



# Leveraging Cognitive Economy & Work-Life Balance for Career Success & Happy Living



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*The Article is a well-organized presentation & consolidated form of some collected recent research findings & expert suggestions which includes:*

*Psychological Principles of Cognitive Capacity Building and Basic Ideas on Balanced Life Leading*

*for*

***“Career Success & Happy Living”***

***(Freely Redistributable to Anyone)***

***[Softcopy or Hardcopy]***



*Cognitive economy means the ‘tendency’ for cognitive processes to ‘minimize’ processing effort and resources. It refers to the combined ‘simplicity’ and ‘relevance’ of a categorization scheme or representation. Psychologists have shown that humans ‘cope with’ difficult tasks by ‘simplifying’ the task domain, ‘focusing’ on relevant features and ‘generalizing’ over states of the world which are ‘the same’ with respect to the task – it is the ‘psychological principle’ of cognitive economy which can be ‘applied’ to the people’s need ‘to choose’ the correct actions in their tasks.*

*The ‘cognitive neuroscience’ of ‘memory’ and ‘attention’—our ‘improved’ understanding of the brain, its evolution and limitations—can ‘help’ us to better ‘cope with’ a world in which more and more of us feel we’re ‘running fast’ just to ‘stand still’. Many of the ‘professional people’ in our country are ‘sleep-deprived’, ‘overstressed’ and not making ‘enough time’ for things they ‘want to do’. However, one can ‘make changes’ in his/her ‘personal life’. There is no ‘one system’ that will work for ‘everyone’—we are each ‘unique’—but there are some ‘general principles’ that anyone can ‘apply’ in their ‘own way’ to ‘recapture’ a sense of order and to ‘regain’ the hours of lost time spent trying to overcome the disorganized mind.*

*The ‘conscientiousness’ trait of ‘being organized’ is ‘most highly associated’ with our ‘self-improvement’. Conscientiousness comprises ‘industriousness’, ‘self-control’, ‘stick-to-itiveness’ and ‘a desire for order’. And it, in turn, is the ‘best predictor’ of many important ‘human outcomes’, including mortality, longevity, educational attainment, and a ‘host of criteria’ related to ‘career success’. Conscientiousness in ‘early childhood’ is associated with positive outcomes ‘decades later’. Conscientiousness is also associated with ‘better recovery outcomes’ following ‘surgery’ and ‘transplants’.*

*We ‘humans’ have a long history of pursuing ‘neural enhancement’—‘ways to improve’ the brains. We train them to become ‘more dependable’ and ‘efficient allies’ in helping us to achieve our goals. To ‘better organize’ our mind, we need to understand ‘the architecture’ of our brain’s ‘attentional system’. ‘Two’ of the ‘most crucial’ principles used by the ‘attentional filter’ of our brain are ‘change’ and ‘importance’. The brain is an exquisite ‘change detector’. When our brain detects the ‘change’, this information is ‘sent’ to our ‘consciousness’, but our brain doesn’t explicitly ‘send a message’ when there is ‘no change’. The second principle, ‘importance’, can also ‘let information through’. Here, ‘importance’ is not just something that is ‘objectively important’ but something that is ‘personally important’ to us. If someone is driving, a billboard for his ‘favorite’ music group might ‘catch his eye’ while other billboards ‘go ignored’. The brain’s ‘attentional filter’ is thus ‘fairly sophisticated’. It is ‘capable’ of monitoring lots of ‘different conversations’ as well as their ‘semantic content’, letting through ‘only those’ that it thinks you will ‘want to know about’.*

*Our brains ‘evolved’ to focus on ‘one thing at a time’. The ‘attentional filter’ evolved to ‘help’ us to ‘stay on task’, letting through only ‘information’ that was ‘important enough’ to deserve ‘disrupting’ our ‘train of thought’. But a ‘funny thing’ happened in the ‘twenty-first century’ when the ‘plethora of information’ and the ‘technologies’ that serve it ‘changed the way’ we ‘use’ our brains. ‘Multitasking’ is the ‘enemy’ of a ‘focused’ attentional system. Increasingly, we ‘demand’ that our attentional system try to focus on ‘several things at once’, something that it was not ‘evolved to do’. In order to ‘understand one person’ speaking to us, we need to process ‘60 bits of information per second’. Our brain has a processing limit of ‘120 bits per second’ which means we can ‘barely understand two people’ talking to us at the ‘same time’.*

Under *'most circumstances'*, we will not be able to understand *'three people'* talking at the *'same time'*. We are surrounded on this planet by *'billions of other humans'*, but we can understand *'only two'* at a time *'at the most'*! With such attentional restrictions, it's *'clear'* why many of us feel *'overwhelmed'* by managing some of the *'most basic aspects of life'*.

*'Attention'* is the most essential *'mental resource'* for any person. It *'determines'* which aspects of the environment *'we deal with'*, and most of the time, various automatic, subconscious processes make the *'correct choice'* about what gets passed through to our *'conscious awareness'*. For this to happen, millions of neurons are constantly monitoring the environment to select the *'most important things'* for us to focus on. These *'neurons'* are collectively the *'attentional filter'*. They work *'largely'* in the *'background'*, outside of our *'conscious awareness'*. This is why when we've been driving on the *'freeway'* for several hours *'at a stretch'*, we don't remember much of the scenery that has *'whizzed by'* – our attentional system *'protects us'* from *'registering it'* because it isn't *'deemed important'*.

*'Our success'* owes in *'large part'* to our *'cognitive capacity'*, the *'ability'* of our brains to *'flexibly handle information'*. But our brains evolved in a *'much simpler'* world with *'far less'* information coming at us. Today, our attentional filters easily *'become overwhelmed'*. *'Successful people'* – or people who can *'afford it'* – employ *'layers of people'* whose job it is *'to narrow'* the attentional filter. That is, *'corporate heads'*, *'political leaders'*, *'movie stars'* and others whose *'time'* and *'attention'* are especially valuable have a *'staff of people'* around them who are *'effectively extensions'* of their own brains, *'replicating'* and *'refining'* the functions of the prefrontal cortex's *'attentional filter'*. If we *'organize'* *'our minds'* and *'our lives'* following the *'new neuroscience'* of *'attention'* and *'memory'*, we can all *'deal with the world'* in ways that provide the *'sense of freedom'* that these *'successful'* persons *'enjoy'*.

How can we actually *'leverage'* this science in *'everyday life'*?

In a real *'biological sense'*, we have *'more things'* to keep track of than our brains were *'designed to handle'*. Everyday, we are confronted with *'dozens of decisions'*, most of which we would characterize as *'insignificant'* or *'unimportant'*. Most of us have adopted *'a strategy'* to get along called *'satisficing'* - a term coined by the Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon, one of the founders of the fields of *'organization theory'* and *'information processing'*. Simon wanted *'a word'* to describe not getting the *'very best'* option but one that was *'good enough'*. For things that don't matter *'critically'*, we make a choice that *'satisfies us'* and is *'deemed sufficient'*. We don't really know if our *'hair dryer'* is *'the best'* – we only know that they're *'good enough'*. And that's what helps us *'get by'*. All of us *'engage in satisficing'* every time. Recent research in social psychology has shown that *'happy people'* are not people who *'have more'*; rather, they are people *'who are happy'* with what they *'already have'*. Happy people *'engage in satisficing'* all of the time, even if they *'don't know it'*.

In recent time, many effective *'external systems'* are available for *'organizing'*, *'categorizing'*, and *'keeping track of things'*. In the past, the only option was a string of human assistants. But now, in the *'age of automation'*, there are *'other options'*. So we just have to *'know the biology'* underlying the *'use of these'* external systems and *'how'* we can all *'use them'* to better keep track of *'our lives'*, to be *'efficient'*, *'productive'*, *'happy'* and *'less stressed'* in a *'wired world'* that is increasingly *'filled with distractions'*.

*'Productivity'* and *'efficiency'* depend on *'systems'* that help us *'organize'* through *'categorization'*. The drive to categorize developed in the *'prehistoric wiring'* of our brains, in specialized *'neural systems'* that *'create'* and *'maintain'* meaningful, coherent amalgamations of things. Fundamentally, categorization *'reduces'* mental effort and *'streamlines'* the flow of information.

Companies are like *'expanded brains'*, with individual workers functioning something like *'neurons'*. Companies tend to be collections of individuals united to a *'common set of goals'*, with each worker performing a *'specialized function'*. Businesses typically *'do better'* than individuals at *'day-to-day tasks'* because of *'distributed processing'*. Of course, business organizations are not always perfectly organized, and occasionally, through the same *'cognitive blocks'* that cause us to lose our *'car keys'*, businesses lose things, too – *'profits'*, *'clients'*, *'competitive positions'* in the marketplace.

An *'organized mind'* leads effortlessly to *'good decision making'*. Cognitive economy *'dictates'* that we categorize things in *'such a way'* as not to be overwhelmed by *'details'* that for most purposes which *'don't matter'*. Obviously, there are certain things on which we want *'detailed information'* right now, but we never want *'all the details'* all the time.

Learning what to look for in a *'new situation'* is one of the hardest aspects of *'adaptive behavior'*. It is also *'one of the critical differences'* between *'experts'* and *'novices'*; the experts are able to *'ignore irrelevant information'* and *'focus on details'* which have a *'bearing on the task at hand'*. A first-year medical student will often reach a *'wrong diagnosis'* because he has not learned *'which symptoms'* are the *'important ones'* and is misled by

*'irrelevant features red herrings'. Although knowing the 'important features' is critical for 'intelligent action', it is difficult to 'learn' an effective representation 'from scratch'. Yet this is a critical component of 'adaptive problem solving' - learning to identify the 'important features' through our 'interaction with the world'.*

*One very 'interesting feature' of our brain is that the 'decision making network' in our brain 'doesn't prioritize'. It's 'helpful' to understand that our 'modes of thinking' and 'decision-making' evolved over the 'tens of thousands of years'. Our genes haven't fully 'caught up' with the demands of 'modern civilization', but fortunately 'human knowledge' has—we now 'better understand' how to overcome 'evolutionary limitations'. The most successful members of society—from successful 'artists', 'athletes' and 'warriors' to 'business executives' and 'highly credentialed professionals'—have learned to 'maximize' their 'creativity' and 'efficiency' by 'organizing' their lives so that they spend 'less time' on the 'mundane' and 'more time' on the 'inspiring', 'comforting' and 'rewarding' things in life.*

*'Work-Life Balance' is an 'important aspect' of a 'healthy' work environment. Maintaining work-life balance helps 'reduce stress' and helps 'prevent burnout' in the 'workplace'. 'Chronic stress' is one of the most common 'health issues' in the workplace. It can lead to 'physical consequences' such as hypertension, digestive troubles, chronic aches, pains and heart problems. 'Chronic stress' can also negatively impact 'mental health' because it's linked to a higher risk of 'depression', 'anxiety' and 'insomnia'.*

*Too much 'stress' over a 'long period' of time leads to 'workplace burnout'. Employees who work 'tons of overtime hours' are at a 'high risk of burnout'. Burnout can cause 'fatigue', 'mood swings', 'irritability' and a 'decrease' in work performance. By 'creating' a work environment that 'prioritizes' work-life balance, employers can 'save' money and 'maintain' a 'healthier', 'more productive' workforce. For an employer, promoting work-life balance can seem a 'daunting challenge'. While employers can look to studies about what 'work-life balance means' to gain some insight, it's 'important to remember' that work-life balance will always mean something 'a little different' to everyone. Just because an employee fits into a 'specific generation', this doesn't always mean that he will want the 'same things' as another employee of the 'same generation'. This is where 'flexibility' and 'workplace happiness' comes into play.*

*'Intelligence' reveals itself in 'many ways'; one of the 'most impressive' is the 'ability to adapt' to 'unknown' or 'changing' environments. Without this 'capability', one can only 'respond to situations' according to 'instinct', or by 'applying' a previously-written 'set of rules'.*

*Trying to schedule an 'equal number' of hours for each of our 'various work' and 'personal activities' is usually 'unrewarding' and 'unrealistic'. The 'right balance' for us 'today' will probably 'be different' for us 'tomorrow'. The 'right balance' for us when 'we are single' will be 'different' when 'we marry', or if we have 'children'; when we should be 'striving for'. The best work-life balance is 'different for each of us' because we all have 'different priorities' and 'different lives'.*

*At the core of an 'effective work-life balance' definition there are 'two key' everyday concepts that are relevant to 'each of us'. They are daily 'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment'. Generally, we all know the 'meaning of Achievement'. But let's explore the 'concept of Enjoyment' a little more. Enjoyment does not just mean keeping 'a smile' on the face 'all the time'. It means 'Pride', 'Satisfaction', 'Happiness', 'Celebration', 'Love', 'A Sense of Well Being', i.e. 'all the Joys of Living'.*

*'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment' are the 'front' and 'back' of the 'coin of value' in life. We can't have 'one' without the 'other', no more than we can have a coin with 'only one side'. Trying to live a 'one sided life' is why so many 'successful' people are 'not happy', or not nearly as happy as they 'should be'. We cannot get the 'full value' from life without both 'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment'. Life will deliver the 'value' and 'balance' we desire when we are 'achieving' and 'enjoying' something 'every single day' - in all the 'important areas' that make up our lives. We need to think 'every time' about whether we want to 'focus' on 'achieving' and 'enjoying' or 'not'. As such, a good 'working definition' of 'Work-Life Balance' is - meaningful daily 'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment' in each of our 04 (four) life quadrants: (1) Work, (2) Family, (3) Friends and (4) Self.*

*At work we can 'create' our own best 'Work-Life Balance' by making sure we not only 'Achieve', but also 'Reflect' the 'Joy of the Job' and the 'Joy of Life', Everyday. If nobody encourages us, at least we have to 'encourage ourselves' and also help others to 'do the same'. When 'we do', then we are 'the persons' that not only 'get things done', but also 'enjoy the doing', it 'attracts people' to us. People want us on 'their team' and they want to be on 'our team'. Though these are 'simple concepts', once we 'focus' on them as 'key components' of our day, they are not that 'hard to implement'. So, we should 'make it happen', for 'ourselves', 'our family' and 'all the important individuals we care about', i.e. Everyday for the 'rest of our life' we have to 'Achieve' and 'Enjoy'.*

## ***Cognitive Economy: Key Points***

1. Psychological principle of 'cognitive economy' suggests that difficult tasks should be performed by 'simplifying' the task domain, 'focusing' on relevant features and 'generalizing' the others. It also 'dictates' that we categorize things in 'such a way' as not to be overwhelmed by 'details' that for most purposes which 'don't matter'.
2. One can 'make changes' in his/her 'personal life'. There is no 'one system' that will work for 'everyone' – we are each 'unique' – but there are some 'general principles' that anyone can apply in their 'own way' to 'recapture' a sense of order and to 'regain' the hours of lost time spent trying to overcome the disorganized mind.
3. The 'conscientiousness' trait of being organized is 'most highly associated' with our 'self-improvement'. Conscientiousness comprises 'industriousness', 'self-control', 'stick-to-itiveness' and 'a desire for order'. And it, in turn, is the 'best predictor' of many important human outcomes.
4. 'Productivity' and 'efficiency' depend on 'systems' that help us 'organize' through 'categorization'. We humans have a long history of pursuing 'neural enhancement' – ways to improve the brains. We train them to become more 'dependable' and 'efficient' allies in helping us to 'achieve our goals'.
5. 'Intelligence' reveals itself in 'many ways'; one of the 'most impressive' is the 'ability to adapt' to 'unknown' or 'changing' environments.
6. Learning what to look for in a 'new situation' is one of the hardest aspects of 'adaptive behavior'. It is also 'one of the critical differences' between 'experts' and 'novices'.
7. The 'decision making network' in our brain 'doesn't prioritize'. Our genes haven't fully 'caught up' with the demands of 'modern civilization', but fortunately 'human knowledge' has – we now 'better understand' how to overcome 'evolutionary limitations'.
8. Our brains evolved to focus on 'one thing at a time'. The 'attentional filter' evolved to help us to 'stay on task', letting through only information that was 'important enough' to deserve 'disrupting' our 'train of thought'. 'Multitasking' is the enemy of a 'focused' attentional system.
9. 'Attention' is the most essential 'mental resource' for any person. It 'determines' which aspects of the environment 'we deal with'. 'Two' of the most crucial 'principles' used by the attentional filter of our brain are 'change' and 'importance'.
10. An 'organized mind' leads effortlessly to 'good decision making'. The most successful members of society – from successful 'artists', 'athletes' and 'warriors', to 'business executives' and 'highly credentialed professionals' – have 'learned to maximize' their 'creativity' and 'efficiency' by 'organizing' their lives so that they spend 'less time' on the 'mundane' and 'more time' on the 'inspiring', 'comforting' and 'rewarding' things in life.
11. 'Our success' owes in 'large part' to our 'cognitive capacity', the 'ability' of our brains to 'flexibly handle information'. But our brains evolved in a 'much simpler' world with 'far less' information coming at us. Today, our attentional filters easily 'become overwhelmed'. 'Successful' people – or people who can 'afford it' – employ 'layers of people' whose job it is 'to narrow' the attentional filter.
12. Most of us have adopted 'a strategy' to get along called 'satisficing' - a term which describes not getting the 'very best' option but one that was 'good enough'. For things that don't matter 'critically', we make a choice that 'satisfies us' and is 'deemed sufficient'.
13. If we organize 'our minds' and 'our lives' following the 'new neuroscience' of 'attention' and 'memory', we can all 'deal with the world' in ways that provide the 'sense of freedom' that these 'successful' persons 'enjoy'.
14. Now, in the 'age of automation', many effective 'external systems' are available for 'organizing', 'categorizing', and 'keeping track of things'. We just have to 'know the biology' underlying the 'use of these' external systems and 'how' we can all 'use them' to better keep track of 'our lives', to be 'efficient', 'productive', 'happy' and 'less stressed' in a 'wired world' that is increasingly 'filled with distractions'.

## ***Work-Life Balance: Key Points***

1. 'Work-Life Balance' is an important aspect of a 'healthy' work environment. Maintaining work-life balance helps 'reduce stress' and helps 'prevent burnout' in the workplace. Too much 'stress' over a 'long period' of time leads to 'workplace burnout'. Employees who work 'tons of overtime hours' are at a 'high risk of burnout'. Burnout can cause 'fatigue', 'mood swings', 'irritability' and a 'decrease' in work performance.
2. By 'creating' a work environment that 'prioritizes' work-life balance, employers can 'save' money and 'maintain' a 'healthier', 'more productive' workforce. While employers can look to studies about what 'work-life balance means' to gain some insight, it's 'important to remember' that work-life balance will always mean something 'a little different' to everyone.
3. 'Intelligence' reveals itself in 'many ways'; one of the 'most impressive' is the 'ability to adapt' to 'unknown' or 'changing' environments. Without this 'capability', one can only 'respond to situations' according to 'instinct', or by 'applying' a previously-written 'set of rules'. Trying to schedule an 'equal number' of hours for each of our 'various work' and 'personal activities' is usually 'unrewarding' and 'unrealistic'. The 'right balance' for us today will probably 'be different' for us tomorrow. The best work-life balance is 'different for each of us' because we all have 'different priorities' and 'different lives'.
4. At the core of an 'effective work-life balance' definition there are 'two key' everyday concepts that are relevant to 'each of us'. They are daily 'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment'. 'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment' are the 'front' and 'back' of the 'coin of value' in life. We can't have one without the other, no more than we can have a coin with 'only one side'. Trying to live a 'one sided life' is why so many 'Successful' people are 'not happy', or not nearly as happy as they 'should be'. We cannot get the 'full value' from life without both 'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment'. Life will deliver the 'value' and 'balance' we desire when we are 'achieving' and 'enjoying' something 'every single day' in all the 'important areas' that make up our lives.
5. We need to 'think everytime' about whether we want to 'focus' on 'achieving' and 'enjoying' or 'not'. As such, a good 'working definition' of 'Work-Life Balance' is - meaningful daily 'Achievement' and 'Enjoyment' in each of our 04 (four) life quadrants:  
(i) Work, (ii) Family, (iii) Friends and (iv) Self.