Intention-Action Gap

Idea In Short

You want to exercise more, quit smoking, hold more efficient meetings and so on, but aren't doing it. We have a clear intention, but we don't always act accordingly. In behavioral economics, this discrepancy is known as the Intention-Action Gap. Also known as the Value-Action Gap or Knowledge-Attitudes-Practice Gap, this occurs when one''s values, attitudes, or intentions don''t match one's actions.

Sometimes, the Intention-Action Gap results from behavioral bias towards immediate gratification. We know that getting into a fitness routine or quitting smoking will have long-term health benefits. However, we continue watching the next episode of our favorite TV show or light the next cigarette because this action is more gratifying in the moment.

Alternatively, the intention-action gap can result from being too ambitious. We often intend to choose the right option, but sometimes our environment or the action itself (perhaps, it's too hard!) can inhibit us from starting.

Application in Consulting

The Intention-Action Gap is a prevalent phenomenon, which has critical implications in various domains, including Management Consulting. As Consultants,we have witnessed several scenarios when the client appreciates our recommendations and considers them the right initiatives to pursue. However, after months, we learn that the client has launched none of those initiatives.

If you unravel the obstacles, you will probably find that your client's inaction stems from misapplied heuristics or systemic errors. Systemic errors are not only expensive, but also impede the change your client stakeholders wish to implement.

Reasons for inaction

Among the primary reasons for client inaction is that client stakeholders must actively translate their intention / values into actions. Several issues may interfere with the process of doing so, either by delaying it or by entirely disrupting it. Specifically, people generally need to go through all the following stages in order to get to a point where they undertake a certain action:

1. Client personnel must acquire the necessary knowledge on certain new topics
2. Then, they must process this knowledge in a way that causes them to form relevant values
3. Next, client teams must translate these values into intentions to take action, and
4. Finally, people must translate these intentions into real actions

Sometimes, client personnel may need to go through other steps before they take action, such as recognizing that there is an opportunity for them to act.

Accordingly, given the active role that they must play to translate their knowledge, values, and intentions into actions, people may sometimes fail to take action simply because of the active effort that's required, even if there isn't a single specific issue preventing them from doing so.

Overall, people display value-action gaps because translating values into actions generally requires actively going through a number of steps, and various issues can interfere with this process, including competing values, counter-incentives, and lack of relevant options.

Behavioral Economics

Behavioral Economics research uncovers five patterns that are particularly relevant:

1. Cognitive Overload
2. Group Dynamics
3. Selective Perception
4. Loss Aversion
5. Self Control
6. Develop Habits
7. Influence of Attitudes
8. Mere Measurement Effect

Cognitive Overload

Especially in times of stress, we are particularly susceptible to simplifications. Our brain is already fully utilized - there is simply no more capacity for lengthy considerations. If it gets even more complicated, we are very happy to fall back on what we know: perfect for applying the repetition and recognition heuristics.

Get your employees out of the I do it the same way I always do trap. Simplify the decision. Create a sense of urgency. Set standards. Use plain language.

Group Dynamics

Remember that people like to imitate what they see in others. Realize that people like to be part of a group. Cohesiveness, or the desire for cohesiveness, in a group may produce a tendency among its members to agree at all costs. This phenomenon is known as the conformity bias or social desirability bias describes the tendency for people to behave like those around them, rather than using their own personal judgment. There are four types of Conformity Bias:

1. **Compliance conformity** happens when we internally disagree but accept influence anyway to gain approval and avoid disapproval
2. **Internalization** is the true internal acceptance of norms that are compatible with one's personal values and intrinsic reward systems
3. **Identification** is when people openly adopt group norms to maintain membership within the group, whether or not they agree internally
4. **Ingratiation conformity**, similarly to compliance, occurs when someone follows the norm to seek personal gain or social reward

To break the status quo, promote disruptors. Establish role models. Enable change agents.

Selective Perception

Selective perception is the phenomenon where we see what we want to see. Even if our basic assumption is wrong, we stick to our course and not deviate from it. We tend to collect evidence that supports our beliefs.

Whether over or under-confident, people need feedback. Without feedback, they remain

trapped in their false world view. Sometimes an outsider's view, as that of an external consultant, is necessary to break the routines.

Build in controls and checks. Define common goals and track progress towards them.

Loss Aversion

According to Prospect Theory, our need to avoid losses often goes so far that we don't even notice possible gains. This is another reason why we are very attached to processes that we know. Giving up habits is often associated with loss; we lose something familiar and have to adjust to something new and unknown.

To overcome this bias, use incentives. Show what is positive about the change. Shift the focus from loss to gain.

Self Control

Our strong focus on the present leads to an over-emphasis on current rewards. What we can have immediately triggers an irresistible attraction - compared to rewards we have to wait for. Resisting available rewards is very difficult for humans. We like to choose the simplest option.

If you want to inhibit behavior, make it harder. Remove temptations. And vice versa: Make it as easy as possible for your client stakeholders to go in the desired direction. Keep the present focus in mind and try to put more emphasis on the future.

Develop Habits

Habits are the key in achieving change and closing the Intention-Action Gap. We have to make the desired actions part of our routine, not something that requires a conscious choice each day. There are two ways to do that:

1. **Implementation Intentions** embed the stimulus for action into the environment, so that we are not relying on conscious thought so much
2. **Commitment Devices** counteract people's lack of willpower and to achieve change

Influence of Attitudes

Our attitudes are a compound construct made up of three distinct components:

1. Affective (how we feel)
2. Behavioral (what we intend to do), and
3. Cognitive (what we think)

The affective component involves a person's feelings such as in I'm afraid of spiders. The behavioral component influences how we act or behave like If I see a spider, I will run away. The cognitive component involves a person's knowledge or beliefs such as I believe spiders are dangerous." To put attitudes into the context of change, consider your client stakeholders' attitudes towards change:

- **In terms of affect:** I feel proud when I support the organization's mission
- **In terms of behavior:** I regularly attend townhall meetings about the change and impact we are making
- **In terms of cognition:** I believe being a change agent is the right thing to do

Attitudes are powerful, and researchers have put forth compelling evidence that specific behaviors can be predicted when an attitude is aligned with intentions. For example, if a person holds an attitude (e.g., donating blood save lives) and they say they will do something related to that attitude such as I will donate blood this week, there is a greater likelihood that they will follow through on their stated intention.

In fact, a person's beliefs about a particular behavior is the most critical determinant of whether or not they will perform that behavior. Thus, if a person believes that attending townhall meeting is important to supporting their organization's change mission, they are more likely to behave in a way that is consistent with that attitude (e.g. participating in townhall meetings).

Mere Measurement Effect

In a nationally representative study of more than 40,000 participants, researchers investigated whether or not simply asking someone if they intended to buy a new car would increase actual purchase rates. It did, by a whopping 35 percent. This and numerous other studies show that answering survey questions can actually shift your behavior—especially if the behavior is seen as socially desirable. Dubbed the mere measurement effect (because

the mere act of measuring a person's intent makes it more likely they will act on it), studies have shown that the mere measurement effect can even be amplified by asking people to describe how and when they plan to take a specific action. Consultants can harness the mere measurement effect as an effective intervention to increase uptake of certain behaviors and actions for their recommendations.

Summary

To close the intention-action gap, consultants should intentionally design systems and environments to combat barriers to action. For example, consultants can help their client stakeholders take action on their best intentions by eliminating operational barriers, addressing their concerns, intense communication and change support. Furthermore, they should timebox how and when the person intends to take an action to increase the likelihood that they will follow through on their intentions. While the old adage the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior still holds true, especially in times of massive change and uncertainty, consultants should help their clients prepare for a future that does not follow past patterns of behavior.