The Myth of 10,000 Hours

Idea In Short

Consultants pride themselves on getting smart quickly, structuring an ambiguous problem and reaching a few defensible recommendations. That skill is real, and it is not the same as deep mastery. Proficiency built on a fast study is not excellence, and clients are more sophisticated than ever at spotting the difference.

A Famous, Contested Number

Malcolm Gladwell popularized the idea that genuine mastery requires roughly 10,000 hours of focused practice, drawing on research from psychologist Anders Ericsson, in his book Outliers.1 Even celebrated natural talents, the example goes, spent years grinding through unglamorous repetition, playing small clubs for hundreds of hours, before the talent became visible to the world. Ericsson himself later pushed back on parts of Gladwell's framing, a disagreement that produced a genuinely interesting public debate about what deliberate practice actually requires.

Consultants Are Trained to Be Fast Studies

Getting smart quickly on an unfamiliar topic, then logically structuring the problem down to a handful of recommendations, is a real and valuable skill, honestly earned through repetition across many engagements. The risk shows up when consultants start believing their own marketing, repackaging generic best practices or coasting through a familiar-feeling process as though clients have not gotten more sophisticated since the era when a first SWOT analysis felt genuinely novel. A move that looked impressive five years ago rarely lands the same way today.

Professional Coasting Is Career Death

Coasting is worth naming honestly rather than euphemistically: putting in two real hours of

effort across an eight-hour day happens more often across corporate life than anyone likes to admit. When unstaffed, pretending to be busy while quietly doing very little is a genuine trap, since the honest math a firm's leadership runs constantly compares salary against billing revenue and margin, and idle time shows up in that math eventually.

Proficiency Is Not Excellence

Information moves at internet speed now, and it has become trivially easy to sound informed about almost anything after a half-day of research. That kind of surface fluency is not the same as the deep expertise that justifies premium billing rates. Watching an instructional video does not make someone a genuine master, and copying a competitor's approach will never be the path to standing out from that same competitor.

A Growth Mindset Actually Helps

Decades of research on growth mindset support a specific, practical conclusion: the desire to improve, grow and push through difficulty is a genuine advantage, not just a motivational slogan.2 A few implications follow directly. The brain naturally looks for the easy way out, since real thinking and learning cost real cognitive effort. Process deserves more attention than results in the short run. And the honest answer to "have you mastered this yet" is very often simply not yet, rather than a fixed no.

What Excellence Actually Looks Like

Real excellence shows up in specific, observable behaviors: understanding exactly where the edges of a problem sit, knowing what falls in and out of scope, developing a genuinely independent point of view rather than parroting prevailing wisdom, knowing when to advise, nudge or respectfully disagree with a client, holding firm convictions while staying genuinely open to contradicting evidence, and deliberately building a network of experts across disciplines to bring in lateral ideas a single specialist would never generate alone.

Seek Out Work Instead of Waiting

Actively looking for work rather than waiting passively to be staffed builds an internal professional network, develops new skills and provides real practice at the exact kind of persuasion that later wins paying client work. Building enough rapport to win a project from

a skeptical, overworked internal partner is genuinely good practice for the harder job of winning work from an external, paying client down the road.

Reconciling Speed and Depth

The two skills are not actually in tension, despite how the discussion sometimes frames them. Getting smart quickly is what lets a consultant contribute meaningfully in the first weeks of a new engagement; deliberate practice over years is what eventually makes that fast-study instinct sharper and more reliable each time it gets used. Treating the two as complementary, rather than as a choice between speed and depth, is closer to how genuinely excellent consultants actually operate day to day.

The Honest Self-Check

Coasting is a feeling that is hard to hide from oneself, and it is even harder to hide from colleagues who are paying attention. Anyone who suspects they have been coasting for a stretch almost certainly has been, and the discomfort of that realization is exactly the signal worth acting on before it compounds into a genuinely stalled career.3

- 1Outliers [Book]
- 2Growth Mindset
- 3Deliberate Practice

Summary

Getting smart quickly is a genuine consulting skill, and it is not a substitute for the deliberate practice that builds real excellence. Focus on process over results, seek out work rather than waiting to be staffed, and remember that professional coasting is a slow, quiet form of career death.