



SUE | Behavioural  
Design Academy

# Designing Choices with the Psychology of Influence

*A mini-masterclass in choice architecture*

*By Astrid Groenewegen*



# What you'll learn



What is the paradox of choice?



How do you design choices?



What is the power of bounded choice?



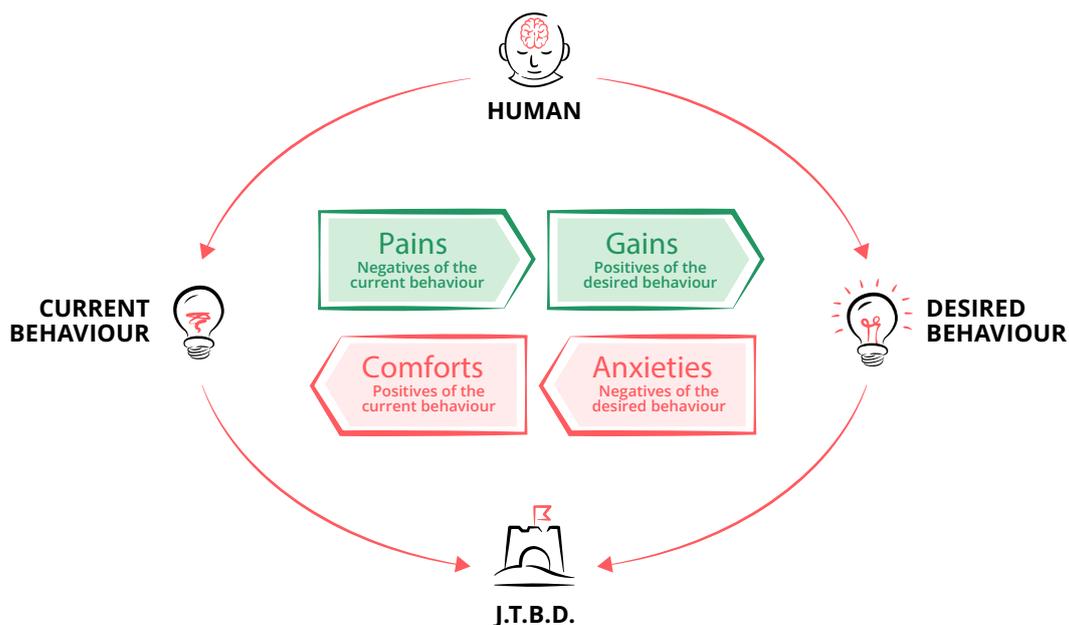
What are the ethical considerations you need to make?



Five behavioural interventions that work



Five practical examples



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# Introduction

Can we design a choice? If there's one thing that people in most societies value, it's our freedom of choice. Autonomy is a core value. And so brands, organisations and governments cater to this: we're surrounded by an endless product range, countless subscriptions, choice menus, preference settings and variants. Something for everyone. And that feels good – because it gives us the idea that we're free to choose.

But is that really the case? Does an abundance of possibilities help us make better decisions? Does more choice also lead to more satisfaction?

**Surprisingly, the answer is: no. Freedom of choice is often merely an illusion of control.**

Precisely because we're inundated with possibilities, we rarely make choices that are completely thought through. In fact, we become tired more quickly, postpone decisions, or make them automatically – often based on irrelevant signals, social influence or convenience.

So the question is no longer: how do we offer people more choice? The real question is: how can we understand the subtle art of choosing and design choices in such a way that people make better decisions that actually make them happier? That's what this mini-masterclass will guide you through. You'll discover insights from behavioural science and see how these can be applied in practice.



**Happy reading!**

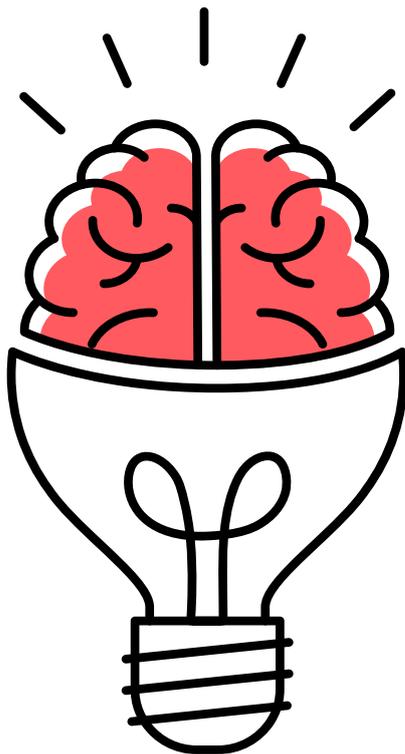
*Astrid Groenewegen*

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## How to design choice: The choice paradox

*You already know that more choice doesn't lead to more satisfaction, but what does this mean? Is less indeed more?*

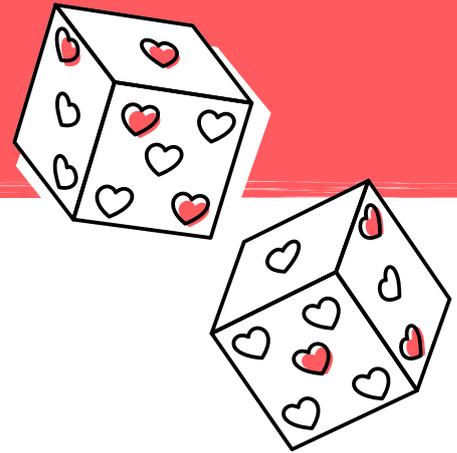
The answer is nuanced: both yes and no. In most cases, an overabundance of choices is not in our best interest. That's because we humans have only a limited capacity to make rational choices. We possess what behavioural scientists call bounded rationality. We simply cannot carefully weigh every decision in our daily lives. We have to make too many of them. Think about your morning. From the moment you heard the alarm go off, you had to decide whether to get up immediately or to snooze for just a little bit longer.



You had to decide whether to stretch or roll over onto your side one more time, right in that comfortable spot with the perfect temperature. You had to decide whether to get up straight away or sleep in a bit longer. You had to decide whether to get dressed immediately or have your first coffee in your pyjamas. Did you indeed go for a caffeine shot or did you decide to have something else? Or did you decide to go to the loo first?

And I haven't even mentioned the decision to check your phone, turn on the radio, heating or the toaster. Or the decision to combine all of this whilst simultaneously looking at your to-dos for the day. And your day has only just begun. What does this mean?

**All those micro-choices may seem insignificant, but they're not. Researchers estimate that our brains make around 35,000 choices every day – from small to large. It's impossible to make all of them consciously, with attention.**



Our brains would simply crash. That's why we make the vast majority of our decisions unconsciously and automatically. As Nobel Prize winners Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have shown, our brains work via two systems:

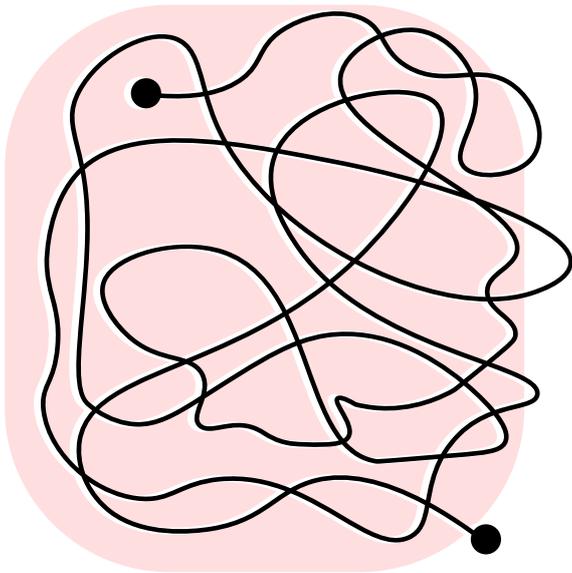
- ✔ **A conscious system**  
(slow, analytical)
- ✔ **An automatic system**  
(fast, intuitive)

That second system has the upper hand. And that's a good thing – it allows us to navigate efficiently through our day with minimal mental effort. But here comes the tension. We want choice. Autonomy. Control. But our brains are not designed to easily handle lots of choices.

**That's the paradox. The more choice we're given, the harder it becomes to make a decision and the less happy we are with the decision we make.**

# The Phenomenon of Choice overload

*Because although that automatic system is efficient, it doesn't always lead to the best decisions. On the contrary. Especially when our brain is confronted with too many options, we can experience a number of negative consequences.*



## We don't choose

Firstly, too many options cause indifference, simply because thinking about too many choices requires too much mental energy. This can lead to:



### Decision fatigue,

no desire to choose or



### Choice paralysis,

also known as postponement of choice

There is also a special reason why people sometimes don't make a choice. Our automatic brain is 'programmed' to avoid regret. In behavioural science, this is called regret aversion (loss aversion). **When people expect regret from a choice, they tend to do nothing.**

This can have serious consequences. Research has shown that people's behaviour in accepting or rejecting an important medical treatment is more strongly influenced by avoiding regret that might arise from making the wrong choice, than by other expected negative emotions (such as fear or pain, for example). **Fear of regretting the wrong choice can lead someone to not undergo necessary treatment.** So when designing a choice, you need to be aware that the number of options you present to someone also increases the chance of regret and thus a lack of making a choice. Which in turn reinforces inertia. In short, not choosing is the first negative effect of too much choice.



## We make worse choices

But there's more. When we have more options to choose from, we tend to make worse decisions because we rely even more on our automatic thinking process instead of our conscious thinking process. Unfortunately, our automatic decisions sometimes don't lead to the best choices.



*An example of this is that we tend to trust what others do (social proof). Even if those people don't even resemble us and their choice might not be the best choice for us at all. So is what they do good for us? You might have experienced this yourself. Have you ever said in a restaurant: 'I'll have the same as what she/he is having'.*

*This was probably caused by an overabundance of options on the menu. Research has shown what happens when there are six or thirty options on a menu. In the first case, people tend to choose for themselves. In the second case, they choose what their partner chooses.*



## We make more conservative choices

Yet a third effect of too many choices: we tend to make more conservative choices. Again to minimise the chance of regret. And there's something else.

**The more options we have, the less satisfied we are afterwards with what we did choose.** Simply because we can more easily imagine what we might have missed out on. Barry Schwartz described this convincingly in his book *'The Paradox of Choice'*.

In his experiment, people showed less satisfaction when they had to choose from 20 types of jam or jeans, compared to a limited set. More choice didn't lead to better decisions, but to more doubt and less satisfaction. This aligns with the work of Sheena Iyengar, who shows how multiple alternatives activate our imagination. We think about what could have been – and as a result, we value less what is.

## The Power of Bounded choice

*If we know that too much choice often hinders rather than activates people, then a logical design question follows: what does work?*

A powerful principle from behavioural science is the idea of 'bounded choice'. This builds on the insight that people are only limitedly able to decide rationally when they're inundated with options. Choices are then avoided, postponed or made based on irrelevant signals.

***"A greater variety of choices makes us feel worse."*** – Barry Schwartz

But the reverse is also true:

***"Limiting the number of options can lead to more satisfying choices."***



An extensive meta-analysis of 99 scientific studies (Chernev et al., 2015) showed that limiting choices is most effective in four situations:

- 1 When people want to make a choice quickly and effortlessly
- 2 When it concerns a complex product or service
- 3 When it's difficult to compare alternatives
- 4 When people don't have strong preferences

In all these cases, limiting choices increases the chance of action, satisfaction and choice commitment. What does this mean for Behavioural Design?

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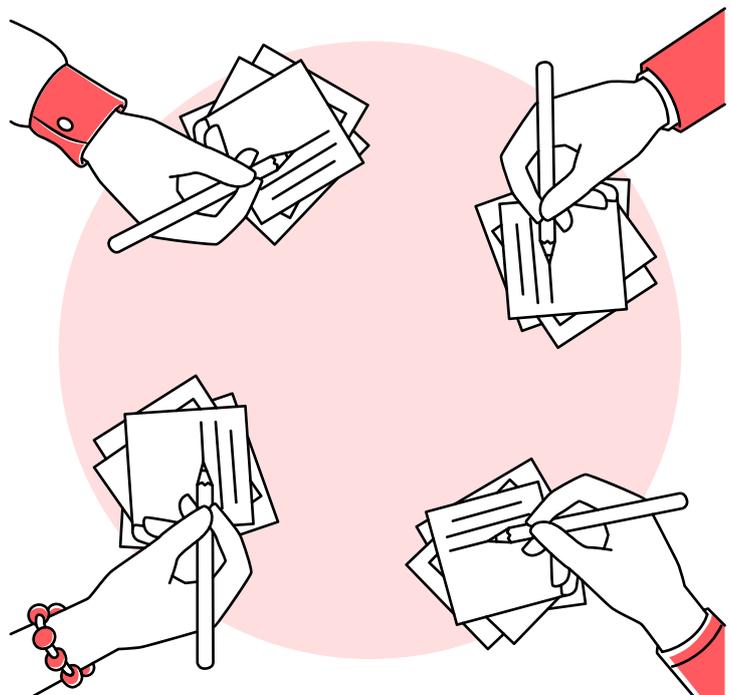
**Choice limitation works not because you deny people something, but because you protect them from cognitive overload.** By reducing the number of options, the mental choice process becomes simpler, faster and psychologically safer. And that increases the chance that people will actually take action.

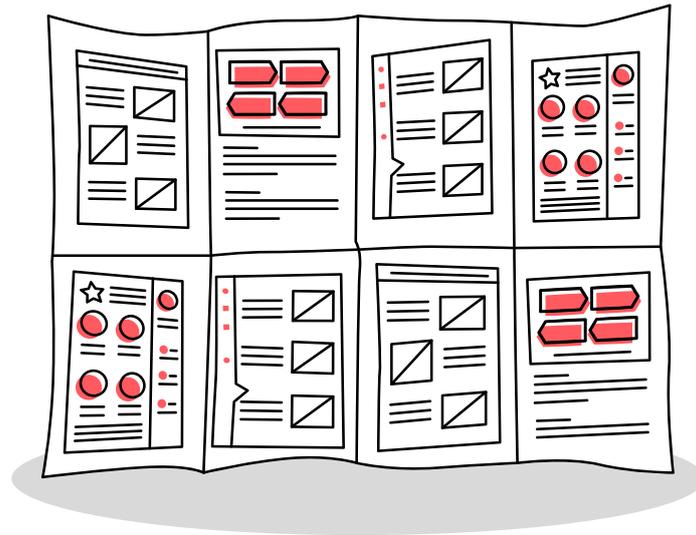
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## Before we design choices: **Ethical considerations**

*There's another important point to consider before you start designing choices. Because although limiting options is often effective, it also raises legitimate questions. People want to feel free. Freedom of choice is not just a cultural value – it's a psychological need.*

According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), **autonomy** is one of the three fundamental psychological basic needs – along with **competence** and **connectedness**. If people feel that their autonomy is being restricted, it can lead to resistance, avoidance behaviour or even opposition. This mechanism is called **reactance** (Brehm, 1966): when people feel that their freedom of choice is being curtailed, they want to do just the opposite.





How often have you changed your behaviour as an adult because someone imposed it on you? Exactly! That worked when you were little. After that, you rebelled. **So when we want to influence behaviour, we must always leave room for self-determination.**

However, that doesn't mean that limiting options should be taboo. Especially in contexts where people become overloaded, such as health, finances or complex products, reducing options can actually be a form of care. If applied properly.

A nice example comes from research into eating behaviour. In a large-scale meta-analysis of nearly 100 behavioural interventions in the field of healthy eating (Cadario & Chandon, 2019), it appeared that adjusting portion sizes or tableware (such as smaller plates or cups) is among the most effective behavioural interventions.

The reason? You implicitly limit the choice, but people retain control. They can certainly take a second portion. Only it turns out: most don't. It works because you change the context, without taking away the right to choose.

And that's precisely what well-designed Behavioural Design is about: you work with options, not against choice. From an ethical perspective, it's therefore important to distinguish:

- ✓ **Between *limiting options* and *restricting freedom of choice***
- ✓ **Between *guiding behaviour* and *forcing behaviour***



**Our position is clear: designing choices is a powerful Behavioural Design, as long as you do it in service of the decision-maker.**

That's why in behavioural interventions, it's essential to distinguish between limiting options and restricting freedom of choice. We believe that good behavioural design can actually strengthen people's autonomy, provided it happens from respect and transparency.

Let me illustrate that with three examples that show how subtle context interventions help people make better decisions, without coercion or restriction:



### **Pension building without obligation (Switzerland)**

A Swiss pension fund struggled with low participation in a voluntary scheme. Instead of making participation mandatory, the box "I participate" was ticked by default on the registration form. People could easily adjust this – but the default was set to 'yes'.



Participant numbers rose from **23% to 91%**.



It worked because the choice remained, but the system pushed in the direction of what was best for them.



## Donor registration with choice activation (Netherlands)

In 2020, the Netherlands changed the law regarding organ donation: everyone was automatically registered, but people could indicate their choice themselves. The communication campaign emphasised: *"It is and remains your choice."*



More people than ever registered their wish including those who chose 'no'.



It wasn't the obligation that worked, but the activation of a decision.



## Addiction care via standard environment (Norway)

In Norwegian hospitals, alcohol use wasn't banned, but the standard was adjusted: alcohol-free zones were the norm. Visitors could still order something – but had to consciously ask for it.

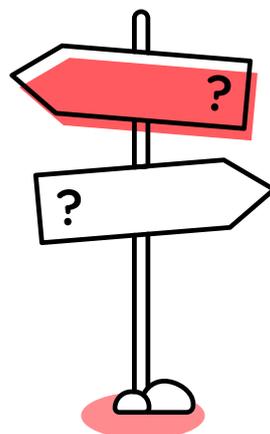


Alcohol use decreased significantly during hospital stays.



The environment guided without enforcing. Freedom of choice remained, but desired behaviour was made easier.

*These examples show that behavioural design isn't a trick, but a form of choice architecture in which you take into account how people really make choices.*



*Not by imposing something, but by making the desired path frictionless and the less desirable path more difficult, without closing it off. And that's precisely what we mean by ethical influencing: **not manipulating, but navigating.***

# 5 behavioural interventions that work

*Now that we know that too much choice can lead to paralysis, regret and passivity, the next question is of course: clever Behavioural Design.*

By aligning with how the brain processes choices - automatically, intuitively, energy-efficiently - you can shape the context in such a way that people make better decisions, with less effort. So choices don't have to be less free, but they should be better guided. Based on behavioural science and dozens of practical cases, you'll see that five interventions are most effective in designing choices:



## 1. Limit or remove options

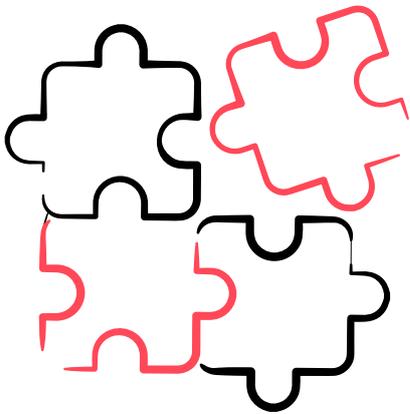
Too much supply leads to postponement. By eliminating irrelevant or contradictory choices, you make it easier for people to come to a decision. Less distraction, more action.

## 2. Frame options

How you present choices matters. By adjusting the context or formulation, you influence how attractive, risky or logical an option feels – without changing the facts.

### 3. Organise options

People get lost in unstructured choice fields. By categorising, filtering or visually ordering, you lower the mental threshold to oversee choices. Offer structure, not chaos. Start with simple choices, build up to more complex ones.



### 4. Identify personal preferences

The better someone knows what suits him or her, the easier irrelevant choices fall away. By activating or making preferences explicit, you reduce choice burden. Activate preferences before choosing. Work with filters, profiles, scenarios.

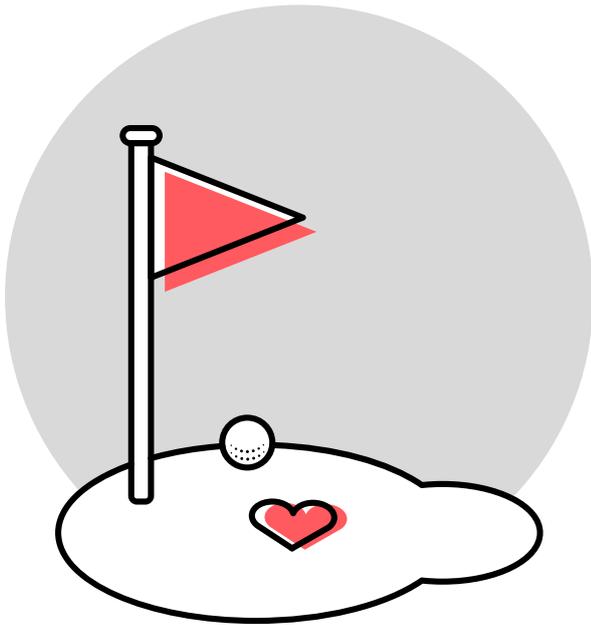
### 5. Offer expert advice

Sometimes you can simplify choices by partially outsourcing the decision process. Relying on an expert not only saves time but also prevents doubt afterwards. Give direction without deciding for the other person. Think of doctors, coaches, advisors: trust is a behaviour accelerator.

**These five principles form the foundation of good choice design.** On the following pages, we'll elaborate on each of these interventions using practical examples, behavioural science substantiation and concrete applications.

# 5 Practical examples

## 1 Limit or remove options



How far you should limit options depends on the behaviour you're trying to influence. If you want someone to click on a button on your website, it's often better to offer one clear option. If you want someone to choose a health programme, you can show three alternatives with your preferred option strategically in the middle, because people are naturally inclined to choose the middle option (centre-stage effect).

And if you want someone to choose a certain product, it works to show two similar products, where the left product (in Western cultures) is more expensive than your target product. That more expensive option then functions as a mental anchor: **it makes your product look more attractive in comparison.**

These principles aren't rules, but guidelines. They're based on behavioural science insights about anchoring, default bias and middle-option preference. Yet designing behaviour always remains a matter of testing and fine-tuning. What remains valid in every situation:

## Less is usually more when making decisions.

By eliminating irrelevant, competing or confusing choices, you make it easier for people to take action – without them feeling like they're missing something.

## 2

## Organise options

But sometimes you can't limit choices. Then you can structure them. People can deal quite well with a large number of options, provided you guide them. A well-known example comes from the automotive industry. A German car manufacturer investigated how customers handled their online configurator, in which they had to make up to 60 choices. Each choice category – from colour to engine, from wheels to roof construction – contained multiple sub-options.

The researchers expected that it would be clever to start with simple choices, such as colour, because people often already have preferences for these.



*But the opposite turned out to be true. The designers had assumed it would be smart to let people start with something easy – like picking a car colour. But that step proved overwhelming: there were so many options that people dropped out before moving on. Meanwhile, a different order turned out to be far more effective. Customers who began with limited, straightforward choices – such as the type of engine, with just a few options – gradually built up confidence. Step by step, they made their way through the configurator. They stuck with it, completed their choices more consciously, and felt more certain about their final decision.*

*What can we learn from this? By structuring choices smartly – from few to many, from simple to complex – you give people a sense of control. Each small, clear decision becomes a stepping stone to the next. You're not just guiding them through the process – you're boosting their confidence along the way.*

### 3 Frame options

Sometimes limiting options is not a matter of elimination, but of framing. How you present a choice largely determines how attractive or acceptable it feels. It's not just about what you offer, but how you frame it. A recognisable example comes from parenting. Parents often say: "Eat your peas." But anyone with a toddler at home knows: that rarely works. You can increase the effect by giving back the feeling of control, via framing:

***"Do you want to eat your peas or your carrots first?"***

The child is still making a choice but within a framework that you've designed. The same principle works in professional contexts, such as salary negotiations. Suppose: you want to attract a candidate for your organisation. Instead of an open discussion about salary, you can make a proposal in which the candidate may choose:

***"Do you want option A: a higher base salary with fewer holidays? Or option B: a lower salary, but more free time?"***



Both options are legitimate. But you determine the playing field. The candidate retains autonomy, while you provide direction to the negotiation climate. This technique is also called 'either/or framing' – and is effective because it prevents tension and endless negotiation, without taking away freedom of choice. So framing is a powerful instrument to give direction, without forcing.

## 4 Identify personal preferences

Another remedy for choice stress is helping people activate their personal preferences. Because when people feel overwhelmed by options, they often fall back on the behaviour of others, think of social proof, or on default settings. But if you help people to explore or name their preferences in advance, then choosing becomes much easier. Not because you reduce the number of options, but because you filter out irrelevant choices.



That's why online filters, profiles or choice guides work so well. They put the automatic brain to work in service of a conscious preference. Think of shopping bots that first ask you about style, price, brand preference or fit – and only then show the supply.

This kind of preference exploration is also increasingly being used in healthcare or pension choices. What you're doing is not reducing the supply, but making it more relevant.

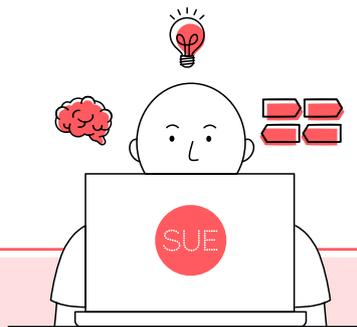
***The behavioural mechanism underlying this is called pre-decisional orientation – the better people know what suits them, the easier choosing becomes. And the greater the chance that they commit to that choice.***

## 5 Offer expert advice

Sometimes the best way to facilitate a choice is: not making the choice alone. When people are confronted with complex choices – for example in health, finances, pensions or parenting – an expert can fulfil a guiding role. Not by taking over the choice, but by filtering relevant alternatives, interpreting complex information, and giving direction.

A doctor who says: *"There are three treatment options, but given your situation, I recommend option B,"* offers peace of mind. Not because you no longer have a choice, but because you know that someone with knowledge and experience has made an assessment. You can apply that same principle in all sorts of domains:

- ✓ **A nutrition coach** who provides the right starting option
- ✓ **A financial planner** who works out three scenarios
- ✓ **A training advisor** who filters on skills AND ambitions



**In behavioural science, this is called delegated decision-making – we dare to choose if we trust someone who has done the preliminary work for us.** Especially if the choice entails uncertainty or risk. And the beauty is: the freedom of choice remains fully intact but the way towards it is clearer and less burdensome.

## Conclusion:

# Choosing is an Art

When you understand how the human brain makes choices – automatically, context-dependent, aimed at minimal friction – then you see that freedom of choice is often not the same as choice ability. People say they like to choose. But in practice, they avoid choices, postpone them or follow someone else's preference. Not because they don't want to, but because their brain is designed that way: to save energy, avoid regret and use quick rules of thumb. That's not a shortcoming. It's the natural functioning of human behaviour. And that opens the door for Behavioural Design.



As a professional, marketer, policy maker or leader, you can help people make better decisions. Not by steering them from a position of power, but by better shaping their choice context.

1

**By removing  
superfluous options**

4

**By activating  
preferences**

2

**By structuring  
choices logically**

5

**And by guiding people  
with expertise**

3

**By using framing  
without manipulating**

**Choosing is then no longer a struggle, but a navigation.**

You give direction, without forcing. And perhaps that's the most beautiful form of influence: helping people convince themselves of the best next step. Most people want to choose. But few people can choose under pressure, from abundance or without direction. **Choice design doesn't limit freedom—it creates clarity.**



If you want to influence behaviour, then design the moment of choice. Make the path to the desired option simpler, more logical and psychologically safer. Not by imposing something on people – but by cleverly shaping the context. Because real persuasion doesn't happen with more information, but with less friction.

***In short, choosing is an art. If you begin to understand a bit more about how the human brain works, you'll gain much more control over successful results.***

# Want to learn more?

## Mastering the power of **Behavioural Design in your work**



**Would you like to apply the principles of behavioural psychology to your everyday work?**

The Behavioural Design Fundamentals Course by SUE is designed for forward-thinking professionals who want to make better decisions, influence more effectively, and design contexts that truly support human behaviour.

You'll learn how to recognise thinking errors, understand the hidden drivers behind choices, and apply behavioural science to create more conscious, fair and effective outcomes. Not just theory – but practical tools you can use straight away.



**Fundamentals Course can be followed in three ways:**



**live at  
our location**



**self-paced  
online**



**team  
training**



## What will you learn in our training?



How the brain really works when it comes to decision-making – for both client and professionals



How to use choice architecture to design fair, bias-aware communication and decision-making processes



Practical methods to improve client advice, content strategy, campaigns and product development



The **SUE | Influence Framework**<sup>®</sup> for systematically designing behavioural interventions



Immediately applicable techniques for your daily work in marketing and communication



## Who is this training for?

This course is designed for professionals who want to influence behaviour and decision-making – whether from clients, colleagues or teams. If you work in HR, marketing, communication, product development, policy or leadership: if you work with people, you work with behaviour.

*This training is for you if you are:*



An HR professional looking to apply behavioural insights to recruitment, talent development or change management



A marketer or communication professional wanting to design better campaigns, messaging or customer journeys



A product owner or UX designer aiming to create solutions that truly align with how people think and behave



A team leader or manager seeking to guide behaviour change within your team or organisation



A policy maker or programme manager working to design interventions that actually change behaviour



Or simply curious about how to achieve more by understanding and shaping human behaviour more effectively



## Why choose SUE?



Accredited by the Education Quality Assessment Committee (EQAC)



Average rating of 9.7 from over 5,000 participants in 45+ countries



Practical tools and templates you can use right away



Small group sizes for personal attention and rich interaction



Trainers with deep expertise in Behavioural Design



## What do past participants say?

“A truly human-centred approach, backed by a solid method. The training combines insights from multiple disciplines into a practical and scalable process.”

**CPO**  
**-Allianz-Tiriac Asigurari SA**

“This training is incredibly valuable for understanding people better and designing solutions to the complex problems they face. I can’t wait to start influencing behaviour in a positive way!”

**Customer Experience  
Consultant**  
**-ABN AMRO**





## Your investment

The Behavioural Design Fundamentals Course is an investment in skills that will serve your entire professional career:

- ✓ **Two intensive training days**
- ✓ **Practical tools and templates you can use immediately**
- ✓ **Certificate of completion**
- ✓ **Access to the exclusive SUE Behavioural Design Club**
- ✓ **6 months online follow-up training**

## Reviews:



**Google 4,8 out of 5**

**bloomville**



## Interested or ready to sign up?

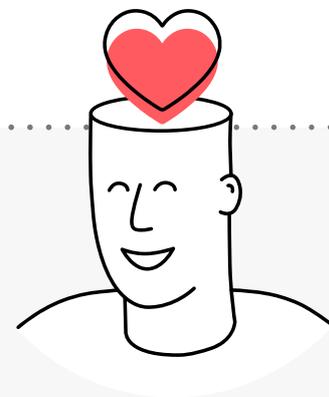
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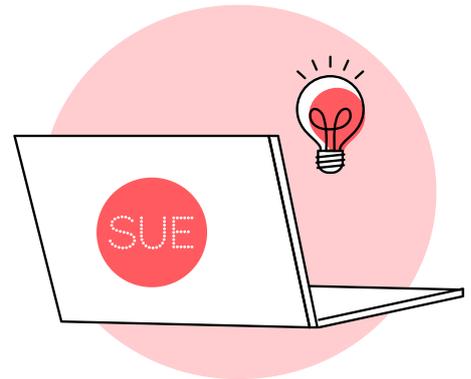




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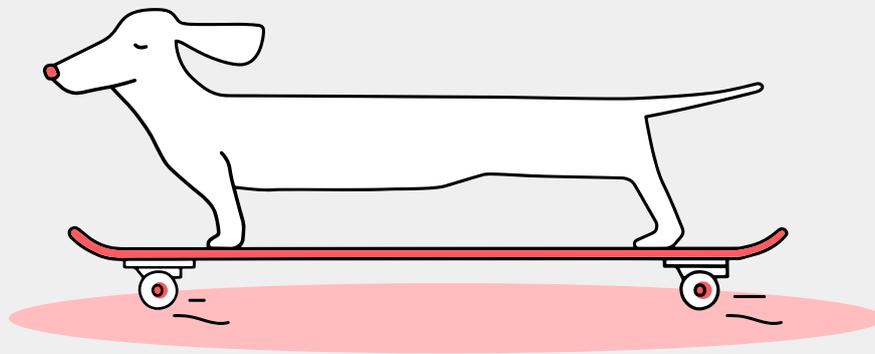
*Invest in skills that benefit both your customers and your organisation. Because effective influence isn't a gamble — it's a science you can master.*



## Sources and references

*This mini-masterclass is based on insights from behavioural economics, cognitive psychology and applied behavioural science. Below you'll find the main sources consulted:*

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