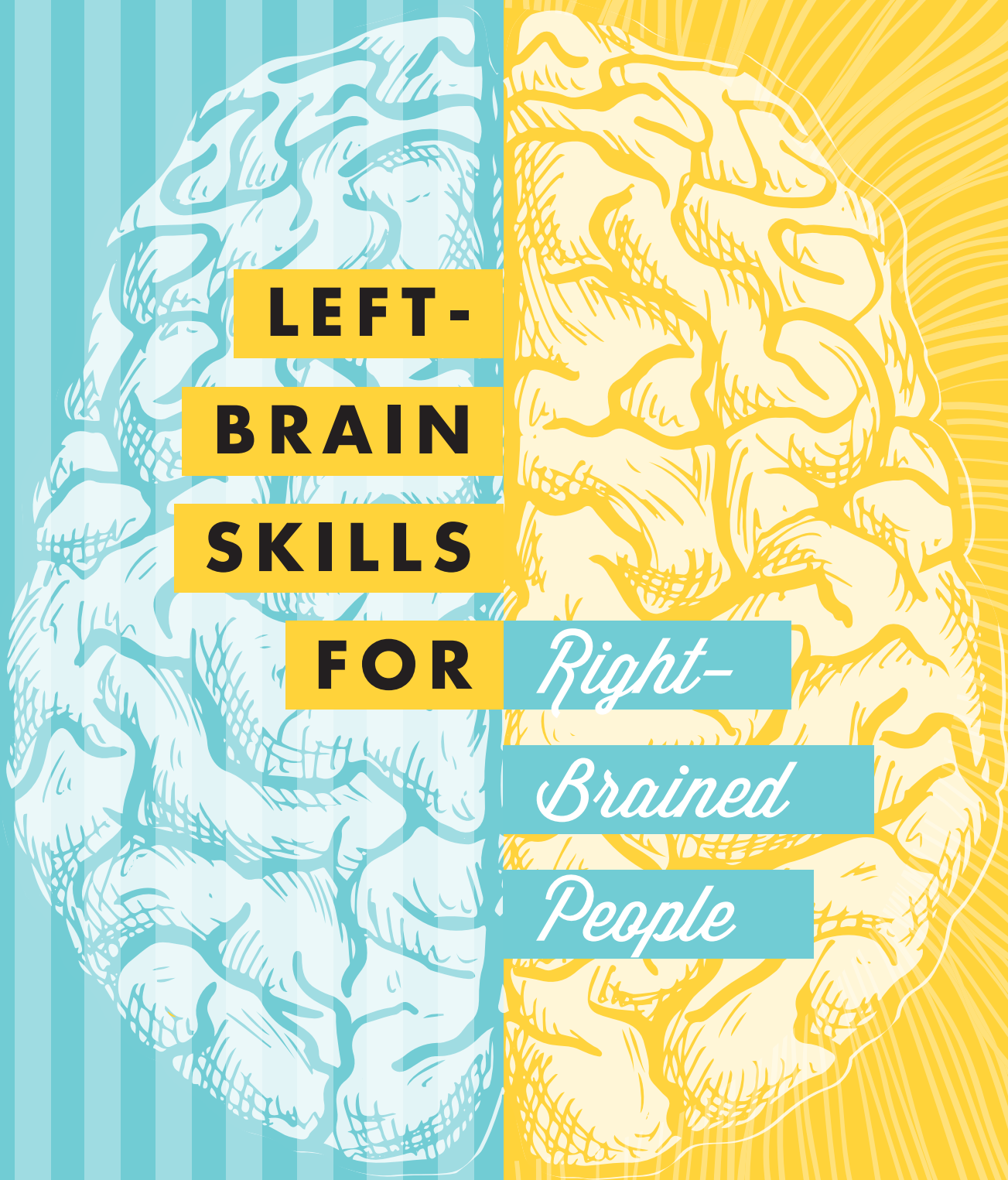


LEFT-BRAIN SKILLS FOR *Right-Brained People*

BY MARY EDWARDS, PH.D.

Did you know … ?
Matthew Daub, *Professional Artist* contributor, is a nationally-known artist and art professor. His work has been included in more than 150 juried and invitational exhibitions including MoMA and the National Academy of Design.

A sculptor is working in his studio, completing a large-scale piece of public art. He gets so lost in the process that he forgets the 5 p.m. deadline to enter his work in a national juried competition.

An abstract painter is at home at her desk, checking off items on her family's to-do-list: Make a dentist appointment for her son, pick up the dry cleaning, balance the checkbook. She wonders why she has no energy to go into her studio to paint.

A fashion designer is sketching in her notebook, pleased at the look of the new suit she's creating. She can see her model walking down the runway at New York Fashion Week. But when the designer sits down to work, she has difficulty understanding the detailed instructions on how to make the zipper lie flat on the delicate fabric.

What is going on here? Why does the sculptor forget his deadline? Why does the painter get stuck in routine tasks, when all she really cares about is making art? Why is it easy for the fashion designer to imagine her creation walking down the runway, but difficult for her to follow written instructions? Are any of these dilemmas familiar to you? Do you recognize your own struggles as an artist?

Many artists believe that the source of their dilemmas isn't just "out there" in the challenging demands of the art world, but somehow inside them. So they blame themselves, thinking that they are just lazy or forgetful, or "not good at" meeting deadlines or following instructions. But self-blame doesn't help, because the source of these problems and their solutions can be found within the artist's brain.

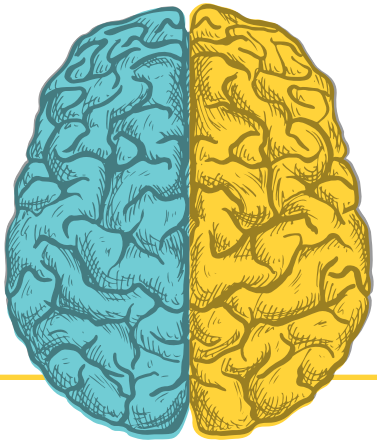
Even though you may know the terms "left brain" and "right brain," you may not understand how this dichotomy affects your professional life.

When you look at the research, you learn that the brain has two hemispheres that are almost opposite in how they experience the world. This was first discovered by Roger Sperry at the California Institute of Technology. In 1981, he won the Pulitzer Prize in physiology for his split-brain experiments, and scientists have validated and expanded on this work ever since. One of the most popular books for artists, Betty Edwards' *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, used Sperry's research to develop a new method to teach drawing. She suggested how anyone could learn to draw if they could "silence" the left hemisphere's interference and release the visual capacities of the right brain. She taught artists how to see.

This following picture shows both cerebral hemispheres and what information they process.

The image is a high-level overview of these functions. When we look closer, we find six key areas which have a profound impact on the careers of visual artists. Remember, one side of the brain is not better than the

LEFT BRAIN FUNCTIONS
Analytic Thought
Logic
Language
Science & Math



RIGHT BRAIN FUNCTIONS
Holistic Thought
Intuition
Creativity
Art & Music

LEFT HEMISPHERE STRENGTHS

VERBAL (thinks in words)
SYMBOLIC (one thing stands for another)
DIGITAL (thinks in numbers)
TEMPORAL (aware of time)
LOGICAL (follows reason)
LINEAR (follows a sequence of linked ideas)

RIGHT HEMISPHERE STRENGTHS

VISUAL (thinks in pictures)
ACTUAL (only the thing itself is real)
SPATIAL (perceives the world through physical relationships)
NONTEMPORAL (unaware of time)
INTUITIVE (insights come from recognizing patterns)
HOLISTIC (understands everything at once)

other — just different. Each hemisphere has its own strengths and need to work together for you to function.

To understand the profound and dramatic differences between the two hemispheres, you only have to read *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey* by neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor. Taylor tells the story of what happened when a massive stroke shut down the left hemisphere of her brain. Her compelling memoir, written 20 years after the event, reveals what it's like to experience the world without a functioning left hemisphere. Her personal story, combined with her professional insight as a neurosurgeon, dramatically illuminates that reality. She describes an extreme version of what it can be like to live in the mind of an artist immersed in the creative process.

Now think about your own experience. When making art you're using right-brain skills and processes. You are visual, intuitive, spontaneous and grounded in the physical reality of making art. You ignore details and perceive the world in a holistic way. You lose track of time as your imagination runs free. You may stay in that mode for hours or even days at a time. This is the creative process. But when you start to work on the professional aspects of your career, suddenly you're asked for a different kind of thinking and doing. You must pay attention to deadlines, follow detailed instructions for entering your work in an exhibition, develop a project plan for a grant or a residency, analyze data about your sales. The list is endless and every one of these critical professional skills is based on left-brain processing.

Now we can understand what was happening to our three struggling artists: The sculptor got so lost in his creative process that he missed an important deadline because he couldn't get out of his right brain in order to pay attention to a left-brain task. The painter checking off items on her to-do list was so mired in a linear sequence of tasks that she couldn't find her way back to the studio. And the fashion designer? She was caught in the middle — while the creative side of her brain happily envisioned her model walking down the runway, she struggled to follow the instructions required to make the actual garment.

These examples illustrate the challenges artists face. Artists who love to create but also want to achieve professional success need to better harness both hemispheres. Your art-making keeps you in a right-brain mode, but you have to switch to left-brain processing to set goals, follow a logical plan and meet deadlines. Making art and managing your professional life pulls you in two directions; it's no wonder you get

discouraged and blame yourself for "not being good at" the professional side of your career.

But many artists succeed in business by developing "left-brain" professional skills. Graphic designers and digital photographers, for example, are forced through the demands of their medium to become skilled at left-brain tasks. Artists who started in the business world often bring a wide range of left-brain skills to their art career.

But what if you don't have such background or experience? How do you develop the skills you need? Believe it or not, the creative side of your brain can be your teacher. To find out how, first observe how the hemispheres of the brain operate when you're trying to learn something new. Even though everyone uses both sides of the brain, most people have a dominant side. For many visual artists, this is the right hemisphere. Luckily the two sides of the brain are connected through a lively band of neurons. Think of them as messengers whose job is to bring information from one side to the other.

Your dominant hemisphere has more of these messengers, who are activated when you're trying to learn something new. But here's the catch. Your right-brain messengers only understand information when it comes in their own language: visual images and spatial forms. So how can they help you learn the difficult professional tasks that seem foreign to your nature?

My work with artists has revealed a simple and elegant answer to this question. When you take left-brain data and translate it into "artist-friendly" visual language, your right brain understands what it means, and you suddenly "get it."

For example, Brigitte McReynolds, an accomplished painter, wanted to develop a new business plan. She had been very successful selling her work in a variety of venues, but to increase

1

her sales she needed to understand the details of her business success. Her bookkeeper had been keeping track of each category — sales from her studio, galleries, art consultants and so on. The bookkeeper summarized all of this sales data, which covered the last decade, on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets in a long scroll of words and numbers.

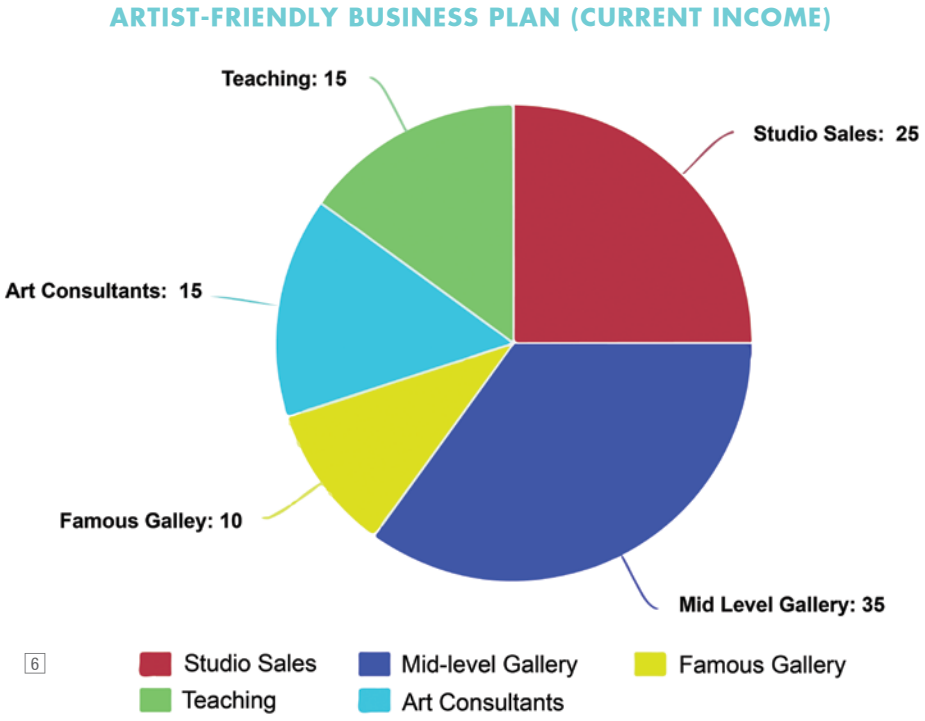
The information was presented in a detailed, logical, linear format. It was all accurate, but her artist brain had little or no access to the data. McReynolds once admitted to me that while she paid careful attention to each sale, she never read the spreadsheets.

McReynolds' business data needed to be translated into "artist-friendly" language that her right-brain messengers could understand. So she put all of her sales data into a series of multi-colored pie charts. Remember, the right brain loves everything visual and spatial. It doesn't absorb fine points of detail but likes to see the "big picture." When she first saw her pie charts, McReynolds immediately understood what those excel spreadsheets were trying to tell her. She exploded with new ideas about how to grow her business: "I really have two kinds of galleries: workhorses and show horses. Let's find another one of each," she said. "I can sell both originals and prints through art consultants — that's a good category for me." The big picture, right there in front of her, communicated directly to her artist brain. She was able to access her own creativity in the service of her business.

MAKE IT VISUAL

Another time I was working with a small team of artists who were re-launching their art business. People loved their colorful images on products (T-shirts, calendars, mugs). They wanted to expand their customer base, but didn't know how to do it. We were talking about the demographics of their current customers: their ages, lifestyles, income levels and geographic locations. As we talked, this lively and creative group

2 *Red Funnel*, by Brigitte McReynolds. Oil, acrylic, and resin on canvas, 48" x 48".



6

of people just shut down. They were polite — but clearly bored. I wondered, what was happening? We were talking about their customers, real people who bought their products and were critical to their success. But we were using written reports, numbers and lists, business documents that didn't engage them. When I realized this, I also noticed that the community center where we met was full of magazines: "shelter" magazines, fashion magazines, *People*, and so on. The next time we met I decided to try an experiment. I divided the group into pairs, handed them scissors and gave them the following assignment:

In the next 30 minutes, go through the magazines, and cut out three sets of pictures:

- Images of your current customers
- Images of potential new customers
- Images of people who are not your customers

Discuss each category and be ready to explain your choices.

Suddenly the room came alive: Friendly arguments erupted, people waved raggedly cut pictures over their heads. In less than an hour, the group reached agreement. They discovered that the many pictures of current customers were so similar that they cohered into a solid profile. These people were less than 40 years old, urban, with upscale incomes and tastes. This was their sweet spot — the customer base that would receive most of their marketing dollars.

A number of pictures of older people suggested an untapped "grandparent market." These people loved to find gifts for their nieces, nephews and especially their grandchildren. We set aside a chunk of advertising dollars to reach this group.

You get the picture — and so did they. By converting documents full of words and numbers into images, this team of artists tapped into their visual intuition. They were able to access their own creativity and apply it to their business.

MAKE IT 3-D

But sometimes a visual image isn't enough. Remember, the right brain isn't just visual — it likes an actual, tangible thing. Artists best understand abstract ideas when they are presented in tangible forms. Sometimes you have to touch and feel something in order to know that it's real. You need the 3-D version.

Take your career plan, for example. Maybe you worked with a coach or went to a workshop and produced such a plan with clear goals, action steps and a timeline. Most likely you keep your plan in a nice binder or in a folder on your computer. As time passes, you wonder why nothing is happening. All the energy and excitement of your career plan has disappeared. You don't find time to take any action steps, and eventually, you forget you have a plan.

So what do you do? To convince your artist brain that the plan is real, make it 3-D. For example, you might create a topographical map out of cardboard or papier-mâché, showing in relief the path you want to follow. You could include a small maquette of a New York gallery space, if that is your goal, or a tiny version of your sculpture in a public art installation.

These miniatures don't have to be accurate or even realistic, but you need to be able to see and touch them. They represent your intentions in material form. When your vision of success is right there in front of you, you'll find the creative energy to make your dreams come true. PA

Mary Edwards is a career and life coach for artists, based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and received her coach training from the College of Executive Coaching. Edwards brings a unique combination of business knowledge, art world experience and professional coaching skill to her practice. She works with painters, sculptors, photographers, designers and other creative people who are trying to reach the next level in their careers. For more information, visit coachingforartists.com.

6 *Artist-Friendly Business Plan* , by Mary Edwards, Ph.D.