

# The Speed Paradox: Why Knowing Every Crack in the Pavement Makes You Run Faster

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There's an old joke about two hikers who encounter a bear. One starts putting on running shoes. "You can't outrun a bear!" his friend exclaims. "I don't need to outrun the bear," he replies, "I just need to outrun you." But here's what the joke doesn't tell you: the guy who survives probably spent years studying bear behavior, knows seventeen different escape routes, and has memorized which trees are climbable. He's not just fast — he's informed fast. And that, as Socrates would say if he worked in Silicon Valley, makes all the difference.

Image: Author/Google AI Studio

## The Seduction of Surface Speed

Anyone can move fast. Watch a startup founder burn through venture capital, or a new manager reorganize everything in their first week. Speed is intoxicating. It feels like progress. It photographs well on LinkedIn. But speed without depth is merely expensive chaos disguised as productivity.

I once watched a colleague proudly implement a "revolutionary" new system in record time. Two weeks. Impressive, right? Three months later, we were still trying to untangle the mess. Meanwhile, our seemingly slow, methodical competitor took six weeks to launch something similar. The difference? They knew where every metaphorical body was buried in their codebase. They moved deliberately because they were familiar with the terrain.

That's the trap: believing that moving fast means skipping the homework.

## The Chess Master's Secret

When you watch Magnus Carlsen play blitz chess, his hands move so quickly they blur. Five-minute games that would leave most of us still contemplating our third move. But here's what you don't see: the twenty years of studying endgames, the 50,000 patterns burned into his neural pathways, the countless hours analyzing positions most of us couldn't even recognize as necessary.

His speed isn't despite his encyclopedic knowledge — it's because of it. Every detail he's absorbed becomes a shortcut. While others calculate, he recognizes. While others deliberate, he knows.

The same principle applies everywhere. The surgeon who completes a complex procedure in half the expected time isn't rushing — she's traveled this anatomical territory a thousand times before. She knows precisely where that tricky artery likes to hide. The master chef who seems to dance through a kitchen during dinner rush? He's not winging it. He knows his station down to the location of every spice, the hot spots on every burner, and the exact timing of every dish.

## **The CEO in the Weeds**

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There's a persistent myth in business that leaders should stay "high level," floating above the details like corporate angels. "Don't get lost in the weeds," they say. But every exceptional leader I've observed does precisely the opposite — selectively.

Consider the CEO who can spot a product issue from a single customer complaint because she knows the architecture inside out. Or the founder who can make instant strategic decisions because he understands not just the market numbers, but the stories behind them — which customer churned because of pricing, which one because of features, which one because their nephew started a competing company.

These leaders aren't micromanaging; they're micro-informed. There's a difference. They've built a mental map so detailed that they can navigate at speed while others are still asking for directions.

## **The Expensive Education of Being Carefully Fast**

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Here's the uncomfortable truth: the ability to be fast without being reckless is expensive. Not in money (though sometimes that too), but in time, attention, and the unglamorous work of actually understanding things.

It means reading the documentation everyone else skips. It means asking the "stupid" questions until you understand not just what happens, but why. It means running post-mortems on successes, not just failures. It means being the person who actually reads the terms and conditions (okay, not all of them, but you get the point).

This is why experience matters, but also why experience alone isn't enough. You need expertise plus attention. Ten years of doing something poorly doesn't make you fast — it makes you efficiently terrible. But ten years of thoughtful practice, of building that detailed mental model? That creates the kind of speed that appears to be magic.

## **Details as Accelerators**

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The paradox is this: details don't slow you down; they speed you up. But only after you've paid the upfront cost of understanding them.

Think of it like driving a familiar route versus using GPS in a new city. The GPS appears to be faster at first — follow the blue line! But the local who knows every shortcut, every traffic pattern, every construction zone? They're already there while you're still recalculating.

In programming, the developer who understands the entire system architecture can debug in minutes what takes others hours. In negotiations, the person who knows the history, the players, the precedents — they can pivot instantly while others are still processing. In creative work, the artist who has mastered the fundamentals can break rules effectively, whereas novices often break them unintentionally.

## **The Reckless and the Wreckless**

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The ability to move fast without being reckless is what separates professionals from amateurs, masters from dabblers, and successful companies from spectacular failures. It's the difference between confidence and arrogance, between decisiveness and impulsiveness, between a calculated risk and a 'YOLO' investment strategy.

Speed is cheap. Anyone can floor the accelerator. But the ability to navigate at high speed, to know when to brake and when to push, to understand not just the road but the vehicle, the conditions, the destination — that's expensive. And valuable. And increasingly rare in a world that celebrates "move fast and break things" without asking what we're breaking or why we're moving.

## **The Takeaway**

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Details aren't speed bumps — they're the map that lets you avoid them. The master moves fast, not because they skip steps, but because they've internalized them. The expert makes instant decisions not from gut instinct alone, but from information that has been processed so thoroughly that it becomes instinct.

So the next time someone tells you not to get lost in the weeds, remember: the person who knows every weed, every root, every hidden rock in that garden? They're the ones who can run through it in the dark.

After all, as my childhood friend (who taught me chess 😊) used to say while teaching me chess and absolutely destroying me in four moves: "I'm not playing fast. I'm just playing the ending I saw at the beginning. Now, want to lose again?"