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How to achieve peak performance

This year WorldSkills London 2011 competitors are benefiting from a new approach to training that aims to maintain focus and fend off nerves. So how does this 'performance excellence programme' work?

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Competitors at WorldSkills London 2011 will undergo training which helps them get used to performing in front of a crowd.

Want to make the most of your skills? Most of us could benefit from some extra knowledge and experience, but one of the most important ingredients to success is being able to set a goal and single-mindedly achieve it. So how can you overcome distractions, keep your composure and stand out from the crowd? That's what competitors and researchers involved in WorldSkills London 2011 have been asking.

"Most people can become good in their chosen field with enough dedication and practice, but that's only a part of what it means to be world class," says David Bowen, a BTec student at Coleg Sir Gar, a college of further and higher education in south-west Wales.

He has just finished a series of gruelling selection events for WorldSkills London 2011. If successful, he'll go on to represent the UK in web design at the four-day event in October, competing against the clock, in front of a live audience. To do that, he'll have to be more than just good at his skill – he'll have to be exceptional.

This year's competitors are benefiting from a new approach to training for the WorldSkills London 2011 event. It is known as the "performance excellence programme", and helps to maintain focus and fend off nerves, which can act as a barrier to success.

The programme is also being piloted in three colleges. One of them is North Warwickshire and Hinckley College, and its principal, Marion Plant, says a big strength of the approach – which has now been formalised into a qualification accredited by the awarding body City & Guilds is that it's highly tailored to young people's individual requirements.

"What you're developing is their ability to own their own learning, to set themselves goals and see them as their goals," she explains. "There's a lot of one-to-one time, which is quite unusual in a college where the traditional model is to stand in front of 18 people and teach them."

Stephenson College is also piloting the programme (which can be completed alongside a range of GCSE to degree equivalent qualifications), and principal Nigel Leigh describes the qualification as formal recognition that a student has gone well "beyond competence" as required by standard vocational awards.

"The most useful elements of the way I've been trained is that it is always trying to push you to your limits and expand your skills, while putting you in high pressure situations," says Bowen.

And as he prepares for the rigours of WorldSkills London 2011, he'll need to be more focused than ever on blocking out the pressure. "You need to be able to work in situations where you are surrounded by noise, people talking, watching, taking photos or filming, and you need to be able to stay focused and remain at the top of your game for nearly 22 hours," he explains.

"Before I started competitions I was extremely shy and tended to keep to myself. Since the competitions many people have commented on how I've developed in my skill, but also in my confidence around people. I talk a lot more and am far happier when talking to those I am not familiar with, which has opened up opportunities for me."

And when it comes to world-class performance, resilience and self-discipline are just as important as mastery of the technical aspects of the craft or skill in question, says WorldSkills training manager Kevin Calpin, who helps to coach and mentor stonemasonry competitors. "Being methodical, having the ability to think through problems very quickly and make a decision, and staying mentally and physically strong are vital," he says.

With a skill such as stonemasonry, nervousness can lead to shaking hands, meaning the competitor can't get to grips with complex geometry – which can mean losing out on a medal.

A recent joint study between researchers from Finland, Oxford University and Australia examined what distinguished world-class vocational performers from other skilled and capable people. They looked at the 2009 WorldSkills Squad UK and their workplaces to identify the relationship between the characteristics of work environments and the development of world-class performance in their young employees.

The purpose of the research, says Susan James, associate director of Skope, the National Research Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (directed by Oxford University), is to see how the findings can be used to "grow excellence, and to demonstrate the positive impact of world-class performers on their work environments, peers and wider vocational and social networks."

Later this year, when WorldSkills London 2011 has crowned its 46 winners and 138 medalists, the newly established research body the WorldSkills Foundation will collect and analyse data on what made them – and their 800 or so expert coaches – the cream of the crop. The idea is that the information can be used to help those countries involved in the competition look at what works and see how they can encourage industry to do more of it.

Lee Davies, deputy chief executive of the Institute for Learning, says that if the UK's skilled craftspeople are to be world class, then teachers and trainers must also excel. Their influence is vital in encouraging students to appreciate the need to learn well beyond the level of an initial qualification.

"If we're not on top of our game in skills terms, the danger is we start to go outside for those skills," he says. "As individual professionals we need to recognise that's the reality. We need to think globally even if we're working locally."

