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**How Your Job Can Make You Smarter** – *Sue Shellenbarger*

Work is often stressful and tiring. But could your job also be making you smarter?

It might. New studies by neuroscientists show training in certain mental skills can build the brain's capacity to process information and solve problems. Experts say practicing those skills on the job may also help sharpen cognitive abilities.

It takes more than just sitting down at your desk, though. A person must be challenged and stimulated, tackling progressively harder tasks and reaping rewards as an incentive to keep building the brain, says Michael Merzenich, a leading researcher and author of "Soft-Wired," a book on practical applications of brain plasticity.

Researchers for more than a decade have been exploring how various jobs affect cognitive abilities. More than a dozen studies, including six in the past two years, link time spent in various occupations, from writing or teaching math to performing music or being an athlete, to increased density or activation of regions of the brain related to core job skills. The impact of such physical changes in the brain on workers' overall cognitive ability isn't clear.

Recently, researchers have begun teasing out the specific cognitive abilities required by particular jobs. Many are abilities that can be improved with practice. Training adults in blocking out distractions, focusing on tasks and interpreting facts leads them to perform better on tests of abstract reasoning and controlling one's attention, according to a 2014 study by researchers at the University of Texas and the University of Illinois.

The study didn't discuss which jobs use these abilities. **But executives and managers must routinely block out distractions and exercise reasoning and problem-solving skills, according to a 2015 study led by William Becker, an assistant professor of management at Texas Christian University, Fort Worth. So must paramedics and emergency-medical technicians, who may be faced with several people in distress and have to focus on only the most pressing injuries, says Dr. Becker, who sees linking specific cognitive skills with jobs as a way to help employers match candidates to positions.**

In another study, doing exercises in translating code, spotting patterns of letters or lines, and visualizing the movement of three-dimensional objects in space was linked to improved scores on tests of those skills three years later, according to research on people ages 18 to 80 by Timothy Salthouse, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Such skills are routinely applied on the job by engineers, who use visual-spatial ability to design structures. Programmers need keen coding and pattern-spotting ability to create software.

Working hard at these core job tasks could sharpen cognitive abilities, "if it's the right kind of job with the right kind of engagement," says Dr. Merzenich, co-founder of Posit Science in San Francisco, a maker of brain-training exercises. "The job has to matter to you. You have to be into it. And the rewards and feedback have to be clear and valuable to you."

Many people stagnate on the job, however, he says. "We have an early period on the job when we master it, commit it all to memory and say, 'I'm good at this now,' and stop advancing. And you slide backward."

To build brainpower, workers must remain “engaged in the world in all its details,” including the attitudes and behavior of people around them, Dr. Merzenich says, based on his research. A rookie saleswoman is likely to improve her skills as she learns to listen closely, understand what customers want and respond to their facial expressions and body language, he says.

**Good managers must learn to wrestle with abstract problems and interpret trends while honing their ability to read colleagues’ mood and attitude. Dr. Becker helps students in his management classes sharpen their perceptual skills by keeping journals describing important conversations they’ve had. They reflect in writing on what they said, whether they responded well to others and how they could have done better. Many resist the task, but “every year there will be a handful of students who really get into it, and they’re the ones who get smarter,” he says.**

People tend to grow cognitively when they work on tasks that can never be completely mastered, Dr. Merzenich says. Alison Burns of Larkspur, Colo., has continually sought out new challenges over the course of her 20-year career, managing several different divisions for Alcatel-Lucent. She continues to sharpen her ability to communicate with colleagues, noticing and interpreting body language or pauses during phone calls. To make sure she understands others, she sometimes asks meeting attendees to illustrate their point on a whiteboard. “If you think you’ve mastered something, you create a rut for yourself,” says Ms. Burns, who is currently vice president of Alcatel-Lucent University, a network of training centers.

Working in a stimulating environment with a lot of other people also “gives people an opportunity to work out” cognitive skills, says Cynthia Green in Montclair, N.J., a speaker and president of Total Brain Health, a provider of training and certification programs. Research shows teachers who spend their careers in busy schools interacting with many people retain cognitive skills longer than computer programmers, who have more advanced technical skills but often work in less stimulating environments, says Dr. Green, author of “Your Best Brain Ever.”

Lenny Stern builds that kind of stimulation into his daily routine by engaging in a lot of varied activities. Mr. Stern, co-founder and partner at SS+K, a New York ad agency, lectures at universities and dines with groups of students afterward “to see what they’re going through.” Visiting museums, Mr. Stern, 53, asks himself, “Am I thinking about what I’m seeing?” Meeting with clients, he strives to listen in depth, and he pushes himself physically by skiing and playing ice hockey. “I don’t think you can continue to grow and develop unless you’re challenging yourself,” he says.

People need frequent and meaningful rewards to continue the hard work of brain-building, says Gary Lambert, a Richmond, Va., psychologist and president of Sharp Mind Consulting, a workplace training and consulting firm. Dr. Lambert recently coached a group of traders in the financial markets whose jobs place intense demands on their information-processing and working-memory skills. They have to monitor and respond instantly to price changes in several markets while heeding spoken orders from other traders and keep broad market trends in mind, Dr. Lambert says. “They have to move very fast, far faster than the average person,” in processing visual and auditory information, Dr. Lambert says.

Traders failed often, but they also reaped rich financial rewards for successes, motivating them to continue gaining speed and accuracy. In time, however, financial rewards weren’t enough to make up for the grueling stress, and many of the traders “found easier ways to make money,” he says.

**Star-Telegram**

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## **2015 in review: Facebook, American Airlines launch big Fort Worth projects— Sandy Baker and Andre Ahles**

Facebook and American Airlines showed how much they like Fort Worth in 2015. The companies each launched high-profile developments — a Facebook data center at Alliance and a new American headquarters in far east Fort Worth — bolstered by tax incentives from the city.

By the end of the year, construction was well underway on the first of three 250,000-square-foot Facebook data centers in far north Fort Worth that over time will become one of the largest such projects in North Texas. In a nod to its self-devised references, the company will be changing the address on the \$1 billion development at 4901 Alliance Gateway to 4500 Like Way. A Facebook data center in North Carolina is on Connect Way, and one in Oregon is on Share Way.

“Like Way was next up in the rotation,” Facebook spokesman Michael Kirkland said.

It’s not that the company “likes” Fort Worth any more than the other cities it’s in, he said. But officials admitted they were overwhelmed at the Texas-size welcome they received at a groundbreaking held in July. The Fort Worth center will become Facebook’s fifth data center and is expected to be its most advanced.

Facebook, based in Menlo Park, Calif., bought 110.7 acres from Ross Perot Jr.’s Hillwood company in June for the project, which officials say will have a huge economic impact in Fort Worth and North Texas. The project was held close to the vest, and Fort Worth was said to have emerged as one of two finalists from as many as 220 cities initially interested.

City and state officials, and other business representatives, opened their arms to Facebook that July day. Earlier, they opened the coffers. In May, the City Council approved an incentive that could give Facebook \$146.7 million in tax rebates over 20 years, potentially becoming the city’s largest incentive package ever offered. Projections show that Fort Worth will receive \$48.5 million in new taxes in that period.

Facebook said it will hire about 40 full-time employees in Fort Worth but said the number could go up to about 100.

Moreover, the Legislature this year approved new sales tax breaks for data centers at least 250,000 square feet and Tarrant County approved property tax abatements on the project as well.

Kirkland said the first “data hall” at the center should be in operation this time next year. Each building will be divided into four data halls and brought online as Facebook needs them, he said.

### **New American headquarters lands in Fort Worth**

In October, American Airlines made its big headquarters announcement, and Fort Worth officials breathed a sigh of relief. The city’s largest private employer unveiled plans to create a new headquarters campus on the west side of Texas 360 south of Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, near where a new operations center opened a month earlier.

**The announcement ended months of speculation that the Fort Worth-based carrier might move its top offices to downtown Dallas or Irving.**

**“It speaks to the importance of Fort Worth in the global community ... to have a prominent company like American Airlines say ‘we want to stay here,’ ” said Homer Erekson, dean of Texas Christian University’s Neeley School of Business.**

**Erekson said the decision shows the confidence that American has in the future of Fort Worth and will add to the city’s growing employment base.**

The airline plans to locate about 5,000 employees at its new \$350 million corporate campus, which will have at least four buildings on the site of a former headquarters building at the southwest intersection of Trinity Boulevard and State Highway 360.

Architecture plans for the campus have not been released, but American CEO Doug Parker says it will include open spaces and areas for workers to collaborate. It will also include walkways and bridges to connect the site to the airline's flight training facility north of the site. American expects to break ground in the first half of 2016. The project, which received a \$21.25 million tax incentive package from the city, should be completed by the fall of 2018.

"We want this to be a place where people come to work but also stay and enjoy working with their colleagues," Parker said during a recent tour of the abandoned former home of American and Sabre at the site, which will be torn down. "We're going to build a facility that is going to encourage that."

American achieved several milestones in 2015 in its integration of US Airways. The airline received its single operating certificate from the Federal Aviation Administration in April and combined frequent flier programs into one AAdvantage program. It also integrated the airlines' passenger service systems in October without any hiccup in flight operations and took down the remaining signs of US Airways at airports nationwide

American put its new Boeing Dreamliner aircraft into service on routes to Beijing, Argentina and Brazil and opened its \$88 million Integrated Operations Center in Fort Worth in September. *Andrea Ahles*



December 30, 2015

**Why this billionaire tycoon saved an ice cream company – *Andrew Marton***

When Blue Bell ice cream makes its triumphant return to Fort Worth on Monday morning, signature flavors like Cookies 'n Cream, Homemade Vanilla and Dutch Chocolate will taste extra-sweet and satisfying.

Not just because Blue Bell's many fans, some of whom are expected to line up at 5:30 a.m. at area grocery stores, have been deprived of the beloved Texas treat for nearly seven months.

It's also because one of Fort Worth's own, reclusive billionaire Sid Bass, rescued the 108-year-old company from the brink of meltdown.

In April, the Brenham-based creamery was in the throes of the worst scandal in its history: Desserts made at Blue Bell's Brenham and Oklahoma plants had been linked to a listeria outbreak that caused 10 illnesses and three deaths, in Arizona, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas. The severity of the health scare eventually forced Blue Bell – the country's third-largest ice cream seller — to stop all production and recall its products.

As the weeks passed, Blue Bell would lay off 1,450 workers and furlough 1,400 others (from a total workforce of 3,900). According to both the *Houston Press* and *The Wall Street Journal*, the crisis sent Blue Bell's annual revenue plummeting from \$680 million in 2014 to a projected \$500 million this year – or a loss of **\$180 million**.

Beset by negative publicity and delays in isolating the source of the bacteria, a cash-strapped Blue Bell struggled to jump-start its operations. The brand was teetering on the edge of extinction.

And then Bass opened his wallet.

In mid-July, the eldest Bass brother, who *Forbes* estimates is worth \$1.66 billion, shelled out up to \$125 million in what many financial observers label a straightforward loan. The infusion of money helped Blue Bell get back in the game, and by early September it began selling its first half-gallons in the Houston and Austin areas, as well as parts of Alabama. Now comes the second wave: Dallas, Fort Worth, Waco, Tulsa and Oklahoma City get their first Blue Bell deliveries as early as 3:30 a.m. Monday.

Why would one of Texas' wealthiest men take an investment plunge into the uncharted waters of a food company when his previous investment experience had been in oil and gas, high tech and notably Walt Disney Co. stock? And why would arguably the most private of the four Bass brothers (Ed, Robert, and Lee all joined Sid on this year's *Forbes* billionaires list), emerge from his carefully formed cocoon of seclusion to make national headlines with an investment in Blue Bell?

Only the 73-year-old, silver-haired Bass knows for sure. He politely declined a request from the *Star-Telegram* last week for a one-on-one interview, saying in an email, "I try to live a quiet life."

But a closer look at the deal reveals layers of sweetness and Bass' signature business savvy. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Bass' investment in a "distressed" Blue Bell comes with warrants that could give him a one-third ownership stake in the company. One analyst estimated he could easily double his investment in two years. Another said that Bass, in fact, has had his eye on Blue Bell since the 1980s.

For now, though, Blue Bell's savior is just happy the ice cream brand is getting back on shelves in North Texas.

"I'm excited for the employees of Blue Bell and its loyal customers," said Bass, who did respond to a follow-up email on the eve of Blue Bell's return. "A lot of hard work has made many people happy. That is a nice outcome."

### **Scooping for investment details**

Citing its privately held, family-run status, Blue Bell has declined to comment on any aspect of Bass' financial involvement in the company. Its president and CEO, Paul Kruse, did issue a boilerplate statement at the time of Bass' highly publicized stake: "We are pleased Sid Bass has made a significant investment with our company. The additional capital will ensure the successful return of our ice cream to the market and our loyal customers."

Bass issued a pro forma, upbeat statement: "We are excited to be a part of the Blue Bell brand and family. Blue Bell is the quality leader in the ice cream industry. We believe quality is the principal attribute that ensures the success, growth and longevity of a business."

Since Bass has chosen not to elaborate on his business motives for rescuing Blue Bell, the void of analysis has been filled by various financial mavens in Texas and beyond.

**Michael Sherrod, in his fifth year as William M. Dickey Entrepreneur-in-residence at TCU's Neeley School of Business, said Bass had his eye on Blue Bell as early as the 1980s.**

**"Sid Bass has always been interested in the Blue Bell brand because it's such an iconic one," Sherrod said. "Secondly, I believe that Bass believes it is still a great investment, now, for his children and grandchildren. It's a brand that he's always believed is valuable to Texas and valuable to keep in Texas,**

**as an independent company. All of those things came together in a perfect storm, and Sid Bass wasn't about to let that opportunity go by."**

**After the crisis occurred, and though Blue Bell was engaged in extensive damage control, its ultimate goal was to remain a privately held company.**

**"Honestly, they were very fortunate that an investor like Sid Bass came along with his long-term interest in their company," Sherrod said. "He happily played the role of white knight in helping Blue Bell stay private and not be sold to some private equity firm, or a large conglomerate like Nestle [the world's biggest ice cream maker]."**

Robert Passikoff, president and founder of Brand Keys, a New York-based brand loyalty consulting firm, said that despite all the damage the recall did to Blue Bell's reputation, the company has a solid chance of recovering.

"We know that loyal customers to a brand beset by uncertain circumstances are six times more likely to give the brand the benefit of the doubt," said Passikoff. "What Blue Bell went through qualifies for that. Clearly, Mr. Bass has an innate sense that loyal customers to Blue Bell will give the brand a break."

Sam Hamadeh is CEO of PrivCo, a research provider on privately held companies. Hamadeh has analyzed Sid Bass' investment in Blue Bell and confirms that it was \$125 million structured as convertible debt, meaning that a loan of \$125 million could be shifted into owning a third of Blue Bell – at a discounted price. Hamadeh estimates Blue Bell's overall value, based on last year's sales figures, at around \$900 million – but Bass could buy it fully for half that.

"Blue Bell had to be priced that way because at the time of Bass' loan, the company had few options," Hamadeh said. "It was already laying off staff, cutting its marketing expenses, so it needed someone to make a distressed investment. And as a billionaire, Mr. Bass could simply write a check, while banks could not act that quickly. As a result, Bass got a really good deal."

Hamadeh estimates that based on other product recalls, within two to three years, as customer memories are short, the company could be worth \$1 billion. At that point, Bass might convert his loan into owning a piece of the company's profit and he could double his investment.

But Hamadeh says some local sentimentality probably went into Bass' decision.

"Even the shrewdest investor has some kind of sweet spot," Hamadeh said. "It's similar to those investors who purchase their local baseball team while getting nothing but a 2 percent return. But despite that sentimentality, I think Mr. Bass saw a good investment in a storied brand."