

General mental ability and specific abilities: Their relative importance for extrinsic career success

[Jonas W B Lang](#)¹, [Harrison J Kell](#)²

Affiliations expand

- PMID: 31855028 /
- DOI: [10.1037/apl0000472](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000472)

Abstract

Recent research on the role of general mental ability (GMA) and specific abilities in work-related outcomes has shown that the results differ depending on the theoretical and conceptual approach that researchers use. While earlier research has typically assumed that GMA causes the specific abilities and has thus used incremental validity analysis, more recent research has explored the implications of treating GMA and specific abilities as equals (differing only in breadth and not subordination) and has used relative importance analysis. In this article, we extend this work to the prediction of extrinsic career success operationalized as pay, income, and the attainment of jobs with high prestige. Results, based on a large national sample, revealed that GMA and specific abilities measured in school were good predictors of job prestige measured after 11 years, pay measured after 11 years, and income 51 years later toward the end of the participants' work lives. With 1 exception, GMA was a dominant predictor in incremental validity analyses. However, in relative importance analyses, the majority of the explained variance was explained by specific abilities, and GMA was not more important than single specific abilities in relative importance analyses. Visuospatial, verbal, and mathematical abilities all had substantial variance shares and were also more important than GMA in some of the analyses. Implications for the interpretation of cognitive ability data and facilitating people's success in their careers are discussed. (PsycInfo Database Record (c) 2020 APA, all rights reserved).