

Talent Is Overrated

- * What *Really* Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else
- * Geoff Colvin - Senior Editor at Large, FORTUNE
- * 2008, Portfolio/The Penguin Group: New York, NY
- * ***The main point of this book is that by understanding how a few become great, anyone can become better.***
- * Summary by Douglas W. Green, EdD - dgreen@stny.rr.com

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The Mystery

- ✱ When asked to explain why a few people are excellent at what they do, most people attribute it to hard work and God-given talent. Drawing on abundant research, Colvin finds that talent advocates have a hard time demonstrating that natural gifts they can substantiate are important in attaining great performance. The factor that seems to explain the most about great performance is what researchers call deliberate practice. It is hard and it hurts. It is not, however, what most of us do on the job every day, which explains why experience doesn't always lead to better performance.

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Talent Is Overrated

- ✱ A study of accomplished musicians shows that skill is essentially a function of the amount of time they spend practicing. Researchers have found few signs of precocious achievement before the individuals started intensive training. This suggests that if talent does exist, it may be irrelevant. When it comes to our genes, no specific gene has been identified to be associated with a particular talent. Colvin tells the stories of Mozart and Tiger Woods and shows how both were guided and pushed by domineering parents who were determined to make their child into something special. The business field contains many top performers who showed no great promise when they were young. Henry Ford, Jack Welch, and Warren Buffett are examples.

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How Smart Do You Have to Be?

- ✱ Correlations between IQ and achievement aren't nearly as strong as the data on broad averages would suggest, and in many cases there's no correlation at all. When looking for leaders, companies like GE look for behaviors such as focus, clear thinking, imagination, and confidence. They also look for energy, the ability to energize others, decisiveness, and the ability to execute.
- ✱ Three things don't appear to drive great performance. They are experience, specific inborn abilities, and general abilities such as intelligence and memory. Now we look for what does.

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Jerry Rice and Great Musicians

- ✱ By all measures, Jerry Rice was the best wide receiver the NFL has ever seen. While he was also the hardest worker, his workouts focused on the skills he would need, and he spent very little time playing football outside of games. Studies of musicians show that solo practice is the most important factor when it comes to getting better. The top players also got more sleep and practiced when they were fairly fresh. It seems that excellence in any field takes about ten years, even for the top performers, and people who practice in a deliberate manner can keep getting better after twenty years or more.

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Deliberate Practice Defined

- ✱ Sometimes it's easier to tell what deliberate practice isn't. Colvin uses his efforts of hitting golf balls at the driving range as an example of practice that doesn't result in improved performance. Deliberate practice requires that one identify certain sharply defined elements of performance that need to be improved. In most cases people can only do so with the help of an expert teacher in the field. One needs to work on skills and abilities that are just out of reach (learning zone) rather than those that are already mastered (comfort zone) or those that are too hard (panic zone). High repetition is the most important difference between deliberate practice of a task and performing the task for real.

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It's Not Fun.

- ✱ Deliberate practice requires focus and concentration, which makes it mentally taxing and not likely to be a lot of fun. A finding across disciplines is that four or five hours a day seems to be the upper limit. “If you’re practicing with your mind, you couldn’t possibly keep it up all day.” Feedback is another important feature. In sports you can usually see the results of your efforts, but in sports and all other areas, feedback from a teacher, coach, or mentor is vital. Great performers never allow themselves to reach the automatic, arrested-development stage. The essence of their practice is constantly trying to do the things they cannot do comfortably. One’s circumstances also play a part.

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How It Works

- ✱ It's all about pushing ourselves just beyond what we can currently do. Rather than pushing beyond our limitations, sometimes we can work around them. Top tennis pros learn where a serve is going by watching the opponent's body before he strikes the ball. This makes their reaction time seem faster as they think into the future of where the ball will be. You need to develop the perspective of looking ahead, be it a second or a lot longer depending on your field. (Doug: In my case it was watching kids on the playground or in the cafeteria.) You also need to learn how to make finer discriminations. Build up your knowledge-base, and your ability to remember chunks of information that is vital to what you do. Knowledge is power. Attempts to build computer expert systems without deep domain knowledge have all failed. As you develop a deep knowledge base, your brain's structure will actually change to accommodate this effort.

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Three Models

- * The music model: This is where you practice something that is written down, so it applies well to writing and presenting. Try to deliver, record, and watch your presentations if you want to improve.
- * The chess model: This is where you study positions from games played by masters. In business and education it goes by the case method, where you are presented with a problem and you have to come up with a plan of action. It allows one to focus on specific skills.
- * The sports model: This is where you build strength and endurance and then practice specific skills. In non sport areas, it means getting stronger at the underlying cognitive skills you already have. You must actively work on learning more about your field and on how to use what you learn when you are in situations that are unpredictable. Build a mental model on which you can hang your growing knowledge. This will help you project what will happen next.

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Before - During - After

- * Before the work: Set goals that are attainable in the near future and make a specific plan for getting there. You must also believe you can do it.
- * During the work: You need to focus on what you are doing. This is called metacognition. As situations change you can use this information to react.
- * After the work: Practice is worthless without feedback. Try to compare your performance to your previous efforts and appropriate established standards. Take responsibility for your actions and don't blame outside factors. After you do this, decide how you are going to adapt your actions the next time you do the work.

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The Organizational Level

- ✱ The best organizations tend to place professional development at the center of their efforts, and they don't cheap out. This helps them attract people who are determined to learn and grow. Most people development comes from carefully selected job assignments. Mentoring and coaching is also much more important than classroom training. People should be placed in jobs that require them to learn and grow. Executives consistently report that their hardest experiences were the most helpful. Encourage people to be active in community organizations where they can find leadership opportunities. Honest feedback is essential, as is establishing a culture where everyone is comfortable speaking openly. People respond better to inspiration than they do to authority. The command and control model of leadership just won't work most of the time. When people see the boss focusing on developing people, they are likely to do the same. Emphasis needs to be placed on team chemistry and opportunities for teams to socialize.

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Performing Great at Innovation

- ✱ Colvin cites facts and research that shows the so-called eureka moment is a myth. The greatest innovators in a wide range of fields all have spent many years in intensive preparation before making any kind of creative breakthrough. There seems to be a ten-year rule, which says that this much time, or almost this much, is needed before someone is ready to make a creative breakthrough. Years of deliberate practice and hard work are necessary. Too much knowledge does not seem to interfere with innovation. Organizations should help people deepen their knowledge of their field and network to share ideas. They also need to give people freedom to innovate.

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The Young and Old of It

- ✱ Reaching the highest level in many fields takes longer than it used to, as there is now more to know before you can innovate. Ages for Nobel Prize winners and when people get their first patent have increased over time. Starting early also holds advantages that become less available later in life. Young people also must have a supportive and stimulating environment, and parents willing to sacrifice. Organizations often lack the ability to push employees like parents do. As adults, young people who perform exceptionally usually develop further. As top performers age, they can maintain their level of performance if they continue focused, designed practice. They also learn to compensate for declines that come with age. Our brains are perfectly able to add new neurons well into old age when conditions demand, and brain plasticity doesn't stop with age. Performance deterioration isn't an inexorable process, it is a choice.

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The Passion Part

- ✱ Where the passion one needs to engage in the hours and years of deliberate practice needed to become great comes from is a question in need of more research. Colvin is convinced that the motivation required is intrinsic, since creative types rank high on tests of intrinsic motivation. As much of a grind as deliberate practice is, it seems to be filling an inner need. Extrinsic rewards can defeat creativity unless they reinforce intrinsic drives. Some people may be born with a compulsion to work in a specific domain. Students who learn faster are rewarded by the results of their efforts. Passion is something that is developed and may require a push from parents. Small advantages can lead to larger advantages. This is called the multiplier effect. Early recognition by teachers may cause children to invest time in improving performance. Starting early will help one appear better than their peers. It is vital that one believes that their efforts will allow them to achieve their goals.

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What I Left Out

- * In an effort to promote the sales of this important book, I have left out summaries of significant content. Here are some things you can get once you or your institution owns this valuable book.
- * Read about how what once were world record performances are now routine efforts at the high school level.
- * Stories of how Mozart and Tiger Woods were raised by determined parents (prior to Tiger's recent downfall). Also the story of Chris Rock and the story of the Polgar sisters, who are the world's top female chess players. The story of Ben Franklin relates to how he developed his ability as a writer.
- * Colvin explains how organizations can adopt the principles in this book. Read to see which corporations are mentioned along with one governmental organization, which may surprise you.
- * The chapter on innovation has many stories about specific people and their accomplishments to support the idea that long periods of hard work precede creative breakthroughs. Read to find out who they are.
- * The chapter on the young and old of it contains many specific examples along with interesting stories. One quote by Warren Buffet is very funny.

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