

Spot the ball.

One of the most visually surprising phenomena in cognitive psychology is what is called 'inattention blindness'. It results from the fact that, although our brains are powerful they do not have enough processing power to allow us to pay attention to everything going on in the world around us. Instead we have evolved a strategy which means we manage our attentional resources carefully, focusing them on things which we believe to be important. In practice we have a mental picture of how we expect the world to be and we pay close attention to that – but the risk is that we might miss other changes, especially at the periphery, which may require our attention.

A powerful demonstration of this is a famous experiment in which an audience is invited to watch a film of a game of basketball. It is being played by two teams of students, one wearing black shirts and the other white. The audience is asked to concentrate carefully (i.e. focus their attention) on the white team and to count how many times the players bounce the ball and how many times they pass it to another member of the team. It is difficult because the game is played in a confined space so bodies are constantly getting in the way and there is the added complication that they are playing with two balls.

After watching the film for about 30 seconds the audience is then asked for answers to the two questions – and typically there are answers in the range of 10-20 for the number of bounces and slightly lower for the number of passes. But then they are asked a third question – how many of them saw the gorilla?!!!

For many of them this comes as an absurd request because the likelihood of a gorilla being part of the scene they have just witnessed is incredibly low. But the reality is that a gorilla (or rather someone in a gorilla suit) does move across the game, stopping in the middle to beat his breast before slowly ambling off! It is not a small peripheral display but something which happens centre stage – and yet many people fail to see it.

It is a well-known experiment and makes a powerful exercise to suggest that in innovation the traditional business school mantra of paying close attention to your environment – competitors, customers, technologies, etc. – may not always be appropriate and some capacity for looking at the edge or in new ways is important to avoid disruptive innovation.

The clip is widely available across the internet – see, for example,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjG698U2Mvo>

The original together with many other examples is available from www.viscog.com