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THE PERSONAL MBA (/)

MASTER THE ART OF BUSINESS

by Josh Kaufman (<https://joshkaufman.net/about-josh-kaufman/>), #1 bestselling business author

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What Is ‘Mental Simulation’?

Mental Simulation is our mind’s ability to imagine taking a specific action and simulating the probable result before acting.

Anticipating the results of our actions improves our ability to solve new problems.

Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) relies on our memory, learned via perception and experience. Without supplying a goal, a destination, mental simulation can’t exist.

Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) is extremely powerful if you learn how to harness it consciously.

Josh Kaufman Explains ‘Mental Simulation’

Quick: imagine jumping into the middle of an active volcano. Is it a good idea?

Answering this question took you only a few fractions of a second, even though you've never personally jumped into a volcano or seen anyone who has.

What you've just done is quite extraordinary: how is it possible to immediately know the answer to something you've never considered before? Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) is our mind's ability to imagine taking a specific action, then simulating the probable result before acting.

Our minds are constantly trying to predict what will happen in the future, based on what's happening around us and what actions we're considering. Anticipating the results of our actions is a significant advantage: it dramatically enhances our ability to solve novel problems.

Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) relies on our memory-the database of Patterns we've learned via perception and experience.

When you imagined jumping into a volcano, your brain couldn't find any personal experiences, but it did find relevant Associations (/association/): lava is hot, hot things burn, burns are painful and dangerous, painful and dangerous things are bad.

This set of associations is used to simulate the probable result in the blink of an eye, resulting in snap judgment: VERY BAD IDEA.

Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) is extremely powerful and versatile-it can be used to test even the most arbitrary actions without risk. Given any goal or scenario, Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) is what your brain uses to connect point A to point B, where point A is where you are now, and point B is what you're imagining.

The only limitation on what you can simulate is your imagination.

For example, how would you go about visiting Antarctica? It's a random question, but by holding the End Result (/end-result/) in mind for a few seconds, your brain automatically starts connecting the dots, based on the Patterns you've learned.

“I could call a travel agent (/agency/)... cruises go to Antarctica all the time... I’d have to fly to Argentina... I’d have to buy a really warm coat, etc.” All of this thinking just happens, without much effort on your part—it’s what your brain is designed to do.

Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) only works if you supply a “point B,” even if the action or goal is completely arbitrary -you can simulate the path to even the most unrealistic and absurd destination you can imagine.

Think of using a service like Google Maps or a vehicle GPS system—the system can give you accurate directions, but it won’t work unless you enter a destination. That destination can be your best friend’s house or someplace random like Albuquerque, New Mexico. Either way, without supplying a Goal (/goals/), the system can’t operate. The same rule applies to mental simulation—no destination, no simulation.

Mental Simulation (/mental-simulation/) is particularly powerful if you learn how to harness it consciously, which we’ll explore in detail in Counterfactual Simulation.

Questions About ‘Mental Simulation’

- How often do you use your imagination to imagine the results or consequences of specific actions or goals?
- How could you set aside more time for deliberate mental simulation?

“I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”

— **Michelangelo**, sculptor and artist