

Bright Ideas



Supporting Organizational
Excellence & Innovation

From newbie to pro

Discovering the level of worker expertise

Wouldn't it be nice to bring on workers who were already peak performers? Unfortunately, it's unlikely to happen. Even experienced professionals will need to learn how things are done at your organization before they can get fully up to speed. For younger workers and those changing careers, the learning curve is steeper. So, what can you do to recognize where on the learning curve someone is?

Signs of expertise level

Back in the early 1980s, the Dreyfus brothers (Hubert and Stuart) described a 5-stage model of expertise development based on training military pilots, a group you definitely do not want learning through trial and error. The stages are usually labelled as novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. Experts do not simply know more than novices, they approach problem solving and learning in very different ways.

Novice. The novice comes to the organization without practical experience to draw on. Novices may or may not have had formal training, such as a degree program, to provide the theoretical

foundation, terms and concepts for practice. But faced with a real life situation, novices are lack the judgement needed to know which rules or procedures apply. They may feel overwhelmed by the amount that they need to know

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and need guidance as to where to start. Reading the organization's policy manual is hardly ever the answer, yet it is often how new employees spend their first days.

Motivated novices can be heard asking supervisors or experienced peers to "Just tell me what I need to do." Their greatest need is to know—and apply—the critical rules and most common procedures. At this stage, their work needs monitoring to ensure that procedures are followed correctly and to provide reassurance. Supervisors may see them as "needy" because they solve problems by seeking direction from others. They tend to do the same thing at this stage regardless of the situation—no exceptions.

Unmotivated novices (the kind you do not want in your organization) do not learn from correction and continue to make the same mistakes. Given an enabling work-

place, they will remain novices forever. I once had a staff member whose writing had the same grammatical and punctuation errors, no matter how carefully we described the rule and how it applied. Instead of learning from the correction, she figured that she didn't need to learn the rule because we would be there to correct her errors. Wrong. We remained, but she was history.

Advanced Beginner. With experience comes both skill in carrying out basic procedures and recognition of certain patterns in the situations they commonly deal with.

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Having learned the “do this” rules, they start to learn the common “if this, do that” variations. Rules applied across the board are replaced by situational guidelines. They can be trusted to carry out straightforward tasks and simple procedures without supervision, but do not have a sense of the “big picture” for their work.

Competent. With greater and more diverse experience comes judgement. The competent worker can distinguish the relevant from irrelevant factors to consider in making decisions or solving problems at work. Standard procedures or routines are skillfully and efficiently completed. Complex situations are analyzed consciously and action sequences are planned deliberately. Supervision and mentoring are needed only with complex situations to ensure that individuals don’t get bogged down and timelines are not compromised. While at lower levels of expertise, individuals focused almost exclusively on their own tasks, competent individuals start to see their actions in the context of the “big picture.”

Proficient. The move from competence to proficiency is accompanied by a shift to holistic thinking. They recognize what is most important to consider from among the relevant factors affecting a situation as well as deviations from the norm. Planning and decision-making are more efficient, although still conscious processes. This makes the proficient individual a good teacher and mentor for those at lower levels of expertise.

Expert. The expert has deep and extensive knowledge gained from wide experience. Decision-making is intuitive rather than consciously analytical. The expert can spot errors in procedure from the results, although may not know exactly the error that was made without looking further. For example, in research involving measurement, looking at the raw data gives the expert a sense of what the statistics should show (e.g., correlations between variables, noise results requiring amelioration, improvements in service delivery). If the statistical analysis results differ from that expectation, chances are,

there was a data entry error or the wrong analysis was done.

The expert is flexible in approach and interprets rules and directives intelligently according to intent rather than the “letter of the law.” Individuals at this level are often engaged in setting policies and standards of practice, as they are aware of the situational variations that must be accounted for. They are also capable of seeing alternatives that improve the “big picture” and achieving outcomes. Although innovation is possible at lower levels of expertise, it is more common at the expert level as individuals take on more complex and challenging problems.

Building expertise

Although newbies have much to learn, even the pros continue to develop their knowledge base. The next **Bright Ideas** will look at what organizations can do to help their workers build expertise.

Check This Out

S.E. & H.L. Dreyfus (1980) [A five-stage model of the mental activities involved in directed skill acquisition.](#)

S. Lester (2005) [Novice to expert: The Dreyfus model of skill acquisition.](#)

From Where I Sit



Welcome to the end of the world

Among the many holiday films on TV this year have been an assortment of apocalyptic disaster movies and end of world specials (on the History channel, no less) thanks to the upcoming last date on Mayan calendar relics. Around our house we’ve been speculating on how many people are taking advantage of the “Don’t Pay Until 2013” sales in the expectation of enjoying new

stuff for a few weeks before the end of the world. This despite assurances from scholars worldwide that December 22 is just the first day of a new cycle on the Mayan calendar.

It is rare that researchers are so definitive in their claims. Most times we hedge our bets with statistical probabilities. And, indeed, the world has as much chance of ending on December 21 as any other day. But, as an eternal optimist, I wish you the happiest of holidays!



K. K. Biersdorff Consulting supports organizational excellence and innovation through an array of planning, research, communication and training services that take projects seamlessly from start to finish.