



GENERAL PAPER

Paper 2

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1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passages for comprehension.

This document consists of **4** printed pages.

Passage 1. *An author writes about the value of pursuing excellence.*

- 1 In 2021, so many people were quitting their jobs the media began calling it the “Great Resignation”. Then, people started “quiet quitting”, proudly doing the bare minimum at work without resigning. Data shows that preference for part-time work is rising and, at least according to one 2022 study, the pandemic ushered a sharp decline in the number of hours adults want to work. Increasingly, it seems, people are eschewing the entrenched norms of stress and burnout traditionally baked into work culture, opting instead for a more languorous and serene lifestyle. To them, the obsessive pursuit of ever higher standards, rather than propelling achievement, is mainly a scourge. 5

- 2 However, embracing mediocrity goes against everything many of us are taught to believe. Something about being human makes it difficult to feel that we have done, or are, enough. We are unwilling to extinguish the hope that, one day, we will be recognised as exceptional: the perfect being that our parents once placed on a pedestal. Hard work has been valued throughout history on the belief that labour was inextricably linked with salvation. The idea that anyone can succeed with enough hard work forms the backbone of the “American Dream”. This belief is reinforced by our media-driven world which tells us that only through hard work can we attain a successful life. If we fall for the complacency of ‘good enough’, we lose out on opportunities to better our lives. Settling for mediocrity is abdicating our responsibility to be better. The world is already filled with mediocrity, and we should not settle for adding more meaningless white noise. 10 15

- 3 Besides, as a society, we need people with extraordinary intellect and prodigious talent. They stand as the vanguards propelling civilisation to new frontiers: they cure diseases, they make discoveries, and they compose brilliant music and artwork that move millions of people. Every single facet of human life thrives because of the spark that comes from the pursuit of excellence. Our schools and workplaces must imbue within us the audacity to aspire to loftier pinnacles. Only with this audacity to imagine and pursue a better future can we continue to plant the seeds of a flourishing tomorrow. The way forward has always been clear – excel, or be left in the dust. 20 25

- 4 Sure, pursuing excellence does have its costs, usually in the form of sacrifices and foregoing short-term gratification. Despite this, everyone admires excellence. This is because excellence does not speak to the head; as an act of integrity, it speaks to the heart. It’s the pure awe when standing in front of art inside the Vatican. It’s the wow of the latest technology unveiling. It’s the adrenaline for speed at Ferrari. Excellence is about learning, curiosity and enjoying the search for something that is almost unattainable. 30

- 5 In this way, the pursuit of excellence is an attitude that cultivates a fertile field for success. It presupposes an openness to feedback, as we open ourselves to evaluation and hence improvement. Many years ago, while American car manufacturers avoided mistakes on their assembly lines by slowing down and introducing slack, the Japanese manufacturers sought breakdowns by putting the line to its paces and pushing its boundaries, receiving feedback by studying the breakdowns, taking corrective action, and then pushing boundaries again. Today, the rigour of the production process has translated into the excellence of the product, and Japanese vehicles are renowned for their reliability. 35 40

- 6 Given the value of pursuing excellence, it is baffling why people today are retreating from it. Perhaps too many of us got used to life being easy. Everything is one click, touch, or call away. Want food? Why cook when you can get fast food? Why go there yourself when you can just order? Need to buy anything? Why physically go to the store when there is Amazon? It is time for us to rethink the value of the super convenience existing in this age which led us to become lazier, ever so willing to lapse into mediocrity – forming a generation that quits from not just work but achieving in life. 45

Passage 2. *An author argues against the pursuit of excellence.*

- 1 We live in a society obsessed with being exceptional. Whether it is as workers, parents, or students, we are expected to be outstanding. Being good enough is seen as simply not good enough. However, our quest to be excellent can create huge inequalities. When high performers are showered with rewards, most of us who are average miss out. This can spark resentment in those who feel that they do not measure up. 5
- 2 That is not all. Research on “insecure overachievers” has found that a burning drive to always be outstanding often leaves even the most exceptional performers feeling like they are not good enough. This can create severe damaging physical and mental health problems. Ultimately, the quest to be outstanding means all of us feel like we will never measure up. It is also not surprising that this quest leads people to demonstrate self-criticism and extreme concern over making mistakes. 10
- 3 Too few of us recognise that life is not about being the best at everything. It is, more of often than not, doing what is just enough to get the results one needs. Embracing this mindset might actually help one produce better work because we are more realistic and relatable. When we are striving for excellence, we are constantly comparing ourselves with others to make sure we are doing better. And, simultaneously, like the paranoid child in a school exam, we shield our work from those around us so no one else can benefit from our personal genius. We also tend to dislike people who are both successful and loveable because usually people who excel in life tend to be people who have put the rest of the world to one side in order to focus on achieving perfection. Competition this intense often creates a sense of superiority in those who excel, something best avoided. 15 20
- 4 Living a good-enough life may not sound as inspiring as striving for excellence. But embracing the frustrations that come along with just being good enough is a vital part of living a life in which we feel safe. This allows us to be able to become absorbed in projects that mean something to us. In that way, being good enough is better than trying to be extraordinary. 25

Passage 3. *An author writes about the need for a balance between pursuing excellence and being mediocre.*

- 1 My career has mainly been in laboratory and medical science, which allows little to no room for error. Perfectionism and productivity have been drilled into me from a young age. While such values have served me well, I have also witnessed colleagues crumbling mentally, making mistakes due to fatigue. Beyond the workplace, the drive for perfectionism has also led to a “hustle culture” that equates busyness with success. This in turn leads to the expectation that our spare time should be spent honing skills. 5
- 2 While I get a sense of fulfilment from developing certain skills, I want to reserve some activities purely for imperfect pleasure. When I focus too much on getting better at something, it creates room for failure. I do not want to fail in my relaxation time. I make clay earrings that often turn out mismatched or lumpy, but I still relish the wholesome pleasure of creating something uniquely mine. Approaching an activity without the dangling pressure of needing to be good at it motivates me to try new things with an open mind. 10
- 3 I am not saying I do not want to put any effort into my recreational pursuits; learning and improving at something provides a fantastic feeling of accomplishment. It just does not have to apply to everything. If I find an activity that brings me simple happiness, I can permit myself to treasure it as it is – whether I am objectively lousy at it or not. People need to start realising that it is not about investing the most amount of effort to improve that is needed these days. Rather, the more we embrace mediocrity, the better we become as we are open to new experiences and live a richer life. 15

