarize:

- Specialists want to dig deeper and deeper into a subject. Generalists want to satiate their curiosity and move on.
- A generalist has a wide variety of knowledge. A specialist has deep knowledge in a narrower number of fields.
- Specialists are more likely to get a PhD, while a generalist might get an MBA.
- A specialist would be the expert of one sector of a company, while a generalist might be the CEO, overseeing all operations of the company.

- Generalists are afraid that focusing on one thing is limiting or stifling. Specialists are masters of focus, and see it as a way to achievement and power.
- Generalists are masters of integration. They want to see the bigger picture and to understand how the pieces fit together. Specialists like to bury themselves in one piece of the puzzle.

“A generalist species is able to thrive in a wide variety of environmental conditions and, if a heterotroph, has a varied diet. Specialist species can only thrive in a narrow range of environmental conditions and/or have a limited diet.” [Wikipedia] Although this is referring to species categorization, it works for personalities and environments, where ‘diet’ might mean activity or sensory input (i.e., entertainment). When it says that specialists “can only thrive”, I interpret it to mean “thrive better” when referring to humans.

Maybe at this point you’re beginning to categorize yourself as either a specialist or a generalist. Neither is better than the other – the world needs both types of people. What is important is to recognize which you are and check that your goals are in alignment with your natural inclinations. Figuring this out can be advantageous when designing your career track. If you’re feeling pressure to dig deeper in your current field and have a natural resistance to doing so, you may be a generalist. If you’re in a management or overseer position and you feel that you lack content or focus, you may be a specialist. My advice is to follow your natural tendency whether it’s to dig deep and focus or to float on top of multiple activities.

As an engineer with a Masters degree, most of the people in my situation are digging deeper into their engineering careers as specialists. Knowing what I know now about being a generalist, it may have been more fitting for me to leverage my undergraduate engineering training in a management consulting or teaching position.

Recognize your tendency to specialize or generalize and consider that when designing your life’s direction.

A specialist friend of mine scoffed at the generalists, summarizing us as “jack of all trades, master of none.”

I responded:

"Jack of all trades, master of none, though oftentimes better than master of one."

To each his own.



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