Leaders: Beware Autopilot Thinking

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By David Peterson

What if I told you that the more experienced you are...

...The less likely you are to come up with innovative ideas? Does that sound paradoxical? If so, you’d do well to consider the risks of autopilot thinking—and learn what you can do to overcome it.

Let’s suppose you are a senior marketing executive with 20 years of experience working at your company. You started in the proverbial mailroom and worked your way up through the organization. In that time, you performed nearly every type of job and have been working in marketing now for 12 years. If you think about the basic tasks of what you do as a marketing executive, how many repetitions of those basic tasks have you performed? Hundreds of times? Thousands of times? Probably tens of thousands of times, right? The more we repetitively do something, the more grounded we are in how something is to be done.

And when we encounter something new, perhaps a wrinkle of a typical task, we might default to our time-honored methodologies when performing the new task—without examining if this is the best option. I call this the numbing effect of routine. It spawns autopilot thinking, which is the killer of creativity.

How does this occur?

Your brain is made up of a left and right hemisphere. As it turns out, the left and right brains have divided up tasks between them.

- **The left brain**—also called the digital brain, is in charge of logic and reason. It is full of facts and is good at science and math. It is logical and makes decisions based on the accumulative learning and experience it has gained. It controls motor skills and is engaged pretty much all the time as we eat, walk, talk, and play golf.
- **The right brain**—also called the analog brain, is where poetry originates, where art flows. It manages love, passion and yearning. And it is the source for our creativity. The left brain can think in a structured, strategic way. But, for true creative problem solving, you need to engage your right brain.

But there’s a problem. Your left brain dominates your right brain. Like a know-it-all school kid who has every answer, the left brain jumps in at every moment to provide “the answer” to any given question. The right brain can hardly get a thought in edge-wise.
Try this: in your mind, spell the word coast. C-O-A-S-T. Okay, now quickly answer this question: What do you put in a toaster? If you thought of toast, then you just experienced an example of autopilot thinking. I conditioned you to think of toast by first introducing the similar sounding word “coast,” and the name of the device itself has the word “toast” in it. So, the left brain quickly put the thought in your mind that a toaster is associated with toast, and you thought “toast.” But you don’t put toast into a toaster; you put in bread. If you thought “toast,” you succumbed to automated thinking.

But even if the left brain were completely shut down, the right brain doesn’t always get us what we need when we need it.

It takes its time to search through the recesses of information we have processed and stored over our lifetimes to eventually come up with the answer.

Eventually.

Think about a time when you were standing at the water cooler talking with a co-worker. You were talking about a song but couldn’t remember the name of the artist. Try as you might, in that moment, the name of that singer just would not come to your memory. The moment passed and you went on about your day, completely forgetting all about it. Then, the next morning while you were brushing your teeth, the name of the artist just pops into your head! When the left brain couldn’t immediately come up with the name, it just moved on to the next thing. But for those 18 hours, your right brain was seeking and searching your memory for that name. Once it located it, it had to find an opportunity to put it into your conscious thought.

That is why you receive these delayed answers or come up with amazing ideas while you are washing your hair, brushing your teeth or some other similar activity. While the left brain is busy with a motor skills activity, the right brain can get into the game.

Okay, so we can get into a routine with our thinking, and the left brain is a bully that doesn’t let the right brain play all that often.

What is the practical application of this?

As we face the quickly changing business landscape, the ability to identify important developments and brainstorm innovative solutions will become a mission-critical skill. We must identify those instances where something new requires creative thinking and not just rely on the automated, left-brained decision-making.
One key to identifying whether we are open to potential new ideas that can transform old, tired thinking and processes is how welcoming we are to the questions posed by new employees.

Consider John, a 24 year-old business major who has just started a new job with your company. As he is going through orientation and training, he is being exposed to all of the processes and procedures that have been created for all the tasks his job requires. Most of these have been honed over years of activity—experience and trial-and-error accumulated into a well-documented procedure.

But as John is examining the steps, he is confused. What is the purpose of step 4? John represents a pair of new eyes, eyes that have not experienced thousands of repetitions of your procedures. So, if there is something that doesn’t make sense to John, it should be a clarion call for you to consider if that step is needed.

I generally find there are two responses to someone like John who is asking a question about process.

1. To politely tell him to do the procedure as it is documented, something like, “Step 4 comes after Step 3 and before Step 5. That is the way we do things around here.” This likely leaves John very unsatisfied, and, if this type of response is endemic to the organization, John will quickly leave for an organization not so prehistoric.
2. To encourage John and his generation to openly challenge all assumptions about process, products and prospect acquisition. The millennials entering the workforce represent our future—our future leaders, our future customers. Their insight is to be rewarded not discouraged.

Maybe the reason Step 4 was created is no longer an issue, and it can be eliminated. If so, quickly dispose of it. Maybe Step 4 is a regulatory requirement that is mandated. If so, explain that to John, help him understand why it is in place. But be rude or ignore John’s questions and legitimate requests for clarification at your peril.

**How does autopilot thinking affect your bank?**

- Autopilot thinking has you advertising on billboards and newspapers just as you did 10 years ago.
- Autopilot thinking has you forcing customers into 12- or 24-month CDs when a 19-month CD would perfectly suit their liquidity needs.
- Autopilot thinking has you turning down a loan request from a long-time customer based on a single credit score, due to the lack of other creative, suitable funding options.

What it means to be a banker is fundamentally changing, and we must be open to seeing new business opportunities. The blur of fintech’s recent activity is not an immediate threat, but it should be a wakeup call.
Our future customers will have alternatives, not for the traditional banking model of the past 30 years but banking as it will become to best suit future customer needs. Autopilot thinking will not cut it for future success. We have to unlock our right brain and think bread, not toast.

David Peterson is chief strategic officer at i7strategies, a consulting and strategic planning firm specializing in financial institutions and the companies that serve them.