The power of the checklist

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"The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it."
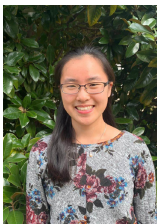
— Edward R. Murrow

By Breanna Shen
Guest Writer

In fastidious preparation for an all-important Zoom presentation where I would explain the conclusions of my two-month-long neuroscience research project, I put on my best blazer and spent half an hour arranging my hair.

I even struggled into my dress pants, determined not to reenact the mortifying stories of business executives who accidently stand up and reveal their SpongeBob pajama pants on live video.

Shen

As the moderator gave the introduction, I kept my camera off and artfully planned the strategic moment when I would flick on my camera and dazzle the audience. Upon the announcement of my name, I turned on my webcam only to discover that my own video feed was missing.

Panicked and sweaty, I gave my entire presentation, clueless about my own appearance. At the end of it all, when I was finally able to glimpse my video, I was horrified to see my webcam angled up, filling the frame with an unflattering close-up of my neck and face.

Something had clearly gone wrong in my plans. I had prepared so much but had forgotten a very important step. I had forgotten the camera check before my presentation.

Besides providing entertainment at my expense, my goofy error on my Zoom presentation didn't cause much damage.

However, in high-stakes corporate deals, airline flights and open-heart surgeries, human errors would be catastrophic. How then do big corporations, airliners and hospitals prevent human fallibility from wreaking havoc?

Surgeon and author Dr. Atul Gawande offers us a deceptively simple answer in his enlightening book, "The Checklist Manifesto."

He suggests that a simple checklist can prevent almost all human errors due to inattention. In fact, the efficacy of the checklist has been tested in multiple real-world situations.

Results show that streamlined checklists for takeoff, landing and emergency situations help avert airline disasters, and checklists for surgical procedures reduce infection rates and boost patient survival rates.

In the first 18 months of one hospital study, "the hospitals saved an estimated $175 million in costs and more than 1,500 lives… all because of a stupid little checklist."

Even in our daily lives, checklists in the form of shopping lists and science lab procedures provide dependable safeguards.

At first, despite all the evidence pointing to the effectiveness of checklists, I still wasn't convinced. I thought that the security of a checklist might not be worth the extra time it takes to create the checklist.

Yet, I have since discovered that the peace of mind a physical checklist offers is invaluable.

The process of creating the checklist also helps clear the clutter in our short-term memory, freeing us to focus on the important things.

Checklists can streamline our thoughts and ensure consistency and discipline in our performance. It also takes surprisingly little effort to jot down a simple list; I take just three minutes to write a list of tasks at the beginning of my study sessions.

For those concerned with maximizing task efficiency and accuracy, adopting the checklist in life, school and work can pay dividends.

The next time I prepare for a Zoom presentation, I will create a checklist, and I will for sure write a bolded, capitalized and underlined reminder: "Check the webcam!"

Breanna Shen is a guest writer and former Arts and Entertainment editor for The Echo.

Illustration by Mark Fantonial