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Doctors should run hospitals, lawyers should run law firms, and engineers should run manufacturing businesses: organisations do best when their chief executives are experts in their fields, according to new research.

Management capability is important, but it is not, by itself, enough. It is having a relevant professional background, not simply sector experience, that makes an exceptional chief executive, said Amanda Goodall, a senior lecturer in management at Cass Business School in London.

This suggests that leadership skills are less generic, and less transferable between organisations, than many people think, she said.

“I’ve found that leaders should be people qualified in the core business activity of the organisation,” she said. “For example, the most highly-rated hospitals tend to be run by former doctors, even though the majority of hospitals are led by people with no medical training.

“People who are highly technically skilled have an understanding about the environment that others do not,” she said. This means they are likely to be able to get more out of technical experts on which the business relies for its success — for example, a former computer programmer running a software business will have a better insight into the type of workplace that other programmers need to excel.

Leading people who know you have done what they do also helps, added Lee McCarren, the chief executive of Forrest, a building and refurbishment business. “Nobody can pull the wool over my eyes,” said McCarren, a former quantity surveyor, “and you get a lot more respect because people know you can do their job”.

McCarren cannot imagine trying to do his job without this background. “There’s a lot to know and learn to run a business like this, and I really think you have to have a construction background.” Up to 80% of construction businesses are run by former quantity surveyors, he estimated.

Having a high-performing expert in the top job can also be a good way to attract talent, added Goodall. “The leader should represent the aspirations of the organisation, so if you want to be the best law firm in the business, for example, get the best lawyer to run the firm.”

Kit Bingham, a partner at Odgers Berndtson, the executive search company, said that few firms demand a specific professional background when appointing chief executives. “A sensible organisation says ‘right, what skills do we need for what we want to do’ rather than ‘we must have someone with a background in a particular thing’,” he said. For example, a company looking for rapid expansion into a particular market would look for candidates who had done this elsewhere.

“It depends on what the company is trying to achieve when they appoint the chief executive,” he said. “If you are a successful business that wants more of the same, then someone with a background in the sector may make a lot of sense. But if you are after a change, a rethinking of the business model, you may want someone who can come in and challenge preconceptions.”

James Petter, a former British Army officer who is now the UK & Ireland managing director of EMC, a technology business, agreed. “Many of the strongest leaders are those who can look at a business from the outside in, and view the opportunities unencumbered by the technical limits of the industry,” he said. “ You can’t be ignorant of the basic tenets that govern your industry, but the fact that touch-screen phones had never been successful did not stop Steve Jobs from backing and launching the iPhone.”

But Ian Cook, the chief executive of Logicalis Group, another technology firm, comes down on the side of relevant expertise. “Having advised customers on IT throughout my career, I am able to impart this knowledge throughout the organisation,” he said. “You need to earn the trust of your colleagues and clients to do an outstanding job as a chief executive. Having walked in their shoes builds confidence in your ability to make the right decisions.”