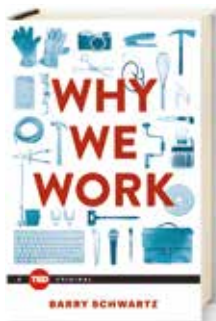


## LABOR PAINS

### Why We Work

by Barry Schwartz. TED Books, 2015 (\$16.99; 100 pages)



“Men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost.” So wrote Henry David Thoreau in his 1854 classic, *Walden*, and so confirms the Gallup organization based on recent surveys of 25 million people in 189 countries.

Work frustrates rather than fulfills almost 90 percent of the world’s workforce.

Most people work because they need money, but scholars have long known that money is not what people most want from work. In fact, J. D. Houser’s 1938 book, *What People Want from Business*, put money 21st on the list, and Robert Hoppock’s extensive study entitled *Job Satisfaction*, published in 1935, found that the best predictors of workplace satisfaction were autonomy, variety, security, appreciation, positive relationships and opportunities for advancement.

In *Why We Work*, Schwartz, a psychology professor at Swarthmore College, promises to explain why the modern work experience falls so far short of this ideal. Unfortunately, he does so mainly by criticizing the views of three straw men: Adam Smith, the 18th-century author of *The Wealth of Nations*, and 20th-century thinkers Frederick Taylor, the inventor of management science, and B. F. Skinner, an early behavioral psychologist. All three wrote about the power of incentives—promised rewards—and Schwartz’s book can be rightly described as a diatribe against what he calls the “incentive theory of everything.”

In education, medicine and law, in particular, Schwartz says, the focus on efficiency and profitability has robbed practitioners of the intrinsic motivators that drove them to these professions in the first place. All three professions have turned into assembly lines in which behavior is scripted to maximize gain.

But virtually any job, Schwartz notes, can be made satisfying if it is modified to boost autonomy and to include “variety, complexity, skill development, and growth.” (Sound familiar?) The problem

with this proposed fix is that he largely glosses over why many business owners and executives avoid such practices. Efficiency and profitability are important, after all. The small family farm provided meaningful experiences for workers, sure, but it did not produce much food.

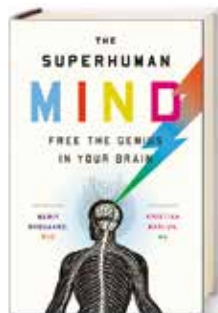
Ironically, Schwartz mentions Google as an exception to what he sees as the modern obsession with incentive-based management, overlooking the fact that Google employees are chauffeured to work each morning in leather-appointed buses and fed free of charge by gourmet

chefs.

*Why We Work* seems superficial, perhaps in part because the author was incentivized to present his views in a fast-moving, assembly-line format. TED talks are limited to 18 minutes, and the new TED books, of which this is one, are limited to 100 pages. Now that would be an intriguing topic for a TED book: how to get people to pay attention to in-depth discussions about complex issues that cannot be explored adequately in the blink of an eye. — Robert Epstein

### The Superhuman Mind: How to Unleash Your Inner Genius

by Berit Brogaard and Kristian Marlow. Hudson Street Press, 2015 (\$25.95; 304 pages)



Ask about the color of a painful toothache or the sound of a delicious lamb shank, and most people will respond with confusion. But artist Carol Steen would say that pain is orange, and researcher Lidell Simpson might tell you that all the noise in the restaurant makes it difficult to hear the flavor of the food. Such seemingly illogical pairings are the hallmark of synesthesia, a neurological phenomenon that causes some people to form strong connections between otherwise unrelated sensations.

So-called synesthetes such as Steen and Simpson experience these sensory links automatically throughout their life. In *The Superhuman Mind*, neuroscience and philosophy researchers Brogaard—a synesthete herself—and Marlow contend that anyone can acquire a form of synesthesia and, in so doing, open “a gateway into inaccessible parts of our brains.”

Central to their case is the idea that even “normal” brains unconsciously perform incredibly complicated feats all the time. Coordinating the many muscles in our hand and arm to pick up a mug, for example, requires scores of intricate calculations to which our conscious mind is not privy. The mental algorithms that allow us to carry out such mundane actions are in a sense preprogrammed, but the authors surmise that through targeted brain training, we can intentionally fashion new algorithms to tap into existing neural networks.

Brogaard and Marlow highlight this vast potential of the human brain using extreme real-life examples. They explore a study in which sighted people, after being blindfolded for a week, began to spontaneously echolocate, a technique more commonly used by bats for sensing their surroundings. Brain scans showed that these people’s brains apparently began to recruit their underutilized visual cortices for new tasks.

Brain trauma may similarly prompt a rewiring of our neural connections. For instance, soon after jumping headfirst into the shallow end of a pool, one man discovered an all-new talent—the ability to play the piano proficiently. A brain scan revealed that he had a lesion on his parietal cortex, the region responsible for producing language and music. Researchers investigating his condition thought that some form of compensation for the lesion could explain his new prowess at the keyboard.

Of course, Brogaard and Marlow do not advocate that anyone live in darkness or seek brain injuries to achieve new cognitive skills. Rather they relay such stories to highlight the intriguing possibilities that can emerge when we form new neural connections. And they describe related tricks people can employ in their everyday life to build mental shortcuts for memory, math and even more esoteric capabilities, such as carrying out savant-like calendar calculations (Which day of the week was April 23, 1987? Anyone?). Participants in memory competitions generally have neurologically ordinary brains but take advantage of our innate affinity for remembering emotions and stories to achieve remarkable feats of memory. To recall the irrational number pi to more than 20,000 decimal