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How to Keep Innovating

The dogged pursuit of excellence might be the wrong strategy. Microsoft Research Principal Scientist Bill Buxton outlines some tips to keep innovating

By [Bill Buxton](#)

I've recently been nagged by a somewhat peculiar thought: In a way, the dogged pursuit of excellence is the path to anything but. As you head down the road to mastery, you run a real risk that in fact you have nothing to distinguish yourself other than the depth of your expertise. That may sound like a good thing, but that expertise may not be either sufficient or satisfying.

To be clear, I am not suggesting for a moment that depth is not important. There are no shortcuts. One *does* have to put in the thousands of hours that are required to achieve mastery in pretty much anything worthwhile. But like anything else, there are limits beyond which the effort may well prove counter-productive.

In this vein, let me put forward a few balancing counter-propositions:

Always be bad at something that you are passionate about.

By this, I really mean two things: always be a beginner at something, and always be in love with what you are beginning.

Why? The latter keeps a fire in your heart and soul, and the former keeps you grounded. The more expert you are in your "day job," the more important such grounding is. Additionally, the further such new beginnings are from your core expertise, the more likely it is that they will feed that expertise in some unexpected way in the future.

For example, Yvon Chouinard refers to himself as "an 80% man." Yvon is the founder of [clothing company Patagonia](#) and the author of one of my favorite design books of the past decade, *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman*. In the book, he talks about climbing, explaining that when he reached about 80% of his potential in the sport, he promptly devoted time to other passions rather than directing his focus on pursuing that remaining 20%.

For Chouinard, other passions included fly-fishing and surfing, not to mention his business, family, and commitment to the environment. All of these experiences helped to shape every aspect of his craft and businesses, from innovating on the [design](#) of pitons and ice axes, to founding what became Black Diamond (one of the world's top makers of climbing gear), and Patagonia itself, which is a paragon of eco-sensitive business. And I suspect that his having done so also improved his climbing—or at least the quality of his experience in the mountains—more than if he had focused on that alone.

You can be everything in your life—just not all at once.

Always being in the throes of a passionate beginning is one of my primary methods of sustenance. But as is all too frequently the case, too much of a good thing can cause its own set of problems. The energy of pursuing such passions can be addictive, and take over at the expense of other things that are equally or more important. It can

become destructive. I found this out the hard way, and my wife was able to help me when I most needed it. It was she who reminded me that the limitlessness of life has to be shoe-horned through the limitations of the present. Which leads me to...:

When you get good at one skill, drop another in which you have achieved competence in order to make room for a new passion at which you are—yet again—bad.

Lest what I am advocating be confused with superficiality or dilettantism, let me emphasize that what I am speaking about here is what one wraps around one's true calling. Of course one needs depth and perseverance in one's profession. But the behaviors that I am advocating serve to feed the base of your experience and your soul while you pursue that calling. Don't be surprised if they also inform it, shape it, or even morph into a new calling.

Life is too short to waste on bad teachers and inefficient learning.

When you decide that you want to learn something, do your homework and find the best person in the world that you can possibly convince to teach you. It is amazing how far true passion, willingness, and dedication will take you when approaching mentors that you might otherwise consider unapproachable. Keep this in mind if and when someone approaches you for help with a newfound passion!

For instance, when at age 40 I decided that I wanted to ride competitively (never having been on a horse), I somehow convinced the top Canadian rider from the Los Angeles Olympics to coach me. I stated my desire to see if I could qualify for the Olympics, and then mentioned that I had neither horse nor saddle. She laughed, but she also took me on, and what I learned over the next decade not only got me on the talent squad of the national team, it helped my other work in a myriad of subtle and unexpected ways.

Remember: You can learn from anyone.

So, yes, my coach was an Olympian. But on the other hand, some of my most valuable lessons were learned from a 14-year-old girl who, while laughing at my incompetence on horseback, was also generous with her insights. Was she world-class? No, but her feedback was exactly what I needed. Riding in that environment was a very design-like experience in that we critiqued each other. It was a salient reminder: All of those in training are also coaches of a sort.

We live at a time where we hear repeated calls for the need for creativity and [innovation](#). What better way to cultivate the full potential of our creativity than by sustaining the passion, curiosity, delight, energy, and enthusiasm of the beginner, coupled with the wisdom and experience of the expert?

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