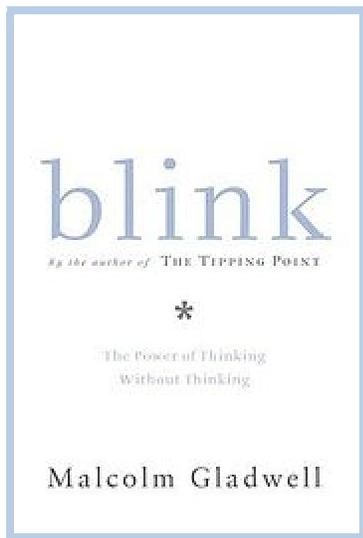


## **'Blink: the Power of Thinking Without Thinking'**

*A book review by Joey Ng  
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This book is about making quick decisions with limited information.



In his book 'Blink', author Malcom Gladwell used the term 'thin-slicing' to describe the ability to draw what is important from a narrow period of experience to draw conclusions. Through the process of rapid cognition, an individual uses tiny but crucial bit of information to assess a situation and make judgment. This mental process last no more than a blink of any eye, in other words, a matter of seconds, and this book explained the psychology workings behind snap decisions. Gladwell did not associate the word 'Intuition' with this process because he felt that 'Intuition' is used to describe emotional reactions and gut-feel, concepts he felt were not entirely rational. Rather, he argued that snap decisions were in-fact grounded on thinking – an entirely rational process just that it happens a little faster and a little

more mysterious than our usual ways of conscious decision-making.

Spontaneous decisions are as good, if not better, than decisions made through careful analysis and planning. Conventional wisdom has it that more information means better judgment but Gladwell argued that too much information would overload and confuse the mind, affecting the accuracy of the decisions. As some of the information gathered might be irrelevant and too much data would reduce a plan's flexibility, we are better off making decision by slicing and analyzing data that really matter. However, many are still committed to the notion that more is definitely better.

With increased data, more factors are inevitably considered and this will slow down the decision making process. While there are times when a broader perspective would result in better judgment, there are also situations that require snap decisions to respond to unpredictable circumstances. In times of urgency, overload of information will reduced flexibility for making immediate changes because there are more factors to consider, resulting in delayed decisions and consequently, delay reaction.

## Choke on Information



Source: <http://www.voltairenet.org/article153013.html>

An example he cited in the book was a major war game called 'Millennium Challenge 2002' conducted by the U.S. Army in 2002. The game was to test the U.S. military's (Blue Team) sophisticated system of technologies and networks against an inferior adversary (Red Team). Red Team was commanded by a retired U.S. Army General Paul Van Riper. Blue Team had an unprecedented amount of information on the terrain and the adversary and all kinds of weaponry, as you would expect from a side representing the U.S. Army. But, with a supposedly third-world army, Van Riper outwitted the mightier force through the use of guerilla tactics to gain an unexpected victory. Blue Team, armed with all the information they need, were severely hempen by their strategy because it was overloaded with information! This made their plan rigid and caused decision making to be delayed because it had to be passed along a chain of commands. Blue Team was choking itself. On the other hand, with lesser information, the Red Team left most of the ground decisions to the commanders at the front-line and they relied mostly on spontaneous responses and reactions. Operating in an ever-changing situation (it was a war after all), Van Riper's commanded with just a set of guidelines and left room for those in front to make their own decisions and this enabled forces on the ground to respond to changes more rapidly and decisively. Red Team's victory showed that more information does not necessarily benefit the making decisions process, especially in a constantly changing environment that requires snap responds. (Subsequently, a 're-match' was scheduled and the Red Team was ordered to give Blue Team the victory.)

## Less is More

Gladwell cited other examples of how experts in various fields fared better when making judgment with limited information. In a small hospital in Chicago, significant amount of resources were spent assessing patients with chest-pain syndrome for fear of being struck with heart attack. However, many of these cases turned out to be not (any form of chest-pain were perceived by worried patients as a sign of heart-attack but most of the time, they were not.) and the resource-intensive diagnostic process prevent the doctors from spending more time on actual cases of heart issues. To overcome this problem, the doctors started to ask fewer but more significant questions when diagnosing patients who complained of chest-pain. Formerly, the diagnostic process was longer and more thorough but many of the questions clouded and distorted the

doctors' judgment. The newer method thin-sliced by asking less and the result – diagnostic accuracy rate increased by an incredible 70%.

### **How it Works**

The ability to thin-slice and make accurate judgment is not a gift inherent to a few lucky ones. It can be learned and developed. Thin-slicing is the process of tapping on and drawing knowledge from our unconscious, the bigger computer that runs behind the smaller conscious mind. Our unconscious works like a scanner that scans our surrounding for any form of anomalies. Once detected, it sends a signal to our body that result in some kind of reaction while our conscious is still trying to make sense of the situation. This explains the often-heard saying 'I feel that something is not quite right but I couldn't explain it yet'.

Our unconscious is a composite of past experiences and knowledge. The beneficiaries of snap decisions cited by Gladwell are all expert in their own field whom have spent years learning and understanding their trades. We can also do the same if we are passionate and dedicated to our practice. Aside from studying, experts in some field such as securities and policing are also put through trainings that simulate real-life high-pressured scenarios. Over time, as the unconscious database expands, it increases our sensitivity in detecting anomalies, and more importantly, it allows us to understand and explained what is precisely wrong and the ability to accurately diagnose a situation is the key to better and sounder snap-decisions.

### **The Other Side of the Coin**

While rapid cognition requires only a small portion of information to be sliced and read, we have to be mindful of the kind of data we thin-slice. If judgments were rooted in prejudice and stereotype, it would lead to stray decision. For example, when car salesmen using appearance to size-up customer and assess the likelihood of a purchase. If the customer looks the part, service quality would increase and a more attractive deal offered by the salesman. If the customer does not look like a buyer, then it will be the opposite. Relying on appearance per se to determine spending power is not an accurate way to thin-slice because not all well-off people dress like one and for that matter, not all well-dressed people are well-off. Using appearance only, the salesmen are slicing data from the wrong piece of information.

Other than the way people dressed, another appearance feature that many people tend to draw conclusion from is the color of our skin. A series of studies showed no scientific

link between skin color and commonly attributed characteristic. Most of the time, these faulted attributions are the results of over-generalization or personal prejudice.

While thin-slicing enable quicker and sometimes, better decisions, we have to be prudent over the kind of information we thin-sliced from.

### **What Can We Learn?**

Everyone can be anyone. We meet new people all the time, in meetings and during programmes. How often do we pass judgment at the very first sight - sized someone up the instance we meet, pigeonhole him, and relate to him in the same way as we would with others in the same 'category'? The blind side of this is that we would reject any behavior that counters our initial attributions and brush them off as 'on-off', while accepting any minor data that cements our pre-conceived thoughts. Psychologists label this form of cognitive biasness as 'confirmation bias' - *a phenomenon wherein decision makers have been shown to actively seek out and assign more weight to evidence that confirms their hypothesis, and ignore or under weigh evidence that could disconfirm their hypothesis* ([www.sciencedaily.com](http://www.sciencedaily.com)).

*When I view you as a '5 cents', I will treat you as one. You will perform only '5 cents' duties, and it shows you are only good for '5 cents' responsibilities.*

Every day, we form quick opinion of people in order to further a communication or make decision because we lack the time to obtain every bit of relevant information. To avoid stereotyping and prejudice, here are three things we should do:

- Examine where we slice the information from?
- Suspend judgment till we know them well enough.
- At the start, treat everyone the same.

### **References:**

- 1) Blink: The Power Of Thinking Without Thinking (2007) - Malcolm Gladwell
- 2) [http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/c/confirmation\\_bias.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/c/confirmation_bias.htm)