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**How to Build Expertise in a New Field**

by

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Better pay, more joy in the job, or prerequisite to promotion? Whatever your reasons for deciding to build expertise in a new field, the question is how to get there.

Your goal, of course, is to become a swift and wise decision-maker in this new arena, able to diagnose problems and assess opportunities in multiple contexts. You want what I call “deep smarts” — business-critical, experience-based knowledge. Typically, these smarts take years to develop; they’re hard-earned. But that doesn’t mean that it’s too late for you to move into a different field. The following steps can accelerate your acquisition of such expertise.

*Identify the best exemplars.* Who is really good at what you want to do? Which experts are held in high regard by their peers and immediate supervisors? Whom do you want to emulate?

*Assess the gap between you and them.* This requires brutal self-assessment. How much work will this change require, and are you ready to take it on? If you discover the knowledge gap is fairly small, that should give you confidence. If you determine that it’s really large, take a deep breath and consider whether you have the courage and resolve to bridge it.

**You and Your Team**

* [**Mid-Career Crisis**](https://hbr.org/topic/career-planning)

When you’re feeling stuck.

*Study on your own.* Especially if the knowledge gap between you and experts in the new arena is large, think about what you can do on your own to begin to close it. Self-study, talking to knowledgeable colleagues and possibly some online courses will help.

*Persuade experts to share.* Many will be pleased to do so — especially if you’ve done your homework and have some foundational knowledge. But some may resist for a host of possible reasons, ranging from a lack of time to fear that you are after their job. Their reactions depend heavily upon both personality and organizational culture. You can strengthen your case by focusing on how helping you will benefit them. Perhaps you could take over some routine tasks that are tiresome to them, but new to you. If the experts are in your own organization, management may reward any investment they make in developing talent. Emphasize that the time commitment can be minimal; you’ll find small time slots in which to query them.

*Learn to pull knowledge.* You need to become some combination of a bird of prey and a sponge — eagle eyed for opportunities to learn and avid to absorb. Don’t expect experts just to tell you their most critical know-how in bullet points. That’s impossible (because they know what they know in context, when it’s called upon), insulting (because if it were that easy to impart, their knowledge wouldn’t be worth much), and frustrating for you both (because lectures about how to do something rarely translate into true learning.) Instead, use the two most powerful questions in eliciting knowledge: “Why?” and “Can you give me an example?”

*Observe experts in action.*Concentrated observation is often more effective than interviews because it shows you how they think and act in real time. Ask to sit in on crucial meetings, accompany them to conferences and customer visits, follow them as they solve problems. This is far from a passive process; you’ll need to constantly ask yourself: Why did he or she do that? What was the effect? Would I have done it differently? Afterwards, insist on a few minutes to debrief—even if it’s just during a walk to the parking lot. Check what you observed against the experts’ intention and see if you can “teach it back” by explaining the steps taken and the reasons for them.

*Seek mini-experiences.* The next step, as I describe in my book Critical Knowledge Transfer, is to identify opportunities to experience in some limited fashion, the environments, situations or roles that have made the expert so valuable to the organization. Perhaps you can’t go to medical school before becoming an MRI-machine designer like the person you’re shadowing, but you can spend a week in a doctor’s office. Maybe you didn’t start out in your company’s call center, like the super sales manager you’re emulating, but you could certainly work the telephones for a few days. Any “mini-experience” that gives you a taste of the expert’s much deeper understanding of a context that informs their judgment will help you gain insights. If nothing else, you will be equipped to ask better questions and pull knowledge more effectively.

*Add visible value as soon as possible.* The experts and your new or future bosses will want to see some evidence that all this work is paying off. A log of what you have done and learned shows effort and progress. But if you can actually take over some small parts of an expert’s job that he or she is willing (or eager) to relinquish — even better. Perhaps you can attend a conference or association meeting, teach part of an in-house course, draft a report.

Developing expertise takes time. Estimates usually range from seven years or more. But if you follow the steps suggested above, you will have these smarts — and be able to use them — much sooner.