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GENERAL NEWS

Book Review: 'The Organized Mind' by Daniel J. Levitin

Our minds were designed to succeed in an environment utterly unlike the information overload we now face.

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Christopher Chabris

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More than a century ago, Sigmund Freud wrote the "Psychopathology of Everyday Life." Over two decades ago, Donald Norman published the "Psychology of Everyday Things." Three years ago, David Myers called a new edition of his textbook "Psychology in Everyday Life." The word "everyday" has a special appeal in such titles, since so many psychology books, especially of the self-help variety, are written for the self with major problems to contend with—love, illness, grief, identity, conflict—leaving the small tasks of mundane functioning to common sense, or perhaps to business writers who purvey "habits" and "disciplines."

The Organized Mind

By Daniel J. Levitin

Dutton, 496 pages, \$27.95



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In "The Organized Mind," Daniel J. Levitin, a cognitive neuroscientist at McGill University, makes an ambitious attempt to bring research in neuroscience and cognitive psychology to bear on the more ordinary parts of our lives. He focuses on the daily challenges of professionals, managers and knowledge workers. But we are all knowledge workers now, since everyone uses [Facebook](#), [FB +1.18%](#) communicates by email, and must process, store and retrieve an ever-growing volume of information. In this impressively wide-ranging and thoughtful work, Mr. Levitin stresses the

many ways in which evolution designed our minds to succeed in an environment that was utterly unlike the world of information overload we now face. And he aims to help us cope by providing concrete suggestions for solving the daily problems of modern existence.

Mr. Levitin begins by explaining why we are in the mess we are in. The capacities of our brains grew out of solutions to the problems that our ancestor species confronted when living in the natural world. We have very good memories for routes we walk and for places where things are located because those are the most important things for primates and mammals to be keep track of. And our tendency to be attracted by anything new had great value when new things were likely to be important threats or opportunities. But these capacities may be maladapted to the challenges of current life, especially the man-made parts of it.

Memories tuned for routes and places are simply not designed to store the

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near-infinity of unique passwords (random strings of letters, numbers and punctuation) that Internet security demands. Decision-making systems that put a premium on novelty betray us when millions upon millions of new data packets are mere finger-taps away. "Every status update you read on Facebook, every tweet or text message you get from a friend," Mr. Levitin writes, "is competing for resources in your brain with important things like whether to put your savings in stocks or bonds, where you left your passport, or how to reconcile with a close friend you just had an argument with." All this piling up taxes our abilities to process information, remember it and make decisions.

What to do? Mr. Levitin devotes several meaty chapters to specific domains—including domestic matters, social connections and time management—in which we tend to fall short of what is needed for peace of mind and productivity. He also considers how to teach younger people to cope with the information-rich environment they will grow up in. Throughout, he mixes anecdote and science, first-person narrative and tips for successful living. On one page you may read a detailed description of a brain-imaging study, on the next a quotation from the man who was once in charge of managing President Obama's mail, and after that a formula for generating strong but memorable passwords.

A good way to deal with overload, Mr. Levitin suggests, is to offload the responsibilities of "personal management," tasks like being on time and staying in touch with friends or associates. This strategy is routinely adopted by members of a category that Mr. Levitin calls HSPs—Highly Successful Persons. A few months ago, I was excited to learn that my newest [Twitter](#) ([TWTR +0.89%](#)) followers were Phil Ivey, one of the best poker players in the world, and the popular actor Taye Diggs—both undoubted HSPs. Then I found out that they employ other people to manage their social media. Mr. Levitin tells us that he met [Jimmy Carter](#) back in the mid-1970s, when he was first running for president, and Mr. Carter spoke "as though we had all the time in the world." He could focus on the task at hand, Mr. Levitin notes, because his aides were worrying about where he needed to be and when, freeing him to "let go of those inner nagging voices and be *there*."

Mr. Levitin isn't recommending that we all hire personal assistants, an unrealistic approach unless you happen to be an HSP or a Real Housewife. We don't need human helpers because computational ones become better all the time. A calendar app that buzzes quietly 15 minutes before each appointment is better and cheaper than a human who has to knock on your door and interrupt your conversation or train of thought. Sites like Orbitz and Kayak are faster and more flexible for booking almost any trip than human travel agents ever were. A well-curated Twitter feed will keep you up on news about your work and hobbies in a way that no personal assistant ever could. Indeed, we have outsourced to [Google](#) ([GOOGL +1.56%](#)) a massive volume of "research" chores that used to take anywhere from minutes to months of trawling through reference sources, making phone calls and visiting archives. These conveniences come with frustrations (also known as "first-world problems"), but to focus on such trees is to miss the forest of improvements that we enjoy today.

To a surprising extent, Mr. Levitin's advice for organizing our minds consists not of learning mental tricks or doing brain exercises but of organizing our surroundings—literally, the physical world we inhabit every day. This effort can reduce needless demands on our cognitive abilities, especially on our capacity for paying attention, which he rightly calls "the most essential mental resource for any organism." The suggestions range from the simple (keep in plain sight the things you need to access most often) to the detailed, such as setting up various filing systems, including a junk drawer and "miscellaneous" file.

Explaining filing systems, Mr. Levitin writes, "the key to creating useful categories in our homes is to limit the number of types of things they contain to one or at most *four* (respecting the capacity limitations of working memory)." By keeping items that share a common use in a single place (e.g., supplies for a party) you reduce the burden on memory, since you must only associate one location ("top middle kitchen island drawer") with one category ("birthday party") rather than several locations (different drawers and cabinets) with several items (colored napkins, paper plates, plastic cups).

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The same idea applies to files of important documents and media, whether physical or digital.

In the case of the junk drawer, Mr. Levitin explains that, while we have a powerful instinct to categorize things, we don't benefit from creating categories that have only a single member. Uncategorizable stuff should go together in its own space because this is the easiest way for the human mind to keep track of it. If you have a lot of folders with just one document in each, you might soon forget that those folders even exist. It would be better if their contents remained together in a bigger "misc" folder.

When it comes to teaching younger generations how to organize their minds, Mr. Levitin makes some surprising points. Today's college students are thought of as "digital natives" who are inherently skilled with computers and the Internet because they grew up with them from their earliest days. But they have trouble distinguishing media outlets and websites that at least try to report news and facts objectively from those that are deliberately partisan or ideological. Even medical students aren't good at telling high-quality journals (whose research reports should be given more trust) from low-quality ones (whose reports should be regarded with skepticism). Given that our minds mostly evolved long before the invention of reading and writing, let alone mass media, it stands to reason that a fine eye for evaluating the quality of sources must be learned, and even taught, rather than assumed to be part of our standard equipment.

What to do about this? It turns out that librarians have already responded by writing guides to evaluating sources. These include questions like "is the page current?" and "what is the domain?" (A page from nih.gov will have more authoritative medical advice than one from autismspeaks.org.) These suggestions point to considerations that many of us take for granted but that are increasingly crucial for everyone to grasp, now that Google's cornucopia is rarely farther away than our hip pockets.

Some of Mr. Levitin's recommendations may seem like little more than common sense or reiterations of techniques developed from generations of experience. Has anyone not heard of a junk drawer? But if there is one lesson to be drawn from the past century of research on human behavior it is that common sense is a much poorer guide to life than, well, common sense would have us believe. Common sense is often contradicted by empirical evidence—we assume, for instance, that we remember important events in precise detail, when research shows that such memories become distorted and decay over time. And elements of common sense frequently contradict one another. How can opposites attract but birds of a feather flock together? When common sense can be shown to be consistent with solid scientific principles, we should prize it all the more.

"The Organized Mind" is an organized book, but it also rewards dipping in at any point, for there are fascinating facts and examples throughout. Mr. Levitin concisely explains Kolmogorov complexity (a way to measure how much information a message or algorithm contains, which can help with communicating and storing data optimally). He provides a handy inventory of things to keep extras of in your luggage, so you don't have to remember them and then scurry around to gather them up before you leave for a trip. (Most important, keep a phone charger in your bag at all times.) He even lists the rules that govern how interstate highways are numbered—with examples and a map. The point is that if you learn the system, you don't need to memorize the specific directions and junctions of dozens of individual highways. (Nowadays, though, we outsource this knowledge to GPS-equipped cars and phones.) An appendix explains how to construct simple 2x2 tables to properly interpret important percentages and probabilities like the likelihood of having a serious disease given a positive diagnostic test.

Like any neuroscience-based book, "The Organized Mind" has to confront the problem of the still-tentative nature of many of the most fascinating findings and resist the ever-present temptation to pick a few new ideas to weave a just-so story. Books with titles like "the new science of X" or "the neuroscience of Y" can almost be counted on to be wrong—often breathlessly so. Mr. Levitin mostly eludes this trap by sticking to established principles, such as the limited capacities of memory and attention or the biases that plague our thinking (e.g., the difficulty of reasoning rationally about risks).

None of these principles will rise or fall at the next conference or in the next edition of a scholarly journal.

Clearly, most of us could use more organization in our lives and in our minds. But does a push for organization and focus, for the optimal use of our scarce attention, come at any cost? Perhaps. Students who use "study drugs" like Ritalin or Adderall to stay awake and concentrate on work and deadlines report that they find it easier to complete projects but feel that the results are less creative than they otherwise would be. Such a tradeoff—if it is even more than anecdotal—could be the natural result of "powering through" a task in a fixed time frame, regardless of whether drugs or other forces were involved.

But such trade-offs do not mean that organization and creativity are enemies. Without enough organization to complete a project, no amount of creativity will have an effect. And some of the most creative people, Mr. Levitin notes, were also some of the most fanatical organizers of their output. [Michael Jackson](#) employed a full-time archivist, and John Lennon "kept boxes and boxes of work tapes of songs in progress, carefully labeled." Perhaps this habit explains why the ex-Beatle seemed to go on releasing album after album of new material after his death. In any case, it's a mistake to think creativity suffers from organization, that a messy desk or office is a sign of genius. What does benefit creativity is exposing one's mind to a variety of influences, sources and types of information. A mind that can stay focused despite diverse stimulation, and that can produce enough ideas so that some of them might be truly great, must be an organized one.

Mr. Levitin makes an impressive case for organizing one's mind and gives sound advice for how to do so. But there's one old-fashioned technique I wish he had talked up more: the habit of writing things down. I don't think I'm unique in believing that, when a thought occurs to me, it is better to write it down immediately, lest it vanish forever. In fact, that's how I wrote this review: As I went through the book, I made a note of everything I thought could be worth mentioning. Of course, about 99% of those things never even made it into what you are reading. But taking notes exploits an important cognitive principle: Things are remembered better if they are encoded in more than one way. A fleeting idea doesn't leave a strong trace, but combine it with the complex cognitive act of translating it into words and putting those words on paper or on a screen and it is likely to affect your later thoughts more than if you had just let it pass unremarked. When you find the concepts and recommendations in "The Organized Mind" that apply to you—there are bound to be many—be sure to write them down.

—Mr. Chabris is a psychology professor at Union College and co-author, with Daniel Simons, of "The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us."

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mike rice

I use an old software that is no longer supported, called Eudora. Since signing onto the net in 1995, I've placed over 4,000 entries in my address book. The Address book can be unattached and sent as a file to another computer and stored there. All my passwords and personal information, memos, items about old friends, addresses, important memos by myself and others, and a New Yorker article written by Malcom Gladwell, are kept in this way. I never found another software that was this adaptable. It also contains well over 1,000 email addresses, not all of which are still valid because some of these folks are dead. I would recommend it to anyone. Choose version 7.1.0.9

9 hours ago



Charles Aulbach

As a addendum. I find it difficult to accept as true any hypothesis that is supported by a statement such as: "Our brains evolved to..." Really? We know how our brains evolved, what they evolved to do, wow!!? Just stick to the facts.

Good review. I'll buy the book. It appears to be useful.

I'd best write this down lest I forget it.

12 hours ago



Charles Aulbach

I have to concur with the proposition that most of what passes for information, news, analysis, etc. is BS (hype, outright lies, half-truths, manipulative 'sales pitches' for whatever purpose). We have to learn to discriminate skeptically. My brother, for example, sorts his USPS mail by postage: If they don't care enough to send it first class, it goes immediately in the trash (or shredder).

12 hours ago

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