



THE PLAYBOOK

The Practice

Getting better at something specific, with no training budget and no course. What the evidence supports, what it does not, and a six-week structure that fits a real week.

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Doing the job is not the same as improving at it

Most people improve quickly in a new role for about a year and then plateau. The work continues, the years accumulate, and the capability stays roughly where it was.

This is not a lack of effort. It is that **repetition and practice are different things**, and normal work supplies a great deal of the first and almost none of the second.

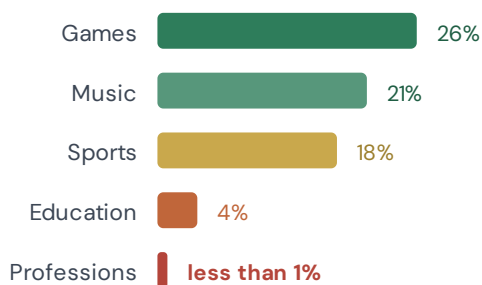
Repetition is doing the task the way you already do it. Practice is attempting a specific thing slightly beyond your current ability, finding out how it went, and adjusting. The second requires a target, a feedback source, and a small amount of protected attention, none of which arrive on their own.

This playbook is for somebody with no training budget, no course, and no learning function, which describes most people in small businesses. It is deliberately modest about what practice can achieve, for reasons the first chapter explains.

The claim that got oversold

Before building anything it is worth knowing how much this can be expected to do, because the popular version of the evidence is misleading.

HOW MUCH PERFORMANCE PRACTICE EXPLAINS



Macnamara and colleagues, meta-analysis. The ten thousand hours claim does not survive contact with the data, especially in education and professions. Practice still helps. It is simply not the main thing, and pretending otherwise sets people up to feel they failed at trying hard.

Figure: worth knowing before you build a practice plan, so you build a realistic one.

Macnamara and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of deliberate practice research and found it explained roughly 26 percent of performance variance in games, 21 percent in music, 18 percent in sports, 4 percent in education, and **less than 1 percent in professions**.

The ten thousand hours idea, in its popular form, does not survive that.

Two honest readings. Professional performance depends heavily on things other than practice: context, opportunity, the specific work available, and what the role permits. And professional work is harder to measure than chess, so the low figure partly reflects measurement difficulty rather than the absence of an effect.

What follows from this is not that practice is pointless. It is that **practice is one lever among several and a small one**, and expecting transformation from six weeks of structured effort sets people up to conclude they failed at trying hard.

Breaking a skill into parts you can practise

The first and most common failure is choosing something too large.

A SKILL YOU CANNOT PRACTISE, BROKEN INTO ONES YOU CAN



Figure: you cannot practise a category. You can practise a sub-skill with a definition of better.

"Better at client communication" cannot be practised. It has no definition of better, no way to tell whether an attempt went well, and no boundary.

Break it until you reach something with a checkable outcome. Writing a client update that gets no clarifying questions back. Saying no to a scope request without damaging the relationship. Delivering bad news early rather than late.

Then pick exactly one, for six weeks. Not three. The constraint is what makes it work, because attention is the scarce input and splitting it produces three sets of half-attempts.

The test for a well-chosen sub-skill: could you tell, within a week, whether an attempt went better than usual? If not, it is still too abstract and needs breaking down further.

Where the feedback comes from

Practice without feedback is repetition with extra intention. The feedback source is the part most people cannot arrange, so here are four that do not require anybody's permission.

01 A checkable outcome in the work itself

The client update that produced no clarifying questions. The proposal that came back signed without amendments. Best where available, because it needs nobody.

02 A named person, asked a narrow question

Not "how am I doing", which produces reassurance. "Was anything in that update unclear on first read?" A specific question about a specific artefact gets a real answer.

03 Your own prediction, written before

Underrated and free. Before sending, write what you expect to happen. Compare afterwards. The gap between prediction and outcome is genuine information about your model.

04 A comparison against something good

Find an example produced by somebody better and put yours next to it. Differences are visible in comparison that are invisible in isolation.

The third is the one to start with, because it requires nobody else and it works immediately.

Practising the thing you avoid

The uncomfortable core of this, and the reason most self-directed improvement fails quietly.

Left to ourselves, we practise what we are already reasonably good at, because it is pleasant and produces visible output. The thing that would actually improve performance is usually the thing being avoided, and it is being avoided precisely because attempts at it go badly.

The question that finds it: what part of your job do you arrange your week to do as little of as possible?

The answer is usually specific and slightly embarrassing. Difficult client conversations, the analysis, presenting, chasing money, giving critical feedback.

Then reduce the stakes rather than the frequency. If difficult conversations are the gap, do not wait for a difficult conversation. Practise the small version: the mildly awkward one, the low-stakes disagreement, the minor no. The mechanics are the same and the cost of a poor attempt is much lower.

You cannot get better at something by encountering it twice a year at maximum difficulty.

Building it into a real week

Practice that requires additional hours does not happen. This has to sit inside work that was going to occur anyway.

Attach it to a recurring task. If you send a client update weekly, that is the practice slot. No extra time, and roughly forty-six attempts a year.

Spend five minutes before, not thirty. Write down what you are attempting differently this time, in one line. That line is what converts the task into an attempt.

Spend five minutes after. What happened, what you would change. Same document, one line.

Review every six weeks, not weekly. Weekly review of a slow-moving skill is discouraging and produces noise rather than signal. At six weeks there is enough to see a direction.

TEN MINUTES A WEEK, TOTAL

That is the whole commitment. Anything more elaborate will survive three weeks. The value is in the consistency of the attempt and the record, not in the volume of effort.

How long this actually takes

Being realistic here prevents the most common failure, which is abandoning something that was working.

Weeks one and two: it gets worse. Attending consciously to something you previously did automatically degrades performance temporarily. This is normal, it is well documented in skill acquisition generally, and it is where most people conclude the approach is not for them.

Weeks three to six: it becomes effortful but not worse. You are doing it deliberately and it costs attention.

Around week eight to twelve: some of it becomes automatic. Not all. Enough that you notice you did the thing without planning to.

And the ceiling arrives sooner than the popular story suggests. Given the evidence in chapter one, expect meaningful improvement in a narrow sub-skill rather than transformation. That is still worth six weeks, and it is a different promise from the one usually made.

When practice is the wrong answer

Four situations where the gap is not a skill gap, and practising will not close it.

You have never seen it done well. Practice without a model is guessing repeatedly. Find an example first; watching somebody good for an hour is worth six weeks of unguided attempts.

You do not have the authority. If the work requires a decision you are not permitted to make, no amount of skill closes that gap. This is a scope conversation, not a practice plan.

You are overloaded. Attention is the input. At capacity there is none to spare, and adding a practice plan on top makes both worse. Fix the load first.

The environment punishes the attempt. If trying the thing and getting it slightly wrong has visible costs, you will not practise it, and you should not. That is an environment problem and it is worth naming as one rather than treating it as a personal failing.

Small, specific, and checked

The evidence says practice matters less at work than the popular story claims, and I would rather tell you that than sell you a system. In professional settings the effect is small.

What is left is still worth doing, provided the promise is honest. Break the skill until you reach something you could tell had gone better within a week. Pick one, for six weeks. Attach it to a task that already happens. One line before about what you are attempting, one line after about what happened. Review at six weeks, not weekly.

And choose the thing you avoid, at the smallest available stakes, because that is where the gap is and it is why it is still there.

The plan overleaf fits on one page and takes ten minutes a week. If you find yourself wanting to make it more thorough, that is a sign it will not survive.

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Six-week practice plan

Ten minutes a week · one sub-skill · v1

Set up once	Answer
The broad skill	
The one sub-skill	
could you tell within a week whether an attempt went better?	
The task it attaches to	
something that already happens weekly	
Where feedback comes from	
outcome, a named person, your own prediction, or a comparison	

Week	What I am trying differently	What happened
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

Expect weeks one and two to be worse. Attending to something you previously did automatically degrades it temporarily. That is the point at which most people stop.

Pick the thing you arrange your week to avoid, at the smallest available stakes. That is where the gap is, and it is why it is still there.