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Peak: Secrets From The New Science Of Expertise

PEAK

SECRETS FROM
THE NEW SCIENCE
OF EXPERTISE

Anders Ericsson
and Robert Pool



Synopsis

From the world's reigning expert on expertise comes a powerful new approach to mastering almost any skill. Have you ever wanted to learn a language or pick up an instrument, only to become too daunted by the task at hand? Expert performance guru Anders Ericsson has made a career of studying chess champions, violin virtuosos, star athletes, and memory maven. Peak condenses three decades of original research to introduce an incredibly powerful approach to learning that is fundamentally different from the way people traditionally think about acquiring a skill. Ericsson's findings have been lauded and debated but never properly explained. So the idea of expertise still intimidates us - we believe we need innate talent to excel or think excelling seems prohibitively difficult. Peak belies both of these notions, proving that almost all of us have the seeds of excellence within us - it's just a question of nurturing them by reducing expertise to a discrete series of attainable practices. Peak offers invaluable, often counterintuitive advice on setting goals, getting feedback, identifying patterns, and motivating yourself. Whether you want to stand out at work or help your kid achieve academic goals, Ericsson's revolutionary methods will show you how to master nearly anything.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 10 hours and 3 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: May 10, 2016

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B01F4A98WQ

Best Sellers Rank: #2 in Books > Sports & Outdoors > Miscellaneous > Sports Psychology #2

in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Education & Training #3 in Books > Audible

Audiobooks > Business & Investing > Careers

Customer Reviews

Anders Ericsson became famous for his work on what he called "deliberate practice", a set of recipes that could help someone gain expertise in an area. In this readable and well-researched book he expands upon this concept and brings several time-tested and scientifically reviewed ideas

to bear on the search for perfection in our lives. Ericsson and his co-author Robert Pool are good storytellers and they pepper their ideas with dozens of case studies and examples from diverse fields like music, sports and medicine. In the first part of the book Ericsson dispels the myth that most "prodigies" or experts achieve what they do by innate talent. I thought he was a bit biased against the truly brilliant individuals like Mozart which humanity has produced, but he makes the good point that even Mozart adopted certain strategies and worked very hard - often helped by his father - to become famous. Similarly Ericsson examines several other extraordinary individuals mainly in the realm of sports, music and recreational arithmetic such as Paganini, Picasso and Bobby Fischer and tells us of their intense and often grueling routine of practice. What he perhaps fails to mention is that even the intense ability to focus or to work repeatedly with improvement has an innate component to it. I would have appreciated his take on recent neuroscience studies investigating factors like concentration and mental stamina. Once the myth of some kind of an innate, unreachable genius is put to rest, Ericsson explains the difference between 'ordinary' practice and 'deliberate' practice. In this difference lies the seed for the rest of the book. When it comes to deliberate practice, the key words are focus, feedback, specific goals and mental representations. Unlike 'naive' practice which involves doing the same thing again and again and expecting improvement, deliberate practice involves setting specific goals for oneself, breaking down complex tasks into chunks, making mental representations of paths leading to success, getting out of your comfort zone and getting constant feedback. Much of the book focuses on those key last three factors. Mental representations are patterns or heuristics that allow you to become successful in a task and do it repeatedly with improvement. Ericsson provides examples from calculating prodigies and chess grandmasters to illustrate the utility and power of mental representations. Getting out of your comfort zone may sound obvious but it's equally important; helped in his narrative by neuroscience studies which illustrate how the brain strengthens neural connections in certain areas when you push yourself, Ericsson provides good tips for exerting yourself just a little bit more than you did the previous time when you attempt to get better at a task. Lastly, he shows us how getting constant feedback on results is of paramount importance in becoming an expert. Ericsson calls this the 'Top Gun' method based on a reference to the elite US Navy pilots who became much better when they got feedback on their combat maneuvers at the Navy's Top Gun flight school. The lack of feedback can explain many seemingly paradoxical results. For instance Ericsson spends several pages describing studies showing that more experienced doctors aren't always necessarily better at diagnosis, mainly because they often work alone, don't change their methods and have no peers to provide feedback; in a nutshell, the work they put in

daily contributes to ordinary practice but not deliberate practice. Doctors who made positive changes in all three areas were much better, and so can the rest of us. In fact it is startling to realize how little feedback we get from our daily work. Other studies from the areas of motivational speaking and business management showed similar trends; breaking up jobs into parcels and getting regular feedback on these can make an enormous difference. As an aside, Ericsson offers a good critique of Malcolm Gladwell's book "Outliers" in which Gladwell made the "ten thousand hour rule" so popular; Ericsson cautions us that Gladwell misunderstood many details of that rule including its limited utility as an average and its inapplicability to some of the examples he cites in his book. Overall I found the book very readable and interesting, with scores of recognizable and thought-provoking examples thrown in. The only caveat to deliberate practice is one Ericsson himself states in the middle of the book: it is mainly applicable only to "highly developed fields" like sports or music where there have been hundreds of years of published and known case studies and data and widely agreed upon metrics for the field, and where there are several world-class experts to whom one can compare themselves when trying to improve. Ericsson himself states that the principles for deliberate practice don't work as well for professions like "engineer, teacher, consultant, electrician and business manager". I would think that these professional titles apply to millions of people around the planet, so those people will probably benefit a bit less from Ericsson's principles. Nonetheless, in a world constantly competing with itself, Ericsson's book offers some timely and well-researched advice for self-improvement.

Every once in a great while a book comes out that is so useful and so relevant for such a widely diverse group of people that I want to stand on my rooftop and yell, "Read this book now!" Fortunately, it's way safer for me to just write about it. Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise by Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool is the book I encourage you to read. Quite simply, it explains in great detail how to continually improve performance in any type of activity. It also explains what it takes to be the best in the world at whatever you do. These explanations are not complicated or theoretical. This book is remarkably straightforward and pragmatic. And it is based on more than forty years of research into dozens of different types of performance. I first became interested in the writings of Anders Ericsson when I read his concepts on expert performance, deliberate practice, and the 10,000-hour rule in the books Outliers by Malcolm Gladwell and Talent is Overrated by Geoff Colvin. After that I read several books and articles by Ericsson and found them all to be intriguing, but also with an academic-orientation to them. Peak, on the other hand, was written for the general public and flows along very nicely from

one idea to another. Anyone who wants to do anything better than they are doing it right now will benefit from this book. I'm recommending it to all of my clients, past clients, readers, and audience members.

Ten Reasons I Recommend Peak

Introduction

The opening question "Why are some people so amazingly good at what they do?" sets the stage for the whole book. Ever since I was in third grade I've read biographies and autobiographies to understand how people achieved great success. I was always more interested in learning about the journey than to know what it was like on the mountaintop. This book explains in detail the journey that expert performers go on to reach the mountaintop.

Chapter One

This chapter explains the value of purposeful practice in expanding your physical and mental capacity for generating greater achievements in the future. It emphasizes the importance of taking small steps on a regular basis and gathering feedback on what you are doing effectively and ineffectively.

Chapter Two

Here you will learn how to specifically harness your mental adaptability to develop new skills and move beyond the status quo way of doing things. It also explains how your potential is not fixed, but rather is something that can be continually expanded.

Chapter Three

You learn the importance of mental representations, of actually seeing the level of performance that you are aspiring to reach. By visualizing the details of what needs to happen, you are able to see the pieces and patterns that are necessary for a great performance.

Chapter Four

This chapter explains in great detail the steps involved in deliberate practice, which is the absolute best way to improve your performance in any type of activity. I would try to explain my interpretation of deliberate practice here, but I think you would benefit a great deal more by really studying this chapter and learning the insights that Anders Ericsson developed over a lifetime of studying deliberate practice.

Chapter Five

A great explanation of how deliberate practice can be used in actual job situations regardless of the type of work that you do. I've found in my executive coaching sessions that guiding people through the steps of deliberate practice and showing how the principles of deliberate practice connect with their work situations helps them to move forward in a more intentional and effective way.

Chapter Six

This chapter shows how deliberate practice can be applied in everyday life situations whether you're exercising, parenting, or enjoying a hobby. Literally anything you do you can learn to do it better the next time.

Chapter Seven

If you were ever wondering what it takes for a young person to go on to be world-class in any activity, this chapter explains what is involved. And it's not for the faint of heart. Literally thousands and thousands of hours of deliberate practice over many years are required to become the best of the best at what you do. But if your goal is to be world-class, then this chapter explains how to do it.

Chapter Eight

This chapter explodes the myth of natural talent. It shows in detail that great performers always got there through extraordinary

practice. Chapter Nine In this closing chapter, Ericsson and Pool guide the reader to think about the future of a world that applies deliberate practice on a regular basis and its impact on education, medicine, health, and relationships. Imagine a world where performance in every area of life gets better and better. They close their book with a new concept, Homo exercens rather than Homo sapiens. They wrote, "Perhaps a better way to see ourselves would be as Homo exercens, or practicing man, the species that takes control of its life through practice and makes of itself what it will." Conclusion Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise by Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool is literally the work of a lifetime, or possibly two lifetimes. It is filled with intriguing ideas and processes to become more effective in any area of life and any type of performance. It will be a permanent member of my all-time recommended books.

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