

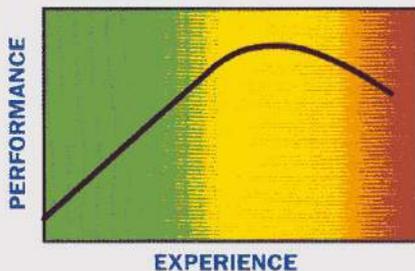


# Improve performance at the peak of experience

Our society places a high value on experience. We use sayings such as "experience is the best teacher." There is a good reason for this: in general, the more experience we have performing a task or in a job, the better our performance. It doesn't necessarily mean that we can only perform with experience; we may have training or transferrable experience from other areas. But our word "expert" is related to experience for a reason.

For example, think back to when you learned to drive. At first, there were all sorts of things to watch - controlling the car, other cars on the road, traffic signals - all this even without distractions such as passengers or the radio. As you gained experience, your performance improved. Your driving became more natural, more automatic. You learned certain ways of doing things such that you didn't have to think about the details. To a large extent, you were training your automatic information filters or habits.

## THE OPTIMUM EXPERIENCE CURVE



Does this performance improvement go on forever? I would argue that it does not; in fact as shown in the diagram, not only does our performance level off, but in many cases it can actually *decrease* with increasing experience.

Let me again use driving as an example. I don't think I'm as good a driver as I used to be. So many of my

driving functions are now carried out automatically by my habits that to a large extent I drive unconsciously. (It's scary to think about!)

This was brought home to me one day when I was driving along, doing several things at the same time, one of which was looking down at the map on the seat next to me. I looked up, and the car in front of me was stopped



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dead. I slammed on my brakes, and fortunately there was no collision. The incident made me realize that I had become complacent, careless, and wasn't paying attention because the actions were so familiar and so automatic.

Are there areas in your life (maybe driving, maybe at work or at home) where you have been doing the same thing for so long that your actions have become automatic? Is your performance lower than when you had less experience? How could you identify if this is the case?

One way - not recommended - is to have an accident. Another less destructive way is to constantly monitor the results you are achieving. Are these the results you want? Are they at least as good as in the past? Ask your clients and your co-workers for their opinions, and listen carefully to their answers.

If you are past the optimum point on the experience curve, it shouldn't be too hard to at least get back to the level you were at in the past and even go beyond. One way to reverse the decline is to shake things up a bit.

Try new ways of doing things, hang out with some different people, consciously look for alternative techniques. Another way is to mentor or train another person. Through mentoring you can help someone on the left side of the Optimum Experience Curve, someone with less experience than you. Your protege will ask lots of questions, some of which

are pretty simple. But as you listen to the questions you'll gain insight into your work through this fresh perspective. If you answer "because I/we always do it this way" it could be an indication that your performance is past the peak of the curve.

The curve doesn't always turn down. I think of Tiger Woods who when he wins yet another championship doesn't sit back and take it easy, but keeps practising to improve his game. Adding experiences is like building a building block by block. The more experiences you have, the bigger the building grows. Just don't forget to leave an opening for new experiences to enter.

*Professional speaker and author Randy Park, B.Sc., M.Eng., helps people achieve their goals and save time, money, and aggravation by understanding and improving their own unique thinking processes. Randy has studied how we think, solve problems, and make decisions and his workshops assist people who want to improve their thinking effectiveness. Look for his book "Thinking for Results" late in 2002. Contact Randy regarding speaking at [rp@ThinkingforResults.com](mailto:rp@ThinkingforResults.com).*