

The lost art of trusting your gut (and how you can reclaim it now!)

[EDINBURGH](#) [OPINION](#) [PEOPLE](#)

ROZ HINDS, STRATEGY DIRECTOR 05 MAR 2018

You stand in front of the chocolate bar fixture agonising over your decision. It's a small decision to make but somehow you are momentarily paralysed, rooted to the spot by the notion that you might get this wrong. As the seconds tick by the feeling of pressure rises...you really might get this wrong!

Of course this isn't about chocolate. This could be the reality for many day-to-day situations – from choosing a sandwich at lunchtime to selecting a shampoo brand in the supermarket. The decision making process feels weighty and fraught with considerations, even though you are making decisions about seemingly small or insignificant things.

This feeling of uncertainty also plays out in the workplace. Perhaps you find yourself in a meeting with an instinctive thought or point of view ... but you find yourself unable to express it as you have insufficient substantiating evidence and the risk of being 'wrong' simply feels too great.

You are no longer trusting your gut – the fast-acting intuitive process which we can tap into to help us navigate decisions. So why exactly has acting on gut instinct become so difficult?

The world revolves around data right now. We use it continuously to predict outcomes, remove uncertainty and optimise results. We are literally swimming in a sea of information, arguing about what kind of data is most useful whilst simultaneously turning to algorithms or peer reviews to help us choose our next purchase. With google at our fingertips to solve every query, the so-called threat of AI looming on our horizons and the way in which fake news has managed to infiltrate our media world it is little wonder that we no longer trust our intuitive decision making abilities. It is a well-documented fact that overwhelming stimuli can make it difficult, if not impossible, for a person to see the decision in front of them with clarity.

But scientific research proves that going with your gut can actually improve your decision making and that intuition can be a more useful tool than deliberate calculation in certain situations.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio of the University of Southern California documented the importance of paying attention to what he describes as “somatic markers.” Originating in the insula (the island in the brain responsible for social emotions like pride or guilt) and the amygdala (which cues our response to threats), they send messages that something just feels right – or it doesn't. The more you pay attention to the outcome of trusting your intuition the better your future decision-making can become (Source: Forbes). The bottom line here – use or lose this powerful resource!

What's it got to do with your gut? The gut has millions of nerve cells and, through them, a

“mind of its own,” says Michael Gershon, author of *The Second Brain* and a professor at Columbia University. The gut literally feeds gut feelings – like when you experience butterflies in the stomach. Experience is recorded in our brains as fact and, importantly, as feeling. When a new experience reminds us of something we’ve seen before it unleashes this powerful combination of knowledge plus emotional state of mind resulting in a predisposition to respond in a certain way. “Intuitions compel us to act in certain ways and those who lack intuition are essentially *cognitively paralysed*” says Psychologist Antoine Bechara who studied brain-damaged patients who could not form emotional intuitions when making a decision. They were left to decide purely via deliberate reasoning. “They ended up doing such a complicated analysis, factoring everything in, that it could take them hours to decide between two kinds of cereal (Source: Psychology Today).

So how do we go about regaining trust in our intuitive thinking? There’s a psychological battle at work here – and it involves trust. Or rather a lack of trust in our own ideas. Society values data, concrete logic and rational planning. It doesn’t value that first thought you had when you woke up this morning. But if you consider the extraordinary benefits of the lucid dreaming technique deployed by Salvador Dali and Ernest Hemingway or improvisation skills of actors and musicians we can begin to see the tangible creative benefits in allowing our subconscious thoughts and ideas to surface. Sometimes, when you have little else to go on, data can offer a jump off point for investigation. But more frequently your first intuitive thought will be better than any data-forced construct. Furthermore, once you have surfaced an intuitive thought, you can then apply the logic and rigour that rational data points can bring.

In fact, Douglas Hofstadter, professor of cognitive science at Indiana University emphasises the importance of not prematurely closing your mind when it comes to intuitions “You have to test these cautiously. When you have confirmation – then you can make the daring leap”. This works well in the workplace. Clearly it’s a less appropriate technique when choosing a chocolate bar. But the more you use your intuitive skills the sharper they become – making the small decisions, as well as the larger decisions, easier and easier.

What can you do right now?

- **Practice** – Practising using your gut intuition will sharpen your abilities to make more accurate predictions and build confidence in ‘trusting your gut’
- **Validate** (and then practice some more with previous outcomes in mind) – if it’s possible you should be validating any ideas rooted in intuition. Not only will this build your intuitive abilities (see point 1) but it will also ensure that you aren’t leaning on old experiences, or biases, recorded by your brain which are no longer useful in the current context
- **Spread the word** – encourage others to trust their gut and reap the boost to self-confidence and creativity as a direct result

Further reading:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2017/02/25/how-to-trust-your-intuition-and-listen-to-your-gut/#7be084235918>

<https://www.inc.com/geil-browning/go-with-your-gut-trusting-your-intuition.html>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200705/gut-almighty>

Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow – Daniel Kahneman

Trust Your Gut: How the Power of Intuition Can Grow Your Business – Lynn Robinson

EDINBURGH OPINION PEOPLE