

Unlock Hiring Potential by Moving Beyond Years of Experience



“Years of experience” (YOE) is often the first requirement in any job description. At face value, this industry convention seems logical. Companies value candidates who can immediately make an impact. Ideally, experience in a similar position or deep domain expertise

developed within a specific industry prepares someone for the challenges they may encounter in a new role, allowing them to be more effective and efficient.

YOE can also be a helpful proxy for recruiters and hiring managers to align on a target profile phenotype when a search begins. It helps answer important questions about the scope of a job, such as, “Is this a leadership role with managerial responsibilities or an independent contributor position with professional growth opportunities?”

Despite its usefulness in some scenarios, I believe that relying on YOE as a qualification makes us worse talent judges. I only reached my stance on this issue after reviewing Madrona Venture Labs’s (MVL) [job board page](#), where, for years, we asked applicants to provide their YOE in a domain for our “[Founder-in-Residence](#)” and “[Leap](#)” opportunities. Until recently, I assumed understanding tenure was a helpful variable in determining someone’s fit for our respective programs.

But a few weeks ago, I started asking myself, “What am I trying to understand by listing this as a requirement? And what is the impact of its inclusion on the candidate pool I will attract?” I concluded that it

was time to remove YOE from our website.

Let's delve into the reasons why:

1. It is an imperfect (and lazy) approximation of skills, attitude, and aptitude.

Often, YOE represents the skills and aptitudes we believe an ideal prospect possesses. While a convenient shortcut, this proxy fails to provide a framework against which to interview. If we're looking to measure a candidate's likelihood to succeed in a role, YOE misleads us. For example, when we decide that a product leader needs "five plus years of people management experience," we signal our desire to identify a strong people leader capable of up-leveling and potentially growing a product team. Someone with seven years of managerial experience is not necessarily better equipped to fulfill this mandate than someone with four. The quality of that time is much more important than the quantity of years.

When we interview candidates, we go beyond referencing YOE to obtain a signal for someone's potential; instead, we ask situational and behavioral questions. Ideally, our queries reveal a candidate's

leadership philosophy and how they handle challenges. So, when we draft job descriptions, why don't we replace YOE with the specific characteristics exemplified by ideal candidates? Shifting this descriptor more effectively aligns the hiring team around who we need and allows applicants to understand whether their style and approach match our expectations. After all, interviewing is a two-way process.

2. A minimum or range of years does not acknowledge the quality of learning accrued in those years or the transferable, if less obvious, skills developed in other environments.

One of the primary drawbacks of relying on YOE is its inherent bias against candidates from "non-traditional" backgrounds. By prioritizing tenure over skills and potential, we risk overlooking talented individuals who may have acquired relevant skills through alternative means such as self-directed learning, freelancing, or career transitions.

Additionally, job titles translate into different responsibilities at different companies. For instance, the designation "Manager" doesn't always signify a role involving direct reports. They could lead an entire business unit with a P&L or be an individual contributor who manages

projects. A year of sales experience at a startup developing a Rolodex from scratch differs drastically from a year of sales experience managing a pre-existing client base at a larger organization.

Beyond the variation in responsibility between companies, YOE fails to account that not every year of professional experience is equivalent. Some years on the job, we learn a lot. We grow our skills exponentially. Our company changes drastically, forcing us to change with it to keep up. On the other end of the spectrum, there are chapters in our career when we accumulate years on the job, yet our skill development stagnates. Why do we insist on mandating minimum years for roles if some years on the job are more meaningful than others?

3. It deters high-potential candidates from applying, especially ones from underrepresented backgrounds.

Rigid experience requirements can perpetuate systemic inequalities in the workforce. Individuals from WTFNB (Women, Trans, Femme, and Nonbinary) gender identities, ethnic and or racial minorities, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by these criteria. The Harvard Business Review (HBR) found

that men apply for jobs when they meet only 60 percent of the qualifications. In contrast, women apply if they meet 100 percent of the requirements. The most common reason provided by the women who decided not to apply was, “I didn’t think they would hire me since I didn’t meet the qualifications, and I didn’t want to waste my time and energy.”

HBR’s research highlights that women and people from other underrepresented identities in the tech workforce perceive a job description’s required qualifications as rigid and non-negotiable. We create a more inclusive and equitable hiring process by shifting the emphasis from YOE to demonstrated skills and capabilities. Attracting a larger and more diverse applicant pool can lead to making more diverse hires, enhancing our companies’ creative potential by bringing together individuals with different perspectives and problem-solving approaches. Ultimately, prioritizing diversity allows us to build products that serve a broader consumer base. Beyond being a savvy business practice, it is the right thing to do, full stop.

4. Prior experience may not correlate with someone’s potential to embrace new technological advances, such as generative AI, that have only recently become available.

People who know how to hustle do better at startups. Things evolve quickly, and top performers are comfortable in ambiguous environments. Embracing new ways of thinking and doing is critical. We want collaborators who are coachable, innately curious, and hungry to learn and advance their careers. In particular, young entrepreneurs with fewer YOE tend to excel at startups. In addition to demonstrating the traits I listed above, they can teach us about cutting-edge systems and how their peers interact with and use technology.

Startups have always rewarded flexibility, but adaptability has become crucial today. Since it has only recently become available, no candidate has “10+ YOE with Generative AI.” Ultimately, ingenuity, force of will, and intensive experimentation determine our success in harnessing these new tools. People entrenched in their respective fields may not have the skills or mindset to leverage them effectively. Conversely, candidates with less traditional experience may demonstrate a greater propensity for learning and innovation, enabling them to grasp and master novel technologies quickly.

Because of these reasons, I removed YOE from MVL's

Founder-in-Residence and Leap listings. Although it may require an initial mindset shift for our team, the result—a more inclusive, meritocratic approach to candidate evaluation—will be well worth the transition costs. By focusing on competencies, skills, and potential rather than arbitrary tenure thresholds, I hope that we can build more diverse, resilient, and high-performing teams primed for success in the dynamic landscape of the future workforce.