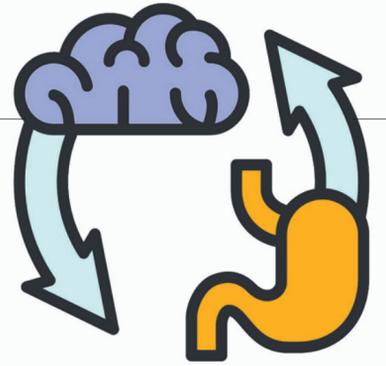


THE DEAL

REINVENTING BUSINESS



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Page 39



TRUST YOUR GUT, NOT YOUR BRAIN

Leave the PowerPoint in the office and start listening and learning in the real world
Story by **Paola Totaro**

Five years ago, London's Financial Times published a letter from a British anthropologist, Simon Roberts, who in a prescient aside questioned the growing gulf between populations and elites or experts. "The view from below," he wrote, "has never felt so out of kilter with the view from above ... how to bridge this gulf in understanding and apparent absence of empathy?"

In a new book published in Australia this week, *The Power of Not Thinking: How Our Bodies Learn and Why We Should Trust Them*, Roberts sets out to answer his own question, arguing that business and political decision-makers should rethink their reliance on big data alone and explore ways to glean a more visceral understanding of what matters to people out in the world.

"Think about driving a car: I'm teaching my son at the moment and it is so difficult to put into words how we change gears once we've learnt — it's the feel of the clutch on your foot, the sound the gearbox and engine make," he tells *The Deal*.

"This is just one example of the vast and sophisticated knowledge that is unconsciously picked up by our bodies and which we use in every area of our lives. PowerPoint presentations flatten out the world, take the richness out of an experience ... we want business and politicians to come along for the ride, to experience the world as we do."

Roberts is one of the world's leading business anthropologists and his toolkit is not dissimilar to that of his more traditional colleagues who walk in their human subjects' shoes to observe and try to understand them. However, his fieldwork involves taking leaders and innovators working at the top of some of the world's biggest companies — from Google, Spotify and Facebook, to Procter & Gamble and other Fortune 500 behemoths — out of their own worlds and into the lived experience of their clients.

"I know, I know in lockdown there's an irony to us discussing all this right now as well as writing a book about living experience," he says with a laugh from his East Sussex home.

Roberts talks with genuine excitement about subverting normal business research methods — consultants going out and then reporting back in — and a first experiment when he asked Duracell executives to hike a wilderness area of a San Diego national park and set up camp in subzero temperatures.

It was a difficult time for the company, which was on the cusp of being sold to Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway. The stakes were high in this risky push into the outdoor market.

The group found it difficult at first but were able to "feel" the trust that climbers and outdoors enthusiasts place in their kit, their light, heat and power sources. They returned enthused by what they had experienced. The team went on to create the most successful integrated communications plan in the company's history, including a YouTube short film starring a free climber. The film went viral and achieved eight million views.

Most recently, Roberts says he has taken a team from Spotify to explore users' relationships with music. They spent days riding around with Uber drivers in two US cities. "They got so much insight just from snatched conversations. I can't say too much, but it was a profound experience for them, important for a platform that not only provides music you like but which must write algorithms for music you might like."



Roberts' book draws on his professional experience to articulate a return to valuing and understanding our bodies and intuition as an integral part of our "intelligence". But he also offers an eminently readable history of how philosophers and scientists over the past two centuries have contributed to the mind versus body argument.

From Descartes' "cogito, ergo sum" (I think therefore I am) to the Hungarian/British polymath, Michael Polanyi, exponent of what he called "tacit knowledge" to cutting-edge, 21st-century neuroscience laboratories, Roberts tracks the journey in Western thought that associated the brain with the rational, objective view of the world and relegated bodily experience to a secondary tier of response and intelligence.

"We've opted for dry and factual representations of the world, which provide a partial account of how it is and how it feels," he says. "At worst, the body has been dismissed as a source of merely subjective or even misleading information."

These reductionist tendencies, Roberts argues, are becoming increasingly evident in the way governments make policy and run countries and the way businesses make corporate decisions relying on digital technology, big data, artificial intelligence and machine learning. All these aim to reduce knowledge to their most basic level.

Explaining what embodied knowledge is and how it is acquired, he says, requires some theoretical understanding but, ultimately, it is about practical forms of cognisance which are both valuable and eminently transferable.

Glassblowing, like driving a car or riding a bike, is another powerful example of expertise gained through repetition and practice, adapting to different circumstances and environments, and requiring the ability to deal with unforeseen situations and at times to improvise.

It is this instant, learned but intuitive decision making, free of rules and constraints, that Roberts argues will always place a limit on the capabilities of artificial intelligence or the development of fully automated cars, for example.

The book also explores how neuroscience has discovered and mapped brain activity which shows that empathy is not learned through intellectual or theoretical understanding but through our bodies: as we watch other people, observe their actions and intentions, emotions and feelings our bodies spark "mirror neurons" in our brains, which allow us to walk in others' shoes.

Executives, he says, often talk of gut instinct about a deal or situation, an expression of a type of learning acquired through the body.

Politicians, he says, would do well to take a leaf out of business: go out and really walk in the shoes of others because that is the way empathy is learnt.

The Power of Not Thinking: How Our Bodies Learn and Why We Should Trust Them (published by Blink, distributed here by Allen & Unwin, \$39.99)



FIFO worker Kiera Sammut with her children Arabella, 6, and Chase, 5, in Caloundra; and below, Andrew Hendrie with partner Jenny Delargie
MAIN PICTURE: CLAUDIA BAXTER

WHEN FIFO PROVES THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE

As COVID-19 shut down swathes of the economy our mines kept operating, thanks to fly-in, fly-out workers. But more than three months in, is the price too high? Story by **Helen Trinca**

Kiera Sammut was an executive assistant to a CEO for years but always hankered to work on a mine site. As a single mother of two young children, the money was also attractive.

In January she got her wish, flying from her home at Caloundra on Queensland's Sunshine Coast to the West Australian Pilbara. As she began training as a dump truck operator, Sammut looked forward to a career as one of the State's 60,000 fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers.

Her roster of two weeks on, one week off, worked well. She shared parenting with her former partner but had the bonus of Arabella, 6, and five-year-old Chase full-time during her week back on the coast. Then in late March, in Caloundra for her week off, Sammut was called back to the Pilbara. Her company anticipated the border closure that came a few days later and the message to employees was clear: come back now if you want your job.

"I honestly thought I would only be away for four weeks," Sammut tells *The Deal*. "Four turned into six, then eight, then it was three months."

She spent her regular off week holed up in a Perth hotel until, desperate to see her kids, she took unpaid leave and returned to Caloundra.

It has been a searing experience; one suffered by many interstate FIFO workers who have held onto their jobs during the lockdown but have been unable to see their families for up to 20 weeks.

Now, new research from Curtin University has revealed the high toll border and quarantine restrictions are having on the mental health of workers — up from 33 per cent in pre-COVID research.

Preliminary results from a survey of 275 workers also show high risks of suicide among FIFO workers, and lead researcher Professor Sharon Parker, director of the Centre for Transformative Work Design, says there are some "quite devastating" quotes from respondents about the impact COVID is having on them.

"I am isolated and mentally drained," wrote one worker.

None of it surprises Perth-based Andrew Hendrie, a Pilbara mobile plant operator for eight years, who runs an app called FIFO Life.

"FIFO has always been a big red flag for mental health in the first place," he says. "Now with COVID, it's like a bomb waiting to go off."

The pressure on interstate workers — of whom there are about 6000 in normal times — has been intense because border controls and quarantine have left many stuck in WA if they want to continue working. Local workers are better off, although many have been on "COVID rosters" staying on site for up to six weeks at a time, to minimise people movement.

Tamryn Harvey, whose partner Kyle Death, has been away from their Queanbeyan, NSW home since mid-April, has seen friends' marriages collapse under the strain. She is aware, too, of suicide attempts among FIFO workers.

"It's rife over there at the moment," she says. "They just don't have an end date and I think that's the hardest part. Most families were on rosters where people were coming home every two weeks but 15, 16, 17 weeks is too much."

"We were lucky (in the early stages of the lockdown) because Kyle was on five months paternity leave. But he had to fly back at the end of April and he has been there ever since."

It's been tough for Harvey, a horticulturalist who says: "Kyle is ex-army, so we were used to being apart, but not like this."

Faced with the prospect that unless he went into quarantine her partner, who is a diesel mechanic in the Pilbara, would not be back before Christmas, Harvey and the couple's children — Mia, 13, Jack, 3, and baby Hudson who is almost a year old — will relocate to Perth in August.

Sammut, who hopes to spend a month in Caloundra on unpaid leave is keen to return to the Pilbara but is worried about once again being stuck in WA for an extended period.

"You are on the other side of the country and there is no way to get home," she says. "On site you just work, eat, sleep, repeat, but down in Perth (for her rostered week off) with nothing to do and nothing open, the reality hits you."

She says resource companies need to step up



and take more action to address mental health issues on site not just "put up a poster". She says that at her site, employee support staff who helped with mental health issues were among the first to be laid off during COVID because the government deemed them "non-essential workers".

Professor Parker says that many companies try hard to run activities and address the mental health risks. But more is needed because FIFO — with or without the COVID restrictions — is here to stay.

"We are trying to move away from this debate of should there be FIFO or not," Parker says. "That's not a healthy debate. There needs to be FIFO, so the question is, do we have to just accept that a third of all workers will face mental health challenges or are there things we can do about it? The evidence is very clear that if you create more positive cultures, decent rosters, more social support, people's mental health is better."

Parker, who is working with Dr Jess Gilbert of Curtin University and Dr Laura Fruhen of the University of Western Australia, says that while part of the problem is being away from family and friends, there are other factors: "Do people have good social connections when they are away, access to barbecues and social nights? Do you have a leader who is supportive and interested and cares about you? Do you have more flexibility about when you can contact your family?"

The survey, funded by the Australia Research Council, found a "very high degree of loneliness" says Parker. One third of workers report sometimes being lonely when at camp or on site, and another 35 per cent being "often" or "always" lonely on site. Fatigue is a problem with employees often working 12-hour shifts. Some travel an hour each way from their accommodation to the site. Thirty per cent of workers say they are "tired out, for no good reason" most or all of the time.

Something as simple as being assigned a permanent room can make a big difference, Parker says: "On some sites people have to stay in a different room when they come back from their time off. But we found those who stay in the same room have better mental health."

Parker and a team from Curtin and UWA carried out a major 2018 study for the WA Mental Health Commission after concerns about mental health on remote mines. That study covered 3000 FIFO workers and their partners and found 33 per cent had high or very high psychological distress, compared with 10 per cent in the general population and 17 per cent in a benchmarked group of similar workers in non-FIFO situations. The 2018 survey also found FIFO workers scored significantly worse than the benchmarked group on a sense of belonging, a measure used to indicate suicidal thoughts. They also reported higher levels of suicidal intent.

When COVID-19 hit, Parker and her co-re-

searchers grabbed the opportunity to do a second survey. "Everyone knew it was a potential problem and while our current results are only preliminary, they suggest, as we feared, an increase in mental health concerns for this already vulnerable group of workers," she says. "In our previous research, we found that suicide risk was higher for this group of workers compared to Australian norms, so there was already cause for concern."

"Our preliminary analyses for the FIFO workers during COVID-19 suggest that many more workers are at risk than was even the case shown in our previous research — which is worrying. We are conducting more analyses to understand this further, and our sample is relatively small, but we nevertheless urge companies, unions, family and friends to do all they can to support FIFO workers."

Parker says workers fear raising concerns about mental ill health because they think it will harm their career, change the way peers and leaders see them, and will mean they are seen as weak.

On the plus side, about 70 per cent felt supported by their work colleagues and feel they can talk to them about problems. More than half of the sample reported high levels of work-family conflict, for example, feeling they can't fulfil family responsibilities.

Workers also listed examples of good practice such as companies paying for people to self-isolate, daily barbecues, and sending high-risk workers home on paid leave.

But Parker says rosters need to be addressed. "Pre-COVID, and this was extremely contentious, we spent a lot of time debating with the Chamber of Commerce about having better rosters, such as one week on, one week off," she says. "We got a lot of push back from industry because of course there is a cost implication."

With a home in Perth and a roster of three weeks on site, and one week off Andrew Hendrie enjoys FIFO. It's been a bit tougher since he met his partner Jenny Delargie two years ago. Delargie also works FIFO on another site but their rosters coincide.

Hendrie tries to be disciplined on site, spending his evenings in the gym rather than the bar. He's busy, too, with his app, FIFO Life, which has been downloaded more than 20,000 times and helps workers schedule their rosters as well as offering resources on relationships and wellbeing.

There's also a "Countdown" page — a digital calendar showing the days, hours, minutes and seconds before the next reunion.

The researchers are keen to survey more workers. You can find the survey at www.transformativeworkdesign.com/fifo-mental-health-survey

Help is available at Lifeline 131114



Our ability to see and communicate with colleagues face-to-face may have long term consequences for businesses and overall productivity, according to Ben Waber, the president and co-founder of Humanyze.

Humanyze is a Boston-based workplace analytics company that spun out of PhD research Waber and his co-founders were conducting at MIT.

"We use data that companies already have about how work happens to understand the health of organisations," he tells *The Australian's* Forward Slash podcast. "What we have found is that face-to-face interaction always comes out as being the most important thing that

we do at work and, frankly, the thing that we are suffering most from today."

According to Waber, if two employees sit next to each other, for example, they talk a lot to one another, but then they also email each other more, too.

"If you don't see someone very often, you will email them a lot less. And that's something we are seeing compound today, and these patterns are strongly related to the health of organisations," Waber says.

"As less strong ties degrade and get weaker, that has strong implications for the engagement of employees within a company, and the productivity of that company." **DAVID SWAN**

