

There are just some ideas or innovations in the business world that burst forth and really catch fire in the minds of people. Many times, they're really just fads that then slowly fade—that happened with author Ken Blanchard's book *The One Minute Manager* from the 1980s. You see? Many of you likely haven't heard of that book, but it was a real influence for quite a while!

Occasionally, a new idea or innovation is an enduring game-changer, especially in the area of key tech innovations that literally change everything for a whole lot of folks. You know...like the iPhone! Then, there are a whole lot of influences lurking somewhere in-between *faded fads* and *broadly-enduring inventions*—and we're going to tackle one of those today.

In 2008, a book titled *Outliers: The Story of Success* was published and kinda became a minor phenomenon that was discussed in many a casual business conversation at the time. The book's author is a gifted storyteller named Malcolm Gladwell, and he patched together some engaging vignettes of thought-provoking theories about people he personally labeled "outliers." For Gladwell, those are people—often achievers—who are outside the norm. Let's go to the back-of-the-book-cover blurb to speak for the book.

"Malcolm Gladwell argues in *Outliers* [that] we should look at the world that surrounds the successful—their culture, their family, their generation, and the idiosyncratic experiences of their upbringing. Along the way, Gladwell reveals what the Beatles and Bill Gates have in common, the reason you've never heard of the smartest man in the world, why almost no star hockey players are born in the fall, and why, when it comes to plane crashes, where the pilots are born matters as much as how well they are trained."

Well, Gladwell's book really *is* a fun read...an engaging mix of his packaged sociological, psychological, and cultural theories! And one of the chapters that got a lot of attention in business circles was "The 10,000-Hour Rule." That's the chapter that talks about Bill Gates spending countless hours coding as a young man...and also the Beatles spending several of their early years hanging out in obscure German pubs honing their skills and fine-tuning their listenability! Gladwell also throws in the pioneering computer geek Bill Joy, who was a cofounder of Sun Microsystems, which was an early, leading Silicon Valley "outlier."

Indeed, these three cases were world-class performers recognized as such in large global marketplaces. And with these, Gladwell attached success to what he calls the "10,000-Hour Rule." You see, to Gladwell, it's seemingly about outliers intensely spending 10,000 hours...say, over 10 years...to become a top expert.

But Gladwell himself muddles his 10,000-Hour Rule more than a little bit by mixing in or largely ignoring other legitimate factors like the raw talent of each individual and the special opportunities afforded these high achievers, such as living in the right place and time—like affluent, tech-enabled circumstances in America the last few decades of the 20th century. So, is it really *just about* the 10,000 hours dedicated?

Now a root of the Gladwell 10,000-hour thinking is sometimes attributed to a research paper titled *The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*. And since you have earned some cynicism over the years, you might suspect the research paper's authors didn't claim there was a sort of magical 10,000-hour threshold for achieving real expertise, even for very specific skills. Well, duh.

In fact, a bit ironically, the research paper's title itself clearly affirms a more flexible, seasoned, and very wise adage that's been around for a very long time: *practice makes perfect*. And who didn't already know that serious practice will likely improve your performance? ...Unless you're me and trying to sound like the vocal artist Michael Bublé...even 100,000 hours of practice is *not* going to make me into a great singer!

Even so, Gladwell's positioning of a 10,000-hour standard very much holds some thought-provoking and even helpful realities for us to ponder. Let me explain. I've been teaching and mentoring university students and business leaders for a long time. And the past couple of decades have changed how many people perceive how learning happens—too many expect that real learning often takes just ten minutes on a phone screen. To reframe that, you may recall that there's an already-published Whitestone podcast where I spoke of the necessity of being a "knowledge worker" throughout our lives. And that means this...

All Christians who are serious stewards of their personal gifting and upcoming opportunities must constantly work to be at the top of their game as to skills-development, new learning, and spiritual depth. So, why not a sort of vigorous “10,000-hour rule”...? I like it a lot—but with important qualifications and modifications! Let’s talk about seven quick ways to address *the thousands of hours still ahead of us all*.

First, you are not really an expert because you quickly searched the web and got a glib answer for a client or your boss. And that’s true even when you used generative AI. Stop thinking that quick web results or even using AI will make you an expert and propel you to greatness...sooner or later you will be asked for greater depth or greater nuance, and *your strategy of not learning for yourself will be exposed as a sham* during a critical event in your life. You see, integrative learning of value is a result of your *personal ongoing grind* of research, trials-and-errors-and-success experiences, and lessons-learned discernment.

Second, ask this: is *learning* your consistent mode and outcome? As a full-time employee, you’re spending 2,000 hours per year working...that’s 50 weeks times 40 hours per week. Each of those 2,000 hours is spent either *learning* or *not learning*—so, which of the two is typically happening for you?

Third, the average people you work with are, by definition, *just average!* Shocking, huh? Yes, their knowledge, their expertise, their wisdom are all typically *just average*. But, still, you can learn nuggets of particular wisdom each person may have, yeah, even from a clerk or a staffer who *does* know specifics as to where the company is faltering. So...value each person for what they do or might know, but also be aware that *few are in the top tier of knowledge workers*. Especially be aware of those who *think* they are!

Fourth, when it comes to people influencing others, *average begets average!* But that’s very true as to companies, too! I coach college students that their first career job is their “MIJ”—their “most important job.” And if you spend five years at an average company as your first career job, then *that’s* 10,000 hours where that average company expects their employees to learn, conform to, and train others in their *average* processes. So, yeah, the average company is *just average*, too! And when fresh college grads only have an average company’s processes as their dominant intake, they *start out absorbing mediocrity*. So...especially regarding your first job working 2,000 hours a year, join the best enterprise you can find!

Fifth, no matter your stage of life, work to spend *as much of your thousands of hours ahead as possible* with the best individual performers and mentors available to you. In the case of your workplace, you may not be able to do that easily. Nevertheless, discern who the best are and work to establish connections with them. Also, read excellent books...listen to astute podcasts...seek out a great church...hang out with savvy folks. In other words, spend your hours wisely. As part of that, vigorously challenge where you are spending your “tech-intake” time. FYI, web content is 99.99% unworthy. So, discern and study the .01%.

Sixth, study the Word and truly learn from the Holy Spirit constantly (John 14:26)! Attend a strong church. Be discerning about your sources of truth—remember, it’s routine that pastors and theologians strongly disagree with one another, often on issues of critical importance. Look at the true fruits of their disciples.

Seventh, in your life, develop what I call a robust “*rolling 10,000-hours strategy*.” Here’s the thing. You spend thousands of hours each year taking in information. Over time, what’s important is your never-ending, *rolling cycle of affirming, embracing, and discarding*. Yeah, gladly *affirming* what remains true. But also *embracing* valuable, new or “new-to-you” information—especially in our tech-intense era. And last-but-definitely-not-least, *discarding* rightly-eclipsed, *even dearly-held* thinking, processes, and tools.

Since the Holy Spirit teaches *all* things, He will be instrumental in any affirming, embracing, and discarding process. But He is especially crucial in directing you in *affirming* Bible truth...in your *embracing* of Bible truth where you’ve been deficient...and in your *discarding* of unbiblical beliefs. No matter your diligence in this area, *if you assume your theology is totally nailed, you can be sure it isn’t*. Honest humility while standing firm on the clear core is key! This, too, is a part of a *never-ending, rolling 10,000-hours strategy* for each of us to thrive, not only in our workplaces but in the entirety of our lives in Christ! Every hour of intake is eligible for affirming, embracing or discarding. *So, get rolling...it will be a rewarding trip!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. In order for you to maximize your own personal growth, do you see your coworkers in your workplace clearly as to whether each is more “average” or more “exceptional” in their knowledge, skills, and fruits? And, is your workplace enterprise itself more “average” or more “exceptional” in its processes, knowledge, and fruits? How do these answers impact your personal “rolling 10,000-hours strategy?” Discuss.
2. Is your local church more “average” or truly more “exceptional” in its anchored processes, lived-out knowledge, and clear fruits? Specifically identify and discuss its top three clearly-demonstrable, sustained fruits and the Scripture references supporting their importance in Kingdom priorities.
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, with “10” being outstanding, how would you rate your handling and the demonstrable fruits of your personal, “rolling 10,000-hours strategy” at the current time? Discuss.