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Neuroscience in the boardroom – is brain training the key to success?

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While there hasn't been a study produced on the specific impact brain training can have in the boardroom, it is well known many high level execs use certain techniques – what impact can they have on your business?

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Can we change our brains?

In 1879, when the telephone was taking off in the US, the British Post Office chief engineer said "it won't take off in Britain; we have more than enough messenger boys."

Today, I would argue, we are in a similar position when it comes to brain training programmes aimed at helping individuals suffering from stress, anxiety, learning difficulties and improving peak performance in the boardroom.

While brain training is still regarded as an alternative treatment and not a mainstream one, our cousins across the pond are far further down the road than we, and techniques like neurofeedback, which we will look at in this article, are widely available.

Although there hasn't been a study produced on the specific impact brain training can have in the boardroom (yet) it is well known many high level execs use the techniques described below and people like self-development guru Tony Robbins and "bulletproof executive" Dave Aspery are big advocates.

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But what exactly do we mean by brain training ?

Single & double loop learning

Until the last decade, it was assumed that our brains were fixed; that was until scientists accepted that our brains can and do change, and named it "neuroplasticity".

Since then an abundance of "brain training" games have hit the market, the idea being that by exercising our brain through conscious exercise we get better at the exercises.

While these can certainly have an impact on a basic level (single loop learning), what has really interested neuroscientists is the impact certain techniques could have on a much deeper level of learning (double loop learning).

But is it really possible to train at this level?

The answer is yes, using a technology called neurofeedback we can give the brain information to stimulate learning at a deep level.

This technology, originally discovered through NASA research in the 1960s, has found wide medical application with conditions including migraine, trauma and autism. There are 100s of scientific journal articles describing studies on a wide range of clinical conditions, and the NHS are reviewing neurofeedback for ADHD, with the results expected in 2017.

Outside clinical applications, neurofeedback brain training has tended to be the "secret sauce" used by business leaders and elite athletes for peak performance.

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How it works

Neurofeedback comes from the concept of operant conditioning – by giving feedback on behaviour, behaviour can be changed.

It works like this: We monitor your brain waves from your scalp by using small electrode connectors; the brainwaves are amplified and fed into a computer, they are processed, analysed and feedback is generated in real-time.

While this is happening you sit in front of a screen either watching your favourite DVD, playing a video game or hearing pleasant "gong" sounds when you brain enters the desired state.

The feedback you receive isn't through the electrodes on your scalp, but through what you see, hear and feel.

In this way we are giving feedback directly to the brain on how it is functioning, helping it learn, develop and grow in a direction that is relevant and specific to you: your goals, your challenges, your needs.

From normalisation to peak performance

The application of neurofeedback brain training to peak performance requires a different mindset from that used in medical applications.

In medical applications the primary objective is normalisation of brain function, and increased modern computer power has fuelled a trend to use computer databases of "normal" brains to guide the brain back to a more "average" state when staring into space or with eyes shut.

Critics of this approach question if there is such a thing as an "average" brain? This question becomes even more acute when dealing boardroom executives – if I have an above average IQ of 130, (typical for a high functioning executive and in the top 2.3 per cent of the population) do I really want my brain to be more "average"?

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Peak performance boardroom brain training requires a bespoke approach, tailored to the individual as much as a Saville Row suit.

With the latest equipment, tests and coaching techniques to elicit certain brain challenges, it is possible to capture how an individual executive brain responds under various scenarios.

These are flexible but for example can include creative problem-solving, analytical thought, decision-making under stress, performance under pressure and attitude to risk.

And the results of this analysis can be used to develop made-to-measure neurofeedback protocols to maximise performance.

It should be stressed that maximum brain performance doesn't mean maximum brain activity. In fact, the most productive brain state, commonly known as the "flow" state, our conscious thinking brain is largely switched off.

The benefits of mindfulness are now well known and mindfulness training is not uncommon in the boardroom. But many executives struggle to quieten their thoughts. Peak brain performance is about getting the brain to work smarter, not harder, and neurofeedback brain training teaches the brain how to better control itself.

Stuart Black is the founder and managing director of BrainTrainUK, the UK's fastest growing neurofeedback practice.

To discuss how to bring bespoke neurofeedback to your boardroom, call 0207 978 0186 or email info@BrainTrainUK.com

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