

THE BRAIN-FRIENDLY APPROACH

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Business has become brainwork. How we use or misuse our brain has a huge impact on our success as individuals and as organisations. We need a well-trained and well-managed brain to handle life@work and master change.

While business has changed a lot over the years, the brain has not. Basically, we have the same brain as our ancestors 100,000 years ago, a brain best suited for a simple life with little information and few choices to make.

This for sure is not the reality for most workers these days. We must adapt, innovate, collaborate and perform at our best in highly uncertain and fast-changing environments – under the conditions of exponential growth.

Smarter, faster and better

There is a constant pressure on all of us to do things smarter, faster and better.

We want to contribute, and we try as much as we can. We work harder, sleep less, sit more, move less and choose late-hour customer sprints over relaxation time with friends and family.

Seen from a brain's perspective, a lot of what we do today in our workplaces is far from optimal and often damaging, not only to business performance and worker engagement but to our physical well-being and mental health.

Working against the brain

In the UK, more than 500,000 people suffer from work-related stress. In the US, an estimated one million workers

are absent every day due to stress. WHO predicts that by the year 2020, stress-related mental health conditions will be second only to ischemic heart disease in the scope of disabilities experienced by sufferers.

At the same time, it is hard to make even the most well-planned and nicely executed change projects successful. Not because of lack of skill or will, but due to lack of focus, agency, leadership, citizenship etc. Engagement among workers is still low according to 2018 research.

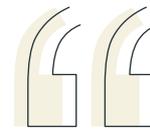
There seems to be a gap between what science says and what business does: We know that long hours sabotage productivity and creativity, that skipping breaks between meetings lowers the quality of decisions, that fast thinking impairs reasoning, that too much sitting is unhealthy and that long-term stress increases the risk of anxiety disorders, depression and burnout.

The paradox is that the more we try to fight back and overcome the problems, the harder it gets. Why is that? Why is it that so many people end up being stressed or disengaged at work? Why is it that most change initiatives fail?

Working with the brain

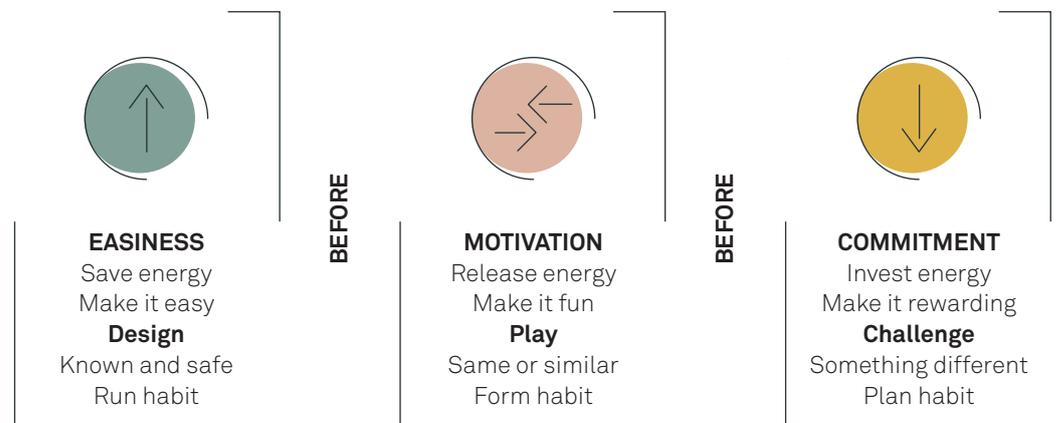
Neuroscience gives interesting answers to these questions, but maybe more importantly, it also inspires to better manage our energy, regulate emotions, make choices, influence behaviour, master change and collaborate.

According to one of the pioneers, David Rock, working brain-friendly includes taking care of mental capacity (what limits us), motivation (what drives us) and bias (what blinds us). Our capacity for taking in new stuff is less than we would think. Especially in information-overloaded and fear-provoking environments. Motivation as a driving force of change is overrated. Bias helps us to run our lives, but unless we become aware of it and are able to adjust, we will end up with wrong and sometimes hazardous decisions.



The Brain-Friendly Approach is the science and practice of giving the brain the best possible working conditions – in the moment and over time.”

Figure 1:
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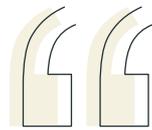


BFA focuses on how we manage personal energy, make choices and influence behaviour. It is about integrating structural, cultural and individual elements to reach the desired goals as easy, fun and rewarding as possible.

Easiness before motivation before commitment

Practitioners of BFA ask: How easy, fun and rewarding can we make it? The normal top-down approach is replaced by a more natural flowing bottom-up approach. This will be a paradigm shift in many large organisations.

The norm in corporate thinking is top-down; beginning with why and what before moving to how and who, cascading down the organisation from overall strategy to everyday action. It looks nice in theory but often works terrible in practice. Too much resistance and hard work – too much waste of energy, time and talent.



Starting from the easy end, adding some fun factor and a portion of passion before calling for commitment and discipline will do magic to most transformation processes.”

Easiness – save energy

For the brain, saving energy is the default. It developed at a time in history where resources were scarce and especially food was hard to get. The ability to save energy became an evolutionary qualifier.

The old regions of the brain are super-fast in their processing and very cheap to run compared to the newer regions in the pre-frontal cortex. The behaviour controlled from the old regions is unconscious, automatic and habitual – based on a complex yet primitive pattern recognition system.

By tapping into what is already there, we can influence behaviour with little or no effort. Behaviour design uses this fact to influence behaviour in a wanted direction. Placing triggers, cues and nudges in the environment or removing barriers of the desired behaviour. Making it easy to think, choose and act as desired, and hard not to.

Motivation – release energy

We all have a strong drive to move towards pleasant experiences and away from unpleasant ones. Maximising reward and minimising threat can be seen as the main organisational principle of the brain (Gordon, 2008).

Motivation is our prioritised list of “wants” and “wont’s” in a given situation. When things match our motivation, we perceive them as attractive and important. We have fun and feel energized, we are in flow and feel happy. We don’t want to stop – and ask for more of the same or similar.

Using the fun factor to attract attention and create relation is well-known. Branding experts and user experience designers have their tools to do that. They can inspire business leaders to become better influencers of behaviour and help to understand why perception is king – and context rules.

Two simple fun makers and instantaneous motivators are to go where the energy is and to do it together. Going with the energy is the passionate way, doing it with others is the compassionate way to adventure and achievement.

Commitment – engage energy

Motivation is not long-lasting, but the momentary engagement can be turned into the passion and a discipline of commitment. Passion is the emotional part of commitment, bridging motivation with action. Discipline is the logical part, linking ambition to achievement.

Passion is about engaging energy. Passionate brains are in love with what they do. They can't be stopped. There is a dream, a drive, a purpose – something that creates a level of engagement that can change lives and worlds.

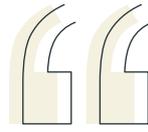
Discipline is about investing energy. It helps with balancing effort, risk and effect, being present and mindful, finding new solutions, making choices and planning future moves.

Many companies aren't creating the type of environments where passionate brains can thrive; too controlled, too fast-paced, too performance-oriented. However, both passion and discipline are needed. We must learn to integrate top-down framing with bottom-up hacking.

Hack behaviour and accelerate change

If we want to change anything, we must think and act differently. We must challenge the path of least resistance, hack behaviour, design new habits and make change projects more attractive and impactful.

Magic change power comes from blending and balancing top-down thinking with bottom-up action, outside-in adaptivity with inside-out creativity.

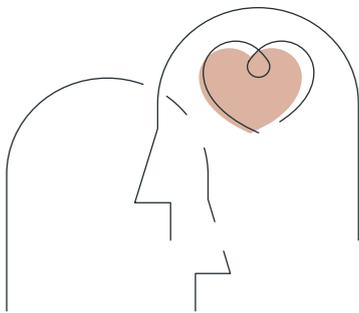


Set a clear goal and let the goal be a lens to validate every choice and action. Define the wanted behaviour and use the structural, cultural and individual context to reach it.”

Adopting the Brain-Friendly Approach will improve your choice making, give more action power and make you a stronger influencer. It will make it possible for everyone involved in a project or a collaboration to be happy – not only with the result, but also the way they are getting it.

Change is challenging. There will always be bumps on the road, unforeseen incidents, ups and downs, resistance, emotional reactions, crises and so on. Applying the BFA mindset will help you making it easy, fun and rewarding.

Enjoy your life@work.



FAST FACTS ABOUT IMPLEMENT

Founded: 1996

Number of employees: 800

Headquarters: Copenhagen

Offices: Stockholm, Malmo, Oslo, Zurich and Munich

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