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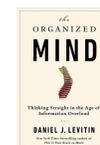
‘The Organized Mind’ by Daniel J. Levitin

By Michael Andor Brodeur | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 18, 2014

Sometime after I picked up neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin’s “The Organized Mind,” I lost my T pass.

The separation of the pass from its usual companions in its usual pocket was unsettling, and sent my hands digging through my other pockets in a sequence that seemed rehearsed — predetermined by primacy or likelihood, a Michael Jackson-esque dance of highly focused pants slapping.

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ARSENIO COROA

Daniel J. Levitin highlights the four components of our attentional system.

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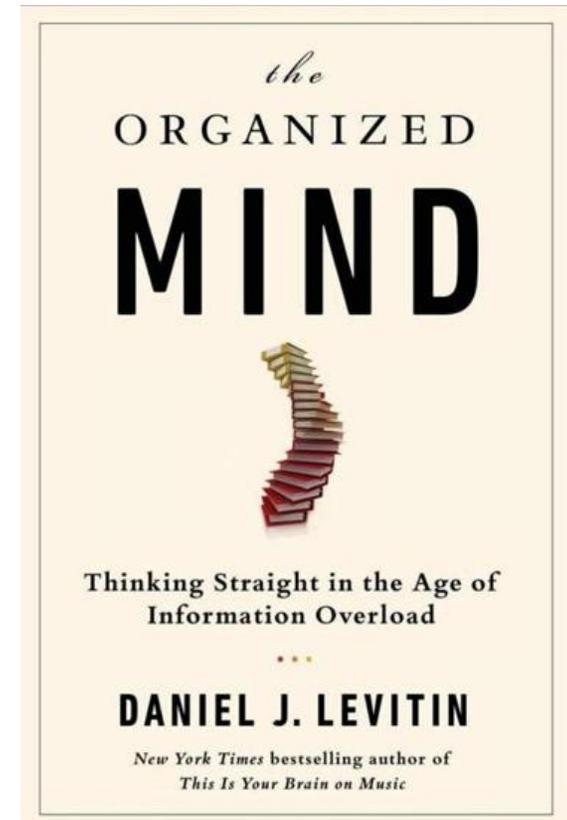
From that failure, I thumbed the slots of my wallet — affordances specifically designed for things like T passes and bank cards, but cluttered with old train tickets and spent gift cards. No luck. I then expanded the search into tiered categories: things I was wearing with pockets; flat surfaces I'd encountered since my last subway trip; the

floor of my apartment. Stumped, I auditioned a variety of creative possibilities that didn't pan out (e.g., had I used it as a bookmark?). A flare of frustration was put out by a wave of acceptance.

All told, this journey took about 30 seconds.

Losing things, as I sometimes do, has earned me a reputation among certain spouses as a somewhat disorganized person. But according to Levitin, my brain was just doing what the average brain does — which is actually pretty spectacular.

Everything about this episode — from my tactile discovery of the absence of the T pass, to the backup system of possible locations my brain quickly conjured, to the outward graduation through levels of spatial categories, to the last-ditch recruitment of the imagination, to the emotional pirouette at the finish (a spritz of cortisol when I stressed, a dollop of dopamine when I chilled) — points to the incredible sophistication of not just the brain itself, but its skill with offloading so many of its burdens to its immediate environment. Even with all of this intricacy (or perhaps because of it), things can fall through the cracks.



The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload

Author: Daniel J. Levitin

Publisher: Dutton

Number of pages: 496 pp.

Book price: \$27.95

The world outside our minds is, in many ways, an extension of the one inside. A plate for your keys means never having to actively think about where your keys will end up; wallets, when used properly, can do much the same for T passes. Words, books, albums, hard drives — they're all third-party storage. Those little Post-its all over my desk may be a mess, but they are how my brain cleans house, putting thoughts somewhere else until they're needed, and hollering for the hippocampus to locate them when necessary.

The digitization of our lives hasn't just created more information than any of us can realistically process, it's more than we can fathom. (Levitin offers the figure of 300 exabytes of data, which, accurate or not, is too many zeros to show you.)

But Levitin highlights the four components of our attentional system — the default or “mind-wandering” mode (lost keys); the central executive mode (the search for keys); the attentional filter (focusing on task); and the attentional switch that moves us from one mode to the other (giving up the search) — as tools that can be used to sort, interpret, and make use of the endless influx of information.

His timing is good with his book. “Brain-training” mobile apps like Lumosity and Elevate are experiencing a rise in popularity, using game-like exercises to test and enhance the neuroplasticity of our brains — the ease with which it switches between and operates across different “modes.” But the “personal trainer” metaphor these apps employ perpetuates a misunderstanding of the brain as a lumpy muscle that can go flabby, rather than an unknowably intricate, multilayered system of networked neurons. If we can alter our understanding of the brain as more of a filing system than a filing cabinet, we can make better use of both our time and our minds.

Levitin suggests that a working knowledge of the brain's M.O. can help us organize our homes, our time, our business dealings, our moments of crisis, and our social lives online and off. Many of his recommendations are less about teaching an old brain new tricks, and more about changing aspects of your surroundings (or your interaction with them) to better cooperate with your brain's unique way of doing things.

Some of these solutions may seem too practical for their own good; when Levitin rhapsodizes about the efficacies of 3-by-5-inch index cards, plastic pill dispensers, and 1,001-piece nut and bolt storehouses from the hardware store, his raft of low-tech solutions might seem out of place given their origins in the lab.

But it's easier to get on board when he dismantles the notion of multitasking (you're less doing a hundred things at once than breaking your cognitive potential into a hundred pieces, and wasting valuable oxygenated glucose in the process). Turns out, taking things one at a time is, medically speaking, the ideal.

But beyond all the physical hacks and tweaks Levitin suggests, he even cites a spiritual aspect to mental organization. Levitin pushes the importance of maintaining a Zen-like state of mindfulness, both as a way to relieve the tension that comes with worries over undone tasks and future uncertainties, and to allot more of our finite attention to the moment at hand.

Had I been more focused on the moment, my T pass might not have vanished into a cognitive blind spot. And while, in this case, acceptance is the only path to comfort, don't get too comfortable, brain: I'll remember this.

Michael Andor Brodeur is the culture writer at the Globe. He can be reached at mbrodeur@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@MBrodeur](https://twitter.com/MBrodeur).