



What Sets Top Performers Apart

By: Ira S Wolfe

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Description: If you think you know what it takes to be a top performer in the work arena, think again. Trailblazing neuroscience investigator and best selling author Chuck Martin devoted two years of rigorous research to mapping core cognitive functions or "Executive Skills" of over 2,500 high performing individuals to what they do and where they work. Join Workforce Trends host/author Ira S Wolfe and guest Chuck Martin on this live broadcast as they discuss the 12 executive skills that are prevalent in high-performing individuals in business...and the one weakness they share in common. Whether you're searching for a new career or seeking to confirm the identity of your next emerging star, don't miss this show.

[Start of Transcript]

Announcer

(0:00): Blog Talk Radio [MUSIC]

Speaker

(0:12): Welcome to Workforce Trends, the talk radio show that keeps business leaders and journalists in the know about what's happening in America's workplace. Today's show is sponsored by Success Performance Solutions: experts in matching the right employee to the right jobs. Here's your host for today's show: Ira Wolfe. [MUSIC FADING]

Ira Wolfe

(0:34): Good morning, everyone, and today is July 14th. It's a really, really nice day on the East Coast-- well, sort of a nice day, the sun's going in and out a bit. I'm really excited about today's show. We have Chuck Martin, and he's going to talk about his new book, and we're going to talk about executive skills. As the title of the show said, what sets top performers apart? If anybody's been following us on Twitter, we know we're talking about our top skills, are top performers' skills hard-wired? Can you really train what's needed to be not only satisfied in a career, but also, can you train people to fit into jobs that they're not naturally equipped to do? Today will be a great show and it's obviously a topic that is my bread and butter for my business, and certainly a topic that I'm excited about learning about.

(1:32): I don't want to waste any more time, so I'm going to introduce Chuck. Chuck Martin is a New York Times best-selling author, a business best-selling author. He's also chairman and CEO of NFI Research, and director of the Center for Media Research at MediaPost. Just kind of an aside, he recently was selected as one of the top marketing professors on Twitter by Systemic Marketing, so that's kind of a fun little point. Chuck, I'd like to welcome you to the show today.

Chuck Martin

(2:02): Hey, Ira. Great to be here.

Ira Wolfe

(2:04): Yeah, great. Hey, we had a really nice couple minutes' conversation beforehand, so we can just jump into it. As you know, I received your book a couple weeks ago. I'm not sure if you knew I received it, but I received the book, and read through it, and it immediately resonated with me. For one particular reason, and it's certainly a hot topic today, in a career and in the workforce: a lot of people are out of work. A lot of people that are in jobs are not very happy with the job, as I shared with you just a few minutes ago. My first career, I was a dentist. I went through ten, eleven years of professional school and college. I had a very successful practice, but at the end it was just drudgery. I just couldn't do it for another day, and that's really how I got into this business, which has been for the last fifteen years. I kind of mentally made the decision to leave my leave the profession probably a year and a half or two years before I actually did, so people say, when did you leave? I kind of checked out in 1994, and sold my practice to a partner in 1995. But, I love what I'm doing now, and Work Your Strengths, which is the title of your new book, certainly resonated really well with me.

(3:27): So let's talk about that: I mean, you put a ton of research into this, which is certainly impressive. This isn't certainly that you just were winging off the top of your head, with a bunch of guys sitting around in a room and figuring out how to write another book. There's been a couple books in the past, Discover Your Strengths and Strengths Finder by Marcus Buckingham. They're



really popular amongst CEOs and other leaders and business owners. What's different, what's a little different about your book, *Work Your Strengths*? Before you answer that question, I just want to let listeners know that today's show is live. There's a call-in number: 646-200-3752. That's 646-200-3752, and if you have questions for Chuck or myself, don't hesitate to call in. Chuck, what's unique about *Work Your Strengths*?

Chuck Martin

(4:16): The similarities-- there are several books about strengths that are out, and we all agree that people should play to their strengths. What's unique about *Work Your Strengths* is that it's based on a psychological, scientific model. The research in the book-- and the whole premise-- is based on 40 years of neuroscience brain research. It turns out that people are-- and this is, by the way, very well known in clinical psychology and is not my theory, this is used in clinical practice-- people are born with certain characteristics and everyone knows what the left and right brain is. There's another part of the brain called the frontal lobes, or the prefrontal cortex. I don't want to get too scientific here, but it's the part of the brain right behind your forehead. In there are located specific functions, cognitive functions called executive skills, which is an absolutely terrible, terrible name, but that's what psychologists named them more than ten years ago. They're called executive skills; they have nothing to do with executives and nothing to do with skills, but they're called the executive skills because they help people execute tasks, and psychologists refer to the brain as the central executive.

(5:21): There are twelve of these skills that people are born with, and they develop over time, into late adolescence and early adulthood. By the time people reach what psychologists believe is somewhere in their twenties, these skills are fully developed. It's very much like your height. Like your height gets developed over time, or you being left or right handed, this is the same thing: it's neurological. These are skills like time management, organization, planning prioritization, task initiation, and so forth. People end up with two or three that are their strongest, two or three that are their weakest, and that's pretty much what you've got. The problem is people don't always get into situations that play to what are their strongest. They end up with situations like you described earlier, that might play to your weakest, which means a job or a function of whatever you're doing is unnatural for how your brain is essentially hardwired.

Ira Wolfe

(6:12): When I was reading through the twelve skills that you identified, I was pretty easily able to identify what my strengths and what my weaknesses were. You also have an assessment that can do that, is that correct?

Chuck Martin

(6:31): Yes, what we did-- we have a profile, it's called the executive skills profile, and there's a web address in the book, and it's free. People can go do it: it takes about six or seven minutes. You answer some questions and it actually gives you your twelve skills, with what are your strongest, what are your weakest, and what are the sequence of your highs and lows. What we did, is with this instrument, we wanted to know if there were certain characteristics that successful people in business had, so we spent two years-- over the course of two years we had 113 researchers work on this at various parts of it-- and we actually profiled high performing people in business around the world at every level. We did we did thousands of profiles on thousands of people in hundreds of companies. We did huge big brands, we did small companies, we did nonprofits, and manufacturing, financial services, health care, every industry you could imagine.

(7:25): What we were wondering, are there three skills of the twelve that successful people have, in which case would have been kind of a disaster. That would mean that everyone else is a potential loser, but that's not what we found. What we found was that there are certain characteristics that go with certain jobs. Again, these are only high performing people, so we had executives or managers determine who were their high performers, and then we sent the profile to that executive. They sent it to the high performer 100% anonymously, so this is all done by very high research standards. We ended up knowing what the characteristics were by function, by department, by industry, by profession, and we also looked at employee versus manager versus executive and found some really interesting things there. It explains a lot of why people get promoted, and they were really successful before they got promoted, and they're really not successful. It explains that very nicely and scientifically. The idea of the book and the research was, that people end up-- and you're just a great example-- they end up successful, but it's through a lot of bumps and grinds, and this didn't work, that didn't work, I don't like this, I like that, but it takes a lot of trial and error. What we wanted to do was to be able to help people



predict scientifically where they're likely to be successful from a percentage standpoint.

(8:58): For example, in information technology, if you are low in the skill of planning prioritization-- and planning prioritization is that your brain automatically creates road maps in terms of reaching your goals, if you're very good at sequencing things-- if you are weak in that skill, your probability of being a high performer in information technology anywhere is only about five percent, because of the high performers in information technology, a very, very large percentage have that as a strength, and very, very few have it as a weakness. If that is your weakness, that is probably going to be a really hard profession for you to succeed in. We did this with a lot of jobs, so you can go through the ideas and you can get your own profile. Then you could say, if you go to the book and say, OK, the people who are strong in this like me, where do they work? Where have they been successful? Then you can potentially use this to help map your career.

Ira Wolfe

(9:54): Now, if I'm an employer-- I work with a lot of employers-- and let's say that they're interested in taking this assessment, and there's a number of people that are in the positions and they complete it. Let's say somebody is that I.T., and let's say they have a VP of I.T. or project manager and they're looking at promoting them. Is your research saying that trying to develop the weakness, or add some new skills, or improve, and turn a weakness into a strength is not going to work?

Chuck Martin

(10:32): That is absolutely correct. You can't. It's like changing your height. You're five nine and you might want to be five seven. Well, you can want to be five seven, or you're five seven, and you want to be five nine. You can stretch for a year, and do exercises, and when you're done, you'll still be five seven. The brain is kind of the same way-- and I don't mean to be this cold and hard about it-- but there's a lot of good news. What it does is, it allows you to know in advance where there's going to be issues, for example. So, if you're in one job-- I'll give you an example of salespeople. Working memory was a common strength found in salespeople at an employee level, manager level, and executive level. That was the most commonly found executive skill across all three categories of people in sales. Working memory is the ability that when you get really, really busy, you don't forget things, and things just kind of pop back into your brain that you remember that you don't know why you remembered it. If you're weak in that, someone tells you, oh, after you've done this, make sure you do this before you come home, and you do all those things, but you forget that thing before you come home. Your memory's not always on.

Ira Wolfe

(11:49): I remember all those things in the shower, when I remember all those things in the shower--

(11:52): [LAUGHTER]

Ira Wolfe

(11:53): --or walking out of the room, right?

(11:56): CHUCK MARTIN: Yeah, those things that you meant to do. So, we found that is a common strength. However, if you look at managers versus executives, one of the top executive skills of employees is not a skill called goal-directed persistence. Goal-directed persistence is the ability to keep your eye on the long-term goal. Someone strong in that, they hit their deadlines that are five weeks away, and they always hit them on time. That's one of my strengths, by the way. That's why I get my books and my manuscripts in on time, but I'm low in time management, so I can't guess how much time it's going to take, so it kind of balances out.

(12:35): However, for sales managers and sales executives, a strength is goal-directed persistence, but that is not a common strength of sales employees. What that means is, if you're an executive, and you want to promote an employee and you want to bring them up the ranks to executive, you can say, OK, as a manager, they're going to have a difficult time with this end-goal stuff. I know that, so I'm going to help them. I'll pair them with someone who is really good at long-term objectives. What you do is, you eliminate the problems caused by the weakness, as opposed to trying to fix the weakness.

(13:13): The problem in business today-- and this is very, very common, it's very normal, intuitive-- is we hire somebody based on their strengths, and then we spend all the time in their career in the company trying to fix their weakness. You know, the performance review: well, you're



doing really, really well at this, but let's talk about the things you need to work on. It's the same review every year, after year, after year, as opposed to getting people to say this is your strength, let's see what other kinds positions and functions we can get you into that use those, because you'll be really good at that. What do we do with the person who's weak in time management that can't process time accurately? We send them to five or ten time management courses, and that's the person who ends up still weak in time management. The great irony is, and it's totally counterintuitive, is if you send the person who is strong in time management to a time management course, they will be taught skills that impact things using time, and that will be very natural for them and they will actually get better at it. It doesn't change their cognitive function, but it gives them more tools to use that function very naturally.

(14:20): I teach marketing research at a university, and on the first day of class-- these are all marketing majors, they're mostly all seniors-- we have everyone in the class do the profile, and then we build teams based on strengths. We'll say OK, we need five teams, let's put one organization on each team. We need one working memory on each team, we need one time management strength on each team. We don't know these people, they're total strangers on the first day. At the end of the semester, every team says it's the most effective team they've been on in college. What happened is their strength covered other people's weaknesses, so the weaknesses never become an issue. It's really the strengths, and this stuff really does work. It's scientific.

Ira Wolfe

(14:59): You said a couple things, and again, as soon as I read the book I realized that a lot of things that I was doing somewhat empirically, I was basing it on research of other people and trying to assimilate it and integrate the information. One of the things that I've sometimes said is that someone can teach me how to dunk the basketball and-- I'm five nine, and I have no lift at all-- and I can work on it day in and day out, but the reality is it will never be easy for me to dunk a basketball, if I ever can even achieve that, although I can work really hard and want to be able to do it. That resonated. It certainly hit home pretty well.

(15:43): You mentioned-- there's a couple of things here, too. I mean, I've been writing a lot about leadership, and what's it's going to take. Certainly, our world has become massively more complex-- just take, for instance, the Gulf oil spill-- I mean, you know, where we have the brightest minds in the world able to create new things, we create new problems that we haven't figured out the solutions for. The world is becoming more complex, and change is happening at a rapid pace.

(16:15): One of the skills that you mentioned here that I've been talking about, I didn't call it metacognition, but I talked about it just as cognitive abilities-- easy to say, cognitive abilities. I read it somewhere in the book; one of the many highlights was that it was a differentiator in top performing people.

Chuck Martin

(16:35): Yes, it was. Metacognition is the ability to very naturally, when you've done something, you finish it and your brain stands back, and takes a kind of a review of yourself: how I could do that better next time around? It's just that you just do that all the time, without really consciously thinking about it. If you're weak in that skill, then you don't do that. You might tend to make the same mistake over and over again. Someone might say to you hey, you may want to try it a different way, oh, that's a good idea. So it's not that people are doing these things intentionally, it's really just how their brain is wired and especially how they were born.

(17:16): We did find certain characteristics by titles, though. If you look at CEOs, 43% of all CEOs are strong in goal-directed persistence. That was also the number one strength of CFOs, chief financial officers. So, there a lot of strengths like that, where we found there's certain places where these people ended up. There's a place for everybody. That's really good news. If that's one of your weaknesses, that doesn't mean that there's no place for you. You just look at what your strengths are, and see where the places are. It also doesn't mean you can't do the job, it just means it's going to be really hard for you because it's counter to what you do. If you look at by industry, people who are strong in metacognition-- in the skill you just mentioned-- 15% of all high performing people are strong in metacognition are at work in associations, and 11% are in manufacturing. We broke all the percentages down like that because-- I'm not sure if people want to hear this-- but I don't believe that people, businesspeople, have time to read a lot of books from front to back, but they do have time to go through a book. So, what we did was we organized it so you can do your profile online and quickly just go look and find the table of where are the people,



and then if you want the explanation all the details are in the book, obviously.

(18:40): The idea is that you find out where is a logical fit for you. I'm getting people who come to me saying, here are my strengths, where are people like me working, because I don't like my job. I don't know why I don't like it, I just don't like it. I'm unhappy, I don't look forward to going to work. What happens is people get into situations that require their strengths. All of a sudden, their job is "easy" to them, because it's more natural for how they're wired. It's all about getting into a perfect-fit situation. In psychology, they call it goodness of fit. Metacognition, by the way, is one of those psychology terms. That's what they call it. They do have clinical names. Unfortunately, that's what it's called. People don't intuitively know what metacognition is, but like you, successful people have come around and said, well, I think I'm good at this.

(19:36): One of the things with the executive skills, it helps people understand something they may not have known. It's basically a map, so it's a template for here are the things, this is what they're called. Someone can look at this and say, oh, I didn't know what that was called, but that's what I'm good at.

Ira Wolfe

(19:51): And there's no question. Just to let the readers know, or the listeners know, for the people that are interested in picking up the book: you're absolutely right. I mean, I've been carrying around the book. I did not read it in one sitting, cover to cover, but I've got the thing highlighted like crazy. I started reading something, and then I flipped to the back, and found some interesting areas for me that I might have even been writing about, or working with a client. Having the information about specific job titles, and also industries, has been a great help. It's certainly going to be a great reference book to people, for people to have on the shelf.

(20:32): CHUCK MARTIN: It was a lot of work to do those, that table kind of stuff, because you have to really pull everything together and analyze it. Metacognition, for example, to use that one example, we looked at what's a logical industry, department, and title, and the most commonly found industries for people who are strong in metacognition are associations, manufacturing, and business services. The number one departments they are in: research development, marketing, and general management. The most commonly found titles they have: chairman or a partner, executive vice president, and director. We did it for all of the industries and departments, so you can go find your skill, and find out where people are who are successful, with the same strengths that you have.

Ira Wolfe

(21:20): Let's talk a few minutes. We have about eight or nine minutes left here. One of the first skills that was listed, you had response inhibition. I immediately jotted it down. In fact, I just wrote a post on my one of my blogs about this, and you think about Joe Biden.

Chuck Martin

(21:46): Low response inhibition 101.

(21:49): [LAUGHTER]

(21:50): IRA WOLFE: I'm talking about Dan Gilbert the other day-- the Cleveland Cavaliers' coach, his rant afterward. You know, the list goes on-- like Donavich-- I mean, the list goes on. Joe Biden is probably the classic of how a single weakness could either sabotage or corral your career.

(22:15): CHUCK MARTIN: Response inhibition is, if you're strong in it, you very naturally think before you speak. If you're low in it, you basically speak and then you think. Typically, if you're weak in response inhibition, it is very common that you'll say something, and then you'll say to yourself, I can't believe I just said that.

Ira Wolfe

(22:35): That would be sad, right?

(22:37): [LAUGHTER]

(22:37): CHUCK MARTIN: And worse, in business meetings, you'll have someone else who will sit there to themselves and say, I can't believe he just said that. It just kind of blurts out. Everybody knows someone who's weak in response inhibition, because they're very frequently fun people to



be around. They seem so impulsive, they'll just say stuff, and sometimes it gets them in trouble. But under pressure, and under stress, your weakest skills fail first, and they're magnified. So if you're under pressure, say you're on TV-- I've done a lot of TV --even though people look calm on TV, they're really under pressure because the camera's rolling, it's live, and a Biden type of person is in those situations frequently. When you look at the situation where someone, anyone in business, where they say something that really you can't believe they said it, it will typically or commonly be a situation where they're under pressure, they're moving fast, or whatever. It just kind of comes out in passing. However, there are places for people who are strong in response inhibition. The number one industries that they're in are hospitality and education. The number one department they're in is HR. Doesn't it seem logical? The HR--

(23:51): IRA WOLFE: Absolutely. As you start reading this, it absolutely makes sense where you are. But let me ask: I go through this, and I recognize that I've got Joe Biden's tendencies. I wanted more opportunities to be in front of a group. I recognize they're going to be pretty high pressure situations, and maybe even a little bit ambiguous as far as questions or responses that I'm going to have to make. What can I do? How do I lessen the weakness? I understand I can't make it a strength, but what could someone do to lessen the chance that pops up as a problem?

Chuck Martin

(24:30): We actually have a lot of those things in the book that we did before this, called Smarts: Are We Hardwired For Success? These are companion books, basically. I'll give you some examples. What you can do: you need to do something that interrupts the flow. Essentially, it's just neurological. If say, someone works for you, and they're in a meeting, and they're low in response inhibition-- they always say something that you say is just bizarre-- you tell them at the meeting, look, you can speak at the meeting any time you want, but before you speak, you have to look at me, or you have to write down two words. Anyway, what it does is it interrupts the flow. It basically reroutes what they were going to do. For you, you might say OK, before I answer any questions, I'm going to have a-- you know those little rubber stress balls, those things are actually used in psychology, by the way; they really do things-- you might say that before I answer a question, I'm going to just reach in my pocket and squeeze this rubber ball one time, or I'm going to click my pen one time. I'm going to move to the-- whatever, you do something that for you that you always say before I answer, I'm going to do this. As a result, it stops you from saying something that you would normally say that might get you in trouble. There are hundreds of techniques like that.

Ira Wolfe

(25:44): You mentioned that those suggestions are in your previous book, is that correct?

(25:51): CHUCK MARTIN: Yes, it's called Smarts. The reason we did Work Your Strengths was after Smarts, where we looked at people in business, and how you map these to what you do at work. We wanted to know, are there common things that people have at work? We ended up-- the study, we were hoping do it in a year, but it took two years, just because it just took a long time to analyze all these people-- it turned out there really are common characteristics for people based on what their profile is. Then again, these are high performers, so we wanted to shortcut the career process for people, so they could scientifically say, OK, I'm going to go in that job because I really like doing that thing. I see that being a manager in that job is going to be harder for me than when I get to the executive level. They may still want to do it. It's not like you read this book and say, I can't do this, I'm going to be a failure. That's not the idea. It's to go in with your eyes open and say, OK, these things are going to be easy, these things are going to be hard because they're unnatural for me. How do I get to things that are easier for me for the way my brain is wired, and how do I deal with those that are hard, because they play to my weakness? We also tell people, once you know your weaknesses, and you have a task-- because you will have a task that requires your weakest skill in the course of your work career-- do those first, while you're fresh. It takes more horsepower for your brain to do that. Those that play to your strengths, do those later. That's upside down from what people do, by the way. People typically--

Ira Wolfe

(27:22): Sure. You do what you're good at, and then you put everything else off towards the end. Chuck, we've just got a couple minutes here, and so I want to be able to let listeners know where to get your book Work Your Strengths, or contact you if they have any questions.

Chuck Martin

(27:40): Anybody can contact me directly. I answer 100% of my email. It may not be in the first day, because I get a lot, but it's chuck@nfi, like Net Feature Institute, chuck@nfiresearch.com.



They can get Work Your Strengths at Amazon, of course, Barnes and Noble, Borders, independent bookstores, BN.com, pretty much anywhere books are sold. I'd love to hear from anybody who has any thoughts. Again, the profile's free, so you get the book and it gives you the web address and you just go there. It takes six minutes, and bang, you know your strengths and weaknesses.

Ira Wolfe

(28:16): Excellent. We've got the about 45 seconds here. Any final words of advice for managers, or people looking for jobs, or people who feel they're stuck in a career?

Chuck Martin

(28:28): Anyone who feels like they're doing really well and they love their job, they should go see why by looking at their strengths. Anyone who's not happy in their job, they should go look at this and maybe see the why of why they're not, and see how they get out of that into a situation that fits them, and see where people like them, like their brains, basically. It takes all the personality out of it to see where people with the same brain as them are successful, with the chance that they could be successful in that same situation.

Ira Wolfe

(28:55): Well, Chuck, thanks. I've been speaking with Chuck Martin, author of Work Your Strengths and also Smarts. It's been great having you today. It's just been really enjoyable and it's certainly a book that's very timely, and I wish you a lot of good luck with it, Chuck.

(29:14): CHUCK MARTIN: Thanks, Ira. I really appreciate it.

Ira Wolfe

(29:16): Have a great day, everyone. Join me next week again, Wednesday 11 am, for Workforce Trends on Blog Talk Radio.

(29:26): [MUSIC]

[End of Show Transcript]