Book Outliers

The Story of Success

Malcolm Gladwell
Allen Lane, 2008
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Recommendation

Malcolm Gladwell writes so well that this book seems to race along, and even to be more persuasive than the evidence he presents might cover. He does a great job of challenging existing notions of where success comes from, and of proposing new models to account for social context and various mitigating factors. He points out many details governing success that often go unnoticed, and provides potential routes for social change and professional excellence. As lovely as it is, *Outliers* isn't perfect – it might have been nice to see Gladwell tackle successful people who really don't fit his model or fields where it doesn't quite apply – but it is original, useful and fun. *BooksInShort* recommends it to readers who are interested in fresh thinking, in understanding broad social trends or in finding talented individuals who have slipped through the cracks.

Take-Aways

- The common model of success only tells half the story.
- The people who become really good at something put in 10,000 hours of practice.
- Genius alone is not enough. You must pair it with practical intelligence.
- Intelligence is a threshold: You need to be sufficiently smart to succeed. Beyond that, intelligence has little impact on your ultimate achievement.
- When you personalize success, you overlook important social and cultural factors.
- Family background shapes practical intelligence and strongly influences success.
- Your regional, cultural and ethnic backgrounds affect how you respond to conflict and crisis, and how you communicate.
- This impact continues long after you have moved away from such roots.
- A culture's agricultural traditions shape how its members view education, work and concentration long after they leave their farms.
- If you identify the cultural factors that govern success in a particular area, you can teach them to more people.

Summary

What Is the Secret of Success?

People who succeed must work hard, but lots of people work hard and don't succeed. So stars must have some distinct talent or gift, right? They must be special somehow. That's the common explanation of why some people do well and others don't – and it is wrong or, at least, it tells only part of the story. In leaving out the other elements of success, this old model dangerously distorts reality. It personalizes a process that, while personal, is also social and cultural. It thus leaves people looking for talent in the wrong places.

> "This is a book about outliers, about men and women who do things that are out of the ordinary."

Take the Canadian Hockey League. Its late-teenage athletes are superb players. They're fit and talented, and many turn professional. However, though they all pour out endless energy to reach the top, that's only half the story. The other half is found in what biologists call the "ecology" of a specific living thing. A tall oak tree standing in the forest didn't just come from a good acorn; that acorn also landed in the right place, on good soil with no other trees blocking the sun, and so on. Likewise, these athletes are superior, in part, because of their work and gifts, and, in part, because of the intersection of random chance and an arbitrary social choice.

> "Extraordinary achievement is less about talent than it is about opportunity."

The date that demarcates athletes in the top Canadian hockey leagues is January 1. An overwhelming percentage of champions are born in the first few months of the year. Scant months make a big difference in a child's development, so when kids with birthdays early in the year begin to compete, they are already larger, more coordinated and more promising than those born later the same year. Thus, they get singled out early as having more potential. They receive more coaching and more time on the ice. As a result, they become better hockey players than slightly younger kids. Adults focus resources on them early in their development, but it isn't their talent that gets rewarded; it is their birth dates. To balance this, and to harvest any genuine talent, it might be better to have two hockey systems. The same holds for schools. Rather than grouping kids by age beside older peers, thus creating an uneven playing field, make two or more tracks.

> "Because we so profoundly personalize success, we miss opportunities to lift others onto the top rung."

This early selection process matters greatly because of a second factor that determines superior performance – amount of practice time. If you track a group of potential professionals in an area such as music from childhood through adulthood, a marked pattern emerges: Their final status depends on how much they practice. Strong amateurs accumulate about 2,000 hours of practice by adulthood. Future music teachers build up about 4,000 hours. Really good students amass about 8,000 hours and "elite performers" invest about 10,000 hours of practice. This 10,000-hour marker carries over to other fields, such as sports, the arts and even technical training, like computer programming. People who have dominated the computer world, such as Bill Joy, who rewrote UNIX and Java, put in parallel practice time. That's what carried Joy to stunning computer feats. But it wasn't dedication alone that let him succeed; it was also the right situation.

> "The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise."

In the 1970s, Joy attended the University of Michigan – one of the few places in the U.S. at the time with the resources to let many people practice programming at once. Joy didn't go to Michigan to study computers; he stumbled across the computer center by accident. But, once he did, he could program round the clock, due to access and to a glitch in the system that let students get more than their allotted computer time. Bill Gates had similar luck; he was bright and talented with computers, but he also attended a Seattle private school that had a computer club in the 1960s, and he could "steal" time on the computers of a nearby university.

> "The idea that IQ has a threshold, I realize, goes against our intuition."

For such an incredible tally of time, effort and proximity to pay off, the larger context still has to work. The 75 richest people who ever lived include individuals from across history's span, but nearly 20% of them come from "a single generation in a single country": the mid-19th century in the U.S. John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Jay Gould and more became so rich because they were born at just the right time to take advantage of the American economic explosion. You'll find a similar age grouping for Gates, Joy and other major tech players: Gates was born in 1955, Joy in 1954, Paul Allen in 1953, Steve Ballmer in 1956 and Steve Jobs in 1955. They shaped their field because they entered it at the right time: early enough to have a major impact, but late enough to get practice time on computers after the early days of punch cards.

> "The particular skill that allows you to talk your way out of a murder rap, or convince your professor to move you from the morning to the afternoon section, is what the psychologist Robert Sternberg calls 'practical intelligence'."

This historical positioning is rarely conscious and it doesn't necessarily seem like a good thing at the time. It can happen accidentally, even via negative social forces, and still produce striking success. Take Harvard Law graduate Joseph Flom. When he started, he was one of the few grads who could not get hired. He was "ungainly, awkward, a fat kid" and Jewish, at a time when the New York legal establishment was made up of socially graceful WASPs who all knew one another. Excluded from white glove firms, Flom and two partners started their own firm and handled whatever cases came to them. One kind of case got referred to them specifically because Flom was Jewish and, thus, at the time, an outsider to his profession. Established firms didn't want to touch the harsher edges of corporate law, like takeovers involving ugly proxy battles, so they shunted such cases to Flom. When the business climate shifted and takeovers became common, Flom was already an expert, with far more experience in the field than his competitors, and far less emotional investment in maintaining good personal relations with other lawyers (who had already excluded him). Demand for his legal services boomed and he prospered.

Genius Is Not Enough

When Christopher Langan won $250,000 on a quiz show called *1 VS. 100*, he became famous for his staggering IQ, said to be "too high to be accurately measured." Langan's childhood intellectual accomplishments were stunning. He talked at six months old, taught himself to read by age three, read *Principia Mathematica* at 16 and "got a perfect score on his SAT, even though he fell asleep" during the exam. Nevertheless, he achieved little success until he won the quiz show – because pure intellectual genius alone is not enough. It must be paired with "practical intelligence," which Langan's life had systematically omitted. His mother was isolated from her family and had four sons, each by a different man. Langan's father was an abusive alcoholic. Langan lost his first college scholarship because he was a social misfit, and car trouble kept him from his classes at Montana State. He raked clams, worked in factories and took jobs as a bouncer at bars. He never really used his intelligence professionally.

> "Autonomy, complexity and a connection between effort and reward – are, most people agree, the three qualities that work has to have if it is to be satisfying."

Robert Oppenheimer provides a vivid counterexample of what happens when practical intelligence and genius are combined. Like Langan, he demonstrated his intelligence at an early age, conducting science experiments by third grade, and speaking Latin and Greek by age nine. He, too, ran into self-created trouble at college:

Gripped by serious depression, he planned to kill his adviser! Langan dropped out of college due to a dead car and social differences, but Oppenheimer was merely put on probation for planning a homicide. The difference was Oppenheimer's practical intelligence. At ease with social norms, he could talk his way into opportunities, in large part, due to his background. His family placed him in special schools that gave him extra attention when he showed his potential. They praised his interests and gave him the sense that he would rise to the top, which he did as a physicist. These men illustrate what formal long-term studies of high IQ individuals have shown: Family background markedly influences success, even for a genius. To succeed, brilliant people need praise for their intellectual gains, guidance through human society's complexities and practicality.

The Social Roots of Conflict and Math Ability

For years, deadly family feuds disrupted life in Harlan County, Kentucky. Sons and cousins killed cousins and sons, as their fathers had killed other fathers. Facing violence bravely and accepting feuds as part of life became integral to Appalachian culture – but why there to such an intense degree? The answer resides in the origins of the British immigrants who came to Harlan County in 1819. They brought a "culture of honor" that required a man to respond violently to threats, insults and economic pressure.

> "The plain truth of the [Lewis] Terman study, however, is that in the end almost none of the genius children from the lowest social and economic class ended up making a name for themselves."

Such cultures turn out to be common in rocky areas where herding is pivotal. The shepherd lives at risk, and must act quickly and in isolation to protect his livelihood. This is unlike farming, which depends on community involvement. In herding cultures, a single insult might define a man's character, so he must respond to it. Such characteristics carry over into regional cultures, long after their roots are forgotten. Men from America's South, where the heritage includes a culture of honor, are more likely to be gracious on first meeting – but also likelier to respond to an insult with violent anger – than U.S. northerners, even if both have long lived far from their home regions.

> "What if coming from a culture shaped by the demands of growing rice also makes you better at math?"

In another example, Asian superiority in math has clear cultural roots. Asians have linguistic advantages. The Chinese words for numbers are shorter than the English words, thus easier to process quickly. Japan, Korea and China's counting system is more logical, too; rather than using new words for numbers greater than ten, it makes combinations: "Eleven is ten-one. Twelve is ten-two." Thus, adding and subtracting are almost automatic: Say the words and you add them. Some Asian mathematical superiority comes, surprisingly, from historical contrasts between Asian agriculture, especially rice growing, and European farming. In 18th-century Europe, peasants worked hard in the spring to plant their fields, worked somewhat hard in the summer to weed them and labored hard again to harvest in the fall. They were sometimes idle in the winter and had many days off because of how the plants grew. By contrast, rice farming took regular, extremely hard work. Asian peasants had to prepare rice paddies with an established, constantly monitored water flow. Rice crops were timed for two annual yields from the same fields. Farmers could choose among a much larger array of seeds, switching strains of rice from one planting to another. This produced a deeply ingrained cultural predisposition toward working very long hours while maintaining focused attention on multiple factors: exactly what you need to master math.

In the Air

Social influences affect individual actions even in the specific field of commercial plane crashes. Commercial airliners are mature machines with highly dependable technology, so accidents don't happen because a plane suddenly bursts into flames. Instead, they happen because pilots encounter complications, like bad weather, in situations where one mistake happens, then another, then another. In fact, "the typical accident involves seven consecutive human errors," stemming not from lack of flying skill, but from stress, poor communication and the crew's social morés.

> "Our ability to succeed at what we do is powerfully bound up with where we're from, and being a good pilot and coming from a high-power distance culture is a difficult mix."

National cultures differ in several relevant traits, for example, the "Power Distance Index." The more a "culture values and respects authority," the less likely its members are to challenge their superiors or to tell them unpleasant information (e.g., that a crash is impending). Cultures also differ in how independent they expect their members to be. Some cultures expect people to align with the group; others expect members to be "highly individualistic." In certain contexts, like a stress-filled, error-ridden plane cabin, members of individualistic cultures function better at focusing attention on missed information. As a result, crews from hierarchical, group-focused nations (e.g., Korea) are more likely to crash planes than those from other nations, unless specialized training counters these cultural influences. Thus, once businesses recognize that many of the factors determining performance are cultural, they can develop training programs to reshape cultural habits and generate greater success. Korean Air did so when it asked consultant David Greenberg to retrain its crews. He taught the crew members English to help lighten "the heavy weight of their country's cultural legacy." He also taught them new attitudes about hierarchy, and showed that it was possible for them to be "re-normed."

> "Virtually every success story we've seen in this book so far involves someone or some group working harder than their peers."

The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) in New York is attempting a similar revision of cultural norms. To improve low-income students' education, KIPP teaches some of the cultural practices that help middle-class students succeed academically. One "protocol," called "SSLANT," stands for "smile, sit up, listen, ask questions, nod when being spoken to and track with your eyes." KIPP also extends the school day, week and year. These actions address a socioeconomic reality: Outside school, middle- and upper-class kids are more intellectually active. Various activities stimulate their minds over vacations and on weekends, when lower class kids lose ground. KIPP asks a lot of its students and challenges long-standing educational models, but it also produces superior results, giving students who were performing badly a much better chance at academic success.

About the Author

Malcolm Gladwell writes for *The New Yorker*, and is author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*.