

A question of luck?



What is the question we always ask about successful people? We want to know what they're like – what kind of personalities they have, or how intelligent they are, or what kind of lifestyles they have, or what special talents they might have been born with. And we assume that it is those personal qualities that explain how that individual gets to the top of his or her profession.

But according to Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, we are asking the wrong questions. He thinks that while talent is obviously a factor, there are two other more important ones that make a person successful. The first of these factors is luck.



He begins with the example of sports players. In recent research done on various groups of elite ice hockey players from Canada and the Czech Republic, one fascinating fact came to light. In both countries, it was discovered that 40 per cent of the players in the top teams were born between January and March, 30 per cent between April and June, 20 per cent between July and September, and only 10 per cent between October and December. The explanation was simple. The school year in these countries runs from January to December. A boy who is ten on January 2nd will be in the same class as one whose 10th birthday is on December 30th. The chances are the first boy will be bigger, stronger, and more coordinated. He is much more likely than the other boy to be chosen to play in junior teams. He will then get better coaching than the others, and will play many more games, so will also get more practice. In the beginning his advantage isn't so much that he is more talented, simply that he is older. He was lucky enough to be born in the first months of the year. But by the age of 13 or 14, with the extra coaching and practice, he really will be better than the others, and far more likely to be successful.

The extra practice is vital, because the second factor that Gladwell believes is of great importance in determining whether somebody is going to be successful or not is what he calls the '10,000 hours theory'. This theory, based on studies in many different fields, says that in order to get to the very top you need to put in 10,000 hours of practice, whether it is playing an instrument or a sport, or programming a computer.

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