**Which Is More Important: Talent or Hard Work?**

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*We’ve all heard that hard work is the key to success. But a*[*recent study*](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/sorry-strivers-talent-matters.html#p5)*found that the “profoundly gifted” still have an edge over peers who have less natural talent but are perhaps more dedicated to improving their skills. Have you experienced the power of talent over hard work? Or have you found that success comes to the person willing to put in the most time and effort to achieve it?*

In the Sunday Review piece [“Sorry, Strivers: Talent Matters,”](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/sorry-strivers-talent-matters.html)David Z. Hambrick and Elizabeth J. Meinz describe this study, along with their own research findings that support the idea that talent, not dedication, is the ultimate predictor of success:

Exhibit A is a landmark study of intellectually precocious youths directed by the Vanderbilt University researchers David Lubinski and Camilla Benbow. They and their colleagues tracked the educational and occupational accomplishments of more than 2,000 people who as part of a youth talent search scored in the top 1 percent on the SAT by the age of 13. (Scores on the SAT correlate so highly with I.Q. that the psychologist Howard Gardner described it as a “thinly disguised” intelligence test.) The remarkable finding of their study is that, compared with the participants who were “only” in the 99.1 percentile for intellectual ability at age 12, those who were in the 99.9 percentile — the profoundly gifted — were between three and five times more likely to go on to earn a doctorate, secure a patent, publish an article in a scientific journal or publish a literary work. A high level of intellectual ability gives you an enormous real-world advantage.

In our own recent research, we have discovered that “working memory capacity,” a core component of intellectual ability, predicts success in a wide variety of complex activities. In one study, we assessed the practice habits of pianists and then gauged their working memory capacity, which is measured by having a person try to remember information (like a list of random digits) while performing another task. We then had the pianists sight read pieces of music without preparation.

Not surprisingly, there was a strong positive correlation between practice habits and sight-reading performance. In fact, the total amount of practice the pianists had accumulated in their piano careers accounted for nearly half of the performance differences across participants. But working memory capacity made a statistically significant contribution as well (about 7 percent, a medium-size effect). In other words, if you took two pianists with the same amount of practice, but different levels of working memory capacity, it’s likely that the one higher in working memory capacity would have performed considerably better on the sight-reading task.

It would be nice if intellectual ability and the capacities that underlie it were important for success only up to a point. In fact, it would be nice if they weren’t important at all, because research shows that those factors are highly stable across an individual’s life span. But wishing doesn’t make it so.

None of this is to deny the power of practice. Nor is it to say that it’s impossible for a person with an average I.Q. to, say, earn a Ph.D. in physics. It’s just unlikely, relatively speaking. Sometimes the story that science tells us isn’t the story we want to hear.