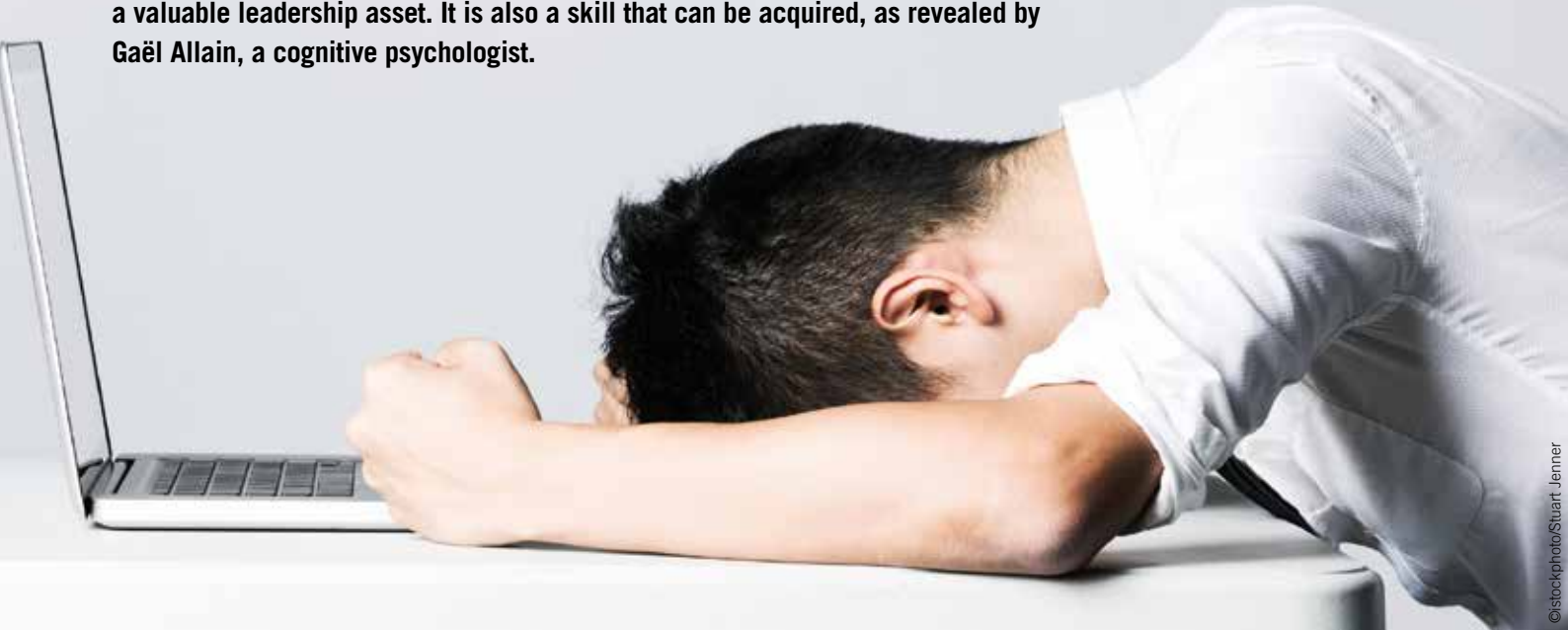


Pressure in the workplace is on the rise, resulting in reduced performance, anxiety and, in the worst cases, burnout. Knowing how to optimize performance (your own and your team's) while avoiding psychological exhaustion is fast becoming a valuable leadership asset. It is also a skill that can be acquired, as revealed by Gaël Allain, a cognitive psychologist.



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Think better, work less



Based on *Penser mieux, travailler moins* by **Gaël ALLAIN** (Eyrolles, January 2013) and his lecture given at the fifty-second HR Lab meeting organized by Business Digest and HEC Executive Education on March 24, 2016.

Is greater efficiency with less effort nothing more than a pipe dream? Far from it! It is possible to build your mental strength so you can reach and sustain an optimal level of professional excellence over time without becoming exhausted. In *Penser*

mieux, travailler moins, Allain suggests building an entire ecosystem of intellectual resources through a method and process that can be applied to individuals and organizations to achieve more sustainable personal and collective performance.

Take a step back to improve your creativity

Being creative means freeing up your intellectual resources so you can think outside the box. It means allowing yourself to take a step back, and to step outside your normal operating mode (which is automatic, comfortable and efficient but routine). You can then let your attention freewheel and freely associate. The most creative people have the ability to shut out external stimuli, listen closely to their inner world and combine innovative ideas. In other words, it is good to let your mind wander at times!

Know yourself and build a virtuous mental ecosystem

It seems paradoxical that, to maximize the potential of the human brain, you first have to be aware of its limitations. Since they are easily exhausted, you need to allocate cognitive capacities wisely. For example, you can't perform several different activities simultaneously without undermining the speed and quality of execution. Your attentional abilities are as limited as they are fragile, and the cost of distraction is high: 30% of your basic daily work. To preserve your capacities, you need to put strategies in place, including creating a sober and ergonomic office environment and imposing distraction-free windows for working with no external interruptions (emails, phone calls, and so on) as a way of promoting concentration.

Allain also recommends not allowing yourself be overwhelmed by details when making decisions or solving problems. Learn to "cut to the quick" even if it involves a degree of guesswork. The aim is to sift through information at speed, picking out what is relevant and meaningful and putting aside anything that is superfluous and that might unnecessarily distract you. Don't forget that 80% of your mental energy is devoted to non-essential tasks. Another function of your finite capacity is your working memory, which can theoretically retain an average of seven different items of information at a single time. In practice, however, it requires a special effort to handle three or four items simultaneously. Reducing the information load by using mnemonic strategies such as association or mind maps is essential (see box: Using the loci method to improve your memory). Integrating new data means actively appropriating it by "encoding" the material at source in the most personalized way possible: episodic information linked to deep personal meaning is the most straightforward to retrieve. Furthermore, cognitive expertise varies between individuals.

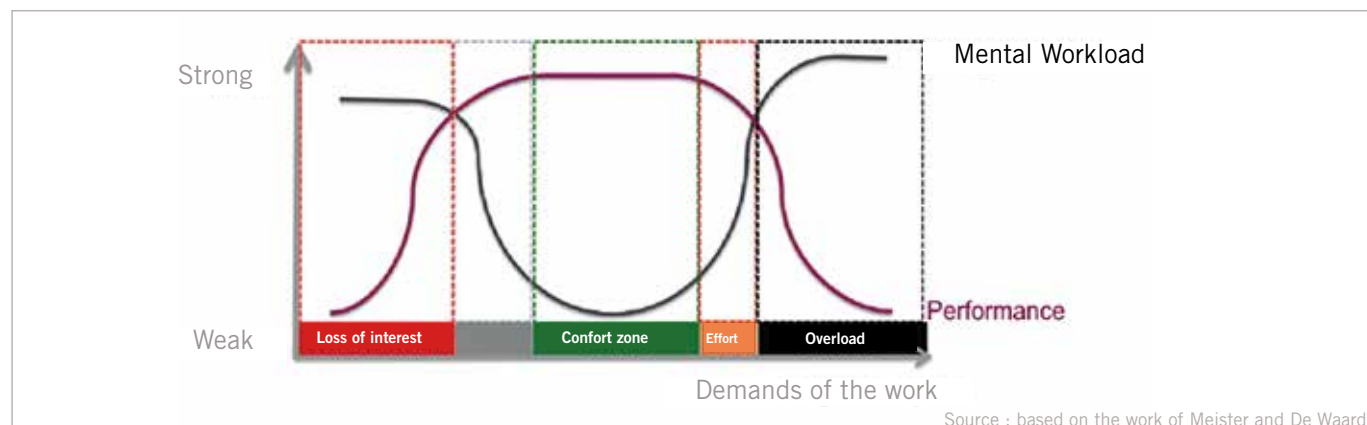
We all have our favorite areas where it is easy to mobilize our mental resources to produce sophisticated lines of argument. It is useful, therefore, to identify the operating modes associated with these strengths so they can be transposed to less familiar fields to gradually increase cognitive fluency.

Knowing how to adjust your mental load to the nature of your work

It is not the amount of effort that determines how productive you are - it is perfectly possible to hammer away at a task to no great effect - but the quality and context. Allain suggests we learn how to optimize our mental load to fit the context: then we can reach the best possible level of performance at any time at the lowest intellectual cost. The ideal scenario is the "comfort zone" (the green area in the diagram), which combines low mental load and high performance. This corresponds to the chosen fields where we are entirely proficient. It is a modus operandi that is fluid and that saves mental energy; it can also be expanded to include new activities, provided that you put in sufficient training, dedicate yourself to it, and find meaning in it.

However, the circumstances of professional life often force you out of this comfort zone. Any job, no matter how interesting it might be in overall terms, includes its share of boring tasks (the red area). Allain advises against putting your head in the sand, as ignoring and putting off work only makes problems worse. Instead, he recommends that fully acknowledging how tedious the tasks are so that you can develop ad hoc strategies for countering the high attentional dispersion they cause. The most effective solution, suggests Allain, is to work for short (but repeated) periods of time and to use a system of rewards to boost motivation.

There is another type of situation that necessitates leaving ...



... the comfort zone behind: spikes in workload (orange area). Whenever there is a significant amount of extra work, your staff have to redouble their efforts. This will be bearable provided that it is only a temporary - and exceptional - state of affairs, otherwise performance will fall rapidly... and exhaustion is waiting in the wings. Here again, at organizational level, activity overload should be anticipated, the reasons duly explained and the effects rigorously supervised (in the process and over time) to ensure that your staff's commitment and collective performance is satisfactory.

Increasing productivity and maintaining motivation through better management

There is often a disconnect between a company's organizational approach and the optimal management of employees' mental workload. For example, the lean management methods devised by the Japanese auto industry (Toyota) have their limits: they are used to plan production activities in the workplace in a highly logical manner, but they largely ignore human factors. Making staff work at 100% capacity and enforcing procedures that are too rigid, as though people were machines, is counter-productive. The human brain needs to take breaks, it needs time to recover and a sense of purpose to work efficiently. If there is no pause for thought, if there is no ownership of the tasks being performed, individuals will keep their heads down and are more likely to make mistakes. The quality of their work will also deteriorate and may even put their safety in danger (in the construction industry, for example). The role of the manager is to create a flexible environment for his or her teams and to set clear, specific and realistic goals. Once this framework has been established, managers can leave their employees to organize themselves autonomously and tolerate a certain degree of guesswork and pragmatism. In addition, managerial practices that stigmatize failure are of no use in stimulating performance: the best way to obtain good results without the

Using the loci method to improve your memory

This method helps you to «store» and organize ideas so that you can recall them painlessly. It consists of mentally visualizing a path or journey that is very familiar to you, and then putting the different concepts that you want to remember in a specific order in various places along the route. You then simply retrace the path mentally so that you can find all the items that were associated with it. The milestones that have been deposited in different places - the loci - can be used to create and memorize a long speech, a pitch, and so on.

risk of mental overload is to encourage individual commitment to owning the information that is to be processed. Because, if employees can encode data as episodic knowledge, they can retrieve and exploit it effortlessly at a later date. It follows that managers should strive to distribute the right information to their teams at the right time, and that they should discard anything that is superfluous and unnecessary or that might divert attention.

The most cogent solution for compensating for a lack of cognitive resources is to pool them. It is difficult, for example, for one individual to produce and control his or her own work (a scenario that is increasingly common in the world of business) because the two activities call on two very different ways of operating. To avoid generating unnecessary mental overload and mistakes, it is better if the tasks are unbundled and shared between two different people.... because, in cognitive behavior as elsewhere, collective intelligence can often perform miracles!



My Mental Training Pro: a mobile app for avoiding mental meltdown

Are you feeling under pressure? Are you at a loss as to how to tackle all the demands of the day in 24 hours? Business Digest believes there are solutions to the problem of efficiency and the quest for peace of mind, which is why we have invested in the start-up My Mental Training Pro®, the first application of its type specially designed for businesses. The app, available for smartphones and on the web, is a multilingual library made up of audio and video micro-exercises, visualizations and guided meditations, giving you the resources to combine performance and inner calm. In short, the app aims to help you use your cognitive and emotional capacities to meet the growing demands of the world of work!