

Success and luck in  
life in outliers by  
malcolm gladwell



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Malcom Gladwell, the author of *Outliers*, discusses important factors that create a lucky combination for an individual to unlock the potential for success; this lucky combination is what sets individuals apart from others, making them outliers. The factors that lead toward success go beyond analytical intelligence, and the situations are both in and out of physical and personal control. Gladwell says that an individual is not able to achieve great success without some, if not all, of these factors being coincidentally lined up to benefit the individual. These factors are products of luck and hard work, learned and inherited behavior, and more importantly the help from others and the position of social location. A prodigy would be lost in a crowd if that individual does not possess the necessary skills that would separate one's self from others and be able to sway social situations in personal favor. These factors that Gladwell says allows an individual to become successful include having a talent and the means to practice that talent excessively, extraordinary opportunities, the home and location an individual is raised in, the sense of self-entitlement and learned practical intelligence, and cultural legacy.

When thinking of success, most people imagine a very talented individual who climbs to the top through personal perseverance. However, mere talent is only a fraction of the cause for success, and certainly not the most important. Most trades can be taught and learned through extensive practice, although there is the existence of innate talent. That talent goes to waste, however, when an individual is not provided with the means to practice and hone in the skills of such talent. The mastering of a skill is generally thought of as reaching the practice of an intentional and

determined ten-thousand hours, which is an overwhelmingly large amount of time. For an individual to recognize their talent at a young age and have the means to practice so intensely would mean that the parents of the individual could afford to give the time and support that would be necessary to put in so much effort (42). That talent then would need to be given the opportunity to advance beyond just passion and practice.

Opportunities are a major subject that Gladwell discusses, because it is through opportunities that an individual is able to take the practiced talent and transform it into a powerful advantage over others. Although it is unfair, people do not receive the same amount of opportunities throughout life. Institutions are a part of what brings opportunities, such as Bill Gates' opportunities. Gates happened to attend Lakeside High School as a young adolescent; the school also happened to have raised the funds for a time-sharing terminal in 1968. Another opportunity was living within walking distance of the University of Washington, where there happened to be free access to a terminal between three and six in the morning (54). Gates also received a lucky opportunity through the social connection of ISI founder Bud Pembroke of TRW, who needed programmers familiar with the very skills Gates had been practicing (53). Opportunities are unique to location, time and social connections; in other words, the individual's social location in history. Opportunities may also arise from the very family an individual is born into and the advantages that family may provide.

Growing up in a family that is actively engaged in the development of skills and the mind creates a beneficial environment for an individual, but the location in which a family lives allows an individual to be given different

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opportunities which proves to be just as important. As seen with Bill Gates and the luck of living so close to a university that had free access to a terminal in an age where computers were rare, as well as going to a high school that had a terminal, location is important. For a person to be raised in an area in which the individual's specific talent could be practiced in a special way that others do not get access to, in a time of which the skill becomes needed, is uncommon. Such luck can also be seen in the family behaviors towards mental development. It is generally the wealthier families in the upper-middle class that pay extreme attention to mental development and thus bestow the young mind with a sense of entitlement in which the individual is not afraid to put themselves on the same level as others; the child will, for example, not be afraid to question doctors or teachers or relate personal opinions to those authority figures (106). While it can be taught to lower class individuals as well, it is more commonly seen in the upper class because the lower class parents are typically timid of authority figures and tend to be quiet and submissive, thus teaching the children constraint (107). Interacting with authority figures is a cultural advantage acquired through parental encouragement and is a skill that Gladwell says is necessary for success (108). This entitlement is the foundation for an individual to interact in social environments and to learn the skills of practical intelligence; this is the knowledge of what to say, to whom, and when to say it for maximum effect in order to sway situations in personal favor (100). There is also another contribution that families provide towards an individual's success, which are behavioral traits.

Cultural legacy is the behavioral traits passed down through the generations, dating back even hundreds of years, derived from the nature of the particular culture that a bloodline comes from. Certain cultures value personality traits differently, depending on the necessity of that trait for the area. For example, people whom the rocky mountainsides were the ancestor's homes, tend to become more aggressive in situations that threaten honor because their ancestors had to defend their reputation and stock in a harsh terrain (167). This cultural tendency to be aggressive, along with other behavioral traits and patterns, becomes ingrained in genetics and is present throughout generations to come. Other traits, such as hard work, are also the product of culture. Gladwell explains that the reason Asian countries are able to excel so significantly in mathematics compared to others is because of their long legacy of rice farming, which is a very tedious and precise practice (233). This hard work ethic is applied to all aspects of life, including education, which means that giving up on mathematics is not an option; there is an expectation to number-crunch until the answer is found (230). These behavioral traits affect an individual's response to situations and in turn, the ability to create the social web and situational skills that are beneficial to succeed. These behaviors develop into skills that bring forth possible opportunities to use a mastered talent as an advantage over other people, allowing an individual to achieve great success; in other words, all of the factors are interdependent.

For Gladwell to spell out the foundation of success means that individuals can interpret their own paths towards success in a more detailed and thoughtful way. While many people have different ideas of what success

means, it is safe to say that Gladwell has captured the essence of great historical success stories by analyzing the lives and histories of different outliers. If a person has a great talent and wishes to enhance that skill towards mastery and fame, that individual can then relate Gladwell's explanation of the ten thousand hour rule and understand that mastery only comes with dedication and unrelenting attention. That individual would then also understand from Outliers that beyond talent there must be opportunities and that success is never achieved through a lone struggle. Globally, individuals could have a sense of understanding that for these factors to align in personal favor is rather unlikely, so perhaps there would be less disappointment and expectation for greatness; at the same time, people could find motivation to achieve their own success, even if that does not mean fame, through the means of rewarding work and perseverance.