It’s amazing how much knowledge you accumulate during years of work experience. I still remember my first and second jobs. I was in high school, and my brother got me a gig working as a cashier at the NFL Shop on Pier 39 in San Francisco.

I knew a lot about baseball, but they placed me in the busiest section of the store — the NFL section. The irony: I don’t know anything about football. But I learned over time that 49er fans don’t play well with Raider’s fans and that Giants and Green Bay Packers fans are not friends.

I also learned valuable transferable skills — everything from cashing out a register to how to deal with irate customers. Next job was at Nordstrom’s in downtown San Francisco. I learned the golden rules of customer service from my managers at that store, which I stuck with throughout college. The customer is always right. You treat the customer with respect. If you don’t know the answer, you find it.
By the time I landed my first “real job” as a reporter, I had customer service down and had added writing, reporting and people skills to my resume. Experience in journalism taught me a little about business, politics and the education system.

Each job, no matter how mundane it may seem at the time, gives you value if you learn from it. But you have to know how to recognize it and use it to advance professionally.

I left journalism in 2006 for a public relations career. Since then, I’ve earned several national awards for campaigns that began with me agreeing to take on a challenge while in my head saying: “Are you kidding? You don’t have a degree in communications or marketing. This is going to be a disaster.”

But one of the things I learned early on is that your managers almost never give you something they don’t think you can do. So you say yes, figure it out and make it happen. As I took on each challenge, I found out I had more skills than I realized. I can honestly say I’ve applied most of the skills I learned back at the NFL shop to almost every PR campaign I’ve completed.

Reading judges’ comments made me understand that I do know a little about public relations and marketing campaigns.

I don’t share this to boast. I share it because as I’ve discussed my journey with other women, I’ve found I’m not alone. Many professional women I know, from stockbrokers to police officers, tell me the same thing. There’s often a little voice in their heads that says: “You’re not qualified to do this.” And like me, they’ve had to beat that voice into submission to take risks and move forward. If you take stock of what you’ve learned along the way, you will realize you are well-prepared for most challenges.

Many times, we keep quiet when the boss asks for volunteers for a challenging assignment or when a position becomes available that lists skills not directly listed in our current job descriptions.

Staying quiet is the fastest way to get pigeonholed. We all need to recognize our professional worth and not be shy about going after those challenging projects that will lead to promotions and advancement. Sometimes, it is those skills you learned when you first started that set you apart. If in doubt, take a few minutes to list all the skills you’ve learned from all parts of your job.

We simply have to stop second-guessing ourselves, recognize all the skills we have and just go for it. Take on the tough assignments and volunteer for risky projects. You are better prepared than you know, and it will pay off.
Zenaida Gonzalez Kotala is a University of Central Florida senior communications coordinator responsible for pitching science, technology and medical research stories to local, regional and national media.

Columnist series sponsored by the Women’s Business Center at Florida