

Elliott Masie's

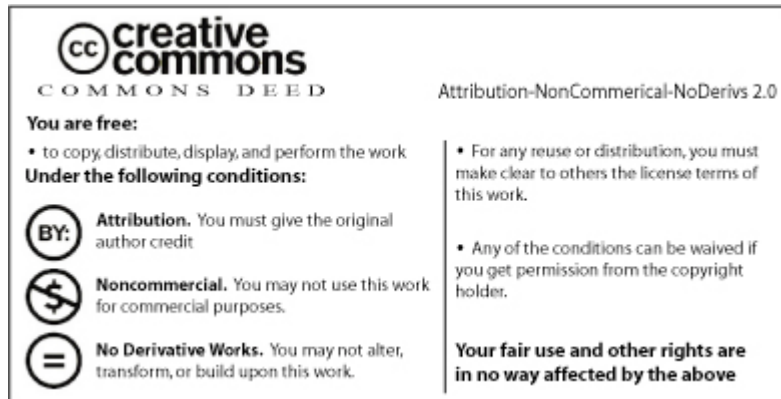
LEARNING2009

Malcolm Gladwell *Outliers*

Learning 2009 Keynote – Automation Leads to Disengagement

November 9th, 2009

Transcription of Video Segment Available at:
<http://www.learning2010.com/gladwell>



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Learning 2010 will be held from October 24-27 in Orlando, Florida.

Elliott Masie: What should I ask Sully tomorrow? What would be a curiosity you have?

Malcolm Gladwell: Well, there are several interesting things. You should ask him about the case of the two pilots the other day who were on their laptops, because it's...so Sully is over here [gesturing to the left]. The dudes on their laptops are over here [gesturing to the right], right? Now, the question is, in what direction is piloting a plane going in? And the answer is, sadly, it's going away from the Sully's and towards the laptop guys.

What you are seeing there is this really unavoidable phenomenon, which is, as you automate the routine tasks of flying a plane more and more and more, that is good in a sense that it cuts down on routine errors. It is bad in the sense that it leaves the pilot cognitively disengaged from flying a plane. It goes back to my earlier point. All new kinds of technologies have risks and benefits. The benefit of automation in the cockpit is clear. The risks are things that we haven't talked about and we need to talk about. Exhibit A is the risk that you are so bored. You have got nothing to do now. You stick it on autopilot, and what do you do? You sit there and you twiddle your thumbs.

A friend of mine who pilots those big airbuses and does international routes said to me, "We get paid for 15 minutes a year." Fifteen minutes a year is when he has to kind of focus. That's a problem. We need to address that problem. What do you do with these highly-trained, highly-skilled people who get up in their plane and have nothing to do? And unless we figure that problem out, you are going to have all kinds of accidents caused by people who are playing on their laptops.

Sully is the opposite. What he is, is the best of the old school. But let's be clear: there are no more Sullys, right? That's over.

Elliott Masie: We both have places in New York. Cathy and I have a little apartment on 47th Street, on the Hudson, and I was really curious, because he picked the very best place on the Hudson to land [the plane]. If you think about it, it's right where the ferry from New Jersey goes across, and I was wondering if he said, you know -

Malcolm Gladwell: But he ran the risk of ending up in New Jersey [said jokingly].

Elliott Masie: That's true. [Laughter] I know he was looking at the Intrepid, but I wonder to what extent he was making a street decision.

Malcolm Gladwell: Well, so here is this great thing that what you are seeing is such a beautiful example of expertise in action. So we always come back to this question, which sounds like a dumb question, but it's a really important one, which is, "Why do we need experts? What value is experience?" And it's an important question because, in some instances [and in] some cases, 85%, 90%, 95% of the time, you actually don't need the experienced expert, because life is manageable within certain carefully restricted parameters and you have tools that can help you. But what the expert can do is, in that totally unscripted moment, he or she can make sense of 25 different variables like that [snapping his fingers], right?

What was to me so fascinating about that crash is just what you said: on some unconscious level, he [Sully] crunched that variable, right? He thought, "Okay, I can land here. I can't make Teterboro [and] LaGuardia is out of the question in going back, so I have to pick a body of water. Okay, which body of water am I going to pick? East River? Hudson River? Hudson! Okay, which part of Hudson?"

Now, he is not doing that as you or I would. We would take out our thing and we would be like - I would be like, Elliott, what do you think? Meanwhile, the plane is about to crash! The virtue of having someone with that degree of - the man has more than 10,000 hours. The man's got 20,000 hours.

When you get to that level of expertise, you can suddenly do those unbelievably complex calculations in a matter of seconds. And that's why we have experts, right? [We have them] for that one in a million moment when there is no other system that can help us, right?

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