

## Geoff Colvin insists you are naturally good at nothing.



You are *not* talented at your job. You never will be. But wait: That's the good news—because talent, argues Geoff Colvin, doesn't exist in the first place—at least not in the traditional sense of the word. It is not, he points out, an innate ability. The sooner you realize that Jack Welch, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and you were not *meant* to be great business leaders, the likelier you are to become a great business leader. Too many of us have been deluded by the promise that talent leads to great success, says Colvin, *Fortune's* senior editor at large and former co-anchor of PBS's *Wall Street Week*. In his new book, he debunks conventional thinking and explains why *Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else* (Portfolio). Colvin, 55, spoke from his New York office about the meaning—and meaninglessness—of talent and why you probably won't get anywhere at work or in life until you acknowledge your lack of it. —VADIM LIBERMAN

### If innate talent doesn't exist, how do you explain Mozart?

That is the first objection that people make. But if you look closely at his story, you see someone who was put through the rigors of deliberate practice by his father starting at an incredibly early age. Yes, Mozart did achieve remarkable things at an early age, but you have to be very careful about what you think he actually achieved. Mozart's father was a famous composer and performer in his own right. He was also a domineering parent who started his son on a program of intensive training in composition and performing at age 3. In some cases, it's clear that the young boy's compositions are not original: He put many of them together out of works by other composers. Mozart's first work regarded today as a masterpiece is his Piano Concerto No. 9, composed when he was 21. That's certainly an early age, but we must remember that by then Wolfgang had been through eighteen years of extremely hard, expert training. You don't have to resort to a miraculous inborn ability to explain his success. *New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross sums it up by saying: "Ambitious parents who are currently playing

the 'Baby Mozart' video for their toddlers may be disappointed to learn that Mozart became Mozart by working furiously hard."

### So hard work, not talent, leads to greatness?

Hard work is always better than no work; you'll do better in your chosen field if you work hard. But plain old hard work doesn't seem to correlate all that well with really top-level, world-class performance. Look around you. We're surrounded by lots of people who work very hard, who put in a lot of hours. But they're not great. I'd say only about one in a thousand people is a great performer.

### Maybe your book should've been called *Talent—and Hard Work—Are Overrated*.

Hard work is important, but it must be the *right kind* of hard work. It's tempting to say that Mozart's or anyone's success is all about talent, hard work, and practice, but not quite, because when most of us practice, we're not doing what researchers call *deliberate practice*, which is the real key to success.

For practice to be deliberate, it must have certain characteristics: First, it

must be designed by a teacher or the person himself to push the person just beyond current abilities—though not too far, because that would be too frustrating. It must also be repeated at high volume. Typically, whatever activity you're practicing is one that you can do hundreds of times over and over. There must also be continuous feedback. Now, sometimes it's obvious whether you do something right, but sometimes you need a teacher to give you an evaluation. Deliberate practice is also highly demanding and mentally draining—so much so that people can only accomplish it for a few hours a day.

### Doesn't sound like much fun.

It's not, and it's not supposed to be, which is another characteristic of deliberate practice. If you're pushing yourself beyond your current abilities, it means that you're going to be failing a lot, trying to do stuff you can't quite do. That's not most people's idea of fun.

### That's also why people give up on tasks.

Yes, but that's understandable. If your goal is just to have fun doing something, why make yourself miserable? Go ahead and do it for the fun—but at

the same time, realize that you'll never get *really* good at it. Ultimately, if you want to be great, there arises a question of what you want to do with your life. You have to make some really big decisions. It makes sense to give up if putting in necessary hours in a given domain will prevent you from doing other things important to your life, like spending time with your family.

**But even if you aspire to greatness, how do you know if and when to give up?**

In my book, I quote Sir Francis Galton, the nineteenth-century writer, who was an early champion of the notion of inherited ability. He says, Look, every man will find for himself the natural limit of his abilities. At that point,

will be called upon repeatedly. For example, when Jeff Immelt was a young GE manager in the 1980s and the company had a crisis where refrigerator compressors were failing, they put Immelt in charge of the recall. Here is a horrible, overwhelming crisis, and GE puts someone who has no experience with appliances or recalls in charge of it. But the company knew what it was doing—it put him in there to give him lots of experience with an ability he didn't yet have but could develop. Immelt said to me explicitly, "I wouldn't be CEO today if I hadn't had that job."

**Things turned out well for Immelt, but they could have gone the other way. Given that you write, "We weren't hired**

something that you can do easily is very tempting.

Nonetheless, deliberately putting managers into stretch jobs that will require them to learn and grow is the central development technique of the most successful organizations. It goes back to the idea that deliberate practice is an investment intended to pay off down the road. Companies need to understand that their real business is building the abilities of their people, because—

**—your people are your greatest assets. What company doesn't believe that by now?**

They say it all the time, but they don't mean it. At least, they don't behave as if they mean it, because they don't use this stuff I'm talking about. Many companies seem arranged almost perfectly to prevent people from taking advantage of these principles. Instead, they need to think of all the ways they could apply deliberate practice. For instance, organizations can have their managers take part in business-simulation activities.

**You also say that experienced managers don't necessarily produce better results. So when businesses hire people, years of experience shouldn't count?**

Extensive research in a wide range of fields shows that many people not only fail to become outstandingly good at what they do, no matter how many years they spend doing it—they frequently don't even get any better than they were when they started. There's also plenty of evidence that as people do something for a long time, they may even get *worse* because they may forget some of what they learned in their initial training. They haven't been stretched in their jobs. For example, there was a famous study on how good clinicians were at diagnosing. After a researcher asked a group of doctors to name the best clinicians in their area, a few names clearly stood out. The researcher discovered that these clinicians were no better than average when it came to properly diagnosing—doctors

**so we could spend time improving our own abilities; we were hired to produce results," isn't there something to be said for keeping a manager in a position in which he already excels?**

It's true that organizations tend to assign people based on what they're good at, not what they need to work on. It can be difficult for a company to take someone who's a great performer out of the job he or she is doing and put them in a job where they may not do so well, because it will cost. You may not have that person produce the same results. And that person probably won't be all that terrific at the beginning in the new job. You have to make a judgment about whether the investment is worth making, and the best companies are willing to do it. I realize this is risky. Certainly, the temptation is great for the individual to remain in the current role, and frankly, as people's careers move along, they have other demands in life, like family commitments or playing golf or having more leisure time, so being able to continue doing

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he will realize he can go no further and he will content himself with having reached his limit. But Galton was wrong. The message of the deliberate-practice approach is that you *never* give up, because in an awful lot of domains, it's not clear what your limits are. People are constantly exceeding them. These days, Olympic records from a hundred years ago are constantly being broken by high-schoolers. That's because training today is being designed better and better. It's become more deliberate.

**How does deliberate practice apply to business?**

In most companies, there is little or no emphasis on deliberate practice. People are simply supposed to go to work and perform. That's like asking football players to play games without practicing. That's what life is like at most companies. Some, however, are consciously building careers of managers by figuring out what skills are just beyond their current abilities and putting them in jobs where those skills

thought they were great because they had a lot of experience, held high positions, and belonged to professional societies. There's an awful lot of that going on in business too. Rather than look at years of experience, companies are better off looking at the person's proven ability to produce results.

**Still, you concede that the right kind of experience *does* matter—ten years of it, in fact.**

Ah, the ten-year rule. It's really a remarkable thing, a generalization that happens to be remarkably consistent. It seems that if you engage in deliberate practice for as many hours a day as you can before you can't take it anymore, and you do that about every day for ten years, you'll be in the neighborhood of about ten thousand hours of deliberate practice. That's the number of hours required to reach an international standard of performance in all kinds of domains. Studies in a wide range of fields have substantiated the ten-year rule everywhere researchers have looked. In math, science, musical composition, swimming, X-ray diagnosis, tennis, literature—no one, not even the most quote-unquote talented performers, became great without at least ten years of very hard preparation.

**Indeed, you point out that innovation doesn't strike—it grows.**

Yes, there's a widely held view that breakthrough ideas come from people who are not overly familiar with a problem. But research suggests that innovation isn't a lightning bolt. It grows from what has been accomplished before and benefits enormously from familiarity with a problem. The better you know the problem, the likelier you'll come up with a solution. I don't subscribe to the thinking that you can be too close to something to see it correctly, which you hear a lot in business. The real trouble may be that you are bringing the wrong skills to it. If people think that they are looking at a problem involving the distribution system, but the real problem is

with the marketing, then it's true that the distribution people aren't going to solve it, but that's only because they've misidentified the problem.

**Ah, if only the company had stretched the distribution people by assigning them marketing tasks earlier in their careers.**

Exactly!

**Still, just as one still might blame lack of talent for lack of success, can't one just as easily blame one's shortcomings on an improperly designed system of deliberate practice?**

Well, first, to use lack of talent as an excuse is tragic. As for using a lack of the right deliberate practice as an excuse—sure, that may be valid. You can say you didn't start young enough, or that your parents never made you practice enough as a child. In the end, you have to judge for yourself, though I will say that excellent performers judge themselves differently from the way other people do. They take a much more mature and realistic view of a situation and are less likely to blame other people or outside forces.

On the other hand, there will always be limits imposed by luck. If you're

**No matter when you start, you can become much better at any task.**

seven feet tall, you'll never be an Olympic gymnast. Then there's the issue of when you started practicing deliberately. Sometimes, it may be too late. Tiger Woods started practicing very early in life. If you start playing golf later in life, no matter how hard you work to become a great golfer, you will never accumulate as many hours of deliberate practice as Tiger has—and he's still practicing. However, there's something to be said for the fact that no matter when you start, you can become much better at any task.

**You also mention that having intrinsic motivation to succeed is essential, but can enough extrinsic motivation compensate for lack of an inner drive?**

No, it can never compensate for true passion, though it can help. There are extrinsic motivators that essentially feed the intrinsic. For instance, if you achieve certain things in your career, that will give you more freedom to pursue other things at work. But just as abilities must develop over time, so must passion. Neither is there at the beginning, though early extrinsic motivators, like recognition and promotions, help. When you look at businesspeople, what drives them at the beginning is money.

**How have people reacted to your arguments?**

I've encountered people who don't like the idea that talent isn't what they thought it was, and I think it's because they don't like giving up the idea that maybe success can be easy and quick. If only you find your talent in life, or if your kids can find their natural talent, success can be quick and easy for them. I'm saying, no, it can't and never will be. A lot of people hate giving up that dream.

**Then there are people like me who believe they have no talent in the traditional sense of the word. You've given me hope!**

Yes! That's my message. This is the most hopeful, liberating news that you can encounter. I've met people who've found comfort in what I've written because they realize that just because they aren't great performers doesn't mean there's anything wrong with them. It just means that they've chosen not to pursue activities to make them great. That's an enormously liberating idea. 🍌