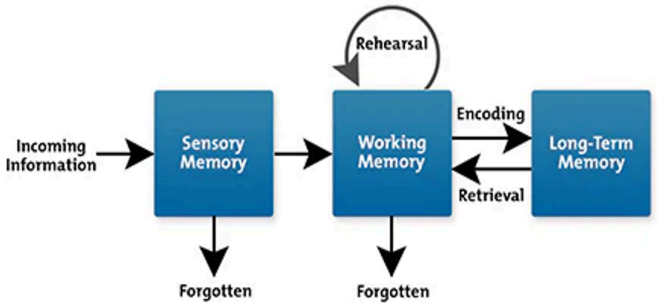
OCTOBER 4, 2024
ISSUE 21

ONE THING

COGNITIVE LOAD THEORY

The amount of information our working memory can process at any given time.



Adapted from Atkinson, R.C. and Shiffrin, R.M. (1968).

Increasing Cognitive Load with interview subjects can not only aid in recall (as in context reinstatement with Cognitive Interviewing) and make it difficult to stray from the truth without giving signs but can also affect the investigative interviewer. This Cognitive Load increase on the interviewer can often lead to the interviewer straying from best practices and recommended interviewing techniques and can affect recall and introduce erroneous information.

The Investigative Interviewer performs a myriad of cognitive tasks related to the interview itself, for instance:

- Identifying additional topics for exploration
- Generating questions
- Seeking clarification
- Accurately recalling details
- Formulation of hypotheses
- Rapport building and maintenance
- Maintaining proper questioning techniques

HIGHLIGHTS

- Straying from best practices
- Impact of fatigue
- Reducing cognitive load

BRYAN BARLOW, CFI
WZ Instructor

bbarlow@w-z.com
@bryan-barlow-cfi

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CONTINUED >>

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COGNITIVE LOAD THEORY

Researchers conducted a study of mock interviews where three groups of mock interviewers were given the same basic instructions (listen to a witness's account of an event with questions to follow), with additional instructions given based on the group. The groups included a No Cognitive Load (NCL) group, a Medium Cognitive Load (MCL) group, which was additionally advised to carefully consider what is said for clear understanding, and a High Cognitive Load (HCL) group, which was advised not only to carefully consider the statement but to formulate and order ten questions for the person retelling the event. Mock interviewers were then asked to rate their own Perceived Cognitive Load (PCL) and gave free and cued recall reports. The study showed no significant difference in PCL for the HCL and MCL groups, but both had a higher PCL than the NCL group. All three groups remembered approximately the same number of details of the event, but the HCL and MCL groups had lower accuracy than the NCL group. For the cued recall accuracy, there were no significant differences between the HCL and MCL groups, or the MCL and NCL groups. Still, the HCL group had lower accuracy than the NCL group.

Another study looked at the effect of fatigue on interviewers (specifically police interviewers) given that investigations often have a sense of urgency that leads to a 24-hour investigative cycle, and some interviewers are engaged in shift work that disrupts the natural circadian rhythm of the interviewers' bodies. Participants had their sleep and alertness tracked with an actigraphic monitor and self-reported the effectiveness of their interviews during the study period in areas such as establishment of rapport, resistance of subject, the investigator's own composure, the utility of the information gained. The alertness level and interviews were then compared. Generally, interview outcomes were better on days with less fatigue (both self-reported and monitored), specifically with better focus and composure and less resistance from the interview subject. Alertness level was not predictive of the other measured factors.

Based on these studies, interviewers should focus on practicing their interviewing techniques and spend adequate amounts of time preparing for interviews to reduce cognitive load during the interview itself. Interviewers should also (if practicable) ensure they maintain a healthy rest and recovery cycle to prevent their interviews from being adversely affected.

References:
Akehurst, L., Hanway, P., Hope, L., & Vernham, Z. (2020). The Effects of Cognitive Load During an Investigative Interviewing Task on Mock Interviewers' Recall of Information. Legal and Criminological Psychology. DOI: 10.1111/lcrp.12182

Jones, M., Krizan, Z., Meissner, C., & Miller, A. (2023). The Impact of Alertness Vs. Fatigue on Interrogators in an Actigraphic Study of Field Investigations. Nature.com – Scientific Reports. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-32975-w

Medical College of Wisconsin, Office of Educational Improvement. (2022). Cognitive Load Theory: A Guide to Applying Cognitive Load Theory to Your Teaching. (Handout)

The human mind can store billions of pieces of information. Searching through this massive amount of detail seems exhausting. It may help to know how research has advanced our understanding of the human mind, forgetting, and recall.

The search for information can be aided by examining our five senses. Learn more when you read "Why Can't I Find My Keys?"