

# iDENK review

## Blink: or how to make great quick decisions

How do you make your decisions? Like most of us, you've probably been influenced by the relentless promotion of rational decision-making models, especially if you happen to work within a large public or private sector organisation. Masses of MBA courses, business textbooks and consultants advocate the now classic approach: identify all your available options, weigh the pros and cons, evaluate against agreed criteria, rate them, then implement the one that scores best.

But does this approach always serve us best? Malcolm Gladwell suggests not. In 'Blink: The power of thinking without thinking', his follow-on book to the hugely successful 'Tipping Point', he argues that we should be more willing to trust our intuition as the best way to make decisions in all sorts of situations, including our working lives.

He starts with the example of a Greek statue bought by the J Paul Getty museum for 10 million dollars. Despite having had its provenance thoroughly researched and the stone scientifically analysed, this turned out to be a fake - something spotted instantly by several specialists who only got to see it after the purchase was completed. How could these particular experts see in a few seconds what other well-qualified people had failed to spot over many months?

For Gladwell, at the heart of successful intuitive thinking is the concept of 'thin slicing': rapidly spotting the very small amounts of information that are critical to the situation. Those who spotted the fake had accumulated over time a huge range of observations from which they had learned the collection of factors to look out for, something they could now do in an instant. Indeed, this had become second nature to the point that some could not describe the detailed reasons for why they thought it was a fake but simply that they "just knew". Might it be that our 'gut instincts' can guide us more accurately than rational analysis?

The same happens with pilots - having started out learning step by step how to fly a plane, over time the best pilots talk as if they, and not the plane, are flying - the whole act has become so natural to them. This transformation from procedure to instinct actually makes them safer pilots as in emergencies they have no time to respond through more rational and linear decision-making.

Throughout the book, Gladwell draws on number of research projects which are exploring in different ways the power of thin slicing. Strangers, for example, can give a better judgement on your conscientiousness by looking round your house than your friends would if asked. A few minutes observing how a doctor communicates with a patient will show if they are likely to be sued in the future. At the 'love lab', sixty minutes of a couple talking can be used to predict with 95% accuracy if they will still be together in 15 years.

Of course, snap judgements are not infallible, we all know that. So Gladwell spends about half the book drawing attention to the potential pitfalls. Market research, for example, that relies on instant reactions from respondents often uses the wrong question. Coca Cola launched New Coke not because it was losing market share but because it came out less well than Pepsi in blind tastings. The trouble is that Pepsi is sweeter and so was always likely to score better in this type of test; but it doesn't mean that people will prefer to drink it more day-to-day.

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But the biggest challenge to us is to learn how to educate our instincts. This comes from hard work reflecting on what we've experienced to spot the critical patterns and connections so that when we see them again in the future, we recognise them and remember what they mean. Gladwell refers here to the work of Gary Klein who has studied the remarkable success that those working in dangerous situations have in making good snap decisions. Klein has gone beyond the answer "it's all down to experience" to reveal that fire-fighters and the like are able to focus only on the critical data needed to guide their actions. As he says "I noticed that when the most experienced commanders confronted a fire, the biggest question they had to deal with wasn't 'What do I do?' It was 'What's going on?' That's what their experience was buying them - the ability to size up a situation and to recognize the best course of action."

Even for those of us less dangerous jobs, improving our intuitive thinking offers huge benefits in terms of the speed and quality of what we do. The themes of Blink can be translated into how we come up with ideas, how we get things done, how we work as individuals and how we work with others.

## For fresh **ideas**:

- don't place undue reliance on market research and data analysis unless you really know you've got the right question
- do give those close to the customer scope to come up with their own solutions
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## For successful **implementation**:

- don't get bogged down in relentless analysis, too much information obscures the small amounts of critical data
- do delegate responsibility as far down the organisation as possible as that is where on-the-ground experience can best be exploited

## For effective team **interactions**:

- don't teach staff theory, instead encourage observation and trial-and-error as the best way to learn
- do encourage your most experienced staff to share their intuitive insights on what works and what doesn't

## For making the most of **individuals**:

- don't prejudge either potential staff or potential customers. Snap judgements on character and capability can be some of our most inaccurate
- do treat people equally - you never know who the next big customer is going to be or who might turn out to be the rising star in the organisation

Blink offers an entertainingly alternative perspective on thinking in a world afflicted by information overload and rule-driven decision-making. At the very least, you'll get an idea of what to look out for when you're next shopping for some Greek statuary.