

GREAT AT WORK

HOW TOP PERFORMERS DO LESS,
WORK BETTER, AND ACHIEVE MORE

MORTEN T.
HANSEN

SIMON & SCHUSTER

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



Simon & Schuster
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2018 by Morten Hansen

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Simon & Schuster Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition January 2018

SIMON & SCHUSTER and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Interior design by Ruth Lee-Mui

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-4767-6562-4
ISBN 978-1-4767-6583-9 (ebook)

For Hélène

Contents

ONE	The Secrets to Great Performance	1
-----	----------------------------------	---

PART I

MASTERING YOUR OWN WORK

TWO	Do Less, Then Obsess	15
THREE	Redesign Your Work	39
FOUR	Don't Just Learn, Loop	64
FIVE	P-Squared (Passion <i>and</i> Purpose)	88

PART II

MASTERING WORKING WITH OTHERS

SIX	Forceful Champions	115
SEVEN	Fight and Unite	140
EIGHT	The Two Sins of Collaboration	166

PART III

MASTERING YOUR WORK-LIFE

NINE	Great at Work . . . and at Life, Too	193
EPILOGUE	Small Changes, Big Results	208
	<i>Research Appendix</i>	215
	<i>Bibliography</i>	249
	<i>Notes</i>	263
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	291
	<i>Index</i>	295

ONE

THE SECRETS TO GREAT PERFORMANCE

After nine grueling interviews, I landed my dream job as management consultant at the Boston Consulting Group in London. I'll never forget how I showed up on my first day, wearing an elegant blue suit bought for the occasion, with Oxford lace-up shoes to match. My girlfriend had given me a sleek, soft briefcase of the sort bankers carried around. As I strode through the front doors of the office in posh Devonshire House, right near Piccadilly, I looked the part, but felt intimidated.

I yearned to make a mark, so I followed what I thought was a brilliant strategy: I would work crazy hours. I didn't have much relevant work experience—heck, I didn't have any. It was my first real job. I was twenty-four years old and had just finished a master's degree in finance from the London School of Economics. What I lacked in experience I would make up for by staying late in the office. Over the next three years, I worked sixty, seventy, eighty, even ninety hours per week. I drank an endless stream of weak British coffee and survived on a supply of chocolate

bars I kept in my top drawer. It got to the point where I knew the names of the cleaning staff who arrived at five in the morning. As you can imagine, my girlfriend soon wanted the briefcase back.

One day, as I struggled through an intense merger and acquisition project, I happened upon some slides created by a teammate (I'll call her Natalie). Paging through her analysis, I confronted an uncomfortable truth. Natalie's work was better than mine. Her analysis contained crisper insights, more compelling ideas. Her slides boasted a clean, elegant layout that was more pleasing to the eye and easier to comprehend—which in turn made her analysis even more persuasive. Yet one evening in the office, when I went to look for her, she wasn't there. I asked a guy sitting near her desk where she was, and he replied that she'd gone home for the night. He explained that Natalie never worked late. She worked from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. No nights, no weekends. That upset me. We were both talented and had the analytical capability required of BCG consultants. She had no more experience in the field than I did. Yet she did better while working less.

Three years later, I left BCG to embark on an academic career. I earned a Ph.D. from Stanford University and went on to become a professor at Harvard Business School. From time to time, I found myself thinking back to what I called the "Natalie Question": Why had she performed better in fewer hours? She must have carried some secrets explaining her results. I began to wonder about performance in general and decided to focus my research on corporate performance.

Starting in 2002, Jim Collins and I spent nine years working on our book *Great by Choice* as a sequel to Jim's *Good to Great*.¹ Both books offer empirically validated frameworks that account for great performance in *companies*. That's nice if you're leading a business, but what about the rest of us? After we finished the project, I decided to develop a similarly validated framework for *individual* performance. It was time to discover why Natalie had done better than I, and more generally, to tackle the big question: why do some people perform great at work while others don't?

Social scientists and management experts explain performance at work by pointing to people's innate gifts and natural strengths. How often

have you heard phrases like “She’s a natural at sales” or “He’s a brilliant engineer”? One influential book titled *The War for Talent* argues that a company’s ability to recruit and retain talent determines its success.² The popular StrengthsFinder approach advocates that you find a job that taps into your natural strengths, and then focus on developing those further.³ These talent-based explanations are deeply embedded in our perceptions of what makes for success. But are they right?

Some work experts take issue with the talent view. They argue that an individual’s sustained *effort* is just as critical or even more so in determining success.⁴ In one variant of this “work hard” paradigm, people perform because they have grit, persevering against obstacles over the long haul.⁵ In another, people maximize efforts by doing more: they take on many assignments and are busy running to lots of meetings. That’s the approach I subscribed to while at BCG, where I put in long hours in an effort to accomplish more. Many people believe that working harder is key to success.⁶

Talent, effort, and also luck undoubtedly explain why some succeed and others don’t, but I wasn’t satisfied with these arguments. They didn’t account for why Natalie performed better than I, nor did they explain the performance differences I had observed between equally hardworking and talented people.

I decided to take a different approach, exploring whether the *way* some people work—their specific work practices as opposed to the sheer amount of effort they exert—accounts for greatness at work. That led me to explore the idea of “working smart,” whereby people seek to maximize *output per hour of work*. The phrase “work smarter, not harder” has been thrown around so much that it has become a cliché. Who wants to “work dumb”? But many people do in fact work dumb because they don’t know exactly *how* to work smart. And I don’t blame them, because it’s hard to obtain solid guidance.

I scanned for existing advice on how to work smarter, and the picture I arrived at was incoherent and overwhelming. Every author seemed to say something different. Prioritize. Delegate. Keep a calendar. Avoid distractions. Set clear goals. Execute better. Influence people. Inspire.

Manage up. Manage down. Network. Tap into passion. Find a purpose. The list went on, more than 100 pieces of advice.

So what is *really* going on? If Natalie worked smarter than I, what exactly did she and other top performers do? What secrets to their great performance do they harbor? I decided to find out. After years of study, what I found surprised me a great deal and shattered conventional wisdom.

THE PERFORMANCE STUDY

In 2011, I launched one of the most comprehensive research projects ever undertaken on individual performance at work. I recruited a team of researchers with expertise in statistical analysis and began generating a framework—a set of hypotheses about which specific behaviors lead to high performance. I considered the scattered findings I had found in more than 200 published academic studies, and I incorporated insights from my previous discussions with hundreds of managers and executives. I also drew on in-depth interviews with 120 professionals and undertook a 300-person survey pilot. In the final step, we tested the emerging framework in a survey study of 5,000 managers and employees.

To organize the vast array of potential “work smart” factors, I grouped them into categories that scholars regard as important for job performance. We can think of work as consisting of job design characteristics (*what* a person is supposed to do), skill development (*how* a person improves), motivational factors (*why* a person exerts effort), and relational dimensions (with *whom* and how a person interacts). Once I had settled on these broad categories, I examined factors within each, identifying those that previous research suggested were key. (The research appendix contains details on our methodology.)

With this initial list of factors in hand, my team and I designed a 96-item survey instrument, piloting it with a sample of 300 bosses and employees. We also tracked how many hours people worked each week, and we measured their performance relative to their peers. That way, we could compare the effects of hours worked and our “work smart” factors

on performance. We spent months poring over statistical results from the pilot and our notes from in-depth interviews. We winnowed down the number of plausible factors until we arrived at eight main factors. After some more analysis, we discovered that two were similar, so we combined them into one (see the research appendix for further explanation).

In the end, we discovered that seven “work smart” practices seemed to explain a substantial portion of performance. (It always seems to be seven, doesn’t it?) When you work smart, you select a tiny set of priorities and make huge efforts in those chosen areas (what I call the work scope practice). You focus on creating value, not just reaching preset goals (targeting). You eschew mindless repetition in favor of better skills practice (quality learning). You seek roles that match your passion with a strong sense of purpose (inner motivation). You shrewdly deploy influence tactics to gain the support of others (advocacy). You cut back on wasteful team meetings, and make sure that the ones you do attend spark vigorous debate (rigorous teamwork). You carefully pick which cross-unit projects to get involved in, and say no to less productive ones (disciplined collaboration). This is a pretty comprehensive list. The first four relate to mastering your own work, while the remaining three concern mastering working with others.

NOT WHAT WE EXPECTED

These seven practices upend conventional thinking about how you should work. I had thought, for instance, that people who prioritized well would perform well, and they did, but the best performers in our study also did something else. Once they had focused on a few priorities, they *obsessed* over those tasks to produce quality work. That extreme dedication to their priorities created extraordinary results. Top performers did *less and more*: less volume of activities, more concentrated effort. This insight overturns much conventional thinking about focusing that urges you to *choose* a few tasks to prioritize. Choice is only half of the equation—you also need to obsess. This finding led us to reformulate the “work scope” practice and call it “do less, then obsess.”

Our findings also overturned another convention. How many times have you heard, “Do what you love”? Find a role that taps into your passion, and you will be energized and do a better job. Sure enough, we found that people who were highly passionate about their jobs performed better. But we also came across passionate people who didn’t perform well, and people whose passion led them astray (like the poor guy who pursued his passion for graphics design and ended up running down his retirement account and having no job and no income). “Follow your passion,” we found, can be dangerous advice. Our top performers took a different approach: they strove to find roles that contributed value to the organization and society, and then matched passion with that sense of purpose. The *matching* of passion and purpose, and not passion alone, produced the best results.

Our results overturned yet another typical view, the idea that collaboration is necessarily good and that more is better. Experts advise us to tear down “silos” in organizations, collaborate more, build large professional networks, and use lots of high-tech communication tools to get work done. Well, my research shows that convention to be dead wrong. Top performers collaborate *less*. They carefully choose which projects and tasks to join and which to flee, and they channel their efforts and resources to excel in the few chosen ones. They discipline their collaboration.

Our study also disputes the popular idea that the path to top performance lies in practicing a skill for 10,000 hours.⁷ Our best performers in the workplace did something else, practicing what I call the “learning loop” at work, as we’ll discuss in chapter four.

These and other surprising insights turned out to be critical. The very best people didn’t just work smart in a conventional sense, but pursued more nuanced practices, like doing less and obsessing, and matching purpose with passion. Comparing these seven practices, I realized that they all embodied the idea of *selectivity*. Whenever they could, top performers carefully selected which priorities, tasks, collaborations, team meetings, committees, analyses, customers, new ideas, steps in a process, and interactions to undertake, and which to neglect or reject. Yet this more nuanced way of working smart wasn’t *just* about being selective. The very best redesigned their work so that they would create the most *value* (a

term we will define in chapter three) and then they applied *intense, targeted efforts* in their selected work activities.

Based on these findings, I arrived at a more precise definition of working smart: *To work smart means to maximize the value of your work by selecting a few activities and applying intense targeted effort.*

TESTING THE NEW THEORY

To test our framework of the seven work-smart practices, my team and I modified our survey instrument and administered it to 5,000 managers and employees across a wide range of jobs and industries in corporate America. We sampled bosses and direct reports in addition to employees, so as not to rely on self-reported data only (see the research appendix for details). We surveyed sales reps, lawyers, trainers, actuaries, brokers, medical doctors, software programmers, engineers, store managers, plant foremen, marketers, human resource people, consultants, nurses, and my personal favorite—a Las Vegas casino dealer. Some of these people occupied senior positions, but most were supervisors, office managers, department heads, or employees in low-level positions. The 5,000 people represented 15 industry sectors and 22 job functions. Almost half (45 percent) were women (two of the seven practices revealed a gender difference⁸). Age groups ranged from millennials to those over 50. Education level varied from those with less than a bachelor's degree (20 percent of the sample) to people with a master's degree or higher (22 percent). My aim was to develop, test, and share a smart-work theory that most people could use to improve their individual performance.

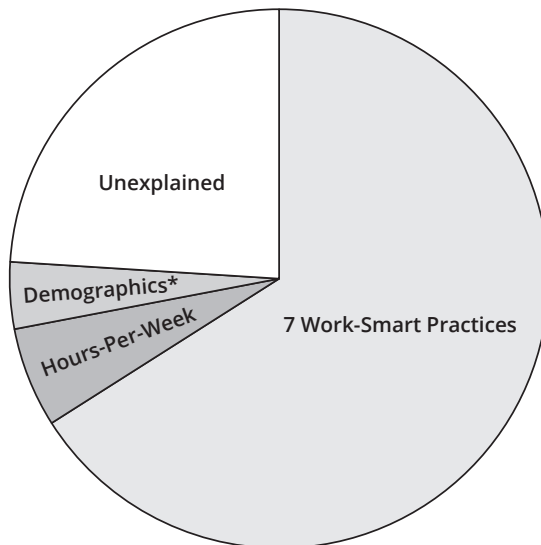
We ran our 5,000-person data set through a rigorous statistical method called regression analysis. It turned out that our seven work-smart practices went a long way toward explaining differences in performance. *In fact, they accounted for a whopping 66 percent of the variation in performance among the 5,000 people in our dataset.*⁹ We can compare that to other fields to get an idea of how remarkable this effect is. Smoking will kill you, we're told, yet smoking only explains 18 percent of variation in people's average life expectancy in the developed world, according to one study.¹⁰

Having a good salary is considered crucial for building lifelong financial resources, yet income only explains 33 percent of differences in people's net worth, according to a study of U.S. citizens between ages 18 and 65.¹¹ The basketball star Stephen Curry is famous for hitting three-point shots twenty-two feet away from the basket, yet he has landed “just” 44 percent of these shots during his professional career.¹² These benchmark numbers from other fields indicate how substantial 66 percent really is in explaining an outcome like individual performance.

By contrast, other factors we tested such as educational background, company tenure, age, gender, and hours worked combined to account for only 10 percent of the differences in performance. Hours worked per week mattered, but as I'll explain in chapter three, the relationship to performance was more complicated than the simple “work harder” view suggests. The other 24 percent of the difference was unexplained and possibly included factors such as luck or talent.

What Explains Individual Performance?

Results from Analysis of 5,000 People in the Study



*Gender, age, years of education, company tenure

Think about what these results mean. The talent and effort explanations still play a significant role in determining how individuals perform. *But the real key to individual performance is the seven “work smarter” practices.*

We now have the answer to the “Natalie” question of why some people perform so well, although I will never know what exactly Natalie did to deliver such stellar work. But I know something far more important—a systematic and empirically tested way to lift performance that holds across jobs. By improving on the seven practices, you can boost your performance beyond what it would be if you relied on talent, luck, or the sheer number of hours worked. As the chart below shows, the more a person in our study adopted the seven practices in their work, the better they performed. If you rank in only the 21st percentile in your adoption of the seven practices, your performance is likely to be lackluster—in the bottom 21st percentile (point A in the chart). However, if you crank up your proficiency at these seven practices, jumping to the 90th percentile, your performance is likely to be in the 89th percentile (point B in the chart) according to our predictions. That’s becoming a top performer.

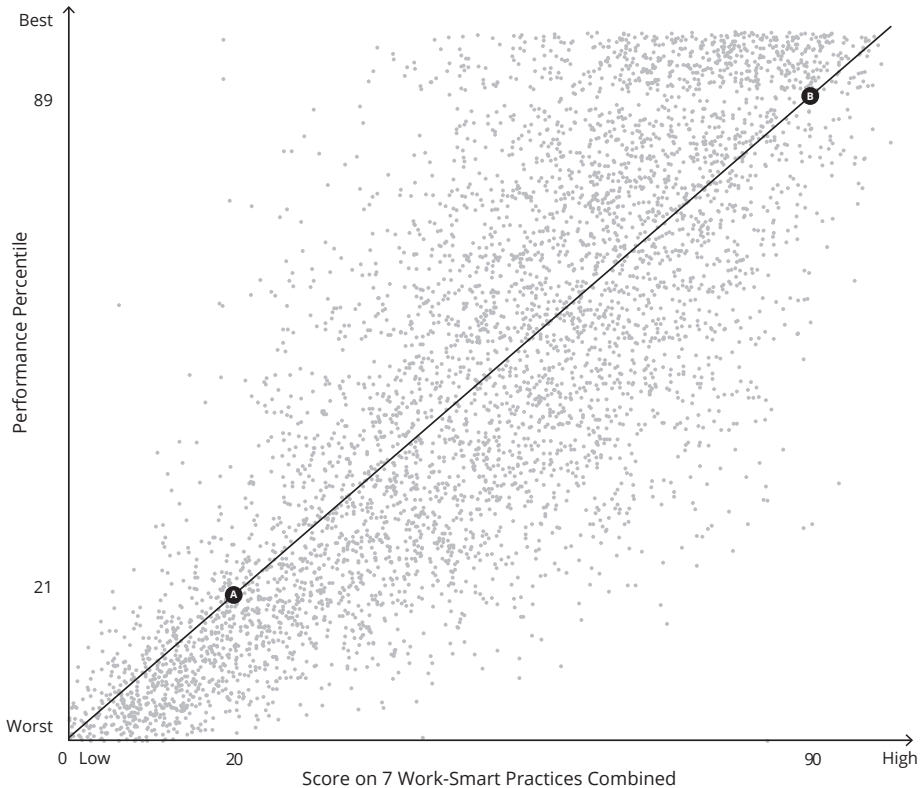
HOW TO WORK AT YOUR BEST

For all that has been written about performance, no book to my knowledge has presented an evidence-based, comprehensive understanding of what enables individuals to perform at the highest level at work. *Great at Work* fills this gap. It gives you a simple and practical framework that you can use to work at your best. Think of it as a complement to Stephen Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, updated to reflect the realities of work today, and backed by an unprecedented statistical analysis.¹³

Each chapter presents a “smart” practice and offers concrete advice for how you can include it in your own work. By using the word “practice,” I want to emphasize that you can incorporate these ideas into your daily work and make them a habit, just like you would other routines, like grabbing that morning coffee, checking your mail, and exercising. You can start small and build up these routines bit by bit, until you master them.

Lifting Individual Performance

The Positive Effect of the Seven Practices Combined on Individual Performance



Note:

These 4,964 data points representing people in our study show a pattern: The inserted line represents a statistical regression prediction of how the seven practices combined affect individual performance. Score low on the seven practices (point A in the chart) and your performance likely will be mediocre. Score high (point B) and your performance likely will be excellent (see the Research Appendix for details).

To inspire and guide you in how to apply these ideas, I tell stories of people from all walks of life who have adopted one or more of these practices and achieved outsize results. You'll meet Steven Birdsall, a senior manager who found a way to carve out a new business in the software company SAP. You'll encounter Genevieve Guay, a hotel concierge who infused her work with passion and purpose. I'll introduce you to Greg Green, a principal who accomplished a dramatic turnaround of his failing

high school, with inspiration from an unlikely source. You'll encounter an emergency room nurse who found a way for her department to save *more* heart attack patients while doing *less* work. You'll meet a consumer products CEO whose unusual approach to team meetings helped him achieve a top 1 percent performance record. You'll also come across a small business owner, a biotech engineer, a physician, a management consultant, a sushi chef, a salesperson, a factory lineperson, and many others who implemented at least one of the seven practices and boosted their performance. (Throughout the book, we have altered the names and settings for most of the people we interviewed from our dataset.)

HOW YOU CAN LIVE WELL, TOO

You might wonder whether people who work smarter as I've defined it are unhappy with their work. Under the old "work hard" paradigm, high achievers tend to become stressed out, even burned out.¹⁴ You work harder and your performance improves, but your quality of life plummets. I know mine did when I was putting in all those hours at BCG. But our study yielded a surprise. The seven "work smarter" practices didn't just improve performance. They also improved people's well-being at work. As I show in chapter nine, people in our study who worked smarter experienced *better work-life balance, higher job satisfaction, and less burnout*.

I have met so many people who believe that they must make a trade-off between achieving at work and enjoying a happy life. They forgo life outside of their jobs and put in huge amounts of hard work—long hours and maximum effort—to become top performers. Millions of people around the world sacrifice this way because they don't know how to work differently. They don't know *how* to work smart. But now there is a clear answer. As our study shows, you can perform exceptionally well and still have plenty of time to do things you love other than work, like being with your family and friends. *Being great at work means performing in your job, infusing your work with passion and a strong sense of purpose, and living well, too.* How great is that?

Whether you're about to graduate from college or in the middle of

your career, whether you're worried about keeping your job or simply want to do it better, I invite you to set aside your preconceived ideas about work and explore the work-smart theory I present in this book. We'll begin with the four practices for mastering your own work, followed by the three practices to help you master working with other people.