UBINODES

WHY WE NEVER WORK ON COMMISSION.

Four reasons rooted in the neuroscience of the human brain.

For our clients and consultants.

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Behind a seemingly ordinary commercial contract, four neurological mechanisms silently transform the working relationship into a minefield. Here is why Ubinodes chose the hourly rate — and why that decision is grounded in the science of the human brain.

There is a persistent assumption in the commercial world: commission-based pay is the ‘natural’ model for sales and consulting, because it aligns the consultant’s interests with those of the client. If the consultant performs, they get paid; if sales come in, the commission follows. The logic seems airtight.

It is — on one condition: that both parties are perfectly rational economic agents. Neuroscience shows that this assumption is false for a significant portion of the population. Irrational behaviors are not exceptions: they are hardwired into the biology of the human brain, often unconscious, and systematically rationalized after the fact with plausible-sounding excuses.

Four independent, scientifically documented arguments explain why Ubinodes never works on commission.

1. The Mimetic Triangle: The Neurological Pleasure of Denying the Other.

The philosopher René Girard showed that human desire is never spontaneous: we desire what the other desires, because the other desires it. This triangular structure — self, object, other — shapes much of our social behavior, including commercial relationships.

In its most rivalrous form, this mechanism shifts: we no longer seek to possess the object; we seek to prevent the other from possessing it. As Girard writes:

> *“In double mediation, one does not so much desire the object as fear to see it possessed by someone else.” — Girard, Deceit, Desire and the Novel, 1961*

This dynamic has a documented neurological basis. Neuroscientist Sébastien Bohler explains in Le Bug humain (2019) that the striatum — the brain’s reward circuit — activates not on absolute gain, but on relative gain compared to others. Studies on macaques confirm this: it is

not receiving more that triggers the reward circuit, but receiving more than the other.

A landmark study published in Science (Takahashi et al., 2009) showed that schadenfreude — pleasure at another's misfortune — activates the striatum directly. The pleasure of denial is neurobiologically real.

Applied to a commission contract: when a client owes a commission to a consultant, this creates a mimetic situation. If the client has a rivalrous profile, not paying — denying the consultant their commission — will activate their reward circuit more powerfully than any commercial benefit from a lasting relationship.

The hourly rate neutralizes this triangle: the consultant invoices time and expertise, resources that are not in competition with the client's. There is no mimetic object, no "other's share" to seize.

2. Loss Aversion: Paying a Commission Feels Like Losing Something.

The second mechanism is universal: it affects every human being, without exception. Behavioral economists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky demonstrated in Prospect Theory (1979) that the psychological pain of a loss is roughly twice as intense as the pleasure of an equivalent gain.

Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler formalized what they call the endowment effect (1990): once an individual perceives a sum of money as theirs, parting with it is experienced as a painful loss — even if that sum was contractually owed to someone else.

Brain imaging confirms this: a study by Knutson and colleagues (2007) showed that the act of parting with a possessed good activates the insula, a brain region associated with the processing of physical pain.

> *"They're taking something from me." — What the brain says when it has to pay a commission already cashed.*

This is what happens with a commission: the client signs the sales, cashes the revenue. That money is, in their brain, theirs. When the time

comes to pay the commission, their brain does not frame this act as settling a debt — it frames it as a loss. Rational economics says: “You owe this amount.” But their insula says: “They’re taking something from me.”

A study published in PNAS (Hanson et al., 2017) found that individuals who experienced high early-life stress (family instability, deprivation) show hyperactivation of the insula in response to losses — their brains were calibrated early on to treat any reduction in resources as an existential threat.

The hourly rate reconfigures this framing: the client knows from the outset that they will disburse X euros for Y hours. This amount is mentally integrated into their operating costs before being received as revenue. It never becomes part of their subjective wealth. There is no loss — only a budgeted expense, like what they pay their lawyer or accountant.

3. The Prediction Error: Commission Destroys the Motivation It Claims to Create.

This third mechanism is paradoxical: commission harms the relationship even when everyone is acting in good faith.

Neuroscientist Wolfram Schultz identified a fundamental principle of the brain: the reward circuit does not activate when an expected result occurs. It activates only when the result exceeds what was anticipated.

Bohler summarizes this in Le Bug humain:

> *“Our reward system only activates if we get more than we expected. Anticipated results produce no pleasure.” — Bohler, 2019*

A well-written commission contract is, by definition, perfectly predictable. Once the consultant has internalized the mechanism, their brain forms an exact prediction about the forthcoming reward. The reward circuit goes silent. Intrinsic motivation — the pleasure of persuading, finding solutions, exceeding one’s own performance — is short-circuited by the predictable extrinsic reward.

This is what psychologists Deci and Ryan called the overjustification effect since the 1970s: an extrinsic reward destroys intrinsic motivation. A literature review published in Frontiers in Human Neuroscience (Murayama et al., 2017) confirmed the neurological basis of this phenomenon.

Over time, the commission-based consultant produces results that meet expectations. But precisely because they meet expectations, those results no longer activate the client's brain. What was once a remarkable performance becomes invisible. The consultant becomes a predictable cost — and predictable costs get cut.

The hourly rate breaks this mechanism: by invoicing time and expertise, the consultant values the process rather than the outcome. Each engagement offers a potential positive prediction error. The relationship stays dynamic.

4. Temporal Discounting: Yesterday's Commitment vs. Today's Pain.

The fourth mechanism acts before the contract is even signed: it makes the commitment to pay structurally fragile from the start.

Bohler describes what he calls temporal discounting: the further away an obligation is in time, the less real weight it carries in the brain. Schultz's work shows that the anticipatory dopamine response declines with delay:

> *"The longer the delay, the weaker the anticipatory response. For this reason, we find it hard to care about what lies in a distant future." — Bohler, 2019*

Walter Mischel, famous for his marshmallow experiment (Stanford, late 1950s), observed that children raised in unreliable families consistently chose the immediate reward — not out of impulsivity, but because experience had taught them that deferred promises are not kept.

When signing a commission contract, the client commits to paying a hypothetical future sum. Their striatum, minimally activated by an abstract and distant promise, naturally underweights this commitment. Signing is easy.

When the time to pay arrives — after the sales have been made, after the money has been received and integrated into subjective wealth — the neurological situation is radically different. The commission, once abstract, is now concrete and painful. A commitment made under one neurological regime (low activation, fuzzy future) must now be honored under the opposite regime (high activation, real and immediate loss).

It is a contract signed by two different versions of the same brain.

The hourly rate eliminates this gap: invoicing occurs at regular intervals for hours already worked. There is no temporal asymmetry between service delivery and payment.

Conclusion.

These four mechanisms — the mimetic triangle, loss aversion, the prediction error, and temporal discounting — are independent of each other. Each one alone is sufficient to make commission-based pay structurally risky. Together, they form a converging demonstration.

The hourly rate is not a simple pricing choice. It is an architectural decision that reconfigures the neuropsychological conditions of the commercial relationship: by eliminating the mimetic object, neutralizing the endowment effect, preserving intrinsic motivation, and aligning the moment of service delivery with the moment of payment.

It does not change human nature. It stops putting human nature in a position to fail.

Sources.

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