A project is a unique venture which makes use of standard processes that are repetitive in nature. As we repeat these processes and gain more experience, our expectations are that costs and resources required to perform them will decrease. This is the premise behind the Learning Curve (or Progress Functions), applicable to both people and organizations. It is not theory; it has been observed in practice where repetitive processes exist, such as in aerospace manufacturing. Therefore, as we and our organizations obtain more experience reusing existing project management processes, our project management costs decrease – right? Is your answer “I don’t know”, or “No”? Is it really just theory then?

Let’s review some Learning Curve fundamentals, conditions behind receiving Learning Curve benefits, and how to identify causes behind loss or lack of learning and what to do about them.
Learning curve benefits are not guaranteed. Practice does not make perfect – perfect practice makes perfect. A quick question: can you identify the project management ‘best practices’ documentation in your organization? Are they applied consistently?

“Not to worry. We are managing our costs as well as anyone else.” Surprise! Most likely, your costs are going up. There are ‘other factors’ at work.

The Learning Curve in Figure 2 shows learning not only stopped but regressed, as the organization or individual returned to earlier levels. “But I followed the conditions,” you might argue. “What happened?” Change, that’s what happened.

A closer look at best practices required to achieve Learning Curve benefits include:
- Personnel are trained and retained.
- Processes and technology remain relatively unchanged.
- Time is provided to deliver within quality specifications.
- The Work Environment remains relatively stable and energy is committed to best practices.

What happens when these factors are missing:
- Personnel – Resignations and downsizing result in learning walking out the door and a ‘hiccup’ in the learning curve.
- Process and technology standards - a change can render past learning useless. Retraining is required. Time to deliver increases; costs increase.
- Time – reducing available time usually causes quality to suffer. And rather than the ‘desired’ beneficial learning, coping and firefighting behaviour may evolve.
- Work Environment – Re-organizations, inadequate tools can sap energy required for the application, monitoring and control of best practices.
Many of these assumptions are also interdependent. As you replace team members with new personnel, the work environment changes. New personnel require training, time to adapt, and consequently, the project requires more time to deliver.

How to remedy your specific situation? A Cause and Effect analysis for Learning Has Stopped (Figure 3) will provide insight. Many of the stated causes can potentially be behind your situation.

What happens when change is constant? Figure 4 shows a scenario where an organization or individual encounters change on a regular basis. An elongated sawtooth pattern emerges. Learn, unlearn, learn, unlearn, etc. Considering the pace of change today, this happens in many organizations. In some industries, it is worse than others. Consider project management in the IT field. Constantly changing software tools (C++, Java, Oracle, Sybase, ERP), delivery environments (mainframe, PCs, web) have historically produced the sawtooth pattern. The ability to accurately estimate does not evolve. Projects take the hit on missed deadlines, descoping or reduced quality.
So what do you do to better your competition? First, identify, document, communicate and consistently apply your best practices. Second, be selective in implementing change. How will that change impact your project management learning curve? Ensure the value is there. And third, accept there will always be change and we may be continuously learning and relearning.