

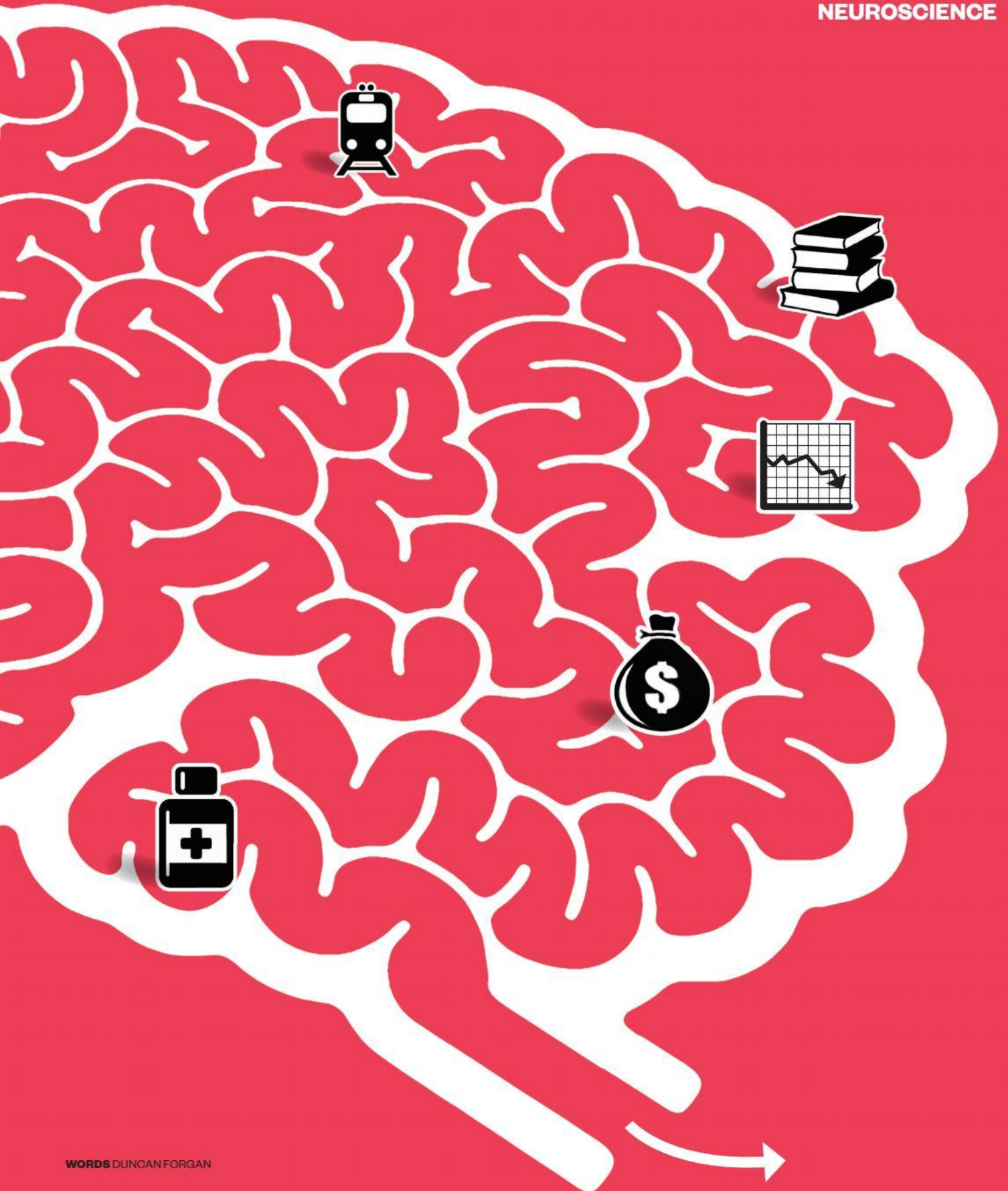
START
HERE



NEURAL

The pathway to enlightenment

*We know more than ever about what makes the brain tick.
But can that give us a competitive advantage in the workplace?*



WORDS DUNCAN FORGAN

It's the question everyone wants an answer to: what is the future of work going to look like? Will sophisticated computer applications remove the need for human operatives? Will robot foremen direct robot staff? Will a company HQ be more redolent of *The Matrix* than a traditional business space?

In fact, despite the breakneck advances in technology, it seems more likely that the future of work – as the CIPD and others have espoused – will be human. And that means that a better understanding of the science of human behaviour has never been more essential for HR professionals looking to ready their organisation for the future.

Key to this grasp on how human potential can be harnessed is neuroscience – the study of the brain and the nervous system. A better understanding of how the mind functions can help transform our knowledge of the way people work, with resulting benefits for learning, change management and motivation.

"The advantages of using neuroscience theory as a development tool are extensive," says Luke Salway, managing director of the NLP Top Coach consultancy in Thailand. "They include the reprogramming of our minds at the conscious and unconscious level, which results in long-term positive behavioural change."

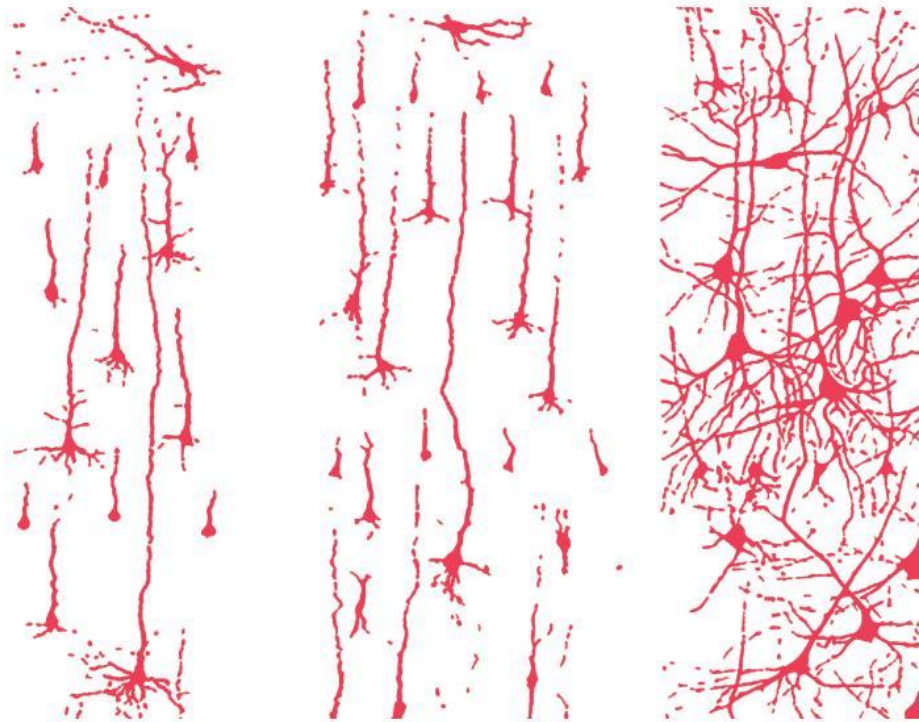
Our comprehension of the brain's awesome power and potential has come on leaps and bounds over the last couple of decades. The advent of functional magnetic resonance imaging – an advanced form of brain scanning – shows which parts of our brains are active at any given time. That means we know what genuinely changes our thinking (rather than just what we think changes it).

"Neuroscience can enhance the overall experience at work and improve all-round quality of life," says James Rule, an HR analytics expert who has worked with organisations including media giant Thomson Reuters. "The science is great, and harnessing it gives us the opportunity to target the right kind of intervention to the right person in the right way."

Neuroscience can be a complex beast. But with better appreciation of a few principles, such as those on these pages, HR practitioners can maximise the potential of people – helping nurture engaged employees who could never be mistaken for robots.

* Find out more about the future of work, courtesy of the CIPD, at futureworkishuman.org

"Neuroscience can enhance our experience at work and improve our quality of life"



Neuroplasticity means you never stop learning

By all reasonable measurement, Lee An could be described as a go-getter. A successful career woman, she studied at a top university in Australia and has built a solid reputation as a legal analyst in Hong Kong's highly competitive corporate world. To broaden her knowledge, she is studying for her bar exams. Lee An, however, is not of an age traditionally considered optimal for learning new skills: she has just turned 70.

Her case, and that of countless others in the workforce, underlines the significance of neuroplasticity: the idea that the brain is changeable and adaptable and that this flexibility continues throughout a lifetime.

The stereotype of being unable to learn new skills later in life has, at least in the past, been depressingly prevalent in workplaces. Until recently, our brains were viewed as fully formed by the time we reached our early twenties. Childhood neurogenesis (frenzied formation of new brain cells) ushered in a period of synaptic pruning in adolescence, as little-used neural pathways became redundant. And that – so the theory went – was that.

Advances in neuroscience thinking have now scotched that notion. Elizabeth Gould, a researcher at Princeton University in the US, spent years studying the brains of adult rodents to show they were developing extra neurons during

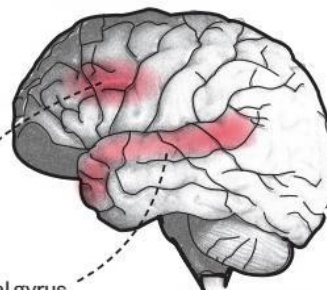
their lifespans. Similar tests on humans have since confirmed her findings.

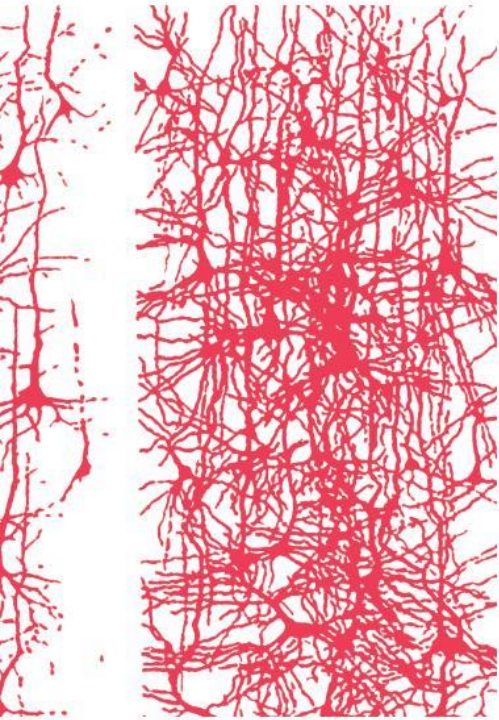
"I had always doubted the accepted thinking on the brain's ability to develop," says Stephanie Thompson of Sydney-based corporate psychologists Insight Matters. "It turns out that brains adapt to meet the demands placed upon them with aplomb."

A knowledge of the most active parts of the brain can help us decipher workplace behaviour

Dorsomedial prefrontal cortex

Superior temporal gyrus





There's no reason that a healthy older person should not be able to take on new information."

Research has shown that neurons 'fire together' over time

Neuroplasticity also has huge implications for coaching, as it makes 'brain training' a reality. And as societies age, and the notion of a 30- or 40-year career is overtaken by a working life of multiple stages and identities, we will need to retrain our brains more regularly. The more immediate challenge for companies and innovative HR professionals is to find the right mechanism for encouraging ongoing workplace learning – and to banish the idea that older employees are less likely to learn.

"A common error is to confuse age with personality," says Nicholas Lim, director of development at Emergenetics International Asia-Pacific. "A person who has held the same job for 26 years is likely to have low-risk, low-adaptability personality traits. But those traits were already there 26 years ago. Older workers can adapt to new challenges and learn information – as long as they are supported in their work and their learning.

"When I learn something, new neural pathways are formed in my brain. The more I reinforce that learning, the more permanent those neural pathways become, the stronger the neural connections. If my company or environment facilitates the learning, retention of that lesson becomes stronger."

Want a 'eureka moment'? Tap into your unconscious mind

Anyone seeking confirmation of the unconscious mind's mysterious power could do worse than look to the heady peak of 1960s rock. The song *Yesterday* came to Paul McCartney in a dream, while the riff and refrain of *(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction* arrived fully formed in the mind of guitarist Keith Richards when he woke up with a start in a Los Angeles hotel room in the middle of the night.

It's not just rockers who mine inspiration from the very backs of their minds. Unconscious thought theory has long told us that we solve our thorniest problems and come up with our best ideas when we're not trying – the so-called 'eureka moment'.

"Our conscious mind is what we are aware of in the present moment, and is known for logical thinking, order, language and numbers, for example," says Salway. "Our unconscious mind is everything that we have experienced since the day we were born that we are not always aware of in the present moment. It is the realm of creativity, emotions and intuition."

During this 'thinking without thinking', a part of the brain called the anterior superior temporal gyrus, located towards the base, is working double time, processing data and reaching its own conclusions by connecting previously disparate concepts.

One of the most important implications of the unconscious mind is that the idea of

'brainstorming' – forcing ourselves to have new ideas, either individually or collectively – simply doesn't work because we're concentrating so hard our unconscious mind is switched off. Instead, we would do better to create a regular space to let our mind process thoughts, when it is active but not over-burdened. Experts suggest that taking on puzzles such as crosswords and Sudoku, or simply enjoying a spell of reading, can stimulate deeper, unconscious thoughts.

With all this sophisticated, not to mention bewildering, machinery working away under the mind's hood, the question of maintenance is an important one. You will be more prone to allowing negative unconscious thoughts to affect your decisions if you haven't slept or exercised, says leading neuroscientist Dr Tara Swart. "Interoception – the sense of the physiological condition of the body – means listening to your body and learning to recognise the data it sends to your brain. It is intrinsically linked with mindfulness," she says. "From raised awareness and focused attention, we eventually see deliberate practice of good behaviours that isn't difficult or challenging but becomes a natural part of your daily routine."

Thompson adds: "Excellent nutrition, exercise, mental application and attending to biological imperatives like sleep and downtime are essential."

Allowing your mind to process thoughts can help unleash creativity



GETTY IMAGES

Recruiters are looking at the wrong part of the brain

While his studies of specimens around the globe led him to formulate his theory of evolution and his views on the process of natural selection, Charles Darwin's less famous belief that emotional expression was essential for survival provided a seed for one of the most HR-relevant principles of neuroscience: 'emotional intelligence'.

In essence, the idea is that being conventionally 'clever' isn't the be-all and end-all of being effective, or even being intelligent. In his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, psychologist Daniel Goleman stated that emotional intelligence, or EQ (emotional quotient), was actually a more accurate predictor of success in life than a person's intelligence quotient (IQ).

Many organisations will have horror stories of hiring individuals who seemed highly intelligent but proved ineffective – or, even worse, destructive – when it came

"It's about self-and-other awareness, and well-judged interpersonal behaviour"

to working with others. In part, that's because we're still wowed by conventional intelligence in the recruitment process but rarely consider or test for other types. Being emotionally intelligent means having the ability to recognise and control your emotions and behaviour while remaining aware of the effect that these have on those around you. It also enables you to understand the emotional state of others and to use this information to adapt your behaviour to achieve a positive response. It isn't necessarily about being a 'people person' who's overly friendly, or a good listener – it's more about the ability to adapt your behaviour when doing so will get the best out of those around you.

"It can be summarised as 'know thyself and play well with others,'" says Adrian Cox, an NLP trainer. "It's about self-and-other

awareness, partnered with well-judged, constructive interpersonal behaviour."

Closely related to EQ, and somewhat more rooted in neuroscience, is the mentalising system: a way of processing the signals we receive from others and our status in relation to them. This takes place in the parts of the brain – notably the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex – that only humans have, and is entirely separate from more formal learning systems for taking on board facts and figures.

Those who are good at mentalising may appear to glide effortlessly through life, picking up friends in the most unlikely of situations. They also tend to be persuasive, inspiring and motivating. But despite these assets, many companies still work on the assumption that a person's IQ is the key to business success.

Forward-thinking HR professionals, however, are increasingly drawing on neuroscience findings to identify people with high EQ and who are good at mentalising by undertaking task-based interviews and questioning that encourages people to talk about times when they have been attuned to the needs of others, rather than focusing on individual achievement.

Other ways of heightening these faculties include self-awareness and emotional mastery courses and executive coaching. Other, less formal, methods work too. "Just be determinedly awake at the wheel of life," advises Thompson.





Psychometric testing comes of age

As companies look beyond qualifications and interview skills and towards neuroscience during the recruitment process, psychometric testing has become one tool at HR's disposal. These tests can be used to evaluate the aptitude and personality traits of an applicant to measure how well they will fit into an organisation.

Psychometric tests often involve questionnaires that ask people to agree to differing degrees with certain statements. The most famous of these is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which dates back to the 1950s and still acts as the basis of many modern tests.

There are no right or wrong answers in a psychometric test – it is supposed to uncover what kind of person you are, with questions designed to expose how you behave and what motivates you.

The tests can identify core drivers in individuals and whether the prospective talent has the edge over others in the running. As psychometric assessments become more sophisticated, they can be tailored around specific hiring needs, from entry-level positions to managerial and executive roles.

But do they make a difference? Marc Baloch, head of global insurance at recruitment experts Harvey Nash, believes psychometric testing can be particularly valuable in global businesses. "Companies are often spread across culturally diverse markets, requiring leaders to quickly adapt to and manage various working styles," he wrote in a post on the firm's blog this year. It could, he suggested, be useful in developing "an effective multicultural and team-centric environment".

* Read the CIPD factsheet on selection methods, including psychometric testing, at bit.ly/PMpsychometric

Can we train our brains not to judge?

Most people, barring the most determinedly dogmatic individuals, like to think they are open-minded and objective. In the vast majority of modern workplaces, diversity is highly valued while equal opportunities – the stipulation that all people should be treated the same – is widely seen as sacrosanct, even where it is not enshrined via legislation.

Unfortunately, one of the brain's most powerful functions – its ability to process information quickly and efficiently – also has a major flaw in promoting unconscious bias. Our logical mind may not think that we are passing any kind of judgement, but unconsciously we tend to like people who look like us, think like us and have a background similar to ours, while rejecting those who are different. This categorisation of people is an instinctive process that is hardwired in our brains.

The unconscious mind acts as an enormous database of beliefs, values and experiences. When human beings interact with each other, there is an abundance of information to process, a lot of which is suppressed, grouped and placed into easy-to-identify categories. These enable us to make quick decisions on future situations, and heavily influence how we view and evaluate others and ourselves.

While this categorisation is a useful function in many social situations, in business it can be costly. It can cause us to make decisions that are not objective, and can stymie diversity, recruitment and retention efforts. It can skew talent and performance reviews and affect who gets hired, promoted and developed – unwittingly undermining an organisation's culture.

"Preventing bias takes a lot of effort," says Professor Kyoko Kusakabe of the Asian Institute of Technology. "For instance, to promote gender equality we do a lot of training for recruiters and evaluators to make them aware of their bias."

But unconscious biases are inherent in every company, says Lim. Swart adds:



Unconsciously, people tend to like those who look and think like them

"Even if you don't think you have a racist, ageist or sexist bone in your body, if that stereotype exists in the world, it's somehow wired into your brain."

Women continue to be the most obvious victims of unconscious bias. For example, working mothers tend to be paid less, are seen as less committed and are less likely to get a promotion. Even though there are now more women in executive positions in Asia, gender parity in the boardroom remains a long way off. Other unconscious biases, meanwhile, are related to race, sexual orientation and income discrimination.

Increasingly, companies are taking action to combat unconscious bias. Tech giants such as Facebook and Google have introduced training programmes, while recruiters and HR professionals in Asia are turning to methods such as panel interviews, formative evaluation and psychometric testing to address the issue.

"I brief every interview panel I lead on the essentials of avoiding bias," says Thompson. "HR has to be well-versed in bias control, and in objective, structured and rigorous recruitment techniques. The same applies for managers conducting performance reviews. Learning these protocols is very eye-opening and extremely worthwhile. It builds wisdom – and EQ."