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When the Credit Goes to DNA

Born Entrepreneurs, Born Leaders

By Scott Shane

Oxford University Press, 266 pages, \$29.95

By Daniel Akst

Genes are a touchy subject for Americans. By belief and principle we are an egalitarian tribe, uneasy with hereditary advantage, and we're rightly sensitive about group judgments of any kind, especially those purporting to be based on science. Yet the direction of science is unmistakable. For a generation, the advantage in the nature-nurture debate has been moving toward nature, with evidence accumulating that genes play a big role in everything from one's politics to one's choice of profession.

It would be surprising, then, if the only time that heredity mattered in the workplace was when the boss hired his nephew. In "Born Entrepreneurs, Born Leaders," Scott Shane takes a close look at recent scientific research to assess the role that genes play in careers and career choices. Researchers, he says, have found "that over one-third of the difference between people on virtually every employment-related dimension investigated, including work interest, work values, job satisfaction, job choice, leadership turnover, job performance, and income, is genetic." That still leaves nearly two-thirds of the difference to be accounted for by environmental forces. (This is to say nothing of human agency, which is itself a complex mixture of nature and nurture.)

If anything, Mr. Shane says, the importance of genetics in the workplace is growing as socially constructed barriers fall away. There was a time when black Americans had few opportunities for top jobs, but now we have a black president. Women have made such professional inroads over the past few decades that the idea of traditional workplace roles for the sexes is, in most cases, obsolete. The result is that "genetics is accounting for more and more of the difference among us in our work-related behaviors and attitudes."

That is not to say that managers, as they hire, fire or promote workers, should take their cues from chromosomes. But a manager might benefit from recognizing that an incentive motivating one worker may simply bore another -- and the difference between the reactions has nothing to do with the manager's approach or "interpersonal skills."

When Melville's *Bartleby*, one of literature's most troublesome employees, said "I would prefer not to," he might have really been saying: "It's not in my DNA."

People have always suspected that, as the saying goes, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, but the evidence in "*Born Entrepreneurs, Born Leaders*" seems to confirm it. Adopted children tend to make career choices more in line with those of their biological parents. Genes make a difference in our vocational interests, too -- a talent for math and a talent for sales rarely go together.

Testosterone levels -- which are primarily hereditary -- play an especially interesting role. "Research shows that managers, on average, have higher testosterone levels than computer programmers," Mr. Shane writes; and "salesmen, on average, have more of this hormone than teachers." High-testosterone men are more likely to have blue-collar jobs -- again, not exactly news to anyone who has ever walked past a construction site, but it's good to know that science sometimes bears out the conventional wisdom. And high-testosterone women are less likely than low-testosterone women to work in fields that elevate communication over other work-related tasks. There are marked variations within professions as well. Is it any great surprise that trial lawyers are more testosterone-fueled than other lawyers?

Genes lie behind the kinds of organizational culture we prefer, Mr. Shane says, and how frequently we change jobs. Such claims shouldn't be all that shocking, given that more than half the difference between people in their "big five" personality traits -- openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism -- appears to be genetic.

More than half the variance between people in intelligence is also genetic, Mr. Shane reports, adding that smarter people "tend to be less satisfied with their jobs." (Apparently today's brainiac, once hired, is tomorrow's malcontent.) Our comfort with risk-taking, our scores on tests gauging management potential, our tendency to plan rather than act spontaneously -- in each case, Mr. Shane says, inherited traits play a role. Heredity is even a factor in how much value we place on future income.

As for leadership, Mr. Shane cites a study in which 47% of identical twins raised by different parents had the same leadership potential as measured by the California Personality Inventory (a reliable guide, at least in this category). Despite the book's title, Mr. Shane spends relatively little time talking about entrepreneurship, which may not be a bad thing. His aim is bigger than that: to illuminate the role of heredity at work. The strength of his account is that it calmly brings an uncomfortable subject to the fore, laying out the research data in admirably plain English and describing in detail how scientists match specific genes to specific traits.

Throughout "*Born Entrepreneurs, Born Leaders*," Mr. Shane bends over backward to note that genes are not destiny, that the science is far from complete, and that he takes no position on the specific ways in which genetic information should be used by employers. The result, unfortunately, is an excess of caution: He fails to grapple with the truly interesting questions raised by the research he has so ably assembled. How will genetic information be used? Who will control it? Will job applicants someday put it on their resumes? Fueled by rapidly evolving technology, the genetics revolution is only beginning. It would be foolish to think that it will leave the workplace untouched.

Mr. Akst is a writer in New York's Hudson Valley.

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