

# IS SUCCESS JUST

By REED TUCKER

**O**N April 3, 1921, a ship arrived in New York Harbor carrying a German scientist whose work was celebrated in academic circles but unknown to most Americans. His name was Albert Einstein.

Several local newspapers sent reporters to the East River pier to cover the arrival. The writers expected little. When they arrived at the East River pier, however, they were shocked to discover a crowd of some 20,000 "cheering themselves hoarse."

Einstein was loaded into an open car and driven in a motorcade up Second Avenue. Thousands lined the streets, cheering and waving handkerchiefs.

And with that, Einstein suddenly became front-page news and his legend was made. He went from being a relatively obscure physicist to a celebrity and, ultimately, our shorthand for genius.

And all from that magical day in New York.

There's only one problem. As it turns out, the crowds weren't actually there to see Einstein.

Success is that most mysterious of forces. It strikes one person like lightning while leaving someone else perhaps more deserving unrecognized.

It can all seem frustratingly down to fate.

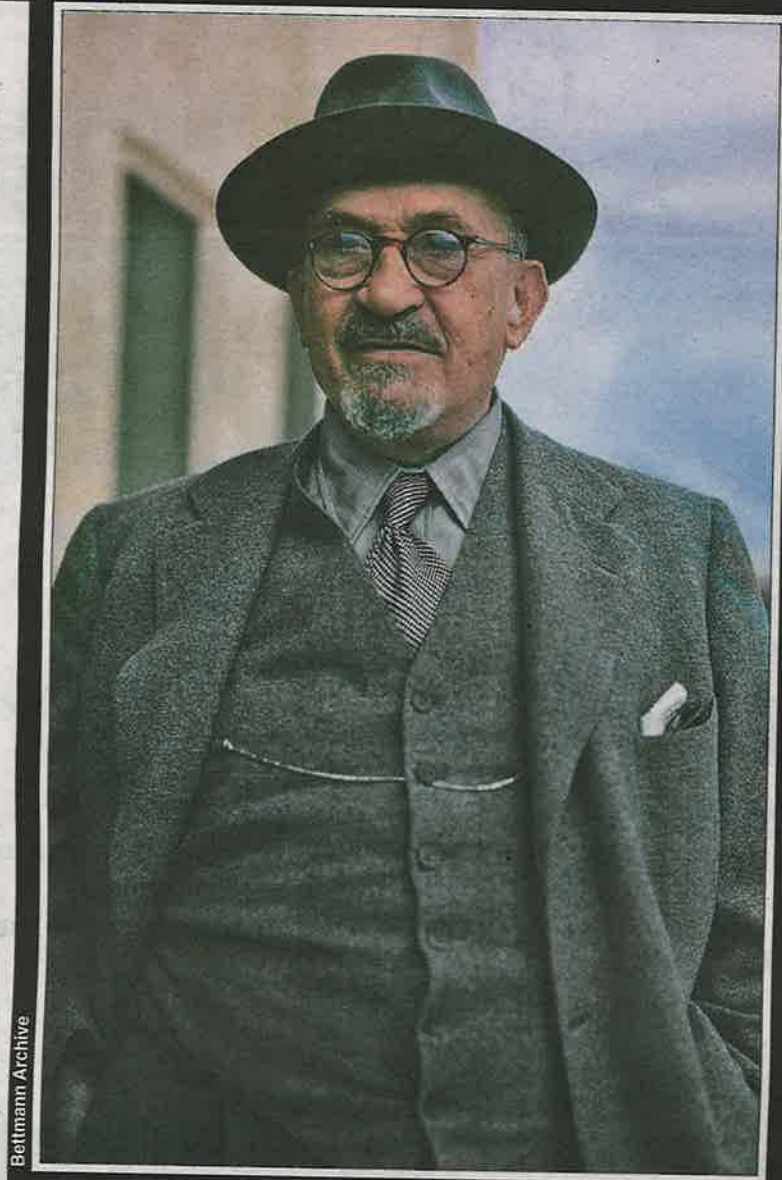
But just maybe success is more under our control than we realize. Is it possible it could be scientifically studied in as cold and calculated way as fruit flies?

That's just what Albert-László Barabási did. Barabási is a professor at Northeastern University and runs the Center for Complex Research, which studies networks.

"In many professions, from science to art to business, there is an exceptional amount of data available that captures an individual's performance and success," Barabási told The Post. "This means that we could apply my lab's big data and network science toolset to do something that could not be done before: We could unearth from the data the patterns and laws that govern the emergence of success."

The result is the new book "The Formula: The Universal Laws of Success" (Little, Brown and Company).

Barabási broke down his findings into five laws, and one result



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**OOPS, WRONG GUY!:** Albert Einstein (right) was feted when he arrived in New York in 1921, but the massive crowds had actually come to see Zionist pioneer Chaim Weizmann (above).

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been for  
**THIS** man,  
Einstein  
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that surprised him was that great performance does not necessarily guarantee success. It's about how that performance is received by the world at large. If greatness is not widely recognized, it won't matter.

Which takes us back to Einstein, whose story, Barabási writes, illustrates the laws of success to an "almost eerie degree."

Einstein had in 1916 published his relativity theory, easily one of the greatest scientific achievements in history, but to cement his reputation, it had to be recognized by millions, not just a few academics.

That day in New York, the

crowd of 20,000 had actually been there to see Chaim Weizmann, president of the International Zionist Organization, which was promoting the idea of a Jewish state.

Had it not been for the press' misunderstanding, Einstein might not have made front-page news and he might not have become a household name.

On to Barabási's laws:

**THE First Law:** Performance drives success — but when performance is immeasurable, networks determine success. In other words, you have to be good to be successful, but it

sometimes comes down to whom you know. Take the mysterious two graffiti artists who got tongues wagging when they began spray-painting "SAMO" across Soho in the 1970s.

One, Al Diaz, remains unknown to most. His partner though, Jean-Michel Basquiat, went on to sell graffiti-inspired work for more than \$100 million.

The difference, as Barabási explains, is that Diaz was a loner not interested in self-promotion, while Basquiat was an "unapologetic networker" and met the right people who ultimately got him into the right galleries.

For most professions, such as

teachers or lawyers, for example, performance is difficult to measure. "And the less we can track performance, the more networks govern your success," the author says.

Einstein was a member of Weizmann's delegation that day, and it was this association that helped make him.

**THE Second Law:** Performance is bounded, but success is unbounded.

Usain Bolt is the fastest human alive, but even his performance has a limit. He'll likely never shave much time off his record-setting 9.58 in the 100-meter.

# AN ACCIDENT?



And even though Bolt is multiple times faster than you or I, he's only about a tenth of a second faster than his nearest competition.

"I found the Second Law's message to be quite humbling," Barabási says. "Not everyone with maximal performance will succeed, and success often comes down to tiny differences between competitors that can even seem random."

Take a job interview. When the candidates are equally qualified, as they often are, studies have shown that the person to interview last most often gets the job. Simple as that. If you're vying for a position, Barabási advises putting the interview off as long as possible.

If you do get that job though, success has no limit. "You may be only 1 percent better than me at your job, but that tiny difference can translate into a hundredfold difference in recognition and reward," he says.

**THE Third Law:** Previous success x fitness = future success.

Barabási cites the work of Arnout van de Rijt. The Dutch sociologist tried an experiment on the crowdfunding site Kickstarter. He randomly selected 200 projects that had not yet received contributions. On half, he kicked in a little money; on the other half, he didn't.

What he found was that the projects he contributed to more than doubled their chances of attracting additional funding.

The experiment demonstrates what Barabási calls "preferential attachment" — or, to put it more simply, success breeds success. Those who win awards win more of them. Those who are rich get richer.

"Humans are inherently leery of risk," he writes.

"We are, therefore, always on the lookout for previous endorsement, some indicator that any promise we offer will have some ready-made company."

Barabási suggests we think hard about how to generate initial momentum. One surefire way is to ask for public praise from fans, be it a book blurb for authors or an Amazon review for retailers.

**THE Fourth Law:** While team success requires diversity and balance, a single individual will receive credit for the group's achievements.

Building the proper team for any project is crucial. You need a diversity of skills, backgrounds and talents.

One researcher, for example, studied the history of jazz and discovered that the most rereleased (or successful) albums were those in which the key contributors were more diverse — that is, they were masters of their instruments but in perhaps different styles or hadn't played together much. But the most successful enterprises still tend to be "dominated by a single leader."

And Barabási found that credit for teamwork "isn't based on performance." It's based on perception.

"Which of your team members will walk away with the credit for the whole team's success?" he asks. "It's not necessarily the person who does most of the work, and it may not even be the one who had the initial idea."

Darlene Love was a somewhat anonymous studio singer who performed on numerous 1960s hits.

By the 1980s, she was scrubbing toilets for a living. Soon, however, she decided to re-enter public life and grab the credit due her. She made it into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2011.

**THE Fifth Law:** Success can come at any time, as long as

we are persistent.

Pop into any tech company and you'll likely be confronted by a staff largely in their 20s. This age imbalance probably has something to do with the perception that innovation is the purview of the young. As Einstein observed, "A person who has not made his great contribution to science before the age of 30 will never do so."

"Having just passed 50, this was news I read with dismay," the author says. Fear not, old-timers. Barabási found that creativity knows no age and that a breakthrough can come at any time.

It's not actually creativity that fades with age, it's productivity. As long as you keep producing, every new foray has the same chance for success as the previous. In the end, it was one of Einstein's late-career papers that ultimately became his most cited. "Which means that as long as I keep trying, a breakthrough can come at any time," Barabási says.

And that's a good formula for any of us.

Albert-László Barabási

