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How to Build a Better Memory

By Barry Gordon, MD.

Does your mind let you down with silly mistakes?

When you're trying to solve one of life's problems, does your brain sizzle with ideas and solutions? Or do you just feel overwhelmed - as if your mind is baffled and blocked? The problem may be that you are not making the most of your intelligent memory. Try this brain-teaser to see. All you have to do is identify the odd word in this sequence: skyscraper, cathedral, temple, prayer. Think about it for a couple of moments before you read on.

Most people will say "prayer" is the odd one out, because they make the connection that "skyscraper, cathedral and temple" are all buildings.

Some people, however, may make religious connections between "cathedral, temple and prayer". So they conclude that "skyscraper" is the odd word. There's no right or wrong answer here - it just shows how easily we can fix on one solution to a problem and ignore others.

It is your intelligent memory that makes these links, and a key test of its performance is how many links it comes up with in any given situation. But with many practical problems, it is vital it makes the right links at the right time.

Ordinary memory deals with the recall of specific times, places, people and events. Intelligent memory, by contrast, is where we keep connections and meanings - the sparks leaping between ideas and past experiences that enable you to solve problems and think creatively. It is at work in every aspect of our mental life.

This makes intelligent memory a very powerful tool - but, as with all tools, it can still make mistakes. Here's a test to show you how.

Executive Trivia Question...

In the 1890's, Sunbeam marketed a sheep-shearing device. By what form of energy did it run?

Published monthly by:
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\$21.95 Annual Subscription

Suppose someone brings you an ancient coin stamped 547 BC. Is it likely to be Greek or Roman? Think for a moment.

Did you get the answer right away? Or is it still whirring around in your mind?

The problem here is that the question is a trick. Most people are likely to miss the implication of something being stamped with the “Before Christ”.

This designation is used only in historical hindsight and was never used at the time — how could someone know about Christ’s birth before it happened?

Once you’ve tested your thinking for this flawed assumption, the answer becomes obvious. The coin is neither Greek nor Roman — it is a fake.

If you saw through the trick, congratulations. If you didn’t, that’s because your intelligent memory went off down a blind alley looking for clues from your past experience - books you’ve read, films you’ve seen, lessons you vaguely remember from school that might offer up some useful facts about ancient coins.

In other circumstances, all those connections could be useful. Here, they missed the point.

There are all sorts of reasons why your intelligent memory can let you down. For a start, it relies on your stock of past experiences. Everything you’ve ever seen, thought, or done has been saved in some way in your intelligent memory and can be a source of new insights and connections to solve problems.

But sometimes, your own experience is not a good guide to the question you need your intelli-

gent memory to answer. Your perspective may be too limited, your experiences too few.

Intelligent memory also depends on generalizations to zero in on the links between similar ideas. But, as we know, generalization can lead to mistakes.

Here’s one to put you on the spot: *Should a man be allowed to marry his widow’s sister?*

Take a second to consider before reading on. This is a test of how deeply you pay attention to words and meanings. To get the right answer you have to be a careful reader.

Quickly scanning the words usually produces a wrong answer - the assumption that a man should be able to marry his dead wife’s sister.

Your intelligent memory will have darted off through your stock of experiences, and checked out your ideas about bereavement and remarriage.

Up comes the answer: Why not let them marry, if they’re in love? However, a more thoughtful reading reveals the question makes no sense. It refers to the man marrying his widow’s sister - meaning he is dead. What could be more absurd?

Most of the time, we don’t have to pay much attention to individual words and their definitions. Our intelligent memory automatically grasps them.

Sometimes there are traps lying in wait for you. And if you are going to give your intelligent memory a chance of picking up all the clues it needs to spot them, you need to be careful and focus on what you are doing. Otherwise you exclude useful information

because you haven’t paid attention to it. Here are some other tips for avoiding mental mistakes:

1. Think Slower

Wrong ways of thinking get embedded in your mind if they’re not corrected. After all, what intelligent memory does well is remember. By itself, it can’t know what is true or false, sense or non-sense. It just records everything for later use.

Slowing your thinking is one way to stop your mind from generating the wrong thoughts. Your intelligent memory is fast, but it will do more if you let it work longer. It will be able to explore more of your network of ideas and associations, and be more likely to come up with the correct answer.

Reading is an activity that can particularly benefit from slower thinking. Take the instructions for a new video recorder.

Most of us breeze through this kind of thing, only to realize we’re out of our depth when we try to record our favorite program. You can head off such problems if you read the instructions carefully and rehearse the processes in your head.

When solving problems, smarter people think more slowly than others. They spend more time analyzing things. They recall similar problems they’ve encountered and solutions that worked.

2. Double-check

One reason bright people are brighter than others is that they are less sure of themselves, so they are more likely to double-

check their answers. In many experiments, the people who perform best are those who are least confident.

It is important to remember that even the most simple challenge may be more difficult than it looks. Read the following quotation, then cover it up and answer the question after it.

“Please accept my resignation. I don’t want to belong to any club that will except me as a member.” (Groucho Marx)

Question: What was the mistake in that sentence? Think for a moment, then continue. In fact there are two errors in the quote. Resignation is misspelled and except is the wrong word; ‘accept’ is correct. The trouble is, the quote is so famous it’s possible to read over both mistakes unless you’re taking care.

3. Expect to Make Mistakes

If you put too much pressure on yourself, your intelligent memory will “choke” - like a sports star under pressure. Everyone remembers Jana Novotna playing in the Wimbledon ladies final in 1993. She had a large lead but became so concerned about losing, and so painfully aware of herself, that her shots suffered and she lost.

The same thing can happen in an exam, a tense driving situation or doing a crossword puzzle. Fret too much about making an error and your intelligent memory will freeze and stop making good connections.

Be kind to yourself - mistakes happen. They are even a necessary part of making progress. So accept

them, and keep going.

This principle is especially important when you’re trying to be creative and forge new connections in your intelligent memory. Coming up with good ideas is like panning for gold – you have to sift through a lot of dirt to find the nuggets.

Thomas Edison obtained patents for 1,093 unique ideas, yet few were on a par with the electric light bulb. Picasso created more than 20,000 works of art, but only a fraction are masterpieces. What counts here is that some ideas hit the jackpot.

4. Listen to Common Sense

Sometimes the common sense solution is better than the round-about, clever, sophisticated solution.

Check for common sense by thinking about the practical applications of an idea or solution. Imagine putting your solution into play or acting on an idea, then see if it still holds up.

Here’s another brainteaser to prove why that’s important.

Working alone, Tom can mow his lawn in two hours. It takes his brother Dave four hours to mow the same lawn. If they work together, which answer is closest to the amount of time it will take? Four hours? Three hours? Two hours —or one hour? Think for a moment before reading on.

If you answered three hours, think again. You chose the average time, but why would both boys working together take more time to mow the lawn than Tom working by himself?

The most likely answer; of the choices given, is one hour - half

the time Tom takes on his own. But even this is suspect. For what if Tom and Dave’s family have only one mower?

The more you apply common sense to questions like this, the less likely you will be to let your intelligent memory lead you astray.

Short Cuts to Give You Total Recall:

Memory can be either short-term or long-term. Short-term memory is the temporary kind that helps you get through the day’s basic tasks. It’s essential for everything you do. Whether you’re writing a letter, working out how much change you’re owed, or solving a problem with your computer, you need this working memory to remember what you’ve just done and what you plan to do next.

However, everyone’s short-term memory can manage only a limited amount of information. In fact, for most people, this is only about seven items at any one time. If you don’t believe it, ask someone to help you with this test. The tester should read each line of numbers, pause, then ask you to repeat them. He should also keep track of the ones you get right.

- 3—4— 7: Pause, test.
- 8—1—6—5—7: Pause, test.
- 3 — 1 — 6 — 8 — 9 — 2 — 4 — 7
Pause, test.
- 5—9—6—3—2—1—7—4—8—
6—2—9—3—4: Pause, test.

So how well did you do?

The first and second lists of numbers were probably easy for you to recite.

As the list grew longer, however,

you surely struggled. With the longest list, you might have recalled a couple of the early numbers and a couple of the last numbers but not the numbers in between. In all likelihood, you probably could not remember more than about seven numbers. That's the capacity of your working memory. Once it's full, your mind has to push a number out to get another in.

Obviously, this places severe limits on the use your intelligent memory can make of this short-term storage space. But the good news is that there is a way around it. Although you can't learn to hold more than seven pieces of information at once, you can make those pieces larger and thus more valuable. It's like money - your purse can hold seven coins, but they can be pennies or dollars. Instead of just remembering seven single-digit numbers at once, you can remember seven five-digit numbers.

How? By 'chunking'.

We all chunk unconsciously.

You learned how to chunk so long ago that it feels like a natural part of thinking. Your mind likes shortcuts, especially bits of information that can be clumped together and so require less effort to remember. The phone number 212-3456 is easy to remember because those digits form a readily recognizable sequence.

In the same way, the four numbers 3—4—9—2 may be hard to remember on their own, but turn them into 3:49.2 and they become a near world-record time for running the mile. If you're interested in running, you'll have no problem keeping them in mind.

Once sequences like this are merged into a single piece of information, your memory has room for six other clusters. Everyone has a personal way of lumping numbers together in order to make them meaningful and easy to recall. Common hooks include birth dates, famous dates in history and significant times of day.

If you can find meaningful con-

nections between items they will always stick in your memory and it doesn't matter how absurd they are.

Here are some examples to help you begin chunking things on your own. Your PIN number: Convert it into a month and a day that's a notable birthday.

Computer passwords: Use the name of pets and imagine each one at your feet when logging on.

Another example is the slogan used to learn the colors of the rainbow: Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain.

The first letter of each word - R, O, Y, G, B, I, V gives you the colors in correct order: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet. But Instead of having to remember an apparently unrelated list of colors, chunking allows you to recall them as one meaningful sentence. The sky really is the limit with this technique - the more you use it, the more versatile you will realize it is.

From: Barry Gordon and Lisa Berger, **Intelligent Memory**, 2003.

The Idea Incubator

By Frank Helton

How Can The Brain Control Wheelchairs?

Severely disabled people could one day be steering their wheelchairs with their minds. Swiss researchers have created a skull cap that monitors wearers' thoughts and transforms them into commands to a wheeled robot. The user simply thinks "turn left," "turn right," or "straight," and electrodes in the cap pick up the electrical patterns those thoughts create. The team at the Dalle Molle

Institute for Perceptual Artificial Intelligence in Martigny plans to increase the number of thoughts the system can identify. If all goes well, the system will eventually be able to operate something as complex as a wheelchair. "The psychological benefits it would offer are huge," *Paul Smith* of the Spinal Injuries Association in London says. Currently, quadriplegics can control automatic wheelchairs by blowing into a tube or with a chin-operated joy stick. But these methods can be exhausting and aren't suitable for some disabled people.

How Can We Control Patents and Competition?

Imagine if Henry Ford had patented the assembly line, or if McDonald's had claimed sole rights to fast food. It sounds absurd, but that is exactly what modern corporations are now doing with innovative business techniques. Until recently, even the most clever business breakthroughs - "selling newspapers on the streets, delivering packages overnight"- could not be patented. But in 1998, a federal court

changed the rules, giving companies the right to patent any novel way of doing business. The gates opened, and in the past five years thousands of business method patents have been granted. Priceline patented its method of selling cut-rate airline tickets. One inventor patented a system for using pictures to train janitors; another, a way of cutting hair with both hands. In theory, if McDonald's first went into business today, it could patent fast food - not just Big Macs, but the idea of fast food itself. Congress has ignored this alarming, anti-competitive trend, leaving the whole mess in the hands of the bureaucrats at the U.S. Patent Office and patent judges. It's time to restore the balance between the rights of inventors and the need for competition, which produces lower prices and better products. "You don't compete by outlawing your competition."

How Can We Make A Self-healing Spy?

Many a soldier wounded on the battlefield has had to find ways to keep moving in spite of the injury. A man who loses a leg might drag himself to safety with his arms. But robots are notoriously unsuccessful at similarly adapting themselves. So a British defense lab has created a self-healing reconnaissance robot that changes the way it moves in response to damage. The snakelike robot, designed to provide video and audio reports from the field, is made up of separate units that snap together to form its long body. On the battlefield, it wrig-

gles along the ground, keeping a low profile. When one segment is damaged, *Peter Bentley* of University College London says, software running the snakebot helps it figure out how to adapt its metal "muscles" to move again. While its new gait is often clumsier, the serpentine spy is still able to limp its way to its destination.

How Can Laughter Be Dangerous?

A belly laugh could be more dangerous to asthmatic children than smog or exercise, say Australian researchers. A study of more than 500 children with asthma found that in two-thirds of the cases, attacks were precipitated by laughing fits, tickling, or excitement; one-third were purely mirth-induced. "This is one example where laughter is not the best medicine," according to researcher *Richard Henry*. "It's definitely not a message saying children with asthma have to go around being glum; the message is those children need to have their asthma more effectively controlled." Mirth-induced asthma was most common in children with greater sensitivity to weather and chemical changes, and in those with more night and morning symptoms. Scientists don't know why mirth triggers asthma, but suggest that laughter stimulates irritant receptors in the airways.

Why Don't Gamblers Know When to Quit?

A loss at the card table triggers electrical activity in the brain that

prompts a gambler to throw good money after bad, say University of Michigan researchers.

Participants in a gambling experiment were much more likely to risk a lot of money just a quarter of a second after losing. That decision invariably coincided with a surge in activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, the part of the brain responsible for evaluating the significance of any given choice and guiding subsequent decision-making. In many situations, our brains rush to judgment. Winning inspired no such brain activity leading researchers to theorize that the brain may have evolved to expect a win after a series of losses, just as in nature the sun eventually shines after a string of rainy days.

IDENTITY THEFT – the Fastest-growing Crime in America!

By Philip Smith

Each year there are now from 500,000 to 700,000 victims of the crime in which an imposter uses a key piece of information - a Social Security number or driver's license number, for example - to obtain credit or merchandise in someone else's name.

Linda Foley is one of those unfortunate victims.

In June 1997, Foley began working for a San Diego magazine and filled out a W-2 tax form, which required her to list her Social Security number.

Three months later, she got a call from a credit card company, inquiring about her change of address. "I said: 'But I haven't changed my address.' There was a pause and they said: 'You may have a problem.'" Was that ever an understatement.

Another employee at the magazine, who was having money problems, had used the information Foley provided to obtain two credit cards and a cell phone in her name - then went on a spending spree.

"She got several thousand dollars in my name," said Foley.

"But that's not where I was hurt.

"I was harmed in the hundreds of hours it took me to clean up the mess. "The aggravation you go through is unbelievable."

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates there are now more than 10,000 victims of identity crime each WEEK!

In 1992, TransUnion - one of

the three major credit-reporting agencies - received 35,000 calls about identity theft. Last year, they received more than a million calls.

"Identity theft is often considered a victimless crime," said Foley, who has founded the Identity Theft Resource Center, dedicated to helping other victims.

"The police tell you not to worry because it's the credit card companies that suffer the loss. Yes, they do.

"But those losses are passed on to consumers in higher prices and higher service fees."

What's more, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which is the clearinghouse for complaints about identity theft, says that victims spend an average of 175 hours of their time and incur \$1,000 in expenses clearing their name.

Foley said there are three main reasons why identity theft has become such a huge problem.

"One, we've become an information society and our information is on far more data bases than any of us can possibly imagine.

"Two, we have a business community that believes the information we give them is theirs to do what they want with rather than allowing consumers to decide who gets it.

"Three, the credit industry does not safeguard the information we give them, and it falls into the wrong hands.

"No one is immune from identity theft. But there are things you can do to minimize your risk of becoming a victim."

TIPS

Watch what you throw in the trash.

"Don't just throw out those pre-approved credit card offers you get in the mail because there are people who will go through your trash so they can open up credit cards in your name," Foley says.

"And don't just tear them up because they can be pieced back together. Use a shredder. You can get one for under \$40.00"

Also, shred health insurance statement and anything else containing you social security number.

Send and receive mail in a locked mailbox, or rent one at the post office.

Don't put mail containing any financial information about you in an unlocked mailbox because people might steal it.

Keep all your account information in a safe place, like a locked drawer in your home.

The was a recent quote from, *Betsey Broder*, Assistant director of the Division of Planning and Information at the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection.

Check your credit report at the three credit reporting agencies – TransUnion, Experian, and

Equifax – at least once a year.

“The average victim does not find about a crime for 12 to 15 months,” says Foley. “By checking your credit report you will be able to spot any changes, like a change of address, that will alert you that someone has stolen your identity.”

Each report costs \$9. “They don’t all have the same information, so you need all three.” The credit agencies’ phone numbers are listed at the end of this article.

Don’t carry your Social Security number in your wallet.

Wallets are lost or stolen and once perpetrators have your number, it’s like you’ve given the key to creating and identity in your name.

Don’t give out information unless you have to.

All too often businesses ask for your social security number when there is no need for it. Ask why they want it. If their answer doesn’t satisfy you, go somewhere else. And don’t include your number on any checks you write. Reduce the number of pre-approved credit cards offers you receive by calling 1-888-567-8688. That will get you off mailing lists.

Keep a record of all your credit card numbers and expiration dates and phone numbers for each card in a safe place for quick reference in case of loss or theft.

Be on guard against telephone and internet scams.

You will often see offers for a

free credit report on the internet, and they will ask for your social security number. Don’t do it. There’s a 50-50 chance it’s a scam. Telephone solicitors will call you up and say you have won a prize and they need your social security number for verification. Don’t give it out.

When you make a purchase over the internet, make sure you are in a secure Web site.

You can tell because the address will change from http to https. The “s” stands for secure, and a lock or key symbol should appear on the lower corner of the web page.

Don’t give an account number over the phone unless you initiated the call.

How to Avoid Identity Theft

Get hold of your credit report. More than 8 million Americans now buy annual membership to Privacy Guard (www.privacy-guard.com), a company that alerts you immediately when anyone inquires about your credit rating.

Be very careful with your Social Security number. You can request that it be obliterated on any credit or loan applications.

Photocopy both sides of your wallet’s critical information; Social Security card, credit cards and driver’s license. If you lose your purse or wallet, file a police report in the local jurisdiction. Call the credit card companies credit rating companies and the Social Security Administration (1-800-269-0271) to put a fraud alert on your name and Social Security number.

Shred old checks, credit cards and other financial records. Also

shred junk-mail solicitations you receive for credit.

Reconcile credit card and bank statements promptly and report questionable activity. Delaying such a report reduces your ability to cover your losses.

You need to do three things if you become a victim of identity theft:

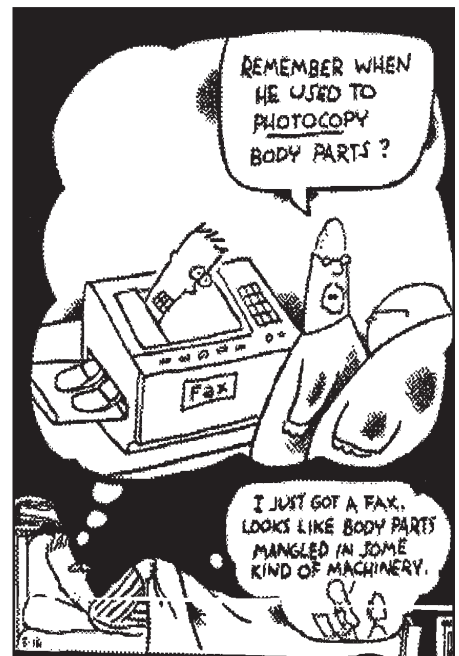
1. CALL the three credit reporting agencies - TransUnion at 1-800-680-7289, Experian at 1-800-EXPERIAN and Equifax at 1-800-525-6285. They will put your file on fraud alert.

2. NOTIFY the police.

3. NOTIFY creditors who have opened fraudulent accounts in your name. Tell them it’s a case of ID theft and to shut down those accounts so that it doesn’t continue.

The FTC has a toll free number, 1-877-IDTHEFT, where victims can report the crime and get advice from trained counselors.

The Identity Theft Resource Center In San Diego can be reached at 1-858-693-7935 or at www.idtheftcenter.org.



Animal Whys?

by Jocelyn Little

- The Grasshopper Battle was a short war between the Delaware and Shawnee Indians in 1872, which started as a squabble between two children over who owned a pet grasshopper. The Shawnees lost the war and, I assume, the grasshopper, and moved out of the Pennsylvania area where the two tribes had long lived in harmony.
- The War of the Stray Dog took place in 1925 when a Greek soldier chased his dog, which had scuttled across the border into Macedonia. A Bulgarian sentry shot him, and Greece invaded Macedonia in revenge. Over fifty men were killed.
- One of the many hero dogs of World War II was a German shepherd named Caesar, who served with the Marines in Bougainville, in the Pacific. The Marines were soon cut off from communications, and Caesar carried all their messages through sniper fire. One day, the dog woke his handler just in time for him to hear a grenade pin being pulled nearby. The live grenade bounced into the foxhole, and the Marine, taking a risk, threw it back. It killed eight Japanese.

Testimonies to Testosterone:

From: Doug Cox

Chicago Cubs outfielder **Andre Dawson** on being a role model: “I wan’ all dem kids to do what I do, to look up to me. I wan’ all the kids to copulate me.”

New Orleans Saint RB **George Rogers** when asked about the upcoming season: “I want to rush for 1,000 or 1,500 yards, whichever comes first.”

And, upon hearing **Joe Jacobi** of the ‘Skins say: “I’d run over my own mother to win the Super Bowl,” **Matt Millen** of the Raiders said: “To win, I’d run over Joe’s Mom, too.”

Torrin Polk, University of Houston receiver, on his coach, John Jenkins: “He treats us like men. He lets us wear earrings.”

Football commentator and former player **Joe Theismann**, 1996: “Nobody in football should be called a genius. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein.”

Senior basketball player at the University of Pittsburgh: “I’m going to graduate on time, no matter how long it takes.” (now that is beautiful)

Bill Peterson, a Florida State football coach: “You guys line up alphabetically by height.” And, “You guys pair up in groups of three, then line up in a circle.”

Boxing promoter **Dan Duva** on

Mike Tyson hooking up again with promoter Don King: “Why would anyone expect him to come out smarter? He went to prison for three years, not Princeton.”

Stu Grimson, Chicago Blackhawks left wing, explaining why he keeps a color photo of himself above his locker: “That’s so when I forget how to spell my name, I can still find my clothes.”

Lou Duva, veteran boxing trainer, on the Spartan training regime of heavyweight Andrew Golota: “He’s a guy who gets up at six o’clock in the morning regardless of what time it is.”

Chuck Nevitt, North Carolina State basketball player, explaining to Coach Jim Valvano why he appeared nervous at practice: “My sister’s expecting a baby, and I don’t know if I’m going to be an uncle or an aunt.” (I wonder if his IQ ever hit room temperature in January.)

Frank Layden, Utah Jazz president, on a former player: “I told him, ‘Son, what is it with you? Is it ignorance or apathy?’ He said, ‘Coach, I don’t know and I don’t care.’”

Shelby Metcalf, basketball coach at Texas A&M, recounting what he told a player who received four Fs and one D: “Son, looks to me like you’re spending too much time on one subject.”

Executive Trivia Answer...

It was drawn by dogs.

Thought To Ponder...

Success is 99 percent failure.

Soichiro Honda
Founder, Honda Motor Co.