

Does Brain Training Work?

By Jenny Brockis

Wouldn't it be good if it did? The idea of using brain training as a means to boost our mental capacities, keep us sharp and one step ahead of the pack is highly appealing. "Darling, where did you put my Lycra shorts? - I'm just off to the brain gym"

No wonder the brain training industry has burgeoned into a billion dollar behemoth as we log onto our online brain training games on the way to work, in between meetings, in meetings...

If you were hoping that brain training would make you smarter and boost your intelligence, sorry it doesn't. No amount of brain training is going to make you smarter than the average bear and most of the games available at the lower end of the market while fun are for the most part just entertainment.

The holy grail of cognitive advantage.

Training the brain implies we can drive our neurobiology to our advantage through our choice of focus and practice in those functions we want to get better at. But as any novice violin player knows, starting out to learn a new skill can be awkward, clumsy (and sometimes excruciating to the ears), though with practice and repetition we get better and faster.

Avoiding getting stuck in a brain rut means trying something new, and



not just one thing either. A cognitive smorgasbord of delight is ideal coupled with continuing challenge. In the workplace we can do this by choosing to step up to learn new skills while learning something new outside of work broadens our capacity to think more creatively and widen our lens of perspective.

Building our capacity for complex reasoning and decision-making is highly desirable, however the lure of using brain training to boost performance without first addressing the modern workplace maladies of silo mentality, bullying, and micromanagement is akin to expecting a course of antibiotics to work against a viral infection.

Brain training can work when applied appropriately.

There are now a number of well-substantiated studies that show cognitive training programs do improve cognitive function in certain groups.

These include commercial and military pilots using cognitive training for specific transferable skills. Older drivers using a structured brain-training program stay driving safer for longer. Medical studies are evaluating the benefit of cognitive training following stroke, brain injury or in the recovery from some

neuropsychiatric conditions.

If your workplace doesn't match these, your hard earned training budget dollars can still be spent in a useful way if

- a) There is a specific thinking bottleneck that needs addressing such as increasing mental processing speed or focus.
- b) It provides a structured program that is user friendly, has clearly tangible benefits for the participant and monitors progress.

What about playing some videogames instead?

With 1.23 billion people around the planet playing videogames for an hour each day these are clearly popular, although the benefit of those 1.73 billion minutes spent playing Candy Crush could be disputed.

Video games are great to develop a faster speed of mental processing and peripheral awareness skills. They are fun and rewarding causing our brain to release more dopamine, which motivates our desire to continue to play (sometimes a bit too much).
Laparoscopic surgeons who relax

with a little video gaming each week have been shown to make up to 37% fewer errors and enjoy a 27% faster completion rate in surgery. Is this the new criteria by which to choose our laparoscopic surgeon?

Unfortunately it is the action video games (which can be pretty gory) that provide the most benefit. They contrast to some of the brain training programs that can sometimes only be described as mind numbingly boring - unless you find following bubbles or numbers floating around the screen riveting.

Introducing the three musketeers of high performance.

1. Physical activity.

Hooray! The Lycra shorts still get a look in. Exercise, movement or anything that gets us off our bottom, primes our brain for better attention, mood and thinking.

2. Human connection.

Effective communication, learning, trust and collaboration work so much better face-to-face.

3. Brain challenge.

Elevate your cognitive finesse by learning a second language, playing a musical instrument or writing a poem! This works especially well

if it is a skillset we don't expect to be good at because this makes our brain work harder and drives our neuroplasticity.

For those of us who are healthy, working hard and looking to improve our mental performance, what works is to use the far less sexy though effective means of stretching our mental muscle though improving our brain health and engagement with our world. If you enjoy the current brain training games available that's fine just don't expect too much more than improving at the games you play.



*Dr. Jenny Brockis is a medical practitioner who specialises in the science of high performance thinking. Her book *Future Brain: The 12 Keys to Create a High Performance Brain* (Wiley) is available at all good bookstores and at www.drjennybrockis.com*

Getting to Know Dr Jenny Brockis

Dr Jenny Brockis and the science of high performance thinking.

We are moving from the Information Age into the Thinking Age, which means it's not what we know, but how we think that matters. Rapid technological advance is changing how we the ways we live, work and play.

Our potential is massive, if we choose to use our brains the way they were designed. Forward thinking businesses and organisations know that their future success will require more than technology and expertise alone, they need to tap into their greatest and most valuable asset - the minds of those who work for them.

This is where the brain science can help - validating what has been shown to really work to build motivation, passion and drive.

Jenny, what inspired you to start your business? What are your goals and values?

As a doctor I've always been curious about human behaviour. The advent of the new brain science is completely fascinating to me because it helps us to make sense of why we think and behave the way we do and has also showed so much of what we used to think about the human brain was wrong!

My worry is that we haven't got the balance right yet of how to use our amazing new technology without it completely taking over our lives.

My concern too is for our health and wellbeing. Stress levels, rates of mental illness are skyrocketing despite so many new medical advances and access to information. Again it comes back to balance, determining how much we really need to know and making wise choices about how we choose to live our lives remembering that we are human with physiological needs.

Eating healthily, doing some exercise, getting enough sleep, managing our stress – it's not rocket science yet we look for ways to circumvent these basic needs, thinking that's the smart thing to do. My wish is to see greater understanding of the need for brain health, and a cultural shift towards personal accountability of our own health and wellbeing. This will come from greater brain awareness – understanding how the human brain is designed to operate at its best.

Treating people as we would like to be treated is such a basic premise; yet hard to manage when we are under the pump. Having the skills to manage the pressure cooker of life and work is paramount to leading happier more fulfilled lives.

I've always said I want to make brain fitness as normal and well understood as Jamie Oliver has made healthy eating and that's what drives me to get out of bed in the morning.

My goal is to have brain health

as part of the normal school curriculum starting in Primary School. Helping our kids to learn more about how their brains work, how to manage those times when things don't turn out right, how to make friends and look after each other, means we will then be well on our way to building a society that is people focused, where communities and workplaces care for others, and lead happy purpose driven lives.

It may sound a bit airy-fairy, but it's about increasing tolerance, celebrating diversity, individual uniqueness and creating a kinder world.

What was the driving force behind your decision to specialise in this area of business?

The more I delved into the research and neuroscience, the more I came to realise that our current medical model that focuses on the outcome of illness and disease is flawed. Both doctors and media have been commenting on the rising burden and cost of chronic and complex medical conditions. It seemed obvious that preventing disease is far preferable, which would have to come from education, insight and behavioural change.

The research is very clear, brain health matters at all ages, so while addressing some of the concerns of the elderly around preventing memory loss and cognitive decline

was important, I realised we need to start paying attention to our brain health from our earliest years. Staying in general practice, much as I loved it, was preventing me from getting the message of brain health out to a wider audience. So I took the somewhat scary decision to start a new career promoting brain health and better thinking skills.

What types of customers do you help? What experience do you have helping small business customers?

My customers include the general public who are hungry to find out more about how their brain works, educators who want assistance for themselves and their students to enhance learning, resiliency skills and stress management and SME's and corporates who have come to realise that a happy healthy workforce is good for higher productivity, performance and profit.

One of the biggest challenges facing many of my clients in small business is managing organisational change. Providing insight into why some resist change, why it can be tricky to achieve the desired change and how to nudge people towards acceptance can alleviate a lot of the fear and anxiety felt on all sides.

Other times my work has been around managing energy levels at work and how to switch off. Over busy, over stretched brains that get stressed find it hard to slow down, so sometimes I provide tools and strategies for slower thinking to enhance clarity and focus and reduce stress.

People skills, effective communication, developing a work culture where people want to come to work and do their job well, is



the new way of doing business. My work starts by first getting to understand what's going on for a business, what their problems and challenges are, because the solution is never a one-size fits all.

What are the main reasons that someone would choose you to help grow/develop/improve their business?

It's about differentiation.

There are a lot of business consultants, executive coaches and training companies who offer specific advice and training.

My premise is, if you want to maintain the competitive edge to stay at the top of your game and one step ahead of the pack it's not what you know, it's how well you think and that comes from starting with a fit and healthy brain.

Business is all about the business of relationships between every person within a company or organisation at every level. What drives motivation and high performance comes from knowing how we tick and having the skill sets to foster understanding, trust and certainty.

What process, services and support do your clients receive?

The Future Brain Program is delivered in a variety of formats, keynotes, half day to two-day workshops, facilitated discussions and individual or group mentoring.

Knowledge alone is never enough, which is why I offer follow up sessions either face-to face or webinars to check in on how some of the ideas are being bedded down and integrated into the way of doing.

What challenges did you face in setting up your business?

Moving from the safety and comfort of my existing medical practice into the unknown was a

little daunting! What helped was finding the right people along the way to help me develop my speaking, authoring and mentoring business.

I had to overcome the guilt for 'abandoning' my patients but came to realise they would be well cared for by others and meanwhile what mattered was focusing on getting the message for the need for brain fitness at work really clear.

One remaining challenge is overcoming the idea in some sectors that health and people skills are all very nice but not relevant or necessary during tough economic times, which is precisely the time brain fitness is needed the most! Many training budgets have been slashed, people are being asked to do more with less and many businesses have batted down the hatches to focus purely on using their technology and expertise to survive. They want the social proof from the early adopters that fitter brains provide business value through lower human costs of high staff turnover, absenteeism, presenteeism and sick leave.

Measuring the intangibles of health, wellbeing and happiness has been seen as difficult, however many more studies have now revealed the statistics clearly demonstrating the positive ROI for implementing a healthy brain work environment.

Tell us about some of the expectations that you had. Have they been met?

I assumed everyone was going to be as fascinated by the brain as I was and willing to leap into action to obtain better brain health! This wasn't the case, so I have had to learn to be patient, (never a strong point) and continue to sow the seeds of awareness.

What is so encouraging is that

many more people in business are now more open to the idea of using better brain health as an essential business tool. They see that it's not just a passing fad and the science is there to back it up.

What types of services do you offer?

I provide keynotes, workshops and consultations. The first sows the seeds of the ideas, the second helps those who are ready to explore further to know what they can be doing and the third is the gold – getting to the nub of the matter, understanding the challenges and fears that may be holding people back, helping them to create their own insights and supporting them over a period of time to achieve the outcomes they are looking for.

Do you provide services nationally?

Yes. I regularly travel interstate.

Do you have any plans for overseas expansion?

Following the launch of my new book there has been considerable interest in Hong Kong and I'm hoping to create more of a presence in the UK.

What would you say to someone looking for a business consultant and what advice would you give them?

Regardless of what business you are in, look for a consultant who can help assist you with people skills. Technology and information are easy to come by, what matters is having the right employees who get you, get your business and want to be a part of it. It all comes down to being human and understanding human behaviour; what motivates us to do our best, gives us meaning and allows us to be happy.