Better Than Perfect & the PEG Framework: Understanding the Psychology

Perfectionism is multidimensional

Perfectionism is not a single characteristic. Hewitt and Flett (1991) identified three dimensions:

- **Socially Prescribed Perfectionism** – the perception that others demand perfection from us, often associated with fear of failure and concern about making mistakes.
- **Self-Oriented Perfectionism** – the setting and pursuit of exceptionally demanding standards for ourselves.
- **Other-Oriented Perfectionism** – imposing perfectionist standards and expectations on other people.

Individuals may exhibit more than one of these dimensions.

Subsequent research by Stoeber and Otto (2006) also distinguishes between *perfectionistic concerns* (fear of mistakes, self-criticism and negative evaluation) and *perfectionistic strivings* (the pursuit of exceptionally high standards). These broadly overlap with, but are not identical to, socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism.

Perfectionism is increasingly prevalent in Western society

Research into perfectionism among university students in the UK, US and Canada has identified significant increases over recent decades (Curran & Hill, 2019).

In a subsequent meta-analysis covering 35 years and more than 82,000 students, Curran et al. (2026) found that perfectionistic strivings increased linearly, whilst perfectionistic concerns followed a quadratic trajectory.

Of particular concern is the accelerating growth of Socially Prescribed Perfectionism, characterised by the perception that others expect increasingly high standards (Curran et al., 2026).

Perfectionism in business

Research into workplace perfectionism has identified associations between perfectionistic concerns, including fear of failure, and poorer psychological wellbeing, increased stress and burnout (Harari et al., 2018). However, their direct relationship with workplace performance is less clear, with meta-analyses reporting mixed or non-significant overall associations (Bellam & Curran, 2025).

Perfectionistic strivings may be associated with slightly better performance, although the reported benefits are small and inconsistent across studies (Harari et al., 2018; Bellam & Curran, 2025). Bellam and Curran (2025) also identify associations with working longer

hours, raising questions about the overall cost of achieving these performance improvements.

Consequently, the evidence suggests that higher standards and greater effort do not necessarily translate into proportionately better workplace performance.

Perfectionism, decision-making and performance

Research by Ceschi et al. (2017) highlights the relationship between workplace demands, decision-making effectiveness and performance. Building on this perspective, my own academic research examined whether decision-making behaviour helps explain the relationship between perfectionism and workplace performance.

In a study involving 237 employed adults, Glen (2026) found that Socially Prescribed Perfectionism was associated with more maladaptive decision-making behaviours, including procrastination, buck-passing and hypervigilance.

These behaviours were in turn associated with poorer self-rated workplace performance.

Maladaptive decision-making accounted for 70.6% of the total negative association between Socially Prescribed Perfectionism and performance in the statistical mediation model.

The study also found that Self-Oriented Perfectionism showed a small positive association with performance but did not significantly offset the negative decision-making pathway.

These findings suggest that interventions to improve decision-making behaviour may be more practical than attempting to change underlying perfectionist personality traits (Glen, 2026).

Excellence

Excellence involves pursuing very high standards without necessarily demanding flawlessness.

Gaudreau et al. (2022), in their research on the *Model of Excellencism and Perfectionism*, distinguish the pursuit of excellence from the pursuit of perfection.

Their findings suggest that striving for perfection does not necessarily offer additional psychological or performance benefits beyond striving for excellence. Further research by Goulet-Pelletier et al. (2022) suggests that excellence-seeking can be associated with better outcomes, including creative performance.

The economic concept of diminishing returns provides a further practical consideration: as standards improve, additional effort may produce progressively smaller improvements.

This provides the basis for a deliberate stopping point, where the value of further improvement no longer justifies its cost.

Good Enough and satisficing

The concept of Good Enough can be understood through Herbert Simon's theory of *satisficing*, developed in the 1950s (Simon, 1955, 1956).

Simon proposed that rather than searching indefinitely for the theoretically optimal solution, decision-makers may instead identify an option that meets an acceptable threshold.

This approach recognises the limits of human information processing and the costs associated with continued searching and decision-making (Simon, 1956).

Good Enough is therefore not necessarily an inferior outcome. It can represent a rational decision to stop when the required standard has been reached.

Iteration and continuous improvement

The principle of iterative improvement draws on established approaches to continuous improvement, particularly *Kaizen*, developed through Japanese management practices and closely associated with the Toyota Production System. Imai (1986) helped popularise this approach internationally.

Iteration allows organisations to learn from experience, test alternatives and improve through successive cycles rather than seeking the final outcome in a single attempt.

Research by Thomke (1998) into experimentation and product development supports the value of learning through repeated testing, particularly where experiments can be conducted efficiently and safely.

A related concept is Dave Brailsford's *aggregation of marginal gains*, popularised through his work with British Cycling (Harrell, 2015). This suggests that numerous small improvements can collectively produce significant performance gains.

However, marginal gains should not be treated as a universal rule requiring every possible improvement to be pursued. The value of additional improvement needs to be considered against the time, effort and resources required.

Bringing the evidence together: The PEG Decision-Making Model

The **PEG model – Perfect, Excellent and Good Enough** – draws together these strands of psychological, economic and management thinking into a practical framework for choosing appropriate standards.

It proposes that the required standard should be informed by three considerations:

1. **Criticality**: What are the consequences of getting it wrong?
2. **Reversibility**: How easily can a mistake be corrected?
3. **Iteration**: Can we safely learn and improve through successive attempts?

The PEG model is a proposed practical synthesis, rather than an independently validated psychological theory.

Its central proposition is that effective performance comes not simply from pursuing the highest possible standards, but from choosing the standards that best balance performance, productivity and wellbeing.

The goal is not to lower the bar. It is to become better at deciding where the bar should be.

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