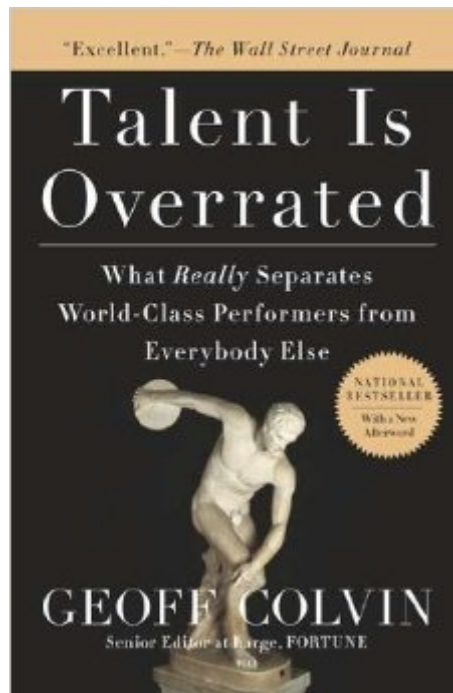


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Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else



Synopsis

Wall Street Journal and BusinessWeek bestseller Asked to explain why a few people truly excel, most people offer one of two answers. The first is hard work. Yet we all know plenty of hard workers who have been doing the same job for years or decades without becoming great. The other possibility is that the elite possess an innate talent for excelling in their field. We assume that Mozart was born with an astounding gift for music, and Warren Buffett carries a gene for brilliant investing. The trouble is, scientific evidence doesn't support the notion that specific natural talents make great performers. According to distinguished journalist Geoff Colvin, both the hard work and natural talent camps are wrong. What really makes the difference is a highly specific kind of effort-"deliberate practice"-that few of us pursue when we're practicing golf or piano or stockpicking. Based on scientific research, Talent is Overrated shares the secrets of extraordinary performance and shows how to apply these principles. It features the stories of people who achieved world-class greatness through deliberate practice-including Benjamin Franklin, comedian Chris Rock, football star Jerry Rice, and top CEOs Jeffrey Immelt and Steven Ballmer.

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Customer Reviews

I inhaled this book. The informal plan was to read it over a few short weeks. Instead I plowed through it in maybe three days. For those teetering on the edge of greatness -- or thinking about really going for the gusto, in whatever field or endeavor that has captured their spirit -- this book is an invitation to walk among the gods. For those who have soured on their dreams and bitterly written them off, however, this book will be painful. It might even read like a damning indictment, and thus incite a hostile emotional response. And finally, this book also has the potential to be terrifying. For

those who feel the pull of greatness but also wrestle with a deep-seated fear of failure, the starkness of the choice will be revealed to them in these pages. Why? Because Colvin's deeper message, beyond the powerful insights into "Deliberate Practice" and what it can do, is that there is no excuse. Whatever it is you like (or love) to do, the fact that you don't hate it means you probably have the basic tools -- and so there's no reason you can't get better, maybe a lot better. And so, at the end of the day, there is simply no real excuse for not being great. Only the classic Bartleby the Scrivener response: "I prefer not to." Greatness requires dedication and sacrifice, period. Being good at something requires a fair amount... being great requires a huge amount. If you truly desire greatness -- or simply to be great at what you do -- then much sacrifice is required. But I fudge slightly. The book does leave room for one excuse of sorts, but not a very satisfying one. In some cases of highly competitive endeavor, wunderkinds (like Mozart and Tiger Woods) have built up a nearly insurmountable "time in the saddle" advantage via taking up the hard work of Deliberate Practice (which I shall from here on out refer to as DP) at an astonishingly young age. Olympian swimmer Michael Phelps has analogized his hard training to putting credits in the bank. DP is like a disciplined investing program -- the longer you do it, the more compounding you see, and it takes many years up front to get to a point of real momentum. This makes it all but impossible in certain prodigy-dominated arenas to come to the game late and try to catch someone who has been continuously working their butt off from, say, age twelve. (Or in Tiger and Mozart's case, age three.) My personal experience with DP -- which I practice in the world of trading and investing -- is that it's a lot like running. The brain is like a muscle, or rather a group of muscles, that has to be built up, like legs and heart and lungs for the runner, if a rigorous DP program is to be sustained. This is another reason why getting into DP is so hard for the average individual. People don't intuitively grasp the concept that the brain is like a muscle... that you have to strengthen your cognitive control and tighten up your executive functions before you can become a powerhouse. Nobody starts out on a running program from a dead stop and assumes they'll be able to run three marathons every week. They build up to it, and work on ways to overcome the initial physical pain and resistance that act as a barrier before "runner's high" kicks in and positive addiction carries them through. It's a similar dynamic with DP. Many people fail in their early quest for excellence, I suspect, because the mind flags and the will tires, and instead of taking this as a normal part of the training process -- like being winded in the early stages of a running program -- they decide they can't hack it and quietly slip back into mediocrity. Another thing I liked about this book is how it puts talent in the proper context. Is it true that talent is overrated? Well, yes. Based on these findings, absolutely. But that doesn't mean talent plays no role in success. It simply means

that having some modicum of talent (whether imparted by genes or favorable early developments) is often a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for success. That lack of sufficiency, i.e. talent alone not being "enough," or even anywhere close to enough, is an absolutely critical point. It's a further interesting quirk that too much talent can even be an impediment, in certain cases, if the obvious presence of said talent convinces the individual that it's okay to shirk on DP. It's no statistical accident, for example, that the less flashy "work horses" of the baseball and basketball worlds tend to have longer careers than their flashier co-players, thanks to a tighter regime of working hard on the fundamentals to make up for lesser natural gifts. And it seems like we all know someone who had a great knack for playing guitar or piano by ear in high school, but couldn't be bothered to put in the sweat equity of trying to develop it into something more. Now, go forth and get on the path to greatness.

Colvin set out to answer this question: "What does great performance require?" In this volume, he shares several insights generated by hundreds of research studies whose major conclusions offer what seem to be several counterintuitive perspectives on what is frequently referred to as "talent." (See Pages 6-7.) In this context, I am reminded of Thomas Edison's observation that "vision without execution is hallucination." If Colvin were asked to paraphrase that to indicate his own purposes in this book, my guess (only a guess) is that his response would be, "Talent without deliberate practice is latent" and agrees with Darrell Royal that "potential" means "you ain't done it yet." In other words, there would be no great performances in any field (e.g. business, theatre, dance, symphonic music, athletics, science, mathematics, entertainment, exploration) without those who have, through deliberate practice developed the requisite abilities. It occurs to me that, however different they may be in almost all other respects, athletes such as Cynthia Cooper, Roger Federer, Michael Jordan, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Lorena Ochoa, Candace Parker, Michael Phelps, Vijay Singh, and Tiger Woods "make it look so easy" in competition because their preparation is so focused, rigorous, and thorough. Obviously, they do not win every game, match, tournament, etc. Colvin's point (and I agree) is that all great performers "make it look so easy" because of their commitment to deliberate practice, often for several years before their first victory. In fact, Colvin cites a "ten-year rule" widely endorsed in chess circles (attributed to Herbert Simon and William Chase) that "no one seemed to reach the top ranks of chess players without a decade or so of intensive study, and some required much more time." The same could also be said of "overnight sensations" who struggled for years to prepare for their "big break" on Broadway or in Hollywood. Colvin duly acknowledges that deliberate practice "is a large concept, and to say that it explains everything would be simplistic and reductive."

Colvin goes on to say, "Critical questions immediately present themselves: What exactly needs to be practiced? Precisely how? Which specific skills or other assets must be acquired? The research has revealed answers that generalize quite well across a wide range of fields." Even after committing all of my time and attention to several years of deliberate practice, under the direct supervision of the best instructor (e.g. Hank Haney, Butch Harman, or David Leadbetter) I probably could not reduce my handicap to zero but I could lower it under those conditions. Colvin's insights offer a reassurance that almost anyone's performance can be improved, sometimes substantially, even if it isn't world-class. Talent is overrated if it is perceived to be the most important factor. It isn't. In fact, talent does not exist unless and until it is developed...and the only way to develop it is (you guessed it) with deliberate practice. When Ben Hogan was asked the "secret" to playing great golf, he replied, "It's in the dirt." Others have their reasons for thinking so highly of this book. Here are three of mine. First, Colvin's observations and suggestions are research-driven rather than based almost entirely on theories developed in isolation from real-world phenomena. He commits sufficient attention to identifying the core components of great performance but focuses most of his narrative to explaining how almost anyone can improve her or his own performance. He reveals himself to be both an empiricist as he shares what he has observed and experienced and a pragmatist who is curious to know what works, what doesn't, and why. I also appreciate Colvin's repudiation of the most common misconceptions about the various dimensions of talent. For example, that "is innate; you're born with it, and if you're not born with it, you can't acquire it." Many people still believe that Mozart was born with so much talent that he required very little (if any) development. In fact, according to Alex Ross, "Mozart became Mozart by working furiously hard" as did all others discussed, including Jack Welch, David Ogilvy, Warren Buffett, Robert Rubin, Jerry Rice, Chris Rock, and Benjamin Franklin. Some were prodigies but most were late-bloomers and each followed a significantly different process of development. About all they shared in common is their commitment to continuous self-improvement through deliberate practice. Here's another reason I hold this book in such high regard. Throughout his narrative, Colvin inserts clusters of insights and recommendations that literally anyone can consider and then act upon to improve her or his individual performance as well as helping to improve the performance of a team of which she or he is a member. For example:

1. Attributes of deliberate practice (Pages 66-72)
2. What top performers perceive that others do not notice (Pages 89-94)
3. Benefits of having a "rich mental model" (Pages 123-124)
4. Rules for peak performance that "elite" organizations follow (Pages 128-136)
5. Misconceptions about innovation and creativity (Pages 149-151)
6. How innovators become great (Pages 159-161)
7. How to make organizations innovative (Pages 162-166)
8. What homes can

teach organizations (Pages 172-175)⁹. The "drivers" of great performance (Pages 187-193)¹⁰. How some organizations "blow it" (Pages 194-198) Colvin provides a wealth of research-driven information that he has rigorously examined and he also draws upon his own extensive and direct experience with all manner of organizations and their C-level executives. Throughout his narrative, with great skill, he sustains a personal rapport with his reader. It is therefore appropriate that, in the final chapter, he invokes direct address and poses a series of questions. "What would cause you to do the enormous work necessary to be a top-performing CEO, Wall Street trader, jazz pianist, courtroom lawyer, or anything else? Would anything? The answer depends on your answers to two basic questions: What do you really want? And what do you really believe? What you want - really want - is fundamental because deliberate practice is a heavy investment." Corbin has provided all the evidence anyone needs to answer those two questions that, in fact, serve as a challenge. Colvin leaves no doubt that by understanding how a few become great, anyone can become better...and that includes his reader. This reader is now convinced that talent is a process that "grows," not a pre-determined set of skills. Also, that deliberate practice "hurts but it works." Long ago, Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right." It would be "tragically constraining," Colvin asserts, for anyone to lack sufficient self-confidence because "what the evidence shouts most loudly is striking, liberating news: That great performance is not reserved for a preordained few. It is available to you and to everyone."

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