



# Book Talent Is Overrated

## What Really Separates World Class Performers from Everybody Else

Geoff Colvin  
Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008  
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### Recommendation

Author Geoff Colvin rejects the popular notion that the genius of a Tiger Woods, a Mozart or a Warren Buffett is inborn uniquely to only a few individuals. He cites research that refutes the value of precocious, innate ability and he provides numerous examples of the intensely hard work that high achievement demands. Best performers’ intense, “deliberate practice” is based on clear objectives, thorough analysis, sharp feedback, and layered, systematic work. *BooksInShort* finds that Colvin makes his case clearly and convincingly. He shows readers how to use hard work and deliberate practice to improve their creative achievements, their work and their companies. The author’s argument about the true nature of genius is very engaging, but, in the end, he makes it clear that the requirements of extraordinary achievement remain so stringent that society, after all, turns out to have very few geniuses. Colvin admits that the severe demands of true, deliberate practice are so painful that only a few people master it, but he also argues that you can benefit from understanding the nature of great performance. Perhaps, he says, the real gift of genius is the capacity for determined practice. You can improve your ability to create and innovate once you accept that even talent isn’t a free ticket to great performance. It takes work.

### Take-Aways

- Recent research undermines the notion of genius as innate talent or ability.
- Talent is a factor in your career arc, but it is a poor indicator of your future achievements.
- In terms of excellent performance, sharp focus, hard work and a strong memory seem to matter more than a high IQ. “Deliberate practice” matters most.
- Deliberate practice involves defining a clear goal, analyzing the elements of success and designing a program for becoming excellent in each element.
- You can raise your level of innovation and attainment with deliberate practice.
- The amount of time you practice is the best indicator of your probable success.
- Deliberate practice enables you to perceive, know and remember more about your field.
- Age matters to great performance. Adults can accumulate expertise and resources, but their responsibilities may prohibit long hours of deliberate practice.
- The highest achievers seek copious feedback to help them do better work.
- Great performance is based on deliberate practice energized by intrinsic passion.

### Summary

#### Where Are the Wellsprings of Great Performance?

As you listen to Mozart’s music, you may wonder about the nature of his genius. As you watch Tiger Woods accumulate triumphs beyond anything golf has seen before,

maybe you also ponder the images of him as a toddler wielding golf clubs with shocking skill. Are geniuses on this level born with a talent that makes amazing results easy for them? If you ask regular folks to explain how the great figures of art, business, athletics and science acquired their gifts, they are bound to say that God or nature gave these stars an almost unnatural level of talent and skill. However, recent studies have shown that great performance is less reliant on talent than you might assume. Researchers find that extreme high achievers fill their lives with focused, intelligent, well-chosen hard work and practice, not just in spurts, but repeatedly, over and over. These great talents strive to improve their performance throughout their lives.

“Great performance comes from deliberate practice, but deliberate practice is...so hard that no one can do it without the benefit of passion, a truly extraordinary drive.”

Mozart and Tiger Woods were prodigies, but they both worked prodigiously hard as children. Directed, focused childhood work and practice also feature strongly in Warren Buffett’s biography. He was close to his stockbroker father and went to work in his office at age 11. He focused on money and investments as a young boy and later sought the best professional education available.

“Successful people do seem to be highly intelligent. But...the link between intelligence and high achievement isn’t nearly as powerful as we commonly suppose.”

This combination of evidence suggests reconsidering the idea of inborn talent and accepting a more complex equation that includes other factors of varying importance. A 1992 study sorted 257 music students by instrument, age, sex and income. Researchers asked them about their musical precociousness, how much they practiced and which of the nine standard levels of musical performance they achieved at school. The researchers found no profound or conclusive measurement of early musical ability that correlated with top musical performance. However, they did find that the top students practiced two hours a day versus 15 minutes a day for the lowest performing students.

## IQ and Talent versus Hard Work and Practice

An examination of the IQs of people who excel shows that while some are brilliant, others are merely bright and some are even below average in the general intelligence that IQ measures. These people are obviously exceptional in their fields’ critical skills, but IQ-type tests may not measure those factors very well. Most top performers also have exceptional memories. Spending years memorizing material develops their ability to remember. Also, their experienced perceptions help them recall items in relevant groupings and patterns that fit their tasks. Think of the patterns a chess champion can see and predict that average players can’t perceive. Can normal people groom such abilities? Yes they can. Anything other than the raw physical limits relevant to a task is up for grabs. For example, with training you can expand the range of your singing voice, though you cannot wholly transform it. So, you can’t grow an extra foot or two taller to play professional basketball, but you can build more kinds of skills and add more capabilities than you probably believe – although that requires a very special kind of hard work.

“The difference between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain.”

Consider Jerry Rice: He took up football quite late in high school. No big-time college football program recruited him. However, he not only became an outstanding NFL receiver, he ruled the game much longer than most men even play in the NFL. So, what made Jerry Rice such a great wide receiver? The answer resides not just in how hard he worked and practiced, but how and what he practiced. He identified specific abilities he needed to improve and found ways, including great coaching, to build those abilities, layer by layer. He pushed himself to run and he did exhausting exercise. Rice persevered in working on his own even when it was painful and tedious, and he continued to dominate the NFL.

“The best and better violinists practiced by themselves about 24 hours a week on average. The third group, the good violinists, practiced by themselves only nine hours a week.”

By age 18, top violin students have accumulated thousands of hours of practice. The best have more than 7,000 practice hours, average players have around 5,000 and third-level musicians have only about 3,400 hours. The top students’ practice hours actually increase once they become professional musicians, since they strive to improve throughout their lives. While decrepitude eventually catches up with everyone, great performers rarely reach their peak achievements as youths. They experiment, learn, strive and grow in mastery; “deliberate practice” sets them apart.

## Most People Don’t Use Deliberate Practice

Think about how you practice a skill-based activity you care about, such as your golf game. Do you just swing your driver as hard as you can? Or do you run through every club and give them each a few swings? That isn’t what Tiger does. He carefully analyzes the elements of his swing and designs deliberate drills to improve those elements. He practices different skills away from his clubs to build the strength, flexibility and stamina he needs to play golf at his transcendent level.

“Deliberate practice requires that one identify certain sharply defined elements of performance that need to be improved and then work intently on them.”

Great performers pay a lot of attention to details and constantly repeat small skills, even the ones they use only occasionally. They know that greatness requires having every skill ready when the game is on the line. They seek feedback from teachers, coaches, onlookers and customers, and don’t rely solely on their own perceptions. Great performers put forth physical and mental exertion even when they don’t want to and don’t find it much fun, because they know complete preparation is vital to top execution. Whether their capacity for work is a gift or a byproduct of some other drive, they develop painstaking mastery so they can rely on their preparation, and free their minds to conquer the details and demands of the contest at hand.

“Today’s best young employees...are demanding that employers help make them better performers.”

Deliberate practice develops your skills and abilities in several ways:

- **“Perceive more”** – Rather than just seeing the problem, you’ll see it in context with all its subtleties. This lets you anticipate your actions and make the best choices.

- **“Know more”** – Deliberate practice builds your skills in each layer and element of great performance, so you are more experienced and more expert than your competition because you have worked harder to learn.
- **“Remember more”** – Experience lets you see internal structures and retain more information about your work. High performance and strong memory go together because you can use past events and details to inform your present decisions.

“Working on people’s development early is a big change at most companies, where development programs were long reserved for an elite group several years into their careers.”

Brain research indicates that the pathways your neurons use to communicate with each other change and adapt based on your activities, including extensive practice. Just as athletes alter their muscles, deliberate practice will enlarge the mental capacities that relate to your activities.

## Living Deliberate Practice

How can you improve your performance in areas that matter? Try these measures:

- **“Know where you want to go”** – Have a distinct, settled destination in mind. Once you know where you want to go, figuring out how to get there becomes a clearer target.
- **“Practicing directly”** – Several models can help you frame your deliberate practice: The music model uses the idea of repetitively performing a composed piece. The chess model says to study your current position, analyze the outcomes of various moves and choose the best one. The sports model emphasizes building strength, capacity and specific skills.
- **“Practicing in the work”** – Think of your work in three vital phases: preparing, performing and seeking feedback. Evaluate your work so you can adjust and develop.
- **“Deepening your knowledge”** – Dig deeper into subject mastery. Sharpen the mental model you use to frame your knowledge about your area of performance. Clarify which data really matters and what you can safely drop. Use information to anticipate events.

## Applying Deliberate Practice at Work

Rather than focusing on preventing errors, energize your organization with these concepts:

- Ensure that each job helps the employee stretch and grow.
- Use jobs to develop leaders by teaching them, providing feedback and allowing them to exercise leadership.
- Build leader development into your organizational culture.
- Notice your top performers early in their careers and invest in their development.
- Inspire people rather than commanding them.

## Using Deliberate Practice to Unleash Creativity

Since people evaluate great performance relative to other existing performance, you can’t just manufacture it. You have to work at it. Achieving great performance is hard enough; sustaining that performance is supremely difficult, particularly since the bar measuring great performance rises when the general quality of performance improves.

“We constantly see managers redirect people’s careers based on slender evidence of what they’ve ‘got’.”

Contrary to myth, creative people do not wait for inspiration to fall from heaven. They work, experiment, succeed or fail, and try again. When a finished creative masterpiece dazzles you, try to see the long period of work that preceded it. Think of your creative efforts as an orchard of fruit trees. You have to plant and cultivate each one. Likewise, creativity begins small and follows a recognizable trajectory to superior performance. Creative people can become blind to difficult problems and overcome them, or fall into ruts that stifle their creative flow. They have ways of setting work aside and coming back to it with fresh eyes. Or they can jar their perspectives, recast challenges and see them in a new light. Deliberate practice lets you come to know your field of performance so deeply that you can work through each part of the process.

## Does Age Matter?

Why do prodigies exist in music and math, but not in literature or particle physics? Since becoming expert in a field takes thousands of hours of work, children can become prodigies only in fields involving work they can do. Their expressions of innovation and creativity evolve as they age. When children develop in environments that support the creative endeavors they want to pursue, this happy circumstance enables their efforts to flourish. Real expertise, however, requires adulthood and life experience. Experts need time to develop creative ideas. Writers need to hone their craft to be compelling. Scientists need access to millions of dollars worth of equipment. On the other hand, adults also may develop responsibilities that distract them from creative work. Maturity can bring obligations that interfere with dedicated practice.

“Most insidiously...we will try something new and, finding that it isn’t easy for us, conclude that we have no talent for it, and so we never pursue it.”

Just as parents sacrifice and invest in their children, your organization must do the same for its employees. Hoping to reap where you did not sow is not a long-term plan for great performance.

## Deliberate Practice and Passion

How do great performers work so hard, and in such a focused, deliberate way? You can find the answer in the emotional fire often referred to as passion. And, what

ignites strong, long-lived passion? In some cases, passionate people act in response to outside or “extrinsic” drives, like kids whose moms and dads force them to go into the family business or even just to practice playing the piano or the violin. Extrinsic fuel is external to the performer.

“The price of top-level achievement is extraordinarily high. Perhaps...not many people will choose to pay it. But...by understanding how a few become great, anyone can become better.”

Of course, having an inner fire creates a stronger drive. The “intrinsic” drive is uniquely conducive to creativity and long-term great performance. If a child is to accumulate the small advantages of dedicated practice and high performance, the drive has to come from within. The fact is that great performers pay a high, painful price. The world has so few truly great performers not because there is so little talent, but because so few people have the drive to pay the necessary price. You can learn from them. Success is not predestined by the luck of the DNA raffle, or limited to just a few. If you really desire it, and you’re willing to sweat for it, higher performance awaits you.

## About the Author

American journalist **Geoff Colvin** is a senior editor at large for *Fortune* magazine. He is a frequent public speaker, and TV and radio guest. He appears on the CBS Radio Network daily and co-anchored *Wall Street Week* on PBS for three years.

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