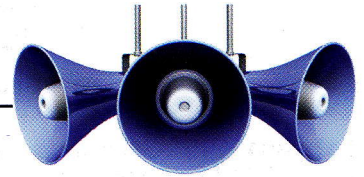


OPINION**WHY NUDGING ISN'T ENOUGH**

The concept of 'nudge' has become popular with politicians, but real behavioural change takes a more complex mix of processes to embed, says **Anton Franckeiss**, managing director of ASK



As a behavioural change-driving mechanism, 'nudge' has gained considerable currency since Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's book of the same name was published in 2008 – not least since it inspired Prime Minister David Cameron

to establish a behavioural insight team (aka 'the Nudge Unit') within No 10. Arguing that 'choice architecture' – setting defaults that encourage particular choices or behaviours – is more effective than direct legislation or coercing, the book is in part a text that seeks to outline a socio-politically expedient path between paternalism and libertarianism. In that regard, and in its promotion of the fledgling discipline of behavioural economics, it's very much a text of our times. Its adoption in some circles has certainly transformed the lives of its authors, but what is its wider impact and implications?

In the context of organisational and workplace learning and development, it's a more troubled – and troubling – text. Despite being the work of two university professors, it's not just the implicit message that people are too stupid to learn that should trigger concern: if nothing else, it surely calls the author's own profession (and track record) into question. More worryingly, the idea – the modishness of which enhances the danger – that nudging is enough to really change behaviour is contradicted by decades of

evidence and research into learning transfer and application – the array of practices that help to ensure that new behaviours are sustained after learning them, rather than lapsing into old, bad habits.

ASK's approach to learning and

behavioural change draws on this informative body of work, as well as on the work of James Prochaska and other psychologists, which shows that real behavioural change needs the sustaining support of others to maintain motivation, provide encouragement and opportunities to practise, and to reward and recognise successes. It is not that we are incapable of learning and changing, but that the overwhelming majority of us need the ongoing input and support of others to do so.

In the broader arena of social change, these concerns were shared by Baroness Neuberger, who commissioned a subgroup of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee to produce a detailed report. Subsequently interviewed by The Guardian, she commented: "It's quite compelling as a book but, like all of those sorts of book – like *The Tipping Point*, like *Bowling Alone*, those books that have made quite an impact on politicians – I would say, you want to stand back for a few minutes and say: 'But, but, but!'"

WE'RE NO PUSHOVERS

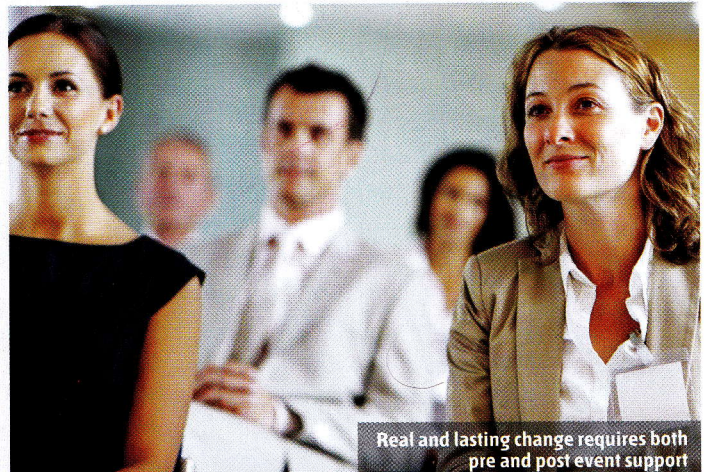
New Yorker journalist Elizabeth Kolbert was equally concerned. "If the 'nudgee' can't be depended on to recognise his own best interests, why stop at a nudge? Why not offer a 'push', or perhaps even a 'shove'? And if people can't be trusted to make the right choices for themselves, how can they possibly be trusted to make the right decisions for the rest of us?"

If social change takes time, the same is true – on shorter timescales – for workplace-

related change. It is already easy to see that a 'hit and run' approach is ineffective. We should therefore be alert to the possibility that a 'nudge and sidle away' could be equally unfruitful. Unlike the political arena (where fashions wax and wane), it's not the force of the impact that is critical; what matters most to a successful outcome – in both arenas – is how the impact is sustained. The results of 'touch and go' are likely to be touch and go. Effective behavioural change requires two things that 'nudging' cannot accommodate: the self-awareness that change is necessary and required and external support to maintain our motivation to make progress.

FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT

If we think of 'nudging' as things like staff manuals, internal processes and constructive suggestions, it has a place in the toolboxes of L&D and HR professionals and of line managers. But if a high-impact training event needs both pre-event and follow-through activities to make a lasting difference – and it certainly does – then a nudge really is as good as wink: without a much wider range of elements and additional support, neither is likely to change much at all. ■



Real and lasting change requires both pre and post event support

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