Noticing changes

Joe McGarrity

Most people have short time horizons. They spend most of their energy focusing on the present day, the present week or perhaps the present year. In these short time frames, they fail to notice big changes. But when they focus on longer time periods, perhaps spanning several decades, big changes jump out and seem commonplace. Like most people, I keep my attention on short term matters, so I fail to notice the big changes, although my recent ski trip turned my attention to these big changes.

In the late 1980s, I took a gap year, after college but before graduate school. During this year, I was a ski lift operator at Steamboat Springs. Then, for several years, I went skiing once a year. After that, about 20 years ago, I stopped skiing, mostly because it was an expensive activity that wasn't convenient from my home in Arkansas, which has no ski slopes. But this year, I took my family to Breckenridge, Colorado. During my 20-year absence from the ski slopes, there were a lot of changes, which were easy for me to notice.

This year I bought a lift ticket that looked like a credit card with my picture on it, which I could keep in my wallet. In the 1980s, when I bought a lift ticket, I attached a thin horseshoe- shaped wire to my jacket and folded the lift ticket over the wire. The ticket adhered to itself, much like a luggage ticket does in an airport. In the 1980s, lift operators looked at your ticket to check that you had paid to use the lift. This year, lift operators hold scanners, which can detect the credit card shaped lift tickets in the skiers' wallets.

In the 1980s, skiers could get lockers to store their shoes and lunch by paying a person each day for a key that opens a locker. This year, skiers get lockers by swiping credit cards at kiosks and by picking four-digit codes that will open the lockers. This year, skiers can even reserve lockers for several days at a time.

I noticed these changes because I did not expect them. I assumed my skiing experience would be the same as I experienced 20 years ago. When the experience was different and I had to go through unfamiliar steps to use lift tickets and lockers, I focused on how to do these steps properly and in the process realized many things had changed on the ski slopes.

I probably would not have thought much about these changes if I had continued to ski every year – because the changes would have appeared small from year to year. My 20-year absence from skiing made these changes appear large to me – since I never witnessed all of the small changes that were occurring.

My skiing experience caused me to reflect on other large changes that have occurred since the 1980s. I immediately thought of several. In the 1980s, people believed that government jobs were secure. The narrative was that, sure, by working for the government, you got paid less than you could earn in the private sector, but you could not be fired unless you really messed up. Now, prompted by Elon Musk and DOGE, the government is firing large swaths of government workers. That is a big change.

In the 1980s, most Republican politicians were in favor of free trade. Today, Republican politicians seem to be supporting Trump's policy of charging high tariffs, which will act to restrict trade. That is another big change. (The effects of this tariff policy were the subject of three of my recent columns).

I encourage everyone to do something that they have not done in a long time. By doing so, you may notice changes that would have gone unnoticed if you had regularly done this activity. When you notice these changes, you are likely to become reflective and consider the other changes that have occurred over the same time period. This kind of reflection, to use a cliché', helps us see the forest through the trees.

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