

Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



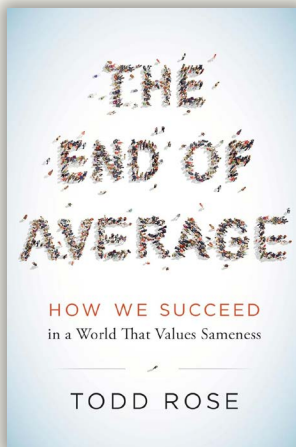
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The End of Average:

How We Succeed in a World That Values Sameness

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A high school dropout, Todd Rose is now the director of Harvard's Mind, Body, and Education Center— his path to success is interwoven into a discussion of his research into the science of the individual. The book focuses on how poor of a descriptor the average is on the level of the individual, and how deeply entrenched our problematic use of averages and standardization is in industrial organization and design, education, and business. Rose touches on the models of Costco, Zoho Corporation, and Morning Star to exemplify how businesses which promote and value the individual first can achieve tremendous success and loyalty.

Key Quote:

"...the main assumption of the science of the individual is that individuality matters—the individual is not error, and on the human qualities that matter most (like talent, intelligence, personality, and character) individuals cannot be reduced to a single score" (p. 68).

KEY POINTS AND CONCEPTS

Why Averages are Problematic

Using averages as accurate measures of individuals has been so thoroughly ingrained in our minds and the systems that govern our society that we rarely question their use (p. 10).

Averages provide a stable and transparent foundation for quick decision-making, but they do little to describe individuals. They are useful only when one is comparing two groups of people. "We can only understand individuals by focusing on individuality in its own right" (p. 12).

The History of Average

"The hardest part of learning something new is not embracing new ideas, but letting go of old ones" (p. 15).

Adolphe Quetelet, influencer of social policy, creator of the modern census and standardized design in the American military, invented the idea of social physics: the average is the ideal, and the individual is error. Therefore, we are all flawed copies of some perfect Average Man (pp. 23-31).

The work of Sir Francis Galton, developer of the correlation statistic, was predicated on the “law of deviation from the average:” what is most important about someone is how much better or worse they are in comparison to the average. This premise expanded to the reasoning that if someone is good at one thing, they are likely good at most things (p. 32-35).

Frederick Winslow Taylor, founding father of industrial organization and the world’s first management consultant, believed that businesses shouldn’t mold their systems for individuals. Rather, businesses should find and promote so-called Average Men who fit the system, as it is their average abilities that will ensure success and stability. “...individuality did not matter. ‘In the past the man was first,’ announced Taylor, ‘in the future the system must be first’” (pp. 39-52).


Taylor’s idea of scientific management standardized entire processes around the average so that method of the task’s performance was “fixed and inviolable.” By so doing, inefficiency and error was thought to be minimized. “According to Taylor, there was always ‘one best way’ to accomplish any given process—and only one way, the standardized way” (p. 44).

Edward Thorndike, a highly influential psychologist who established the fields of educational psychology and psychometrics, was imbued with Taylorist principles. He championed sorting students according to their innate level of talent. “Quality is more important than equality” (p. 53).


Changing the Paradigm

“How can a society predicated on the conviction that individuals can only be evaluated in reference to the average ever create the conditions for understanding and harnessing individuality?” (p. 58).

Peter Molenaar, a Dutch mathematician, observed a precarious situation in classical test theory, the prevailing theory of testing. The theory states that the only way of determining a person’s true score on a test was by giving the same test to the same person again and again. But in place of doing that, the theory assumes it would be equally valid to substitute the scores of many people taking the test once for an individual taking the test many times. **Molenaar called this assumption the ergodic switch** (p. 62).



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Ergodic theory states that one can use group averages to make (accurate) predictions about individuals if and only if two conditions are met: every member of the group is the same and will remain so. The switch occurs when one replaces knowledge of the group with knowledge of the individual. For example: say you want to improve your typing skills by changing how quickly you type. You examine the data which suggests that faster typers make fewer errors, on average. So you incorrectly conclude that in order to improve your typing, you must type faster. Realistically speaking however, those who are faster typers are in general more proficient at typing, and therefore make fewer errors. By looking at the relationship between your speed and your errors, you’ll find that for you, faster typing leads to more errors (p. 64).

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Averagarian methodology is to aggregate people, then find patterns among them. The science of the individual uses just the opposite: analyze, then aggregate—look for the patterns in the individual, then combine these singular patterns into your understanding of groups (p. 69).

The Three Principles of Individuality

Jaggedness Principle (talent is always multifaceted): A quality is jagged if it consists of multiple dimensions that are weakly correlated with one another. Most qualities that have any sort of significance are multidimensional.


Context Principle (traits are a myth): Individual behavior can’t be explained or predicted apart from a particular situation, and the influence of a situation cannot be specified without reference to the individual who experiences it. Behavior instead emerges from the interaction of context and individual.

Pathways Principle (we all walk the road less traveled): In all aspects of our lives and for any given goal, there are many, equally valid ways to reach the same outcome and the particular pathway that is optimal for you depends on your own individuality.


On Jaggedness

“Often, when organizations embrace jaggedness for the first time, they feel like they have found a way to uncover diamonds in the rough, to identify unorthodox or hidden talent. But the jaggedness principle says otherwise: while we may have identified overlooked talent, there is nothing unorthodox or hidden about it. It is simply true talent, as it has always existed, as it can only exist in jagged human beings. The real difficulty is not finding new ways to distinguish talent—it is getting rid of the one-dimensional blinders that prevented us from seeing it all along” (p. 94).

Accepting this principle requires significant self-reflection: “Recognizing our own jaggedness is the first step to understanding our full potential and refusing to be caged in by arbitrary, average based pronouncements of who we are expected to be” (p. 97).



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On Context-Dependency

Yuichi Shoda’s work on personality in children demonstrated that context dictated behavior— different situations call for different aspects of one’s personality to appear. He proposed the use of if/then signatures, which are predictions of a person’s behavior within a specific context (pp. 103-109).

We often forget that our very presence is a factor in someone’s behavior. “Another reason people’s behavior feels trait-like is that you are a part of their context” (p. 119).

“...remembering that we only see others we interact with ... in a single context can help us to be more compassionate and understanding with others. [...] Remembering that there is more to that person than the context that finds both of us together in that moment opens up the door for us to treat others with a deeper understanding and respect than essentialist thinking ever allows us to” (p. 121).

On Self-Determined Pathways

There is no one right way to progress or develop as an individual. “Individuals vary naturally in the pace of their progress, and the sequences they take to reach an outcome” (pp. 129-130). This is reinforced by the concept of equifinality, that in any multidimensional system a given end state can be reached by many potential means.

“The only way to judge if we are on the right path is by judging how the path fits our individuality” (p. 140).

Three Problematic and Common Ways of Thinking

One-dimensional thinking: A multidimensional quality can be adequately boiled down to one dimension with one measurement.

Essentialist thinking: If we know someone’s personality traits, we believe we can accurately classify them as a particular type. Conversely, if we know someone belongs to a particular type, we believe we can accurately form conclusions about their personality and behaviors.

Normative thinking: There is one normal pathway to accomplish a goal; the right pathway is the one followed by the average person.

When Business Commit to Individuality

Case Study - Costco: Costco’s core idea is investment in the individual. Costco employees have power over their career pathways; its management enables employees to develop the skills they believe are useful for a successful performance. They exemplify their commitment to professional growth by heavily promoting from within. Employees rarely leave the company, keeping hiring and training new employees to a minimum cost (pp. 149-153).

Case Study - Zoho Corporation: The philosophy of the largest IT products company in India, Zoho, is that talent “can be found in anyone if you look for it in the right way” (p. 154). Zoho’s employees were overlooked by larger companies because of on-paper profiles that didn’t meet industry standards; at Zoho they were given the chance to prove themselves. Zoho University, a self-based and project-based institution, identifies and develops students to become successful employees at Zoho. Moreover, it pays its students to develop the skills and competency they need for an engaged and productive career. Each student is offered a job at the end of the program (pp. 153-158).

Case Study - Morning Star: At the heart of the largest tomato-processing company in the world is the idea that “the individual is the single most important entity,” whose power should be promoted at every opportunity (p. 159). At Morning Star, there are no managers and there is little hierarchy. “Employees draft their own mission statements that define how they will contribute to the company’s overall mission and describe how they will achieve their goals and objectives. All employees who will be affected by one employee’s goals and activities must sign off on the statement. Employees are given enormous latitude to achieve their mission [...] but are also held accountable by their peers (rather than a boss) for achieving or failing to achieve their goals and objectives” (p. 160). The sense that one person’s ideas will be listened to, valued—and if the ideas are good, implemented—is key to the company’s success (pp. 158-163).

Win-win capitalism: when an organization unwaveringly commits to value its employees’ individuality. As a result, employees and the system win together (p. 163).

Three Key Concepts for Transforming Education

Implementing these three concepts creates a dynamic system in which the pathway of individual is both prioritized and enhanced. This system in education will come largely as a result of the business world hiring employees on credentials and competency rather than diplomas and grades (p. 170).

- Grant credentials, not diplomas
- Replace grades with competency
- Let students determine their educational pathway

Ramifications for Management and Leadership

“Many of the largest and most successful corporations on Earth are still organized around the idea that the individuality of the employee does not matter” (p. 49).

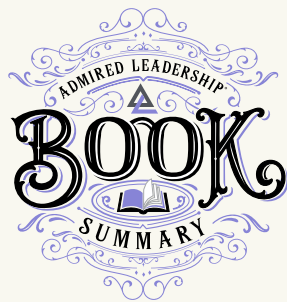
Forced-ranking systems are deeply problematic (p. 78).

Employers’ targets should be the job they want done instead of the person they want. “Instead of focusing on the ‘essence’ of the employee, the context principle suggests that a better starting point is to focus on the performance that we need the employee to perform, and the context in which that performance will occur” (p. 115).

Create accountability and promote motivation by having employees draft their own mission statements (p. 160).

Fit creates opportunity: if the environment is a bad match for individuality, performance will suffer, but if it is right, one has the opportunity to prove one’s capabilities (p. 186).

Rose, T. (2015). **The End of Average: How We Succeed in a World That Values Sameness**. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.



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