



MAIN PHOTO Targeted CPD to develop key skills.

SKILL FADE

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A brief exploration of medical practice learning applied to the adventure sector

Skill fade is a term many of us are familiar with in a professional context; “The depletion of our ability to exercise a skill through a break in practice”. Recent events and the onset of lockdown due to COVID-19 has all but halted the outdoor adventure industry almost overnight. As the situation continues to change many of us are thinking about the restart. So, can we avoid skill fade and how do we do it?

My recent reading has highlighted the lack of published research on the subject in the outdoor sector; what is publicly available appears to be largely relating to other industries. Some of the concepts and ideas from medicine have significant parallels to our industry and may perhaps provide some insight into how we can minimise the problem.

A 2014 General Medical Council literature review captured some key findings that would appear to have direct relevance to our own practice:

1 Skills have been shown to decline over periods ranging from 6 – 18 months, according to a curve with a steeper decline at the outset becoming more gradual.

Many of us will have experienced this in our own practice, where a break from a specific skill; be it personal climbing, belay supervision or orientating a map, leads to getting rusty or errors impacting performance. Knowledge of our skills start point either through reflection or feedback will allow us to better assess the impact of a break from practice e.g. “I follow a set procedure to safely achieve the outcome” – In *Figure 1* the curve starts close to the required competence and the critical intersection of the two lines take place relatively quickly.

2 Keeping in touch with peers and staying aware of developments, can mitigate skills fade.

So, maintaining conversations with peer groups and professional membership organisations can help stay abreast of changes in practice and keep useful knowledge at the top of our minds. The question remains in how this affects the practical application of that knowledge on the ground, where our actions decide our outcomes.

3 The higher the level of learning and proficiency prior to any break from work, the higher the level of retained skill will be.

It makes sense that the greater skill we have over and above the minimum requirement the longer it will take for us to meet that minimum without practice, therefore the relationship between Required Competence and Skill Fade in *Figure 1* will vary for everyone. It’s worth mentioning here that the time periods mentioned refer to medical professionals, most of whom have years of training and practice. A new instructor in their first year may have had no time to consolidate their skills in a working environment. It follows on then that for those with extensive experience and skills we perhaps should be examining the top end of our skills spectrum where fade is likely to be more pronounced. For less experienced practitioners we may need to examine whether our skills meet the minimum requirements and what implications that has. Those deploying instructors may also need to brush up on their assessments of competence and how it is managed, or indeed may choose to seek external input.

4 There is evidence that self-assessment of competence doesn’t necessarily match the findings of objective assessments.

Using tools such as Mountain Training’s Skills Checklists or qualification syllabi will undoubtedly give us useful insight into our performance, but that also requires us to have an in-depth knowledge of the related skills which we may have lost and a further skillset in the analysis of them. This statement may also suggest that there is clearly value in some form of objective assessment, particularly where skills have only been trained and practiced to minimum standard. The Johari Window (see *Figure 2*) offers a useful insight into our blind spots when assessing own competence.

5 Scottish Winter – a specific example from our industry

Those of us who make use of winter qualifications from Mountain Training will be familiar with the sensation of “first time out fuff” on that initial walk or climb in winter conditions. The extra gear, the difficulties of performing with heavy gloves, wearing extra clothing and carrying an extra load, walking in crampons, climbing with winter tools etc. all feel particularly awkward early in the season. Most people will cope by making sure that they can get out a little for themselves (no hardship since after all, arguably, to be a good Winter Mountain Leader or Winter Mountaineering & Climbing Instructor you have to be an active recreational winter walker/mountaineer/climber) before working in winter so that they are getting back up to speed on their own time rather than with paying clients!

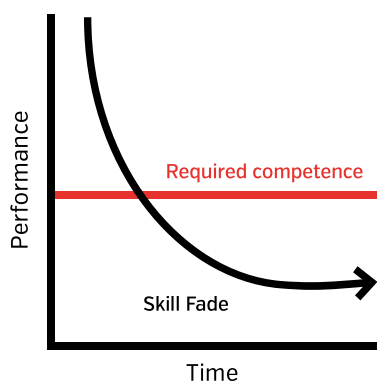


FIGURE 1.

Crucially, the difficulties of avalanche avoidance need to be factored in and a checklist approach like the 'Be Avalanche Aware' process is a very powerful tool to help cope with the annual seasonally enforced skill fade that even working in the Alps or a trip to the Greater Ranges only partially compensates for.

Then comes the spring, and when was the last time I had my rock shoes on?

To answer the original question; nobody will entirely escape a degree of skill fade. Everyone, regardless of experience, is likely to experience it somewhere in our practice – whether we recognise it or not is a question of awareness.

Looking forward

The full effect of COVID-19 on future operations is still not fully clear, but we can be certain that it will undoubtedly impact how we deliver our services. It is not beyond reason, at this stage, to expect there to be further periodic restrictions and breaks in our practice. Skill fade, while limited as a research subject in the outdoors, is well recognised across the industry, if only by virtue of the well-established place of

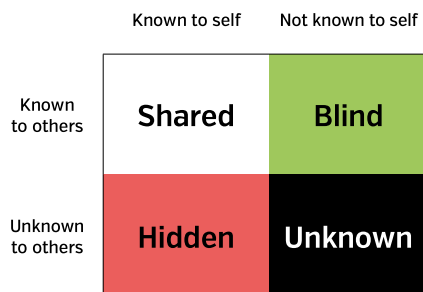


FIGURE 2. The Johari Window.

CPD among many professional bodies and national governing bodies.

Refresher training

Planning opportunities to refresh skills, with or without formal assessment will allow practitioners to exercise skills and develop confidence, while providing feedback to managers and technical advisers about the level of fade

Easing In

Giving practitioners time to get warmed up with the basics in manageable settings will help to limit the demand for those top-end and rusty skills in the first week. Easy venues, low ratios and strong mentoring will also redevelop skills and the judgement to deploy them effectively and safely.

Checklists and mantras

Not just for beginners. A well-designed checklist or a useable mantra or mnemonic can be a great way to prevent us forgetting steps in complex activities.

Overlearning

Incorporating an effective ongoing CPD programme which develops skills and

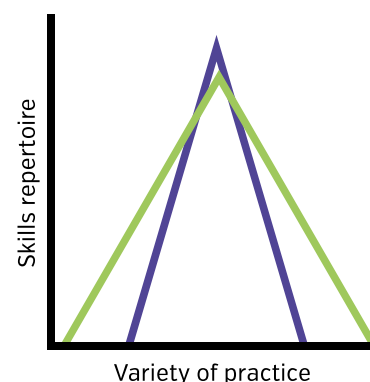


FIGURE 3.

knowledge above and beyond those required will help to increase organisational resilience and flexibility by minimising retraining and delays after any fallow period. Overlearning is not always about increasing the repertoire of skills to draw on though, often variety of practice in the fundamental skills can have a profound effect on ability and judgement – see *Figure 3*.

Stay connected

Just staying in touch and keeping teams connected socially or more formally through remote tasks and training could help to reduce a team's lead in time to operational effectiveness, as well as general cohesiveness on return to work. ■



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