How a Cognitive Psychologist Assesses a Person's Capacity to Complete Tasks over Time

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Introduction

Goal-setting is helpful at keeping people's attention on a work for a long time, but receiving feedback has a significantly bigger effect, according to a new study from The University of Texas at Arlington.

"It's well known that maintaining one's attention is challenging. "The longer a person performs a task, the lower their performance tends to be," said Matthew Robison, assistant professor of psychology at UT Arlington and the study's first author. "Giving feedback about their performance is a very powerful tool if you want to encourage people to remain focus on a task, whether it's learning or job-related, or if you're developing something that you want people to interact with. [1]"

The study was published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance and was titled "Examining the effects of goal-setting, feedback, and incentives on sustained attention."

Researchers provided participants a simple but attention-demanding assignment and asked them to complete it for 30 minutes in four studies [2]. They looked examined how successful goal-setting, feedback, and incentive manipulations were at keeping participants' attention. Participants offered feedback on their motivation and alertness levels, as well as whether their attention was on-task, wandering, or absent.

The researchers discovered that setting a clear objective improved sustained attention but had no effect on task engagement in the first trial (higher motivation and fewer task-unrelated thoughts).

They divided the performance time into blocks in the second experiment and offered comments at the conclusion of each [3]. The results showed that adding a clear objective with feedback increased attention and motivation. Furthermore, feedback was an effective regulator of task-unrelated thoughts on its own.

When compared to the impact of goals and/or feedback, the study showed minimal evidence that incentives, such as a financial bonus or early exit from the trial, boosted task engagement or performance.

The researchers saw a deterioration in performance over time in all of the studies, with individuals expressing less drive, greater exhaustion, and more mind wandering [4,5].

"It's challenging to maintain optimal performance even when people report feeling motivated and engaged, especially if the job is attentionally demanding," Robison said.

Leaders should be cognizant of the human brain system's limitations in performing repetitive activities for lengthy periods of time, according to Robison. Jobs where critical events are rare but still need focus, such as lifeguarding, TSA screening, or radar monitoring, may strain an individual's attention to its limits.

"When we ask others to complete jobs that need them to be attentive for lengthy periods of time, we need to be aware of the level of difficulty involved in maintaining attention," Robison said. "It's possible that we put ourselves in danger by depending too heavily on the human attentional system to achieve accomplishments that may or may not be doable."

References

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