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The Elements of Success

Talent and hard work, yes, but plenty of other ingredients seem essential to achievement

By [DAVID A. SHAYWITZ](#)

Outliers

By *Malcolm Gladwell*

Little, Brown, 309 pages, \$27.99

Microsoft founder Bill Gates, legendary mergers-and-acquisition attorney Joe Flom, computer pioneer Bill Joy: What is it about these people that enabled them to achieve such remarkable success? The answer, Malcolm Gladwell asserts in his thoroughly engaging "Outliers," is that success seems to stem as much from context as from personal attributes. Intrinsic ability appears to be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for exceptional achievement. It also helps to be born at the right time -- the 1830s for titans of industry, the 1950s for computer whizzes -- and in the right home environment, with the right cultural heritage. But the elements of success are not all matters of happenstance and talent: Hard work (practicing a skill for at least 10,000 hours) is essential, too, as even Mozart discovered.



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The Beatles in 1963.

Mr. Gladwell casts a wide net, considering such disparate models of success as the Beatles and Canadian professional hockey players. For the Beatles, the hard work of marathon engagements in Hamburg's red-light district early in their careers was crucial. "By the time they had their first burst of success in 1964," Mr. Gladwell writes, "they had performed live an estimated twelve hundred times. Do you know how extraordinary that is? Most bands today don't perform twelve hundred times in their entire careers."

For elite Canadian hockey players, one unlikely yet vital trait is being born early in the year. Why should a disproportionate number of these athletes be born in the first half -- particularly the first quarter -- of the year? The answer seems to be that youth-hockey leagues determine eligibility by calendar year, so kids born on Jan. 1 play in the

Malcolm Gladwell's Method



The author [reflects on his new book, "Outliers,"](#) as well as how he [frames his ideas.](#)

same league as kids born on Dec. 31. Not surprisingly, boys born in the early months of the year tend to be slightly bigger and more developmentally advanced than the others. As a result, they are often perceived as better athletes, receive extra coaching and are more likely to be selected for the elite leagues.

Mr. Gladwell explains that the hockey phenomenon is an example of "accumulative advantage," where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. He notes that sociologist Robert Merton dubbed the phenomenon "the Matthew Effect," after the biblical verse in the Gospel of Matthew: "For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance. But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." Success, in the hockey example, depends not only on the natural ability of the athletes but also on the idiosyncrasy of the selection process used to identify talent.

The value of an outlier was that it forced you to look a little harder and dig little deeper than you normally would to make sense of the world.

[Read an excerpt from "Outliers"](#)

Consider also the success stories of technology entrepreneurs Bill Gates and Sun Microsystems founder Bill Joy. While most biographies of these men focus on their exceptional individual qualities -- their innate intelligence, their fierce determination -- Mr. Gladwell presents a more nuanced analysis, emphasizing the range of opportunities to which each man was exposed. Mr. Gates, for example, attended an elite Seattle private school that, thanks to the proceeds of a parents' group rummage sale, installed a computer terminal in 1968 -- almost unheard of at the time. And this was not just any computer: It was a state-of-the-art time-sharing terminal directly linked to a mainframe in downtown Seattle. "It was an amazing thing," Mr. Gates tells the author. Mr. Gates says that he and his friends were drawn to the computer, which was kept "in a funny little room that we subsequently took control of."



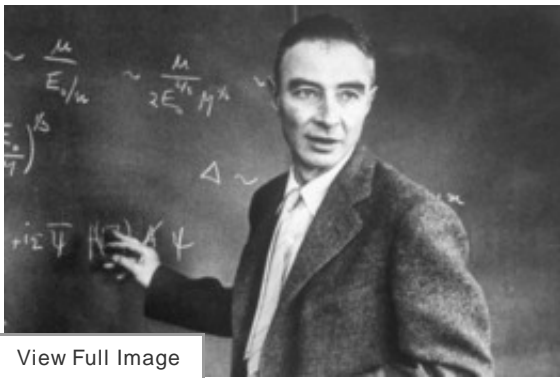
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 Bill Gates at Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, Wash., in 1984

Similarly, Mr. Joy started at the University of Michigan shortly after the school opened a computer center that, for the first time, permitted users to program without the need for labor-intensive punch cards. Had Mr. Gates attended a different high school, or had Mr. Joy enrolled at his college a few years earlier, today's computer industry might look dramatically different.

The point of "Outliers," more generally, is that success is terrifyingly contingent. Intrinsic qualities are required, but a lot of things also need to break just right, and a prodigious amount of luck is necessary.

Without question, Mr. Gladwell's most poignant stories show us people who seemed to have the basic material for success but nevertheless come up short. Mr. Gladwell contrasts two rough-edged

geniuses: Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, and Christopher Langan, a man of seemingly equal natural ability who never gained traction. The pivotal difference, Mr. Gladwell argues, was Oppenheimer's urbane upbringing -- he grew up in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Manhattan, the son of a successful businessman and a painter, attended the Ethical Culture School on Central Park West, and was afforded a childhood of "concerted cultivation." These youthful experiences, explains Mr. Gladwell, enabled Oppenheimer to develop the "practical intelligence" needed for worldly success, such as talking his way out of jams -- for instance, an unsuccessful attempt to poison his tutor at Cambridge. The quality also allowed him to talk his way into jobs, such as directing the Manhattan Project, for which he appeared professionally unqualified. Christopher Langan, by contrast, grew up in a small town in Montana, with an abusive stepfather, estranged from his mother, in abject poverty. Despite his native intelligence -- his renown is still such that the "20/20" television newsmagazine gave him an IQ test and his score was "literally off the charts" Mr. Gladwell reports -- Mr. Langan had neither the means nor the life skills to achieve success and have the sort of impact on the world that he had once envisioned.


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Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Physicist Robert Oppenheimer in 1949

Mr. Gladwell's writing style -- now sufficiently iconic that many new nonfiction authors seek to define themselves as the "Malcolm Gladwell of" their chosen topic -- may be easy to recognize but its clarity and easy grace remain difficult to emulate. Yet clarity may also be its Achilles' heel: As Mr. Gladwell reduces complex sociological phenomenon (such as the success of Eastern European Jewish immigrants or the apparent facility of Asians for math) to compact, pithy explanations (exposure to the entrepreneurial culture of the garment industry and the efficiency-demanding requirements of rice-patty cultivation,

respectively), you can't help wondering whether something has been lost in the simplification. This is especially worrisome in the context of the ever-captivating sociological studies that provide much of the supporting evidence in "Outliers." Science is just not as tidy as Mr. Gladwell's explanations would seem to suggest.


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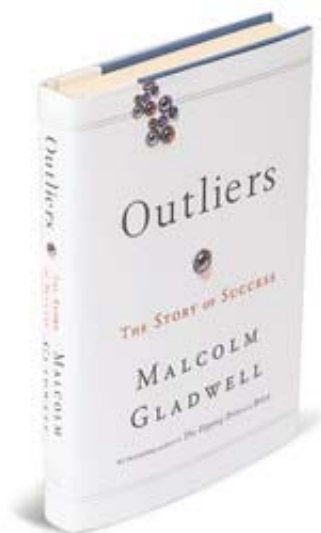
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Canadian youth hockey in Kelowna, British Columbia

And yet -- for all the quibbles that may attend the individual stories that Mr. Gladwell has assembled -- the thrust of his argument is right on target. Ultimately, he isn't trying to provide a prescription for individual success; this is not a self-help book. Rather, he seeks to focus our attention on a much more profound question: How much potential out there is being ignored? How much raw talent remains uncultivated and ultimately lost because we cling to outmoded ideas of what success looks like and what is required to achieve it?

Mr. Gladwell tells us that the white-shoe law firms of 1940s New York thought legal success looked tall, blond and WASPy, and so Joe Flom was turned away. But he persisted in his interest in the law and became the first associate at a small practice that would grow into the formidable law firm Skadden Arps, where Mr. Flom is a named

partner. The author might have also considered the example of dyslexic author John Irving: Because Exeter thought writing success looked like perfect spelling, Mr. Irving received C-minuses in English and remained in school only because of his love of wrestling. Recognition for writing came later. The question Mr. Gladwell encourages us to ask: How many John Irvings are still out there, discouraged before they were ever discovered?



Mr. Gladwell passionately emphasizes the need to cultivate great minds that might be limited by their circumstances or environment. He presents the compelling example of KIPP schools ("Knowledge Is Power Program"), a promising, intensive educational approach inspired by the observation that kids from underprivileged backgrounds lose ground academically to better-off peers not during the school year but during vacations. By extending the time spent in school, according to Mr. Gladwell, KIPP programs have helped students to harness their inherent potential and achieve academic success.

"Outliers" offers an implicit message for companies as well: There is great competitive advantage for the organization recognizing that the work environment can nurture talent -- and also suppress it. The best companies will not only seek to provide their employees with enrichment but will also have the insight -- and courage -- to identify and recruit exceptional though neglected talent that could flourish under the right conditions. In the end, we

aspire to be the graduate-school admissions officer at Iowa who selected John Irving for the creative-writing program -- not the high-school English teacher in New Hampshire who noticed only the poor speller struggling in the back of the classroom.

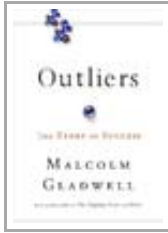
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Books Mentioned In This Article



Outliers: The Story of Success

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Sociology



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