

Q&A: THE MYTH OF THE SELF-MADE MAN

THE SECRET TO SUCCESS* *IT'S NOT WHAT YOU'D EXPECT

In his new book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that success is less about innate ability than birthdate and luck - and we may be squandering half of our nation's hockey talent

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NEW YORK -- Malcolm Gladwell knows a thing or two about success.

His previous books, *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, have sold more than three million copies combined in North America alone. He reportedly commands fees of \$40,000 (U.S.) per speaking engagement and, in 2005, Time named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Not bad for a kid from Elmira, Ont.

Now, Mr. Gladwell - whose trademark blend of social science and storytelling appears regularly in The New Yorker - is out to reveal the secret of success. *Outliers*, due out next week, looks at everyone from hockey players to lawyers and software billionaires to make the case that success has less to do with merit or psychological makeup than with arbitrary factors such as when and where you were born and what your parents did for a living.

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Mr. Gladwell discussed his findings at his home in New York.

Outliers is subtitled "The Story of Success." How did you define success?

It was very, very consciously a narrow definition. I was interested in occupational success in the work that we do. Obviously, that's not the full definition of success. I'm not interested in happiness: This book is squarely about what happens when you go to work in the morning.

The book thoroughly demolishes the myth of the self-made man or woman. Was that something you consciously set out to do?

Very quickly, as it became clear the kind of themes that I was interested in, that's what I was running up against: There was a kind of existing narrative of success. ... It's had so many mythical expressions - Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Carnegie and Horatio Alger - and in the 19th century it took hold so strongly. I feel like it's become part of the architecture of American society. We haven't taken a step back and challenged it, which I was trying to do.

Can you explain why it's no coincidence Wayne Gretzky was born in January?

Hockey players and soccer players are overwhelmingly born in the early part of the year - hugely disproportionately - and the reason is that the cutoff date for hockey and soccer around the world is Jan. 1. When people start recruiting for all-star teams and rep squads, when kids are 8 and 9 years old, they pick the kids they think are the most talented. But at that age, the most talented kids are simply the ones born closest to the cutoff date because they're bigger and more mature. And then you give them special coaching and they play more games and they practise more, so by the time they're 17, 18 years old, they actually are better. ... Kids born in the second half of the school year also underachieve - which is why [parents] hold their kids back. What's curious is that it persists - that you see, if you have a cutoff date for school eligibility at Jan. 1, the December-

born kids are underrepresented in college admissions 15 years later. So it's not trivial - it makes a lasting difference.

You also assert that you need 10,000 hours, or about 10 years of practice, to be a world-class expert in virtually anything.

Anything that is cognitively complex seems like it requires at least 10,000 hours. ... It's deliberate practice, so it's focused, determined, in environments where there's feedback, where there's a chance to really learn from mistakes. What's fascinating about this notion that expertise arises only after 10,000 hours of deliberate practice is that it seems to apply incredibly broadly to an astonishing array of different professions - from playing chess to writing classical music to being a brain surgeon to playing hockey.

Bill Joy, co-founder of Sun Microsystems, jokingly refers to himself as a "no-date nerd" who cared only about computers growing up. So, being an obsessive loner can actually help you become successful?

Absolutely. Getting 10,000 hours is so hard that the only way to do it is to be obsessive in a certain way. It might be a bad thing to be obsessive-compulsive in normal life, but if you're a research scientist, it actually could be a really good thing.

But you found that simply having a really high IQ or mastery in a certain field means little if you don't have practical intelligence.

A critical part of high achievement is not a function of your IQ, your analytical ability, the size of your hard drive in your brain, but rather, a function of your ability to navigate the world and get what you want from the world. ... We radically underestimate how much high achievers rely on that practical side.

You interviewed Chris Langan, who is a genius. Yet he hasn't won a Nobel Prize and most people have never heard of him.

He has an IQ closing in on 200 and he has not been a success by any conventional measure. I'm trying to explain why has he failed. And the answer is that he doesn't have any of that other kind of intelligence - practical intelligence - and it's crippling, even though he has a brain that works better than almost anyone's brain in North America.

Are some people doomed to failure simply because of the lot they've been handed in life?

We vary greatly in the degree of natural advantages that we've been given by the world: That's why governments step in and provide opportunities to try and level the playing field. That's why social interventions to provide opportunities are so important. Because the world's not fair. You point out, though, that poor kids learn just as much as wealthier kids in school. Where they fall behind is during summers. How can we address this discrepancy - short of having no summer vacation for students?

There's no way around it. There's no shortcut. One of the things that drives me crazy about a lot of educational reform ideas is that they try to find shortcuts: a charismatic principal; a cool technology; a fancy new school. All of those things are beside the point. This issue is, do you have enough time in school to master the things you need to know. And if you're a poor kid, you don't, because you're not learning at home at the same time. ... Poorer families should be made aware of the disadvantage that they're operating in and then given the opportunity to deal with that disadvantage by having their kids go to school longer. It's about giving people choices - educating them and giving them choices. That's the way to solve that problem.

Do the rules and principles of success that you lay out in *Outliers* apply to your own success?

I spent exactly 10 years at the Washington Post. When I entered, I was not a good writer and I was not a good reporter. And when I ended, I was. So I very much, very, very much, associate my success with the 10,000-hour rule. ... But that's the point of the book: You should be able to see reflections of your own life in the lessons.

So do you think you've figured out the equation for success?

No, because so much of it is outside of our control. I will only say that there are common elements. The common elements are: some kind of opportunity to work harder than your peers - that would be a critical element; some kind of opportunity to see things that others can't see - that's the generational thing; and a fit, a good fit, between your cultural legacy and what you choose to explore.

But from a cost-benefit point of view, why should society invest in creating opportunities for people who haven't received the sort of breaks you write about?

Because we squander talent. Even in a country like Canada, where hockey is a priority, an obsession, we're squandering a huge amount of hockey talent without realizing it. We could have twice as many star players if we just changed the institutional rules around finding talent. To me, that's such a powerful lesson. Because it just says, look, in a simple area like hockey, in a country that cares more about it than almost anything else, if you're still squandering 50 per cent of your ability, how much more are we squandering everywhere else?