

A few years ago, I wrote a short piece for the *Harvard Business Review* called 'All Hail The Generalist'. It struck a nerve and spurred thousands of individuals to post comments. Some were angry, some grateful. All were engaged.

The essence of the article was that our love affair with deep expertise had gone too far. Specialisation and the siloisation of society had produced acute tunnel vision in almost all walks of life. The future, I suggested, might belong to those who were skilled not only at generating the proverbial dots of specialised information, but also at connecting them.

In an age when expert knowledge seemed to be the source of higher income, greater prestige, and a fast track to an all-around better life, what I said was provocative. But as Walter Gretzky, father and early coach to ice hockey great Wayne Gretzky, said: the key to success is to "skate to where the puck is going, not to where it has been". My main point, one that I've elaborated upon in numerous other pieces, was that the source of competitive advantage in the past may not prove to be as effective in the future.

My forthcoming book, *Think For Yourself*, attempts to take the problem of siloisation and contextualise it, noting how it affects life and decision-making in the 21st century. Today, we're all drowning in data and information. For almost every situation, we expect there to be an optimal decision, a 'best choice', or a correct answer, and so we constantly run headlong into those that know more about a topic than we do. The result is we've become accustomed to blindly outsourcing our thinking.

The domains in which this occurs vary from everyday decisions such as what we buy to the life-or-death choices we make that affect our health.

One obvious example is our use of GPS navigation aides. By allowing the technology to do our thinking for us, we literally stop thinking about where we are and where we're going. In one case, numerous drivers blindly followed directions on to an active airport runway due to a mapping error. An extreme case? Perhaps. But imagine your device suggests a roundabout route to your destination one morning as the map notes heavy traffic near a school. But that day's a holiday. Do you follow the route? Might our blind reliance on the algorithm embedded in the system lead us to take a route that's longer than it needs to be? Could our quest to be efficient be making us inefficient?

Or suppose your cardiologist suggests you should take a statin to help lower your cholesterol levels. The doctor notes that every cardiologist he knows is personally taking a statin and research shows the drugs are remarkably effective at lowering cholesterol. Despite being seven years younger than you, he, too, is taking a statin. Do you take the medication? From a cardiologist's perspective, lower cholesterol indeed lowers the risk of a heart attack, and statins lower cholesterol. But the side

effects are substantial, including a potential increase in the risk of diabetes (this happens because statins interfere with insulin processes in order to help control cholesterol). And it turns out that diabetes can be accompanied with an elevated risk of a heart attack. Ooops.

Here's the thing: there is no one to blame. No one is intentionally misleading you. The cardiologist thinks he is doing his job to promote heart health. The side effects tend to lie outside of his domain, outside of his silo. And herein lies the issue that I address in *Think For Yourself*: because no one worries about the complete picture in our siloed world of specialists, it is our responsibility to think through the decisions we make.

To be clear, I'm not dismissing the work of experts. Indeed, they're essential and have helped us to move forward in countless walks of life. What we need to do is to learn how to manage them. We need to keep experts on tap, not on top. We can and should use expert input to help us make better decisions. But we should not blindly follow or mindlessly outsource our thinking to them. We must think for ourselves.

In my book, I give various tips on how we can work to restore our autonomy.

For example, always ask your experts what would happen if you didn't do what they're recommending. Or if you did nothing? As noted by management theorist Peter Drucker, "A decision without an alternative is a desperate gambler's throw." Most tough decisions, by definition, don't have obvious answers. But siloisation and specialisation can

fool us into deciding without actually understanding our choices. We can think agreement equates to true understanding. This isn't always the case.

Alfred P Sloan, the legendary head of General Motors, once entered a meeting and found his colleagues in complete agreement on a recommended course of action, at which point he adjourned the meeting, stating, "If we are all in agreement on the decision, then I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about."

Managing experts and technologies is one of the most vexing challenges of our time. It's about overcoming the problems of siloisation and specialisation. It's about taking control of tough decisions, and it's about tapping into expertise as needed. But ultimately, it's about (re)learning to think for ourselves. ■

Vikram Mansharamani, PhD, is a lecturer at Harvard University and the author of *Think For Yourself: Restoring common sense in an age of experts and artificial intelligence* (£22, HBR Press). Follow him on Twitter @mansharamani

We should not blindly follow or mindlessly outsource our thinking to experts

AMERICAN THINKING

SWEET REASON

Is our dependence on technology and experts stunting our ability to think for ourselves?

Vikram Mansharamani makes the case for greater self-reliance



3 MINS

PADDY MILLS