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The Key to Success? Don't Think About It,

U.K. Researchers Say

By Angela Cullen

Jan. 8 (Bloomberg) -- Trusting your instinct and acting quickly may lead you to the right answer more often than thinking over a decision, researchers at University College London found.

Test subjects, asked to pick the odd one out on a screen of more than 650 identical symbols, performed better when given just a fraction of a second to find the answer than volunteers who studied the images for more than a second, according to a study published today in the journal Current Biology. The images used in the test included one rotated version of the same symbol.

Those given a fraction of a second had an accuracy rate of 95 percent, compared to 70 percent for participants who had more time. The snap decisions were more likely to be correct because the subconscious brain recognizes a rotated version as different from the original symbol, while a conscious brain perceives them as identical.

``This finding seems counter-intuitive,'' said Li Zhaoping, head of the Laboratory of Natural Intelligence at UCL, in the study. ``You would expect people to make more accurate decisions when given the time to look properly. Instead, they performed better when given almost no time to think.''

Conscious decisions override subconscious ones even if the latter is correct, and make people distrustful of their instincts, according to Zhaoping. People allowed four seconds or more recovered their ability to accurately find the symbol.

``If our higher-level and lower-level cognitive processes are leading us to the same conclusions, there is no issue,'' Zhaoping said. ``Often though, our instincts and higher-level functions are in conflict, and in this case our instincts are often silenced by our reasoning, conscious mind.''

Tracking the volunteers' eye movements, Zhaoping's team controlled the time allotted to each individual's search by switching off the display screen at various intervals. Subjects who had the images switched off immediately after their eyes had landed on the screen believed they had just guessed the right answer.

``What seems like a random darting of the eye is often an essential subconscious scanning technique that allows us to pick out unique, distinctive features in a crowd,''

Zhaoping said. ``Soon after our eyes have fixed on a target, the conscious or top-down part of cognition engages and examines whether the candidate really is the target or not.''

If the target isn't distinctive enough to the conscious brain, it will fail to identify it, the researchers found.

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