

## MALCOLM GLADWELL

**OUTLIERS:  
THE STORY OF  
SUCCESS**



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# OUTLIERS



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malcolm Gladwell is a world-renowned author, international best-seller and Canadian journalist, most known for his writing in the area of theorizing social psychology while connecting these areas to research. This unusual combination and approach is what makes Gladwell such an intriguing author. His early career was marked by his work in journalism after not being able to make it to graduate school due to marks, and

being rejected from a number of advertising agencies. After ten years in journalism, he began writing for *The Washington Post*, where he began to look at research for inspiration in his writing. When asked about his writing he suggested that he is “interested in collecting interesting stories, and ... collecting interesting research” (Gladwell, 2006).

## Overview

Outliers is a unique examination of success and how the ‘outliers’, those who stand out from the rest, arrive at greatness. He challenges the conception that greatness is tied to meritocracy, which is the notion that people are successful in a given field due to the fact that they pull themselves up from their own bootstraps, create their own luck, and are as a result superior to all others in what they do. By looking at a number of different studies and theories, Gladwell postulates that those who are successful are not successful simply due to their innate abilities, rather that they are successful in many parts due to circumstances, and a variety of circumstances at that.

“It is those who are successful, in other words, who are most likely to be given the kinds of special opportunities that lead to further success. It’s the rich who get the biggest tax breaks. It’s the best students who get the best teaching and most attention. And it’s the biggest nine- and ten-year-olds who get the most coaching and practice. Success is the result of what sociologists like to call “accumulative advantage.” - Gladwell in *Outliers*

# Part 1: Opportunity

## The Matthew Effect

Gladwell discusses the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies in this concept, while using the biblical allusion to represent it. It is the notion that those who already have an advantage, are much more likely to be given more advantages, rather than those who are disadvantaged. He cites research and examples from multiple sources, but draws primarily on sports to illustrate his point.

He used a team from the WHL, the Medicine Hat Tigers from 2007 as a way to exemplify the irrational advantage given to hockey players with an earlier birthdate, because in hockey the cutoff date for the season is the new year. As a result, if a child happens to be born on December 31st, they will be 364 days younger, and less physically mature than a player born a day later on January 1st. This gives an unearned and unfair advantage to those with birthdays in the early months of the year, therefore skewing the perception of talent to those born then. Since they are bigger, they are more mature physically and more coordinated and subsequently selected ahead of their peers with later birthdays, although they do not lack skill, they do not get the same attention, coaching and opportunities, and over time they do fall behind their peers in skill. This shows the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy where those who already have, get more and those who have less, get what they have taken away.

It has a significant effect on who is successful based on the opportunities afforded to them, that are purely situational, coincidental, unintended and unearned. Gladwell based this on research of sports psychologist, Roger Barnsley, who noted this in hockey, but it has also been reproduced by sociologists, like Roger Merton, both of whom Gladwell cites.

*"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." - Matthew 25:29*



**"Scott Wasden was born on January 4, within three days of the absolute perfect birthday for an elite hockey player. He was one of the lucky ones." - Gladwell**

Number	Name	Position	L/R	Height	Weight	Birth Date	Hometown
9	Brennan Bosch	C	R	5'8"	173	Feb. 14, 1988	Martensville, SK
11	Scott Wasden	C	R	6'1"	188	Jan. 4, 1988	Westbank, BC
12	Colton Grant	LW	L	5'9"	177	Mar. 20, 1989	Standard, AB
14	Darren Helm	LW	L	6'0"	182	Jan. 21, 1987	St. Andrews, MB
15	Derek Dorsett	RW	L	5'11"	178	Dec. 20, 1986	Kindersley, SK
16	Daine Todd	C	R	5'10"	173	Jan. 10, 1987	Red Deer, AB
17	Tyler Swystun	RW	R	5'11"	185	Jan. 15, 1988	Cochrane, AB
19	Matt Lowry	C	R	6'0"	186	Mar. 2, 1988	Neepawa, MB
20	Kevin Undershute	LW	L	6'0"	178	Apr. 12, 1987	Medicine Hat, AB
21	Jerrid Sauer	RW	R	5'10"	196	Sept. 12, 1987	Medicine Hat, AB
22	Tyler Ennis	C	L	5'9"	160	Oct. 6, 1989	Edmonton, AB
23	Jordan Hickmott	C	R	6'0"	183	Apr. 11, 1990	Mission, BC
25	Jakob Rumpel	RW	R	5'8"	166	Jan. 27, 1987	Hmciarowce, SLO
28	Bretton Cameron	C	R	5'11"	168	Jan. 26, 1987	Didsbury, AB
36	Chris Stevens	LW	L	5'10"	197	Aug. 20, 1986	Dawson Creek, BC
3	Gord Baldwin	D	L	6'5"	205	Mar. 1, 1987	Winnipeg, MB
4	David Schlemko	D	L	6'1"	195	May 7, 1987	Edmonton, AB
5	Trever Glass	D	L	6'0"	190	Jan. 22, 1998	Cochrane, AB
10	Kris Russell	D	L	5'10"	177	May 2, 1987	Caroline, AB
18	Michael Sauer	D	R	6'3"	205	Aug. 7, 1987	Sartell, MN
24	Mark Isherwood	D	R	6'0"	183	Jan. 31, 1989	Abbotsford, BC
27	Shayne Brown	D	L	6'1"	198	Feb. 20, 1989	Stony Plain, AB
29	Jordan Bendfeld	D	R	6'3"	230	Feb. 9, 1988	Leduc, AB
31	Ryan Holfeld	G	L	5'11"	166	Jun. 29, 1989	LeRoy, SK
33	Matt Keetley	G	R	6'2"	189	Apr. 27, 1986	Medicine Hat, AB

## The 10,000 Hour-Rule

“PRACTICE ISN'T THE THING YOU DO ONCE YOU'RE GOOD. IT'S THE THING THAT MAKES YOU GOOD.”

The '10,000 Hour-Rule' is perhaps one of Gladwell's most notorious ideas. He believes that before anyone become a master at anything, they need to put in 10,000 hours of practice into whatever it is that they are doing.

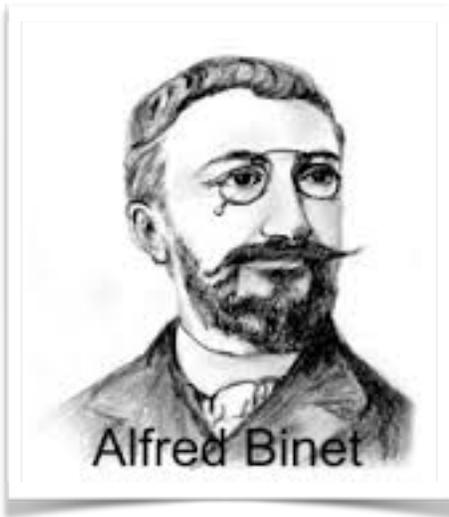
By examining greats like the Beatles, Bill Gates and Bill Joy, along with others like Mozart as well as following up with the idea behind athletes in 'The Matthew Effect'.

He cited the studies of Anders Ericsson, which revealed that there was a massive correlation between the amount of practice time and the success of those individuals. In Ericsson's findings there were no natural musicians who became elite without this significant amount of practice. Nor was the inverse true, meaning that there were not any examples of musicians who put in more time than anyone else that didn't eventually succeed, once finally at a top musical school. So long as there was enough talent to be noticed, there was a good chance that they would get the attention needed, whether that was by an advantage like a cut-off date, or attending a university that had unlimited computer access like Bill Gates and Bill Joy or the opportunity to play eight hour shows every day in Hamburg strip clubs like the Beatles did.

The point was that practicing is what made these and other greats the best, but there was often a unique situation which gave them better access or privilege to practice than their peers, thereby allowing opportunity to shape their success in an unrivalled manner.

“THE STORY OF BILL JOY'S GENIUS HAS BEEN TOLD MANY TIMES... HERE WAS A WORLD THAT WAS THE PUREST OF MERITOCRACIES... ONLY IT WASN'T. IT WAS A STORY OF HOW THE OUTLIERS IN A PARTICULAR FIELD REACHED THEIR LOFTY STATUS THROUGH A COMBINATION OF ABILITY, OPPORTUNITY AND UTTERLY ARBITRARY ADVANTAGE”





## The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 1

“INTELLECT AND ACHIEVEMENT ARE FAR FROM PERFECTLY CORRELATED” - LEWIS TERMAN

In this chapter, Gladwell explores genius and what we as a society typically consider to be genius. He begins by introducing us to some of the most intelligent people by conventional standards, with high IQ and that these people are much smarter than the average human being. The common assumption is that intelligence out to to have a direct correlation to achievement, which is why top companies like Google and Microsoft have their prospective employees do tests to asses their intelligence.

However, this is where he finds ‘The Trouble with Geniuses’. The trouble with intelligence, Gladwell believes is that there is a threshold on its value. After somebody has enough intelligence, any more does not equate to real world value. He proves this example when looking at the University of Michigan’s affirmative action policy where 10% of its student body is reserved for minority students, who have lower achievement results upon entering. However, they do have enough intelligence to make it into college, and study found that once they left, those students were just as successful in the real world as the white students. All this despite the fact some felt as though the bar was lowered through their admission. Gladwell goes on to suggest that as long as people are smart enough, then they will not have trouble succeeding, because they have passed the threshold for intelligence required.



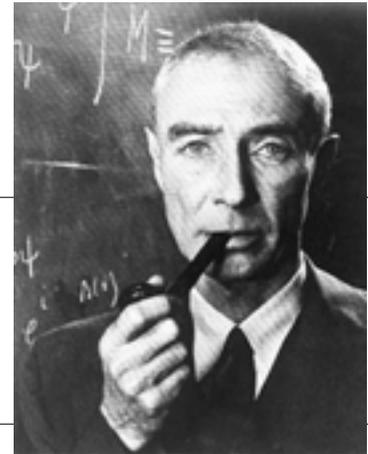
The crux is that intelligence is just one piece of the puzzle, and that it is not the only things that matters, nor is explicitly correlated with achievement.



## The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 2



VS.



Recognize these two men? Perhaps not, but they are two men with genius intelligence that have lived within the last century in North America. On the left is Christopher Langan and on the right is J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Langan grew in poverty and was barely able to get into college due to financial reasons and when he lost his scholarship, was forced to leave because his mother did not complete the necessary paper work for him to maintain his scholarship and attend another college which also didn't last long until he had no other option to forego college education altogether. He lived his life working menial jobs, such as bouncing at a night club while studying on the side in the area of theoretical physics and writing the entire time. However, he realized that since he lacked credentials, he did not have the platform to advance his ideas so that they could be validated and used for any real purpose.

The other man, Oppenheimer, was very similar to Langan. He was also a genius, with a gift in physics also blessed with somewhat of a charm. From a young age Oppenheimer had every educational opportunity afforded to him and flourished. He was a strange man, and during his university career for some reason, unbeknownst to this day he attempted to kill his tutor by poisoning him. One would assume this would result in serious legal and criminal implications, however it did not. The only result was that Oppenheimer was put on probation and forced to see a psychiatrist.

The difference between these two in their nature is minimal, suggested Gladwell. It was their experiences for one that shaped the opportunities afforded to them, but also their 'practical intelligence', which Robert Sternberg describes as the ability to "know...what to say to whom, knowing when to say it, and knowing how to say it for maximum effect". This practical knowledge is something that is learned and cultivated through parenting, experiences, socialization and opportunities that give children opportunities to perform and adjust to a variety of expectations in a structured and scheduled context, as seen in parenting studies by sociologist Annette Lareau, whereas raw intelligence is innate. 'The Trouble with Genius, Part 2' is that intelligence without practical intelligence is less valuable in terms of achieving in life, thus showing that a substantial part of success is circumstantial.

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## THREE LESSONS OF JOE FLOM

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*I'm Joe Flom. I came from humble beginnings in Brooklyn. My parents were Jewish immigrants that busted their backs to make ends meet. I was an American lawyer that specialized in corporate takeovers, mergers and acquisitions. I acquired the nickname 'Mr. Takeover' because of my work while at the helm of the most powerful law firm in the world, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.*

### Lesson # 1: The Importance of Being Jewish

In Flom's early career he was passed over by the big corporate law firms of his day, and instead had to settle for the less desirable work of litigation, by the less desirable firms as this work was looked down on by the big firms of the day. However, with the drastic increase of mergers and takeovers in the 70s the anti-semitism Flom encountered put him further ahead due to the experience and skills that he gained in his work that were now high in demand. Gladwell describes this as "horribly unfair.. [b]ut as is so often the case with outliers, buried in that setback was a golden opportunity."

### Lesson # 2: Demographic Luck

Right place at the right time. Timing is everything. Both of these quotes reflect the importance of circumstance in this lesson. Gladwell provides the examples of a few Jewish lawyers in New York City. The first appeared to have every advantage to be successful that Gladwell has discussed so far, except for the fact that he wasn't successful. His son, on the other hand was everything his father ought to have been, and this is attributed to when he was born as being a much better time, with fewer births and subsequently a luckier demographic in which to be born.

### Lesson # 3: The Garment Industry and Meaningful Work

Autonomy, Complexity and Connection Between Effort and Reward. These were the characteristics of the work that the Jewish immigrant parents whose children went on to become successful lawyers and doctors in their own rights. The work they did was in the garment industry as they had gained this experience in Europe and there was a market for it in New York, which allowed them to make a living, but more importantly the work was meaningful and this kept them working at it. They were their own bosses, and the work was creative and engaged the mind and most importantly the more work they put in, the more money they would make. This value that was demonstrated to their children was invaluable as it showed them that they could make it in the world if they applied themselves, asserted themselves and used their mind.

## Part Two: Legacy

### Harlan, Kentucky

Looks like a picturesque town with a quaint feel, doesn't it? This couldn't have been further from the truth in the early 19th Century.



This small town, settled in the early 1800s by immigrants from the Northern United Kingdom, it was much different than most other American towns at this time. However, it was similar to many that neighbored in the Appalachians and this shares what they had in common.

#### At First Glance...

1. Settled by Scotch-Irish immigrants. Most families had left the highlands in Northern Ireland and Southern Scotland, where most land was contested and the rule of law was not present.
2. Characterized by extreme feuds that were marked with violence and death and this behaviour was not only normal but expected.

*So why was this area plagued by violence and extreme behaviour?*

#### At Second Glance...

1. Harlan County's immigrants brought with them a strong '**Culture of Honour**', which meant that they would do almost anything to defend their personal honour.

*What are the implications of this 'Culture of Honour'?*

The point is not that the Southern U.S. is inherently violent, although Gladwell cites John Shelton Reeds research about Southern crime as it is marked by **personal** crime where one's honour was confronted. So if you can avoid adultery and arguments you'll be fine. This is still the case even though it's been two hundred years since the settling of the Appalachian interior. Gladwell's point is that cultural legacies shape who we are more than we know, just as much as our birth situations and our parents jobs and our upbringings.

# The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes



Do you recall the above airline?

Do you recall the reputation and challenges it had throughout the 1990s?

If so, you would recall that they were plagued with high crash rates and disassociation from the international aviation community.

Conventional aviation knowledge would tell us why most crashes occur, and the most common reasons are due to multiple pilot errors, as well as things like pilot fatigue and new pilot arrangements. However, Korean Air's issues were not characterized by these more common issues. That is not to say that there were diagnosable issues such as these, but there was a much more deep-rooted issue that was affecting Korean Air's flight record.

Gladwell proposes that this is an issue of *Legacy*, that was causing the issues, and it is an extension of the last chapter "Harlan, Kentucky". More specifically, it is an issue of cultural legacy and not just for Korean Air, but also for any other country that has a low Power Distance Index (PDI). PDI is a ranking that is similar to that country or culture's level on the 'individualism-collectivism' scale, which was examined in the Human Resource Leadership Platform. The PDI takes into consideration how much that country values and respects authority and laws and how much they require or denounce power structures.

These countries with high PDI rankings are more likely to mitigate their speech, that is downplay their concerns to Air Traffic Control so not to upset their superiors. As a result, they are less likely to communicate the severity of their concerns, which creates a massive communication issue, especially if there is an issue, which there were in the cases Gladwell. These cultural tendencies, although without moral superiority, do come with benefits and drawbacks, and in this case, they are most definitely drawbacks. Several of these countries with high PDI have had higher instances of crashes due to communication issues.

It is important that we are culturally self-aware of these idiosyncrasies so that we do not fall victim to them. Further evidence, in Gladwell's eyes, that it is not only our opportunities, but our legacy that defines our stories for success or peril.

# Rice Paddies and Math Tests



**“NO ONE WHO CAN RISE BEFORE DAWN THREE HUNDRED SIXTY DAYS A YEAR FAILS TO MAKE HIS FAMILY RICH.”**

We are all too familiar with the stereotype that people with Chinese descent are superior at math. Our Western conscience would tell us to dismiss that as we are likely just choosing to remember and focus on examples that only support that view, and dismissing those that do not support it. However, in my experience it is often the case that students with Chinese ancestry do well in math.

Gladwell begins by discussing the traditional role of Chinese rice paddy farmers and the nature of the work. He describes it as hard work, meticulous work, long work. In fact, rice farmers often work up to 3,000 hours per year, which if compared to a standard Canadian work schedule with only weekends off and statutory holidays, no additional holidays would be the equivalent of twelve hour days.

**“THROUGHOUT HISTORY, NOT SURPRISINGLY, THE PEOPLE WHO GROW RICE HAVE ALWAYS WORKED HARDER THAN ALMOST ANY OTHER KIND OF FARMER.”**

He distinguishes the work of Chinese rice farmers from that of Western cultures and farmers as unique because they lacked the land for expansion and the wealth for machinery (nor was the technology around) so as a result if they wished to get a bigger yield they had to be extremely diligent when it came to everything from water levels, to the clay and mud consistency, to the fertilizer. This required intelligence, strong work ethic and most importantly precision and dedication. It is precisely this culture that developed through the hard, meaningful work that comes along with rice farming that has served and continues to serve Chinese farmers and Asian students well. Gladwell suggests that this shouldn't be a shame but rather something that is celebrated just the same as the other examples of success that were shared.

**“THE BEATLES PUT IN THOUSANDS OF HOURS OF PRACTICE IN HAMBURG. JOE FLOM GROUND AWAY FOR YEARS, PERFECTING THE ART OF TAKEOVERS, BEFORE HE GOT HIS CHANCE. WORKING REALLY HARD IS WHAT SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE DO.”**

## Marita's Bargain

"OUTLIERS ARE THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN GIVEN OPPORTUNITIES -- AND WHO HAVE HAD THE STRENGTH AND PRESENCE OF MIND TO SEIZE THEM."



Marita was a girl from the Bronx who needed a chance to learn the lessons that the Chinese farmers learned in the rice paddy fields. She had the opportunity to attend the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) in the Bronx, which gave her a chance because that is what they do. She needed to learn the value of meaningful work like the Jewish garment workers in New York and become aware of and create her own cultural legacy, just like Korean Air so that she could have the chance to write her own story for success. She needed that so that she too could be noticed and have her skills developed, as if she were a hockey player with a January birthday, because she did not grow up in the right place at the right time like Gates, Joy, or The Beatles.

The predictable outcome for Marita was that she would have the same outcome as her mom, which would mean no college education, living in a small apartment in the Bronx with just enough money to get by.

Marita's bargain is yet another example of legacy, but not how it defines us. Rather this example looks at how we can take advantage of opportunities that have the potential to shape us and give us a better chance for success.

### Critic's Review of Outliers

*Outliers* is a fascinating read from beginning to end. Gladwell engages the reader through his rich variety of examples from a number of different fields. He eloquently weaves his unique perspectives, ideas and theories into well-substantiated research and claims from sociologists, psychologists and researchers from other fields as well.

In addition to its style, it provides a unique and fresh perspective on how we view success. I found that my notions of how I define success were challenged by Gladwell. I have always believed that there are things that are beyond the control of individuals and have never committed to the myths of meritocracy, that is also challenged by Gladwell. However, he goes further by not only looking at the opportunities that are afforded and where people come from, but that it still requires an individual that wishes to take advantage of the opportunities. It feels like the perfect marriage of the two dominant, politically motivated meta-narratives on success and general well-being in society, the first being the ideologically conservative idea being that you create your own luck, no matter where you come from, especially if Obama did it, and the second being that we are the helpless products of our environment, and the lot we are cast is a life sentence. It reminds us that we are in the driver's seat but we also ought to be much more aware and cognizant of our surroundings and environment, in order to best manipulate it for our own well-being.

I highly recommend this book to anyone that has ever adopted one of the two aforementioned views of success, which I imagine most have as this provides an interesting alternative to that typical discourse. The only downfall is that it is not a book that seeks to arm the reader with strategies to advance themselves or be more successful like most leadership books, but I don't believe it intended to as it was driven by Gladwell's curiosity to figure out what lies beneath the surface from a social perspective.

## Questions for Reflection

With what Gladwell proposes about success, do you believe that it is possible to be successful if one does not have the opportunities afforded to them that would better facilitate success?

We as educators believe fully in the idea of multiple intelligence, based on the works of people like Gardner. Does Gladwell's idea of intelligence fit within our current educational context?

How do we use Gladwell's the teachings model of success to better support students and/or employees within our organization/school,etc.?