

# "Thin-Slicing" Experience

Can rapid cognition really help us solve work-related problems?



**DONN LeVIE JR.**

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## Can Rapid Cognition Be a Problem-Solving Tool?

You do it. I do it. We all at times rely on immediate first impressions. But can rapid cognition be a tool to help solve problems? Intuition, sensitivity to non-verbal cues, pattern recognition — our brains are capable of rapidly processing information to help us make judgments and decisions. This ability is called **"thin-slicing."** It can provide another tool for leaders and others to follow their instincts to the truth but only when we use it properly and recognize its limitations.

You've likely experienced a near-instantaneous flash of perception when meeting someone for the first time. Perhaps it was a strong feeling you had something in common, a shared interest or similar line of work. You felt an immediate rapid cognition of the experience, and it revealed itself to have been predictive — and accurate.

Cognitive psychologists refer to this phenomenon as thin-slicing, whereby an experience or observation reveals an immediate recognition of a familiar pattern. Within as little as five seconds, individual characteristics are often visible or inferred through the thin-slice peephole.

## System 1 processing is a critical-thinking shortcut

Thin-slicing, also known as **"System 1 processing,"** is considered a critical-thinking shortcut (intuitive, inductive, recognition primed). Examples of this are the interrogator who instantly surmises an interview subject is lying, a museum curator who immediately "knows" something isn't quite right about a recent (expensive) Egyptian museum acquisition or the fireman on the scene who senses an impending roof collapse and evacuates his team just in time. Yet while thin-slicing can prove to be a vital tool, it's also one best left in the hands of experts.



## How our brains thin-slice experience

We humans are of two minds: the conscious, rational mind, and the **“adaptive unconscious”** (the part of the mind that engages in the thin-slicing process). The conscious mind excels at gathering sensory input and determining what to do with this data. In contrast, the adaptive unconscious is adept at evaluating minute bits of evidence about the external world — hence the term, “thin slice” — and then determines instinctively (and reflexively) how to react (emotion) or respond (emotional intelligence). This adaptive unconscious mind remains hidden from our awareness — until it presents us with some flash of cognition.

## Is thin-slicing useful and valid?

In *The New York Times* best-selling book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, author Malcolm Gladwell explored the work of renowned marital expert John Gottman. Gladwell explains that Gottman can determine with 95% accuracy if a couple will still be together in 15 years — all within one hour of simply observing them. Gottman's accuracy drops to 90% with only 15 minutes of observing couples. Even with such a reduced observation time, Gottman's results support the thin-slicing phenomenon.

## Thin-slicing for job interviews

In the hands (or brains) of experts, thin-slicing can be an important tool to help different types of interviewers determine how best to pursue a line of inquiry — including acting on a hunch interviewees are deceiving, misdirecting or lying to them.

This can be useful whether you're interviewing a job candidate or investigating a potential criminal. But use thin-slicing with caution and alongside other techniques.

Don Rabon, fraud investigator, author and president of Successful Interview Techniques, understands the pitfalls of running with just a thin slice or gut instinct without the help of other cognitive pathways.

"Some studies have shown that we form impressions of another in the first seven seconds. Other studies place it as low as one tenth of a second," Rabon says. He continues:

"My initial implicit impression of the interviewee is based in part on years of experience. However, in my meta-cognition — thinking about my thinking — I apply personal, professional skepticism. I am open to the idea there may be influencing factors below my level of consciousness in play that could be in error. Therefore, while I attend to my initial impression, I am not anchored to it."

Indeed, that gut instinct can raise useful red flags. But it can also come into conflict with our rational minds and what we see around us, often requiring an expert mind and a broader set of tools to ascertain the truth.

## Thin Slicing in different domains

Maria Konnikova, psychologist, author of *Mastermind*, *The Confidence Game*, and world-class poker champion wears headphones to block the distracting banter from male competitors, all the while focusing on the player's hands — not their faces — essentially thin-slicing every micro-gesture while trying to gain a competitive advantage at the table.

Some players wear sunglasses and are masters of the poker face (pun intended). Therefore, in the poker domain, the “tell” (change in a player’s behavior or demeanor that provides clues to that player’s assessment of their hand) is going to be something other than facial expressions. Konnikova uses her Ph.D. in psychology to help her redirect her attention. Konnikova hints at different approaches to thin slicing when she describes how she assesses others in competitive situations—especially where “bluffing” is part of the game:

Can a deep understanding of the human mind win out over the mathematics and statistical wunderkinds of the poker table? In a way, it's as much a test of life philosophy as anything else. The qualitative side of things versus the measurable. The human versus the algorithmic.

— *Maria Konnikova*

## Amygdala hijacking

The **amygdala** (the brain’s emotion processing center in the limbic system) is responsible for that fight-or-flight response that served humans well in the past when they had to protect themselves against wild animals and other dangers. And in the modern world, that limbic system still heavily influences our decision-making process. That’s largely because it reacts faster than the newer prefrontal cortex portion of the brain (the decision-making center) when we’re initially faced with potential threats. This results in what is called an “**amygdala hijack**” that prevents you from thinking clearly or rationally.

A study testing reactions to job assessments in two different groups illustrates how humans interpret different visual and verbal cues, and how that gut instinct can influence perceptions. In the study, researchers offered one group negative performance feedback accompanied by positive emotional signals — namely, nods and smiles. But in the other group, they gave positive feedback that was delivered critically with facial expressions that conveyed disappointment, such as smirks and lack of eye contact. Employees who received positive feedback accompanied by negative emotional signals reported feeling worse about their performances than did the participants who’d received good-natured negative feedback.

The combination of thin-slicing with an amygdala hijack may raise questions about a particular experience for the interviewee or the interviewer. Such a **"pattern interrupt"** can be interpreted as a potential red-flag warning that something might be amiss with the individual or the experience. The trick, of course, is to determine whether those red flags are valid or not, and such occurrences may warrant deeper assessment and evaluation.

The lesson for managers in this job-performance study is that the feedback delivery was more important than the message content. So often, **it's not *what you say that's important; it's how you say it that counts.*** In fact, *how* you say something may launch the amygdala hijack effect faster in another person than *what* it is you actually say.

## When thin-slicing goes bad

There's a menacing side to thin-slicing that has roots in prejudice and bias, and it's known as the **"Warren Harding Error,"** named after the former U.S. president. At six feet tall, Harding was extremely likeable and strikingly handsome — but he wasn't particularly smart, often lost his moral compass and was very gullible. Many consider him to be the country's worst president.

The general public had the unwarranted assumption that Harding was a man of courage, intelligence and integrity. His charisma, presence and appearance played into their superficial and incorrect assumptions. This error is one of implicit bias where unconscious assumptions about someone aren't surrendered even when people are presented with evidence to the contrary.

This effect plays into the popular stereotype that automatically associates leadership ability with physical stature. Such bias represents more of an immediate emotional reaction than rapid cognition. That's worrisome because it reveals that important leadership positions in the public and private sectors are often determined by less rational decision-making than would otherwise seem.

## Timing can enhance Warren Harding Error

The “primacy and recency effects” (first-impression bias) sometimes work in tandem with the Warren Harding Error to cement an incorrect impression of someone due to the inordinate positive or negative influence that the most recent information (rumor, press coverage or “fake news,” for example) may have conveyed to others. Politicians use the primacy and recency effects as strategic weapons in their electoral campaigns by ensuring that the most recent positive publicity about themselves — or negative attacks ads about the opposing candidate — are in the public domain.

## Thin-slicing experience requires caution

Our brains rely on mental shortcuts to simplify making critical and non-critical decisions from all the sensory input we encounter every day. There are many neural-processing shortcuts, called “**heuristics**,” and each occurs in different contexts. It’s important to be cautious, however, as these detours can result in errors and bias. Keep these caveats in plain sight to maintain a proper perspective while conducting research and interviews.

Most communication is honest, so it’s to our advantage to presume other people communicate truthfully to facilitate efficient communication. But this presumption leaves us open to being deceived on occasion. Being suspicious of others can arise from obvious deception motives, questionable demeanor or body language — when communication content is at odds with known facts, and context is misaligned.

## What has thin-slicing taught us?

We know from decades of research that people are, overall, better than one would think at decoding many facets of a stranger’s personality and persona based on an immediate first impression in social situations. And thin-slicing is a useful tool, but it’s not one to be used by itself.

Consider other variables when you're assessing thin-slicing's effectiveness. For instance, sensitivity to non-verbal cues for determining personalities works best with people from the same culture. We also know that women make more accurate assessments using thin slicing than do men. And strangers often assess each other through the cues most readily available to them, the most obvious being physical appearance.

This tendency revealed itself in a 2007 study that suggested a connection between physical cues and shared stereotypes. When that happens, stereotyping becomes **profiling**.

Thin-slicing is a fascinating ability unleashed by the complex and mysterious human brain. For smart leaders, learning to harness this innate "mind hack" capability, while avoiding its pitfalls, could raise hiring quality to an entirely new level. The fictional detective Sherlock Holmes perhaps offered the best advice on how to approach strangers and experiences in Arthur Conan Doyle's book *The Sign of Four* when he said,

**"It is of the first importance not to allow your judgment to be biased by personal qualities ... a client is to me a mere unit, a factor in a problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning."**

— *Sherlock Holmes, in The Sign of Four*





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**Donn LeVie Jr.** is a respected leadership influence strategist/consultant, award-winning author, leadership coach and mentor, and global speaker who focuses on how people speak (**linguistics**), how they think (**cognitive psychology**), and how they make decisions (**behavioral economics**).

In his roles leading people and programs for Fortune 100 companies (**Phillips Petroleum, Motorola, Intel Corp.**), government agencies (**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**), and academia (**the University of Houston Downtown College – Department of Natural Sciences and Mathematics**), Donn has been directly involved with global oceanographic research projects, multi-million-dollar offshore oil and gas exploration programs, high-tech chip design initiatives, and teaching fundamentals of petroleum exploration and production to undergraduate students.

Donn stepped away from the corporate world in 2013 to launch Donn LeVie Jr. STRATEGIES, LLC. Over his career he's spoken at more than 70 conferences and since 2011 has been a regular presenter and leadership strategist at the annual Global Fraud Conference sponsored by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners.

Donn's client and audience list spans organizations from the public, private and education sectors, including the FBI, Dept. of Education Inspector General's Office, New York Port Authority, National Science Foundation, FDIC, Enterprise Holdings, Ernst & Young, the City of Nashville, Franklin and Marshall College, and many more.

As an author, Donn's books have won the Global eBook Award and the International Book Award (*Confessions of a Hiring Manager*, 2012; *Strategic Career Engagement*, 2016). Donn's newly-released books, *From the Underworld to the Boardroom: True Tales of Fraud, Corruption, Counterfeiting, and Cons* and *STACKING THE DECK: Career Strategies for Outsmarting the Competition* are available only through Donn's programs.

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