

## What are ‘flow states’?

I have recently read the chapter, ‘Organising our Time’, in Daniel Levitin’s excellent book, *The Organised Mind* (Penguin Viking, 2014). Within this chapter, he discusses ‘flow states’ and as they struck such a chord with me, I thought I would share them with you.

Imagine you are playing a computer game. You become so intensely involved in it, that you forget to eat, forget to check your emails, you don’t look at the clock, you are so blissfully lost in that activity. Alternatively, you could be doing a piece of work where time passes without you being aware of it, and you are not distracted by anything. Both these instances are examples of being in the flow state.

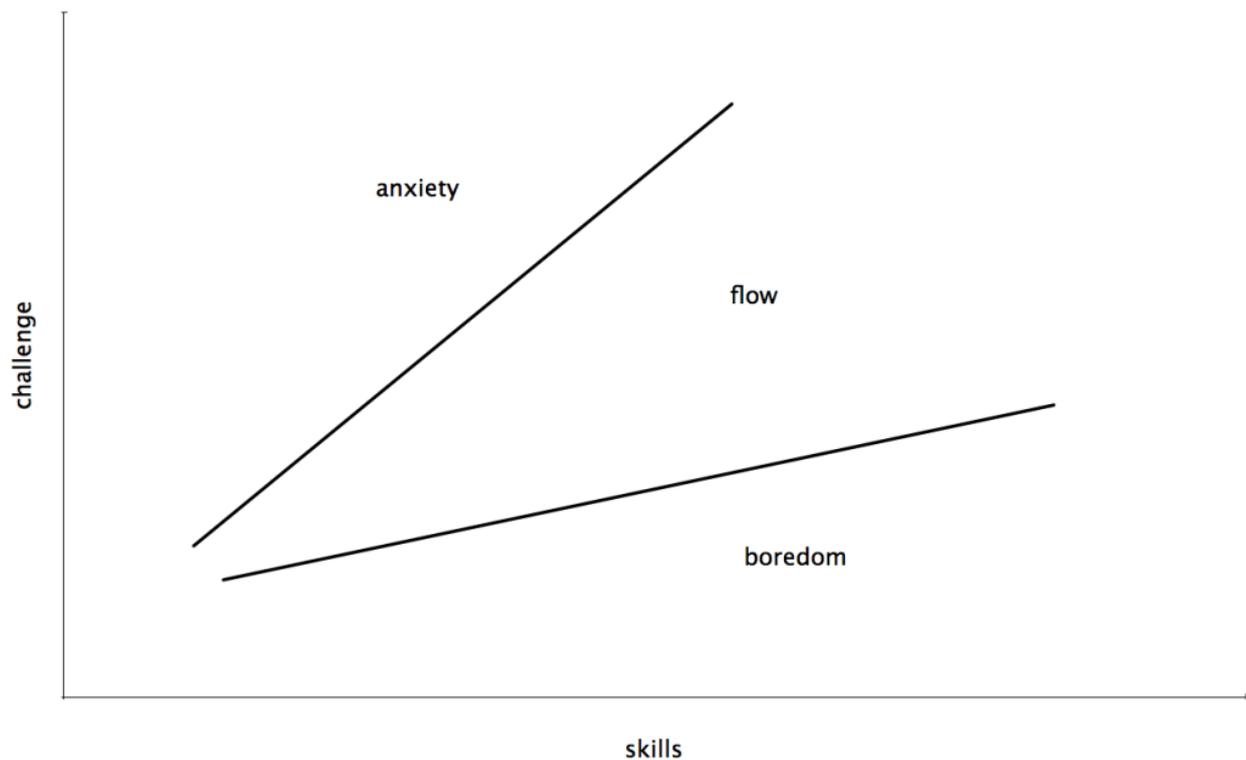
Abraham Maslow identified these peak experiences in the 1950s. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this the flow state. If you have experienced such a state, you will agree that it feels like a completely different state of being. You have feelings of well-being and contentment. You will have a heightened awareness. Scientific research indicates that it is a neurochemically and neuroanatomically distinct state as well. Such states activate both the left prefrontal cortex and the basal ganglia. Interestingly, the portion of the prefrontal cortex responsible for self-criticism and the amygdala, the brain’s fear centre are both deactivated!

During such a state, attention is focussed on a limited field, which receives full concentration and effort. Given those areas of the brain deactivated, you don’t worry about failure. It occurs when you are not explicitly thinking about what you are doing. Actions are performed automatically with no conscious control. Practice and expertise are prerequisites.

So, why does this matter? In a business setting, flow states can occur either during planning or execution phases of an activity, although more common in the latter of a complex task. With the inactivity of those parts of the brain outlined above, we are not subject to our own negativity, or self deprecating thoughts. And such a state does not happen for any task. One needs to be deeply focussed in the task, requiring intense concentration and commitment. There need to be clear goals, immediate feedback, and, particularly important, matched to one’s own



skill level.



It is, therefore, necessary that your skills and abilities are matched to the level of difficulty of the task. If it is too challenging, you will experience anxiety. Too easy, and you will experience boredom.

During flow states, we experience periods of great productivity and efficiency. On the flip side, it can be disruptive when it becomes an addiction (think of social media), and can be a particular problem if you 'withdraw' totally, to the exclusion of others (would you want a babysitter going into a flow state whilst they are minding your children?).