

Ericsson, Anders & Pool, Robert – Peak: Secrets From the New Science of Expertise

Bodley Head, 2016, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

Anders Ericsson is the world's leading expert on expertise. Ericsson who is a professor at Florida State has spent 30 years researching human performance – and yes, he is Swedish. Together with the journalist Robert Pool he gives the inside view of how experts are made.

There are several myths when it comes to expertise. Perhaps the most prevalent one is that ability is innate and by this predestined – “I'm simply not good with math”. In fact Ericsson's research shows that genetic predisposition plays a very marginal role compared to the work put in when it comes to developing a skill. And it isn't too late. Our brain retains much of its adaptability through out life, so while some things might be easier to learn as a child we can all develop. Other misconceptions are that one gets better the longer one does something, or that all it takes is effort – or 10,000 hours of practice specifically.

What it takes to become an elite performer is instead dedicated training that rewires the brain – so-called deliberate practice. What Ericsson has found is that while true elite performers practiced a lot they all practiced in essentially the same way. Without this specific type of practice, 10.000 hours and spent effort will not amount to much. The hands-on almost physical ring to the expression deliberate practice is carefully chosen. There is a difference between knowledge and skill. The bottom line is what someone is able to do, not what they know. Expert skill in this respect is the practical application of something.

Deliberate practice is purposeful and informed in that it is guided by an understanding of what makes elite performers great and has a clear understanding of how they achieved their excellence. A large part of being an expert is in developing and internalizing what Ericsson calls mental representations, “*a mental structure that corresponds to an object, an idea, a collection of information, or anything else, concrete or abstract, that the brain is thinking about*” allowing the expert to see patterns

where non-experts only sees randomness. The concept is similar to, but broader, than Charlie Munger's mental models. Ericsson's concept for example also includes physical and musical skills.

So what is this magic formula? Well the short version is to identify the real experts, identify what makes them great (generally what they do differently) and design a practice that leads you to do the same. The practice should preferably be overseen by a coach that has set up a plan with a number of milestones that in combination leads to a bigger change. The coach also monitors the progress. The practice should be designed to stay just outside the trainee's comfort zone and as such it requires effort, attention and isn't always enjoyable and importantly the process involves feedback and modifications of the practice in response to the feedback. The training focuses on aspect after aspect (or mental representation) of something and improves them specifically. Over time new skills are built on top of old skills and skills regarding different aspects combine to form something larger than the sum of the parts.

I must admit that I was initially skeptical of this book as it might well be the tale from the horses mouth, but still a tale that has been told several times as Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, Carol Dweck's *Mindset*, Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code*, Geoff Colvin's *Talent is Overrated* and so many other books have already presented Ericsson's research to the general public. Not unsurprisingly however it turns out that listening to the original source gives a special depth – then the reader will have to accept that he probably has heard all the examples previously and that in the name of being perfectly clear the authors repeat themselves slightly too often.

In the end this is a book of hope and enthusiasm – after having read it you find yourself making plans for how to improve the sub skills that are holding you back from reaching the next level; Focus. Feedback. Fix it.

Mats Larsson, Dec 13, 2016