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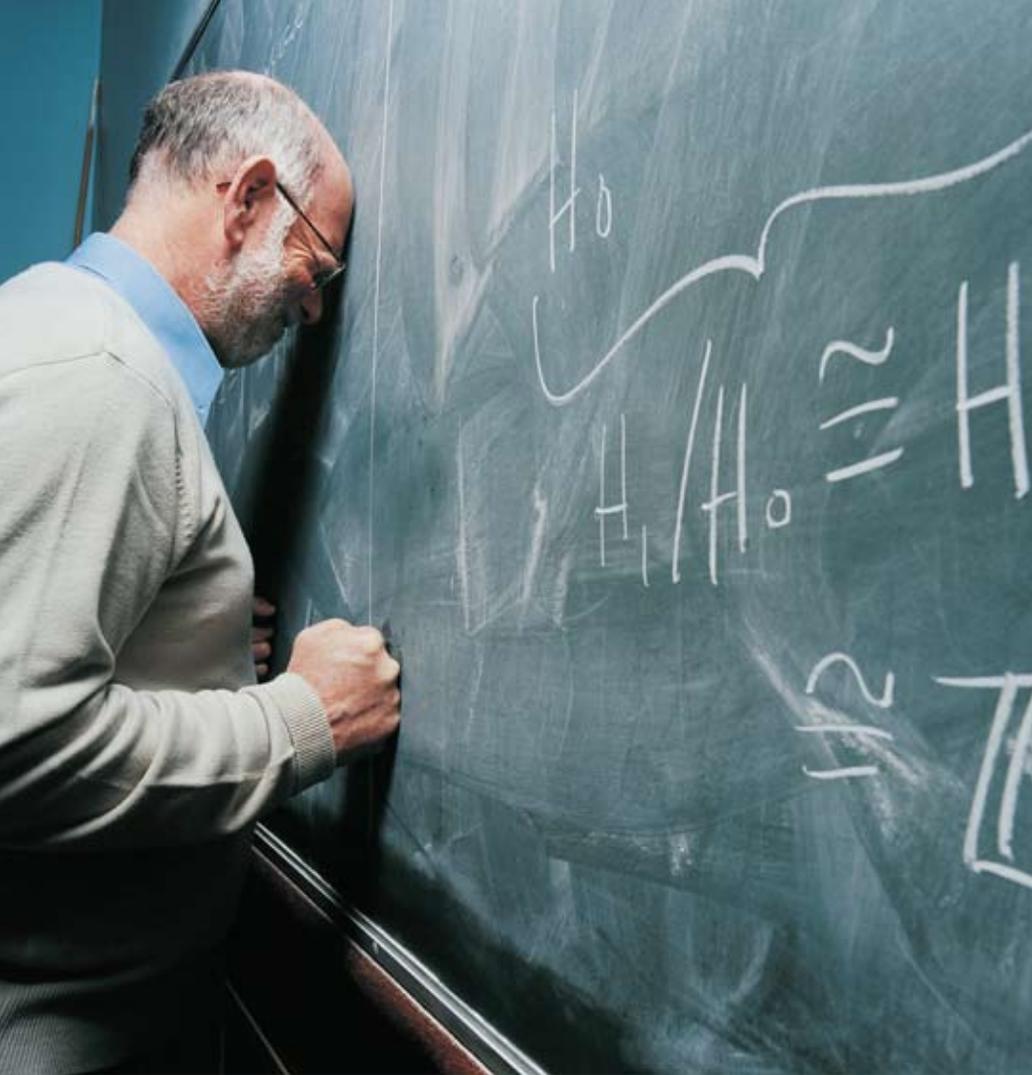
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HUMAN FACTOR

IN THE WORKPLACE



# I Can't Help It, I was Born this Way

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**O**ne of my closest friends in high school took classes after graduating at a local junior college—her favorite subject was calculus. Marty didn't need calculus for her work, but she took Calculus I, and then Calculus II, and then on up to

Calculus IV because it was fun. As far as I know, she never applied it to any aspect of her life. She simply enjoyed the order and symmetry of calculus. I can barely remember how to put together an algebraic equation. Why did math come so easily for Marty—and she didn't even need it for anything?

Have you ever wondered if you were left out when gifts and talents were handed out? Does it sometimes seem as though other people have a big pool of talent and you received a puddle?

Some people believe talents are bestowed upon them miraculously. Gospel singer and songwriter André Crouch has told the story many times of how his father prayed for him in church one Sunday and how he received what he calls "a gift for music." One day he sat down at the piano and began to play chords as though instinctively knowing how the keys sounded together. He was unaware of any aptitude he had for music and had received no training. That's a miraculous example—just not very common.

Some people believe talents are created strictly by our upbringing and influences—such as the man who becomes a successful chef because his mother and aunts enjoyed cooking and he loved being in the kitchen with them. Many believe talents are innate but consider them a tremendous mystery—a roll of the cosmic dice. We can't help but be a bit envious of someone who never has to work hard at the things with which we struggle, such as my friend and her "head for numbers."

## The blank slate

For many years within recent history, experts told the world that we are the product of our environments, shaped by our parents and experiences. These experts believed we came into the world *tabula rasa*—a Latin term meaning "blank slate"—ready to have things written on us. The most potent pen that writes upon us, the experts told us, is our parents.

Long before these experts, however, people understood intuitively what their eyes told them—there are different types of people, born with different personalities and abilities. In about the last 30 years, technology has given researchers the ability to put to

the test the thinking that we're just empty tablets waiting for life to write upon us. What they're discovering is what folks a millennium ago could have told them—we're born with something.

We now know with certainty that we are born with particular temperamental traits. Different researchers look at temperament in varying ways, but they all admit that we come out of the womb with an inborn way of seeing the world. Our brains provide us with a kind of template through which we view life, and on which we place our learning and experience. We build upon that template with things such as parental upbringing, traumas, character, cultural and generational differences, and general preferences. Together, all of these create our personalities.

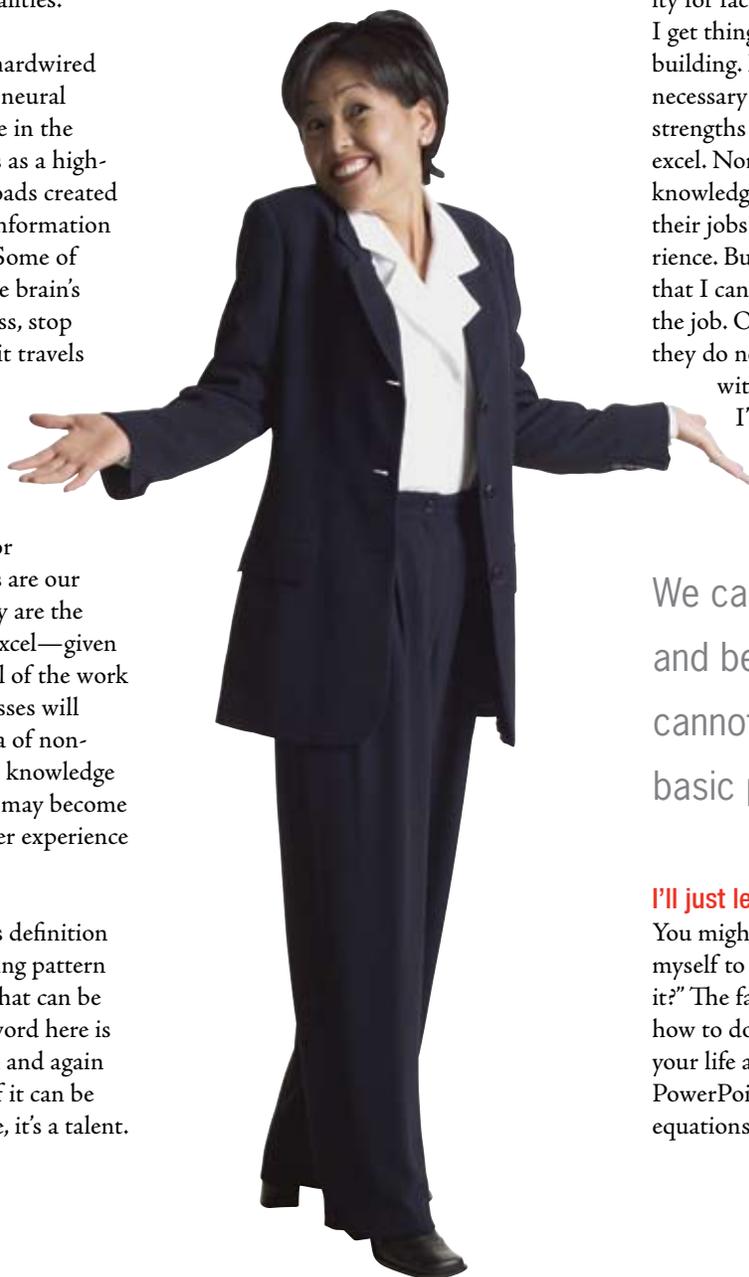
Researchers tell us we are also hardwired with specific talents, formed by neural pathways from the time we were in the womb. Think of these pathways as a highway system in the brain, with roads created by the tremendous amount of information and impulses being processed. Some of that traffic finds its way onto the brain's version of wide-open, frictionless, stop sign-free superhighways where it travels at 100 miles-an-hour with no accidents. These cerebral autobahns are your talents.

### **I was born this way**

Patterns of thought and behavior that seem perfectly natural to us are our individual talents and gifts. They are the things in which we will always excel—given the opportunity to use them. All of the work spent on improving our weaknesses will never cause us to excel in an area of non-talent. We may gather skills and knowledge that will be of use to us, and we may become fairly proficient, but we will never experience the agility of true giftedness.

I like The Gallup Organization's definition of a talent: "any naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behavior that can be productively applied." The key word here is recurring. It's what you do again and again instinctively, without thought. If it can be applied to something productive, it's a talent.

For instance, the ease with which you see how things might be organized or arranged, or your ability to explain complex ideas in terms simple to understand or your love for strategy—these things can be productively applied. Gallup's book, *First, Break All the Rules*, says, "Your talents are the behaviors you find yourself doing often. You have a mental filter that sifts through your world, forcing you to pay attention to some stimuli, while others slip past you unnoticed. Your instinctive ability to remember names, rather than just faces, is a talent. Your need to alphabetize your spice rack and color-code your wardrobe is a talent. So is your love of crossword puzzles, your fascination with risk or your impatience. Any recurring patterns



of behavior that can be productively applied are talents. The key to excellent performance, of course, is finding the match between your talents and your role."<sup>1</sup>

I did not start out in facility management. I came to it after years of work as an administrative assistant and an office manager. During those years, I developed my talent for taking personal responsibility for following through on what was given to me, accurately executing instructions and figuring out how to get things done when I didn't have a clue as to how to do them. I have a natural-born ability to take charge, give orders and, at my best, get difficult people to work together. I carved out a role for myself in a company that has given me the responsibility for facility management simply because I get things done and excel at relationship-building. I do not have all of the strengths necessary for this role, but we do not need strengths for every aspect of our roles to excel. Nor do I have all of the skills and knowledge many facility managers bring to their jobs as a result of education and experience. But I do have talents and strengths that I can use anywhere, no matter what the job. Of course I have weaknesses, but they do not hinder my ability to perform with excellence. I can't help it that I'm good at what I do. I was born this way—and I developed it.

We can change patterns and behaviors; what we cannot do is change our basic personality.

### **I'll just learn to sing**

You might be asking, "Can't I just apply myself to something and become strong in it?" The fact is that you certainly can learn how to do things that will be of use to you in your life and work. You can learn how to use PowerPoint, calculate complex mathematical equations and speak confidently to a group.

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You can study accounting, acting, diplomacy, engineering or art history. You can take a speed-reading course or “Finance for Non-Financial Managers.” But if the talent for the task is not there, it will simply be a learned skill without the power of natural aptitude behind it. In fact, a number of studies have shown that when being trained, we grow exponentially in areas where we already possess a talent. Without the talent, we can improve only appreciably. Possessing that learned skill or ability is still quite useful. However, you will become aware that you do not excel at the ability. Next to someone with natural ability, we’re just getting by, but we can still use a skill and be glad we have it.

### What are your natural born talents?

Naturally, you’ll want to know how to find out what talents you were born with. One way to find your principal talents is by observing yourself. According to Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D., authors of *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, “If you want to reveal your talents monitor the situations you encounter.” These top-of-mind reactions provide the best trace of your talents. They reveal the location of strong mental connections.”<sup>2</sup>

The authors offer these “five clues to a talent”:

- **Yearning:** What kinds of activities are you naturally drawn to?
- **Rapid learning:** What kinds of activities do you seem to pick up quickly?
- **Flow:** In what activities did the steps just come to you automatically?
- **Glimpses of excellence:** During what activities have you had moments of subconscious excellence (“How did I do that?”)?
- **Satisfaction:** What activities motivate you, either while doing them or immediately after finishing them (“When can I do that again?”)?

### Tackling weaknesses

Which brings us to the question—what about our weaknesses? Given all of this wonderful instruction on how our brains are formed and how we can develop our hardwiring, what do we do with the things we aren’t wired for? Working on one’s weaknesses is not wrong, but it might not be fruitful. It all depends on what we want.

We certainly have weaknesses that can be addressed. We may need a particular skill for the job, even if we’re not wildly talented. For instance, it doesn’t matter if I’m not good at financial concepts—I still have to manage budgets in my position, so I have to learn enough to do what’s required of me. Working on creating new strategies

for communication, learning to develop our relationships, or going through experiences that open us up to different values are also important. As social creatures we must learn to deal appropriately and effectively with people we encounter. The old excuse, “I can’t help it—I was born this way,” is not completely true in these cases. We possess learned responses and can address our weaknesses—expressing ourselves in more beneficial ways or learning a task we can’t avoid. We can change patterns and



behaviors; what we cannot do is change our basic personality.

Instead of seeing our non-talents as weaknesses that must be corrected, consider focusing on what you're really good at and finding ways to manage the things that need work. *Now, Discover Your Strengths* provides five strategies for managing a weakness due to a lack of talent<sup>3</sup>:

- Get a little better at it.
- Design a support system.
- Use one of your strongest themes to overwhelm your weaknesses.
- Find a partner.
- Just stop doing it.

As much as possible, dedicate time and energy to the things in which you excel. Manage around a weakness so that you won't waste time on trying to fix what cannot be fixed.

### Confidence in your strengths

Someone once said, "I don't do a lot of things well, but I do a few things brilliantly." It's finding those things that we do brilliantly that will give us direction and purpose if we are willing to follow their lead. You

should be able to confidently describe your strengths. You can't help what you're good at. You were born that way. **FMJ**

<sup>1</sup> Buckingham, Marcus and Coffman, Curt, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. Simon & Schuster 1999, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67, italics theirs.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150-155.



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