Stop Reinventing the Wheel

Idea In Short

Business problems vary enormously in surface detail, yet the underlying patterns behind them repeat constantly across industries and organizations: leadership changes, office politics, data overload, poor communication, unclear post-merger integration. Recognizing that repetition, and deliberately building a personal library of proven frameworks and past work to draw from, is a genuine professional skill, not a shortcut to be embarrassed about.

Problems Repeat More Than They First Appear

After many years spent working across different organizations and industries, a consistent pattern becomes hard to ignore: business problems, despite wildly different surface details, tend to repeat in remarkably similar ways. Industries differ, companies differ, and products differ, yet common organizational challenges recur constantly: leadership transitions, office politics, poor planning, an unengaged corporate culture, bloated bureaucracy, unchanging distribution channels, data overload, product obsolescence, weak post-merger integration, inadequate talent development, miscommunication and short-term quarterly thinking.

Looking for Shortcuts Is Not a Character Flaw

Productivity, at its core, is about achieving more output with less redundant time and effort. Looking for legitimate shortcuts is a completely normal professional instinct, not a lazy habit to hide. This instinct shows up constantly in how experienced professionals talk about their work: reminders not to reinvent the wheel, encouragement to apply proven best practices, requests to find whoever has handled a similar situation before, or a simple question about what a close competitor is already doing successfully.

Tapping Into Collective, Communal Knowledge

Organizations that have operated for any meaningful length of time accumulate an

enormous amount of project know-how, carried both informally in the minds of experienced colleagues and formally codified in past deliverables that logically walk through how a similar problem was previously broken down and solved.1 Searching for that accumulated knowledge before starting from scratch is closer to searching for treasure while holding a stack of genuinely useful maps than it is to cutting corners.

Building a Personal Library Worth Keeping

Experienced professionals often accumulate substantial personal archives of past project deliverables spanning wildly different topics: organizational design, outsourcing, technology strategy, pricing, mergers and dozens of other categories. Building and organizing that kind of library deliberately, rather than letting useful past work scatter and disappear across old files and forgotten folders, pays off enormously the next time a related problem resurfaces unexpectedly.

Sharing Generously Builds Real Goodwill

Sharing carefully chosen past work generously with trusted colleagues facing a similar challenge tends to build genuine goodwill and reciprocity over time. Few things build professional trust as quickly as handing a struggling colleague exactly the framework or example they needed, at precisely the moment they needed it. That kind of generosity tends to circulate back, since colleagues who receive useful help freely are far more likely to reciprocate the next time roles reverse.2

Where the Line Between Reuse and Plagiarism Sits

A frequently repeated observation captures the underlying tension well: taking material from a single source and presenting it as entirely original work is generally considered plagiarism, while drawing on and synthesizing insight from many different sources is generally considered legitimate research.3 The meaningful distinction is not whether prior work gets reused at all, but whether it gets synthesized thoughtfully and adapted intelligently to a new, specific context rather than copied wholesale without genuine adaptation.

Why This Habit Compounds Over a Career

Professionals who build this habit early accumulate an increasingly valuable resource over

time: a well-organized, broad library of prior thinking that lets them move faster and more confidently on new problems than colleagues who insist on starting from a blank page every single time. That accumulated efficiency compounds across an entire career, freeing genuinely original thinking for the parts of a problem that are actually new rather than the parts that have already been solved many times before.

A Discipline Worth Building From the Start

Anyone early in their career benefits from starting this habit immediately rather than waiting until an archive feels large enough to matter, since the value of a personal library only becomes obvious in hindsight, well after the moment when it would have been easiest to start. Saving, labeling and periodically revisiting even a modest collection of past work builds the foundation for a genuinely valuable resource years before it might otherwise start to feel worth the effort, and it costs almost nothing to begin, only a small, consistent habit repeated often enough to build something genuinely useful.

- 1Organizational Learning
- 2Reciprocity (Social Psychology)
- 3Intertextuality

Summary

Business problems repeat far more than their surface details suggest, and deliberately drawing on proven frameworks and prior work is a genuine skill, not a lazy shortcut. Building a personal library of past deliverables, organized and ready to adapt, consistently separates efficient, high-value professionals from those who insist on starting from a blank page every time.