

## Letters to the Editor

November-December 2007

### The Making of an Expert

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Dear Editor:

In the article "The Making of an Expert" (July–August 2007), K. Anders Ericsson, Michael J. Prietula, and Edward T. Cokely reinforce a belief in the value of experience. They rightly emphasize the importance of acquiring expertise and point out that leadership is not achieved in a day, but rather is the result of time, effort, strategy, and determination.

Experts are not born virtuosos. They first need to establish their credentials and then move on to build relationships with the right stakeholders and acquire skills in their domains. They need to bring value-added contribution to the organization and eventually create sustainable advantage through thought and practice leadership. This is the path to achieving gurutdom.

In Asia, the traditional value on seniority and experience, which play a role in competence building, seems to be eroding. This is unfortunate. As the article illustrates clearly, there are no shortcuts to success.

#### **Aneeta Madhok**

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*Ericsson, Prietula, and Cokely respond:* We appreciate Aneeta Madhok's note and strongly agree that extensive practice and preparation are necessary to acquire superior professional performance.

At the same time, Madhok's appeal for restoring the appreciation of seniority and experience in businesses throughout Asia inspires comment. In our article, we certainly present considerable evidence corroborating the need for a long period of preparation, study, and deliberate practice. However, we also demonstrate that seniority and extensive experience are often weakly—or even negatively—related to objective measures of performance across a variety of professional domains. As a consequence, we recommend that businesses develop and adopt direct, objective measures of reproducibly superior performance rather than rely on soft indicators such as seniority and experience.

We believe that a focus on measurable aspects of expert performance not only aligns with Madhok's primary goal but also increases professional respect and motivation for learning. For example, without valid measurement, aspiring managers can only trust that experienced, senior managers are indeed performing at higher levels and thus deserve the greater responsibilities and compensation they are afforded. Valid measurement replaces that faith with tangible evidence. Furthermore, measurement allows candidates for advancement to identify the aspects of their own performance that they must improve.

In traditional domains of expertise with explicit measures of performance—such as chess, music, and sports—hopeful contenders can respect and learn from their more skilled colleagues and actively seek out the right deliberate practice activities for improving their performance.