

November, 2003

Life lists

Why are some people good at things and others less so? I'm sure we would all like to know this when selecting work teams. I would like to know because, in sport at least, I have always struggled to make the team. Not only that, I have a talent for inspiring in others a lack of confidence in my abilities.

When anyone was picking a football team in the schoolyard, I was usually the last one leaning up against the wall. I could think a good game, even talk a good game but seldom played one. I was really not so bad, but people rarely passed to me.

In cricket matches I would dread the skied shot towards my lonely spot, fielding on the boundary. The ball would bounce from my hands like a hot potato, accompanied by groans from the rest of the team. If only I could have caught it just once.

My latest failure happened last weekend at a pheasant shoot. The birds were tumbling out of the sky among the other guns but the majority of my shots missed their target.

At one stage I heard a pheasant behind me. It was a healthy hen bird just 10 feet away. She looked me in the eye for a few seconds, then trotted past as calm as you like back to the woods.

The other thing I suffer on these occasions is constant admonishments. If it's on the football field, it is for losing the ball. If I'm sailing, I have tied the wrong knot. It is as if my role in life is to be the self-selecting fall guy.

But think about it: whatever the team, whatever the event, someone has to be the worst player. If you are not so hot yourself, you need someone such as me to be superior to (this, incidentally is the "Bs pick Cs" argument I have heard advanced by Microsoft and McKinsey).

Well, I hear you say, you should get out and practise more. I have tried that but it does not deal with anxiety. The best players are able to rationalise a fluffed shot at goal and concentrate on the positives.

Yogi Berra, the former New York Yankees batter, would blame his bat when going through a bad patch. "If I know it isn't my fault that I'm not hitting, how can I get mad at myself?" he said.

I have played enough sport to know that practice has to be combined, most of all, with an unfailing confidence in yourself that seems to communicate itself to others. Innate ability must count for something too, but I suspect that it is less than we think.

Of course, practice matters. The immortal Don Bradman used to stand in his backyard as a child and hit a ball against the wall with a stick, repeatedly, constantly improving the hand-eye co-ordination that made him excel as a batsman.

Gary Player, the golfer, famously remarked that "the more I practice, the luckier I get".

Some have questioned the perfectionist approach of Jonny Wilkinson, England's rugby fly half. Wilkinson has a natural ability to kick a rugby ball accurately with either foot. This, added to his perfectionism, creates his own confidence.

One of my problems may be slow reactions. In the early days of intelligence measuring it was believed, erroneously, that your thinking ability was associated with your reactions. So the first psychometric tests, devised by Francis Galton in the 19th century, were based on measuring reaction times. (Galton had odd views: he thought that only men could make a decent cup of tea).

There is another, less studied area of skill attainment covering the need to sustain motivation with fresh challenges. Some people enjoy the challenge associated with excellence.

Some of the best game shooters, for example, will leave easy birds and just go for the high ones. This should be an important constituent of job design. If work does not have the potential for growth and increasing complexity or skill, there is a risk that people will become bored and unfulfilled.

But there are many jobs that require a consistent, disciplined, measured approach. It would hardly be appreciated if an air traffic controller played with the dots on the radar screen, reducing the safety margins for course alterations simply to make the job more interesting. The continuing growth in air traffic is piling on enough pressure as it is.

In these jobs it would help to utilise the most competent employees in job development and training, partly because it makes sense and partly because it keeps them interested. Outplacement specialists, who help people find new careers, work on the belief that people do their best work in areas where they have a real interest. This is one reason why recruiters should not ignore the hobbies sections of CVs.

One way any of us can focus on our interests is to produce a "life list" of things to do or see before we grow too old to act. This is a great exercise for working out where you want to be at whatever stage of your life or career.

The window of opportunity for certain things on my own life list is closing fast. I have never been skiing or surfing, for example.

Some things, such as bee-keeping and reading Tolstoy's War and Peace I think can wait a while longer. Others, such as spending a night in a snow hole, defy explanation. Anyone, however, must understand the satisfaction to be gained from making fire by rubbing two pieces of wood together.

And some of the things on my list, such as walking up a volcano, will need a second try. A visit to a volcano in the Philippines had to be cancelled when it erupted. Finding a Great Crested Newt, another of my "must do's" sounds simple but it has so far eluded me. Relating this desire to my career is less elusive because my voluntary work happens to include the environment.

The most important point is to have some kind of list, even if it has nothing more than a single reminder to "get a life". Some may think that such lists are not important but recruiters faced with uniform qualifications among graduates are becoming increasingly interested in so-called "life" achievements often gained during gap years.

Does this mean that bungee jumping and bee-keeping should go on the CV? I would argue that they should be there if these are activities that help to define you as an individual.

The great thing about life lists is that working your way through them produces new ideas for extending your experiences and means that you will need to make plans and give priority to items on the list.

It is true that such a list won't improve on the things you do badly but it will give you confidence to discover there are things you can do well and point the way in your career.

As Yogi Berra once said: "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."

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