

# Entrepreneur of the Century or Company of the Century: Pondering Steve Jobs and Apple

Article By:

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With Steve Jobs passing the reins at Apple (well, sort of: my guess is that he will be more active than the average Chairman of the Board) two main streams of analysis of the move have emerged. On the one hand, there is the not unexpected almost worshipful take on his career and his genius. On the other hand, there has been a pretty consistent message that “hey, Apple’s future is golden even without Steve”. Does anyone else think these two messages – Jobs as Second Coming and Apple as continuing master of Wall Street – are a bit, well, incongruous?

If Steve Jobs really is as brilliant as everyone seems to think (yours truly included) how can anyone seriously think that his departure from Apple will not herald a new era of diminished success for Apple? I mean, Tim Cook seems like a good manager – even very good – but is he a genius on the level of Jobs? If not, either Jobs being a genius wasn’t a material factor in Apple’s rising to the top spot in the business world, or, well, maybe he isn’t a genius. But he clearly he is a genius.

Genius to genius hand-offs are in the real world are pretty rare, and it seems to me especially so when you talk about genius in terms of softer skills like design, vision and negotiating prowess – the kind of skills Jobs is justly heralded for; and the kind of things that are pretty much universally acknowledged as the foundation of Apple’s success. (I can’t recall ever having read an article lauding Apple’s manufacturing prowess, or its financial engineering, though doubtless at least a few such articles have been written.) Frankly, in the business world, none come quickly to mind, and Montanaro Young and Favre to Rodgers in the sports world seem more like exceptions that prove the rule than repeatable models.

Perhaps, though, there is a third alternative. In “[Outliers: The Story of Success](#)” [Malcolm Gladwell](#) posits that truly exceptional achievers in any field are the products of a combination of great skill and great luck. Anyone who knows the key twists in the emergence of Microsoft knows the peculiar mix of ability and good fortune that transformed Bill Gates from a modestly gifted programmer to one of the richest men in the world. Maybe luck is the real story at Apple, not Jobs?

I don’t think so. For one thing, while I am sure Apple got some breaks over the course of time, I can’t think of any on a par with the break that came Microsoft’s way with IBM and DOS. But even if luck was a big factor in Apple’s return from the dead under Jobs, does past good fortune make it any more likely that Apple can keep up the pace, so to speak, in the post-Jobs era? Unlikely: getting

lucky, by definition, is not (with due respect to the cliché that the harder you work the luckier you get) something you can plan for.

So, it seems to me that if you can't assume genius will follow genius, and that luck will follow luck, you can't, I think, really believe that Apple's success over the past decade can be repeated in the coming decade. Just as it was, in 1997, absurd to predict that a struggling Apple would over the next dozen years go from needing a handout from Microsoft to overtaking Microsoft in the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of consumers and investors alike, so, I think, it is ultimately folly to predict that Apple's success over the past dozen years will be replicated in the next dozen. Check back in, say, 2022 and see if I am right.

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