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Creating Citizen Choice Architects

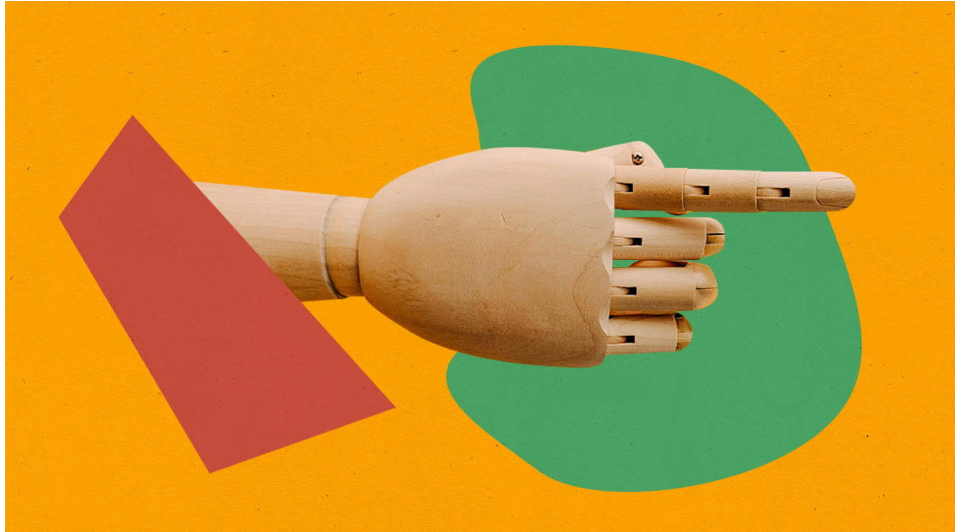By **Ralph Hertwig** and **Samuli Reijula**

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Image Adapted from Charles Deluvio/Unsplash

Incorporating nudging and other behavioral insights from psychological science into public policy has become de rigueur for governments around the world. Nudging was originally developed as an attempt to reconcile state intervention and individual liberty. It is based on the assumption that people's cognitive abilities and self-control are so limited relative to the complexity of the world that structural changes to their environments, or "choice architectures," are often required for them to act in their own best interest.

Nudging has enriched public policy interventions with the promise of effective, cost-efficient ways to shape citizens' behaviors so as to enhance their welfare. Yet it has also drawn strong criticism. Some have argued that government nudges can be manipulative and coercive, and that they can run the risk of paternalism. Furthermore, nudges implemented by public choice architects rarely reach people in the privacy of their homes—and whether this would even be desirable is another debate altogether. Nudges also require public choice architects to do some guesswork around what people really want or need in the long term, and even the best nudge may not be appropriate for every member of a target group.

Finally, while many nudges are apparent to the public (e.g., graphic health warnings), others may be less obvious (e.g., positional effects that lead to unconscious dietary changes). A person who is unaware of a nudge cannot consciously reject it. There may also be a trade-off between a nudge's effectiveness and its reversibility: if only a small fraction of decision-makers reject a particular nudge (e.g., by opting out of an organ donation default), it may be more reversible in theory than in practice, thus undermining individual autonomy.

The key policy goal of self-nudging is to *empower* people—we call them *citizen choice architects*—to design their own decision environments and thus to choose if and how they want to nudge themselves.

What if there was an elegant way to alleviate these concerns without losing the insights and behavioral evidence from the research on nudging, and without denying the still expanding role that nudging plays in public policy?

We believe that self-nudging could be such an approach. We developed the notion of self-nudging as one principled response to some of the criticism of nudging. To avoid any misunderstandings, self-nudging is not the logical extension of nudging but we see it as a boost aiming to increase people's competences. The key policy goal of self-nudging is to *empower* people—we call them *citizen choice architects*—to design their own decision environments and thus to choose if and how they want to nudge themselves.

In self-nudging, simplicity, not sexiness, is key; people may resist or quickly abandon complicated measures. And simple interventions can be surprisingly powerful: the slightest of changes to the environment can prevent a commercial

nudge from hijacking people's attention.

Consider self-control problems in the digital world. Who has not caught themselves compulsively checking their smartphone, or emerging from a rabbit hole of Twitter threads, breaking news, or YouTube videos after initially intending to take just a moment to respond to an urgent email? The citizen choice architect who needs to meet deadlines might tweak their choice architecture by, for instance, turning off notifications on their smartphone, offloading distracting apps from their home screen, changing disruptive default settings, or putting their phone in a drawer when they get home. More advanced citizen choice architects may customize how their social media news feeds—among the most sophisticated choice architectures online—are designed and sorted. When the factors that determine how posts are sorted are presented transparently (as is the case on Reddit), power can be put back in the hands of those who choose to take it.

Behavioral scientists can help the "homo distractus" to respond to the individual and collective crisis in attention by teaching people how to regain control from a digital choice architecture that steers them toward commercial ends. In so doing, behavioral scientists can build on all of us having some intuitive firsthand experience with the power of our daily choice architecture. Who has not tried to, for instance, control a craving for sweets after a long day by pushing unhealthy snacks to the back of a cupboard, maybe behind a selection of unsalted nuts. When the craving strikes, we have already muffled the Sirens' call: the cookies are nowhere to be seen. Instead of staring down temptation, we munch on a handful of almonds.

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So do people really need to be taught? Some of the self-nudges above are so simple that they may seem painfully obvious—and yet, many people do not implement them. The collective experience of digital technologies is still one of hijacked control. Furthermore, citizens and behavioral scientists alike may fail to appreciate the power of minimal changes in the environment because they are so effective in removing the inner and sometimes tormenting struggle typically associated with exercising self-control. Successful citizen choice architects have experienced that they do not need to rely on their willpower in the face of temptation; instead, they have learned to fashion more benevolent environments that keep seductive distractions at bay.

To become citizen choice architects in any domain, people require the knowledge that has traditionally been the boon of researchers and government officials. Many of the basic psychological principles behind nudges are intuitive and easy to understand: given the opportunity, most people would quickly grasp

concepts such as defaults, positional effects, cooling-off periods, precommitment devices, and cognitive and visual accessibility. Yet this knowledge is not widely available, and people are largely left to their own devices. Even those who do stumble across a helpful self-nudge will generally not know how to apply the principle behind it to similar challenges. Imagine what people could achieve if they were let in on all the secrets of nudging instead of being left to scour the internet for motivational blog posts.

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Self-nudging offers substantial advantages over nudging. First, people who self-nudge are unlikely to be accused of manipulating their target audience (themselves), and the risk of paternalism is minimal to nonexistent when the person being nudged and the person doing the nudging are one and the same. Second, while nudging stops—for good reason—at people's doorsteps, self-nudging allows citizens to adapt the concepts and ideas generated for the public sphere to their private lives—if they want to. Third, self-nudging offers a solution to the fact that people often want different things. When confronted with a heterogeneous group, a public policymaker will miss the mark for at least some people. The person who can best identify their goals is, unsurprisingly, not a distant policymaker—it's them. It is true that an individual may mistake the goals of their present self for those of their future self. However, if they are introduced to what George Ainslie portrayed as the bargaining process (or even limited warfare) between their short-term and long-term desires, citizen choice architects can design their choice environments so as to flexibly shape the impacts of their short-term and long-term goals and desires.

Last but not least, self-nudging can also foster awareness about the extent to which inconspicuous properties of the environment control human behavior. Self-nudging boosts people's ability to detect and alter these properties. Once citizens realize the power of simple changes in the environment, they may start noticing—and resisting—relentless commercial nudging.

Designing and empirically testing self-nudges should be on behavioral science's research agenda. Behavioral insight units may begin to think about how to best communicate self-nudges and the psychological knowledge they embody to citizens. And they need not start from scratch. Akin to stickK, self-nudges can, for instance, be communicated through dedicated websites that also may offer opportunities for citizen choice architects to monitor, if so desired, the success (or lack thereof) of their interventions.

Behavioral scientists can do more than explore choice architectures—we can, and should, strive to create citizen choice architects.

Research on self-nudging also need not begin at the beginning. Similar goals—albeit with different concepts and frames—have been promoted in the past and can inform research on self-nudging. For instance, research on self-regulated learning has shown that successful students purposefully engineer their environment in ways that make it easier for them to concentrate on their studies. This environmental structuring could be as simple as turning off the radio and looking for a quiet nook to study. Self-nudging can harness this and related research on self-regulated strategies and combine it with the policy insights and evidence obtained in research on nudging. Behavioral science as a whole also holds many other treasures for citizen choice architects, including self-commitment devices, the concepts of stimulus control and self-management through rules, and the power of social comparison, mental contrasting, and implementation intentions.

Self-nudging is not a panacea, and it comes with its own set of challenges. To become citizen choice architects, people must know both that a behavioral problem exists and how it can be addressed through changes in the choice architecture. They must also be motivated to gain some basic insight into the psychological mechanisms behind these changes. Ultimately, the extent to which providing citizens with open access to behavioral science knowledge can help them achieve their goals is an empirical question.

Let us get to work. Behavioral scientists can do more than explore choice architectures—we can, and should, strive to create citizen choice architects.

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Further Reading & Resources

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