

It's All about the Brain: The Role of Neuroscience in the Corporate World

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- Neuroscience helps identify employees' behavioural strengths and unleash their potential.
- It can be used to recruit and manage more efficiently.

The brain is the source of all human behaviours. It enables us to store our memories, feel emotions and develop our personality to succeed. Thanks to advances in brain imaging technology, scientists can now observe in great detail the brain at work. Neuroscience – the scientific study of the brain and the nervous system – can be a valuable tool for HR professionals to understand employees' behaviours, enhance their performance and implement effective training programmes. Namely, it helps explain why most employees seek feedback but dislike performance reviews, why high performers feel anxious when discussing their future, and why job candidates are more comfortable selling themselves in an informal environment.

Although there are no figures on the popularity of this nascent science amongst HR professionals in Hong Kong and elsewhere, neuroscience is increasingly used in business to understand customer decision-making (neuromarketing) and leadership development (neuroleadership), based on innovative neurological research. For instance, Juniper Networks, an American manufacturer, witnessed an 88% increase in employee engagement levels after implementing a neuroscience-based programme for managers.

Although HR professionals cannot ask staff to go through a magnetic resonance imaging brain scan, they can analyse them by using brain mapping assessment tools. PRISM Brain Mapping, in particular, is a behaviour mapping instrument to understand people's behavioural preferences. When used properly, it can enhance leadership skills, coaching programmes, recruitment processes and performance management.

To illustrate this, Jane is a successful auditor in a medium-sized auditing company in Hong Kong. Her brain map showed that she is a left-brain person (ie she likes systems, processes, data and clear results), which is why she excels at her job. It also indicated that she enjoys routine tasks, cautiousness and precision, and she prefers to work in a secure and stable environment.

When her line manager requested her to be more proactive in looking for new clients and business leads, she became less engaged and even considered leaving the organisation. In fact, active networking requires dopamine (ie a chemical that helps control the brain's reward and pleasure centres) as well as creativity and innovation, which are brain preferences that Jane does not display.

When faced with such a situation, it is advised that the HR manager helps her visualise why she feels uncomfortable performing this new task, thanks to a brain mapping assessment. This could correct Jane's (often inaccurate) perceptions about engaging new clients. The HR manager could then support her to adapt her working style to network more efficiently, and boost her confidence thanks to targeted coaching and training.

The right potential

Neuroscience can be useful in recruitment as it can help HR professionals find out the most suitable candidate for a position. For example, a prospective commercial director with an impressive resume, due to his/her extensive experience, will not necessarily perform highly or fit in the new team. As such, it is recommended that HR professionals and line managers compare

his/her brain map to the benchmark set for the role before recruiting him/her, and identify if it matches the role requirements. They may find out that the candidate lacks self-drive, independence and an analytical mindset, which are additional criteria to succeed in this role.

Similarly, the natural preferences of volunteers working for non-governmental organisations could become derailment factors. As these employees are usually sensitive and altruistic, they might feel overwhelmed by people's distress and unable to perform well (eg they might not prioritise tasks, make appropriate decisions or take the necessary emotional distance to cope with a problem). In this regard, brain mapping enables HR professionals to figure out the parts of the brain that need to be developed for a particular role, and the extent to which each preference may become a derailer.

They can use questionnaires and metrics based on neuroscience to evaluate a job applicant's affinity with a specific job and predict his/her performance. Answers to these questionnaires identify which brain regions individuals tend to use the most. A sample question would be: Rank from 1 to 4 the behaviour that describes you best:

- meticulous;
- values diversity;
- imaginative; or
- aggressive.

Such brain mapping tests hint at the right language and management style HR professionals and line managers can adopt during the recruitment and assessment process in order to appeal to the desired candidate's brain preferences.

Steps to leverage neuroscience in recruitment include:

1. identifying the main criteria to succeed in a given role (eg ability to deal with high level of compliance, creativity, independence);
2. defining key eligibility requirements (eg resume, years of experience, technical knowledge);
3. assessing suitability and work aptitude (ie the candidate's natural preferences);
4. striking a balance between eligibility (ie required criteria) and suitability (ie the degree to which someone fits in);
5. creating a job benchmark based on the work environment;
6. asking candidates to complete a brain mapping questionnaire to identify their brain preferences; and
7. conducting a structured behavioural interview using job applicants' results, and carrying out a relevant background check and skills assessment.

Leveraging science to manage better

Neuroscience can be used not only for recruitment but also for management because it can help employees perform well on the long-term and handle change effectively. A 2006 research paper titled "Personality Measures as Predictors of Job Performance" by Michigan State University, set out that employees who enjoy at least 75% of their job activities are three times more likely to succeed than employees who enjoy less than 75% of their role.

For instance, Stephen, a team leader in a pharmaceutical company in Hong Kong, manages 10 sales representatives. He noted decreased performance and increased resignations in his team. After their brains were mapped, he found that each sales representative used different parts of his/her brain to perform the same tasks. He went over the results with them individually and adapted his management style accordingly: he

assigned tasks that aligned with each team member's brain preferences to increase his/her engagement.

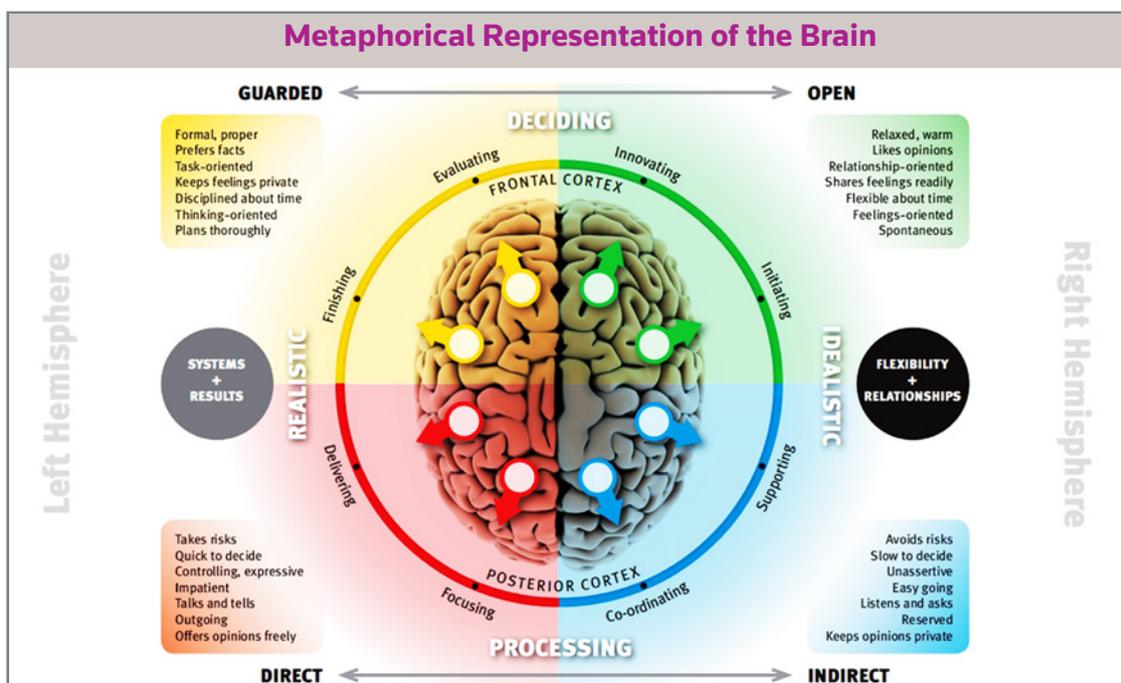
The table on page 19 recommends management styles based on employees' brain preferences. It divides the brain into four main quadrants.

It should be noted that no single part of the brain does just one thing or operates independently. Management styles can hence be adjusted to each type of employees by collecting feedback regularly and brainstorming ideas.

Integrating neuroscience into organisational development

1. Help your staff identify their natural strengths and weaknesses

As behaviour is situational (ie we tend to behave professionally with our peers whilst we are more emotional with our friends), brain mapping assessment tools can help figure out each employee's strengths, weaknesses, aptitudes, and potential derailers. This would help



Source: The Centre for Applied Neuroscience, 2002

Employees' Primary Quadrant	Typical Skills	Suggested Management Style for HR Professionals and Line Managers
front left	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - quality-focused - detail-oriented - structured - accurate - meticulous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - be more process-oriented and organised - ensure a quiet workplace and allow time to formulate answers - commit to promises - offer facts and data to support feedback
front right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - flexible - multi-talented - good communicators - innovative - visualising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - encourage input and ideas - create a friendly environment - focus on the big picture and promote creativity - leverage their natural optimism and energy - praise and recognise them
back right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supportive - likable - sensitive - good listeners - helpful - patient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - acknowledge their loyalty - make sure they believe in the products they sell - give them the opportunity to be genuine - select positive co-workers - foster collaboration with clients and relationships building
back left	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - independent - self-driven - assertive - controlling - competitive - daring - determined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - establish clear and pragmatic goals - discuss targets to achieve higher status - challenge them to bring out the best results - allow independent work - give them the authority to negotiate - avoid micro-management

HR professionals and managers take personalised actions that target each team member's developmental needs.

Additionally, it is a means to identify and groom high-performers to build a strong leadership pipeline. Brain mapping assessment tools offer valuable feedback on the type of learning programmes HR professionals can develop, as a part of an efficient talent engagement and retention strategy (see the following example). Since our brain changes over time – what we call neuroplasticity, neuroscience helps develop the right conditions for change.

2. Brain map your organisation

Neuroscience can also be used to determine a company's "personality",

and whether employees' natural preferences match the corporate culture (eg emphasis on creativity or hierarchy).

For instance, a sales manager in a retail company in Hong Kong found out that his company culture and sales strategy differed significantly from the work preferences of his team, thanks to an online brain mapping test the HR department requested them to take. Whilst the sales strategy was ambitious and competitive (which could appeal to staff who use primarily their back left quadrant), the team had a less aggressive and more relationship-oriented attitude (ie they primarily used their back right quadrant), their individual reports set out. As a result, the team's performance

was poor. The HR manager and the sales director thus created a training programme that taught sales representatives how to be more daring. They also implemented a less "hunter" sales strategy to ensure that senior management and employees work together more efficiently.

Great brains think alike

Neuroscience provides clear tools that help improve the recruitment and assessment process, and employees' performance. It is accessible to any HR division – not just large companies, as an alternative to ineffective management methods. It is likely that, in the coming years, more businesses will shift from psychometric instruments to more "brain focus" tests.