

Is 30 Years of Age Over-the-Hill for Outdoor Professionals?

By Liz Kirk

I am now 30 years old. For more than a decade, I have been paid to facilitate an array of outdoor-based programming with varying groups of participants. With such breadth of experience, I frequently feel like I am a valuable asset to the organizations for which I work. However, at recent staff training and trip preparation days, where I have been surrounded by other outdoor professionals working in a similar role, I have begun to get inklings of feeling “old.”

Is there an expiry date for frontline outdoor professionals? What is it? Or is it just a suggestion, like the milk you sniff and drink anyway, regardless of the date on the carton? At what point does it become necessary or desirable for an outdoor professional to go into to the “real world” and get a “real job”? How valuable is the experience of an outdoor professional over age 30? Is it worth adapting current organizational practices to retain these individuals for more than one or two seasons? I am unable to answer all of these questions within the next few pages, but I will refer to my personal experience and the available literature in order to share a few insights about longevity on the frontline as an outdoor professional.

At least once each year, I reach a career crossroads. Out of the blue, I suddenly start to panic. I have trouble justifying why I am still working on the frontline in the outdoor industry “at my age.” My mother and father have always been confused by how all the years invested in several university degrees could possibly align with my meagre paycheques. However, the panic tends to dissipate quickly once I again realize that I cannot think of an alternative job that would be more rewarding. My happiness and satisfaction are intertwined with this work, however varied and unpredictable it may be. Every opportunity I have to sense the enthusiasm of a new group bouncing off a bus or hear encouraging words from someone who sees the value in what I do, I

become rejuvenated, justified and resourced to continue working on the frontline in this challenging, yet consistently gratifying field.

Many of the individuals who begin work as outdoor professionals are “young, educated, single, and Caucasian” and are typically recent graduates of a related college or university program (Kirby, 2006, p. 79). In a recent study of frontline workers in three American outdoor behavioural healthcare programs, 85% of respondents were under the age of 30 (Marchand, Russell & Cross, 2009). These young men and women may choose to work in the outdoor industry early in their personal careers for a wide variety of reasons that could include

... their professional identity is likely not yet formed; they have the resources to indulge their own curiosity and cushion a couple of wrong turns; they have few or no familial attachments or obligations; and they are often driven by a strong sense of their own right to explore different careers until they land on a “passion” or “calling.” (Kirby, 2006, p. 4–5)

Kirby (2006) suggests that the outdoor industry attracts “inherently transient” individuals, bound to move on from this type of work within a relatively short period of time, regardless of other factors (p. 4). However, it remains unknown how many passionate outdoor professionals entering the field today earnestly intend on making this demanding lifestyle a long-term venture.

It has been said that the use of the term “career” in relation to either the outdoors or outdoor education is relatively recent, and this concept remains a contentious issue (Allin & Humberstone, 2006, p. 136). Despite opportunities for a diverse range of professional development, “it is generally acknowledged within the field that it lacks a clearly defined career structure” (Allin

& Humberstone, 2006, p. 135; Allin, 2004; Ross, 1989). Since there is no such thing as a standardized career path, if a long-term occupation in this field is your goal, “you have got to really work at it” (Udall, 1986, p. 21). Factors like a significant lack of mentoring opportunities and inadequate support to encourage longevity in younger professionals, combined with “limited opportunities for employees to advance up the career ladder,” contribute to frequent replacement of individuals employed at the “field” staff level (Thomas, 2002/2003, p. 59).

Why do so few people seem to continue this work into their late thirties? Physical limitations or injuries, like ongoing shoulder or back pain, may become no longer manageable within a job that requires portaging canoes every summer. Early departures may also potentially stem from a realization of one’s worth if one was performing “an equivalent job on the outside,” an apprehensiveness about getting trapped in a continually “undervalued” profession or from sensing a “mismatch between the nature of the person and the nature of the job” (Thomas, 2002/2003, p. 58). Perhaps personal goals to have a less intense work schedule and more time available to spend with friends, family and intimate partners motivate frontline employees to quickly move on to other fields where work and non-work aspects of one’s life are more easily combined (Marchand et al., 2009). What if concerns like these were more commonly acknowledged and addressed by managers and directors within the outdoor industry? Could early recognition of these issues lead to successful implementation of creative, low-budget alternatives designed to successfully support longevity among frontline staff?

If institutions or organizations offering outdoor-based programs want to offer high-quality instruction, delivered by dedicated and experienced professionals, they must adopt hiring and incentive practices that appropriately encourage this (Ross, 1989). Instructors in this field generally acknowledge the necessity of intertwining one’s lifestyle with this type of work, getting

“paid to play” as some say. In fact, many outdoor professionals find the satisfaction of the job so great, they willingly opt to overlook things like the high intensity of such work, the lack of significant income opportunities and the inability to have a permanent home or simple amenities of life (Ross, 1989), for at least a little while. Despite all this, older, experienced, educated outdoor professionals are “too often expendable” (Ross, 1989, p. 34) and risk exploitation, since “there seems to be no shortage of new people keen to enter the field” (Thomas, 2002/2003, p. 59). Given the common trend of outdoor professionals switching organizations or leaving the field completely after just one or two seasons, staff recruiting and retention frequently remain as major, if not the “greatest,” concerns for outdoor program directors (McCole, 2005, p. 328; Thomas, 2002/2003). Although proven to be a difficult task, hiring and maintaining a staff of caring, dedicated, knowledgeable, interested and committed individuals is “fundamentally important to the viability of the organization” (Erickson & Erickson, 2006, p. 6).

Outward Bound New Zealand runs mainly multi-day expedition programming and the average age of their employees is approximately 33 (personal communication, April, 2008). Twice this organization has been awarded the title of Best Place to Work in New Zealand due to “a clear, strong vision, a real sense of community amongst its employees, a commitment to grow and develop its people, and a culture of high performance” (Scoop Independent News, February, 2008). This is one example where prioritizing growth and development of all 50 employees creates a “very strong team culture” (Scoop Independent News, 2008). Staff satisfaction has skyrocketed due to the organization’s recognition of the importance of factors like family, time off and development of a supportive community atmosphere. I believe this same effect can happen in other places too.

Adjustments to current organizational practices are necessary to improve employee retention on the frontline. No one would

argue that additions like sick days, paid vacation, flexible scheduling options and health benefits could contribute to significant increases in employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Involving staff members in major decision making and in the development of policies and programs could also help. It has been found that such involvement allows staff to develop a stronger sense of ownership and acceptance, acquire a voice, and feel empowered to rebut changes, propose new ideas and vote on revisions (Mulvaney, 2011). If organizations are serious about recruiting and retaining high-performing, committed staff, they must take the basic requirements of these individuals into consideration and invest the necessary resources to implement or adapt current policies and programs in order to most effectively accommodate these needs.



The rewards to be gained from Canadian outdoor-based organizations adopting a more staff-focused business model could prove to be enormous.

Over time, most outdoor professionals develop their skills through various certification courses and professional development workshops. Working with a wide range of co-staff and a diversity of organizations helps expand the facilitation arsenal of the seasoned employee, so that his or her back pocket is overflowing with games, initiative tasks and debriefing ideas, ready to begin just as soon as I say the word “watermelon.” However, those who stick around a while also gain an assortment of skills and abilities that are difficult to quantify or express on a résumé. These skills include learning 13 names in two minutes and not mixing them up even if complete clothing changes are staged several times per day, how to let go of derogatory comments, as well as ways to effectively facilitating important learning experiences by stepping back or stepping in, allowing others to try, fail and succeed.

In today’s highly litigious society, one might assume that organizations offering outdoor programming would place a high value on retaining the decision-making and risk management experience of older outdoor professionals and that “leaders are by and large selected on the basis of their experience and perceived judgmental abilities” (Hanna, 1991, p. 7). Outdoor professionals “with significant field experience,” accumulated from both individual and professional contexts, may respond differently in areas of decision

making and overall judgment than those with limited to no experience in the field (Galloway, 2007, p. 114). In addition,

experienced seasonal staff members who return to a summer job are often easier to train and manage than new staff, engender a better response from participants and free up additional time and money to be dedicated to program needs other than hiring and training staff (McCole, 2005).

A messy and non-linear career path is expected for this kind of work and that aspect of the outdoor industry may never change. The rates of pay for frontline work may never become competitive with other fields. However, it is my hope that it will become more feasible and accessible for frontline outdoor professionals to continue doing what they love if they so choose, whatever adjustments on behalf of organizations may be required. Unable to design a research study within my two-year master's thesis that could appropriately measure the value to any organization of retaining an outdoor professional over age 30 on the frontline, I should probably return to graduate school to complete a PhD. But that would be after working at least five more years "in the field," of course.

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