

Tending to Your Expertise

Expertise is a strange thing. The minute you claim to have it; you probably don't. You know that – I know that – but what are we supposed to be do about the challenge this fact of life presents? The only possible course of action is to keep on learning. So far not rocket science, but how do we slide learning into our already over-burdened schedules? Here are six suggestions for keeping your expertise expert.

1. View yourself as a learner rather than an expert.

Experts often find themselves in the position of defending what they know to be true rather than being open to and able to hear new perspectives that might challenge their current thinking. Challenge yourself to seek out and ponder new ideas, information, and approaches in your field that can spark your creativity.

2. Read, a lot.

Read things in your primary field and read things that strike your fancy. Listen to tapes when you drive or commute and read fiction when you fly. Buy magazines on topics as diverse as you can find. Ask friends, colleagues, and complete strangers for reading recommendations. You'll be amazed at the unlikely places you'll find insights and ideas.

3. Take a class.

At least once a year, attend a formal learning experience. I mean a sit down, take notes, maybe even a test class. Make time for a class for two reasons. First, for the content. There are many times when a class is the only way to learn a skill, make a theory real, or build a network of people interested in learning the same things you are. Second, take a class for the exercise it will provide for your brain. When you work on learning something new - outside your expertise - you can actually increase the effectiveness of your brain.

4. Attend your industry/professional association meetings with a purpose.

It is easy to be over (or under) whelmed at an industry event. Either you'll find so many ideas and so little time for implementation or you'll find you've grown beyond your association's programming. Either situation is okay if you have a clear purpose for attending. If you feel yourself suffering from information overload – focus your attention. Determine what you need to learn about next and let the other information go for now. If you're not getting what you need from the meeting's content – focus on networking. Make this meeting the opportunity to expand your industry contacts through some one-on-one conversations.

5. Volunteer.

Sharing your expertise within your community's non-profit world is enormously rewarding. Taking your expertise outside your normal environment can provide amazing insights. Besides, research is pretty clear that people who volunteer live longer, happier lives.

6. Eavesdrop shamelessly.

Daily life gives you many opportunities to listen in to the conversations of other people. Try going to lunch alone in a crowded restaurant, appearing to be engrossed in an open copy of *USA Today* and just listen. On Hertz buses, street corners, and crowded airplane cabins, you'll hear things that surprise, sadden, and shock. These overheard dialogues ought to send you searching for answers, give you ideas for new directions in your thinking, or even force you to re-think entire positions.

Without a strong commitment to continuous improvement, expertise can fade as quickly as the value of a tech stock. What you do to refresh your expertise is probably less important than the fact that you're doing something purposefully and regularly to enhance your expertise. This way, those people who believe in your reputation as an expert won't ever be disappointed.

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Sidebar

Use Technology

Keeping your expertise up-to-date requires both hours and resources. Many people lament they either can't find the time or if they find themselves with a few spare moments, they don't have access to the materials they need. Technology can help in both instances.

Time

Although books on tape have been available for many years, the number of people who use them is quite small. If you've never listened to a book, run to your nearest bookstore and ask for the Audiobooks section. You'll be amazed at the wide variety of titles you'll find. Fiction in the form of classics and the latest mysteries. Nonfiction from business biographies to self-help bestsellers. On cassette tapes and CDs. Once you've chosen a title you can start looking for time spent on routine tasks that can become *reading* time. Time is relative you know.

Materials

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